



Panel Summary - National Rural Summit, October 27, 2007, Ames, IA

The changing face of rural America: Globalization's impact on immigration and rural life

Summary notes by Sarah Johnson

Panel:

Facilitator: Amalia Anderson, Project Director, Main Street Project
Sister Christine Feagen, Director of Hispanic Ministries, St. Mary's Church, Marshalltown, IA
Leone Jose Bicchieri, Senior Organizer, Center for New Community
Amy Vybrial, Director, Iowa Family Education and Training Center
Ana Nájera Mendoza, Coordinator of Leadership and Language Access, Main Street Project
Diego Alvarez

Amalia Anderson – introduction

Most people think of immigration as an urban experience but jobs are drawing immigrants to rural areas. This movement is helping to revitalize rural areas. Latinos account for 25% of all non-urban growth. Population changes have been particularly high in Midwest.

Ana Nájera Mendoza and Diego Alvarez

Jovenes Latinos Cuentan (JLC) builds on strengths of Latinos. Latino youth know better than anyone else what their community needs; they have the ability to step up and be leaders. How do Latino youth see themselves? How do others see them? How do they contribute?

We see a trend of Latino youth coming together and acting as support systems. Youth are figuring out how to fit into pre-existing structures in rural areas. There are low expectations for Latino community and stereotypes from outside communities. But when JLC works with youth from the inside, they learn how much positive activity is going on. There's a need to reframe and focus on new immigration policy.

Diego Alvarez

Latinos fear to leave homes because of raids – always have to “prove self” to community. Loyal workers, strong work ethic, strong family values – Latinos are trying to show how they can and are creating strong communities in rural areas.

Sister Feagan

In Marshalltown, Iowa, her job has shifted to more of a social services and less of a typical pastor role. After Dec. 12 raids on Swift, everything changed in Marshalltown. 120,000 in donations came in from across the country to be used to help immigrants after the raid. What’s unique about having immigrants in rural areas: brings diversity, new opinions, vitality, challenges bias and the status quo. Stores that would otherwise have been empty are now thriving businesses. Hope and courage have been brought into the community.

Amy Vybrial

In the first year of the training center, 300 students were served. Now more than 800 students are engaged. Over 90% of students are Latinos. Members of the Latino community persevere, taking on challenges, balancing so many new things (GED, language class, etc.).

Vybrial discussed the challenges of immigration. The raids caused mass confusion due to lack of information and disinformation.

What is safe and what is not safe in terms of immigration? There’s a disconnect between what is available to immigrants and what they need.

Leone Jose Bicchieri

We must remember that our personal interests are actually tied up with everyone’s interests. Don’t forget community. We are all tied up in each other’s destiny. Even if you aren’t in a union, you can be part of a larger labor movement. People in the anti-immigration movement are often in white supremacy groups (also think: Minute Men).

The anti-immigrant movement is opening political space for white supremacy groups to push their agenda. Right now the most vulnerable population in America are immigrant people of color.

The anti-people-of-color and anti-immigrant agendas are being disguised as a “concern for our borders” issue. “Let’s fight back because it’s intelligent” encourages cultural programming; we need to bring together different immigrant communities to unite over similarities instead of dividing over differences.

Q & A

People are against “illegal” immigrants and not immigrants in general. So how do we all end up winners via policy? Have to look at it in a broad way. This country has been built on the actions of white people disempowering people of color. No person is “illegal” – but rather, people are undocumented. What laws reflect the kind of just and civil society we want to be? *Bicchieri*: New citizens must register to vote. We have to change laws and reframe how anti-raid sentiments could be seen as unlawful.