

Hispanics in SW Kansas

Researcher studies reasons behind the migration

A Kansas State University researcher is examining why Hispanic immigration has become more common in rural areas and how Hispanic immigrants have adapted in these places, particularly southwest Kansas.

Matthew Sanderson, associate professor of sociology who studies international migration, is completing a study on Hispanic immigrants living in Garden City, Liberal and Ulysses. The study looks at the characteristics of the people immigrating to these towns; what's motivating them to move to these Kansas towns rather than larger, metropolitan cities; what opportunities this region offers immigrants; and whether study participants have achieved upward mobility in their community and in the workforce.

"Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, Houston and Miami are the five key gateways where more than 70 percent of Hispanic and Latino immigration in the U.S. has historically been directed," Sanderson said. "In the early 1980s and especially the 1990s, however, we saw those gateways decline in importance while new rural destinations like southwest Kansas and other rural places in states like North Carolina and Georgia experienced very large increases in Hispanic immigration. This was quite surprising."

According to Sanderson, the unexpected rise of rural destina-

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tions has interested social scientists, who are trying to understand why this happened in so many places at the same time as well as how immigrants fare in these new locations.

In 2012, Sanderson led a student group that conducted interviews with more than 140 self-identified Hispanic or Latino and Latina immigrants primarily living in Garden City. All the interviewees were foreign born, between the ages of 18 to 65, and had work experience in the U.S. and their country of origin.

Seventy percent came to Garden City for a job, often in a meatpacking plant, while 30 percent said they came because of family in the area. Eighty-two percent were from Mexico; 11 percent were from El Salvador; 4 percent were from Guatemala; and a few were from Honduras, Peru and Cuba.

"Migration is not a random event, but rather something that's highly channeled and geographically specific," Sanderson said. "Jobs attract immigrants to specific places, networks of people get them set up, information about things like jobs and housing gets sent back home, and then a cycle begins that perpetuates out-migration from specific places in Mexico, for example, to a place like Garden City. Several villages in Mexico have been depopulated this way."

After adjusting for inflation, those interviewed made on average about \$1,800 a month at their first job in the U.S., compared to about \$600 a month at their last job in Mexico -- a big incentive to migrate to the U.S., Sanderson said. A large number of participants, however, said they also experienced job status downgrading from

their prior occupation as a dentist, doctor or minister in their country of origin.

Data also was collected about social interactions at work and in the community with non-Hispanics. Sanderson found that outside of work, there was very little cross-culture interaction.

"Work environments like meatpacking plants tend to be very multicultural, but that does not seem to have translated into a thriving multicultural community," Sanderson said. "We're basically seeing a community that has two communities in it, each with its own circle of friends, neighborhoods and churches. These two groups frequently interact at work, but then go home to largely separate communities."

Participants were then asked questions such as how they felt about their lives and prospects in the community, as well as where they saw themselves living and working in the next five years.

Sixty percent said they plan to stay in Garden City because it fulfills their needs. Nearly 90 percent said their job was a means for upward mobility and their lives would get better through their job.

"Generally these folks are working in relatively undesirable, low-paying and sometimes dangerous jobs that most people would not equate with upward mobility," Sanderson said. "But participants actually gave us a pretty rosy picture. It's an interesting matter of perspective because according to the data, many report that they're doing much better objectively in terms of income in the U.S. compared to back home."

Sanderson said the goal of his research is to provide a more detailed understanding of immigration and its relationship to these rural communities.