



CENTER *for* RURAL POLICY *and* DEVELOPMENT

MINNESOTA STATE UNIVERSITY, MANKATO

policy brief

The Vitality of Latino Communities in Rural Minnesota

Throughout the country many have been taken by surprise by the new Census numbers indicating a high rate of growth in the Latino population. In some rural Minnesota communities, the Latino population now accounts for approximately one quarter of the community's residents. Overall in Minnesota, the Latino population is estimated to account for at least 3 percent of the total population. Since the early diversification of these rural communities, there have been questions and struggles as these towns have sought to adjust to their changing demographics. This project seeks to identify and measure specific barriers and supports for community development for Latinos in Greater Minnesota.

Community development was examined in seven Greater Minnesota communities with terms relevant to the Latino perspective. The seven rural communities selected for this study are Willmar, Worthington, Albert Lea, Owatonna, St. James, Pelican Rapids and Long Prairie.

This study revealed much strength in these seven communities. Latinos bring a significant workforce, and business owners and other town leaders (city council members, school board members, etc.) understand the economic contributions of the Latino community. Residents express appreciation for the multiculturalism brought to town under the influence of the Latino culture. Educators and community leaders noted that the exposure to cultural and language differences gave children and families a more "realistic" view of the world.

Some communities have developed cultural diversity task forces and other initiatives to respond to the increasing diversity in these towns. Multicultural libraries are under construction in two of the communities, and people appear to be excited about these efforts. Latino organizations are emerging in some of the communities. These organizations hope to serve the entire community by offering a bridge and a path for career development for Latinos.

There is ongoing concern, however, about how the greater community views their relationship to the Latino community. Rochin & de la

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Torre (1991) suggest that this is critical in successful community development. Does the community view the problems of the Latinos as problems of the community?

The findings of this project would suggest that communities consider the following action steps in their ongoing process of development:

Education

- One of the most alarming findings of the study was the consistently high number of high school dropouts reported among young Latinos and Latinas. Many focus group participants cited this as the most salient issue.

Such failure rates should be viewed as unacceptable. Education and community leaders, along with parents must come together to address this critical issue, or face the reality that a significant percentage of their community's future workforce will be unprepared to succeed in a growing knowledge-based economy.

- Continuing education among the adult Latino population was also an issue of great concern, as it was seen as a primary way to advance in the workforce and create a generation of Latino leaders.

Language

- Few barriers cited by participants were greater or more fundamental than the language barrier. The need for bilingual community education cannot be underestimated. The lack of qualified interpreter services inhibits the ability of Latinos to adequately interact with key community institutions, such as hospital and health care clinics, law enforcement, the judicial system and government agencies.

Title VI of the Civil Rights act of 1964 requires that all programs

receiving federal assistance provide appropriate interpretive services and translation of written materials for clients with limited English proficiency. While it is unrealistic to ask all rural hospitals, clinics, and other community institutions to maintain full-time interpreters, innovative solutions, including the use of statewide telecommunication alternatives should be explored.

Law enforcement

- Tensions and distrust between the Latino community and local law enforcement officials should not be underestimated. This tension results from incidents ranging from simple misunderstandings about local regulations to racial profiling and outright harassment. Local law enforcement officials interviewed often noted the need for greater bilingual and bicultural police officers. Hiring such officers would be a good start, along with improving the cultural competency of existing officers.
- A key source of this tension is the issue and debate surrounding access to drivers' licenses among Latinos regardless of their legal status. This issue needs to be productively addressed. To date, four states (Tennessee, Utah, Virginia and North Carolina) offer licenses to any state resident who passes the state driving test, regardless of their legal status. Minnesota officials

should examine the effectiveness of the laws in these states as it pertains to the rate of insurance coverage among immigrant drivers; employment stability; and negative interactions with law enforcement.

Local Leadership

- Integrating Latino members into local community leadership positions decreases the "insider/outsider" perspective, builds cultural bridges within the community, provides positive role models for young Latinos and helps reduce the overall cultural tension in the community. Local community leaders are urged to discuss how to recruit Latino community members into local positions on the school board, city council, chamber of commerce and other local leadership structures. In addition, established community leaders should support the emergence of Latino-specific support groups as a source for future community leaders.

While the above action steps are not an automatic fix for successfully meeting the challenge in rural communities experiencing increasing racial and ethnic diversity, they are a start. The sooner communities recognize the bicultural tensions and issues in their community as community-wide challenges instead of problems caused by the presence of Latinos, the sooner they will begin positively meeting those challenges.

Community	Total Population	Latino Population	Percent Latino
Albert Lea	18,356	1,740	9.5
Long Prairie	3,040	285	9.4
Owatonna	22,434	967	4.3
Pelican Rapids	2,374	465	19.6
St. James	4,695	1,116	23.8
Willmar	18,351	2,911	15.9
Worthington	11,283	2,175	19.3

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000