

# Study of Farmers Branch, Texas: Immigrants seen as threat to white, middle-class 'American' identity

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Who belongs in America? Immigration has sparked a raging national debate about that question — including in the Dallas suburb of Farmers Branch, Texas, the first U.S. city to adopt an ordinance requiring renters to prove they are legal residents.

Contrary to what many believe, however, race isn't the only driving reason that many white, middle-class people feel threatened by immigrants, according to a new analysis by anthropologists at Southern Methodist University in Dallas. White, middle-class people also perceive immigrants who are settling in their suburban communities as a threat to their class status and to their very identity as Americans, say anthropologists Caroline B. Brettell and Faith G. Nibbs.

Immigrants — with cultures and traditions different from white suburbanites — are viewed as an assault on long-standing symbols of American nationality, the researchers say. Those symbols include middle-class values and tastes, and the perception that Americans are patriotic and law-abiding, say the researchers, both in SMU's Department of Anthropology.

"For many whites, American identity is wrapped up with being suburban and middle class, and when they see immigrants changing their communities and potentially threatening their class status, they react with anti-immigrant legislation," says Brettell.

## Class and culture

It's true that for some whites, immigrants can represent competition for [economic security](#) and scarce resources, say Brettell and Nibbs — but in the suburbs they are also seen as a threat to the white, middle-class concept of "social position." Because of that, Brettell and Nibbs argue for greater attention to class and culture in the study of contemporary immigration into the United States.

The anthropologists base their conclusion on a close analysis of Farmers Branch, a suburb of almost 28,000 people. Farmers Branch made news in 2006 as the first U.S. city to adopt an ordinance requiring that apartment managers document tenants as legal residents.

For their analysis, the researchers looked at newspaper articles and blogs, conducted a lengthy interview with a key City Council member, carried out background historical research and analyzed U.S. Census data.

The research has been accepted for publication in the journal *International Migration* in an article titled "Immigrant Suburban Settlement and the 'Threat' to Middle Class Status and Identity: The Case of Farmers Branch, Texas." See [www.smuresearch.com](http://www.smuresearch.com) for links to more information.

## Flooding into suburbia

New immigrants to the United States are settling in major gateway cities like Dallas and making their homes directly in middle-class suburbs, say Brettell and Nibbs.

These suburbs — once called the "bourgeois utopia" where middle-class values triumph — are populated by white people who decades before

fled the central cities to escape poor housing, deteriorating schools, and racial and ethnic diversity, the researchers say.

But when immigrants and white suburbs mix, the result can be explosive — as in the case of Farmers Branch. Whites view their hometown changing. And the changes feel very foreign to them — new religious institutions, ethnic strip-shopping malls, signs in languages other than English, and bilingual programs for education, health care and law-enforcement programs.

## **"Free and white"**

The historic roots of Farmers Branch lie in a land grant designed to draw "free and white" inhabitants to the area in the 1850s, say the researchers. Farmers Branch grew to 17,500 by 1970, and at that time there were 320 Hispanic surnames in the city. By 2000, however, the Hispanic population had grown to more than one-third of the total. By 2008, Hispanics were the largest demographic group, with 46.7 percent of the population.

Today, like many such cities, Farmers Branch sees its minority, elderly and low-income population growing faster than the national average, say Brettell and Nibbs.

The number of owner-occupied homes in Farmers Branch has fallen dramatically, from 87 percent in 1960 to 66 percent in 2000. Raw median income in 2000 was below what it was in 1970 dollars, adjusted against 2008 dollars, say the researchers.

"If you are a family with options, would you move into this neighborhood if presented with these figures?" asks Mayor Tim O'Hare in the journal article. O'Hare led the fight for the renter's ordinance.

## "Rule of Law"

Brettell and Nibbs say that white suburbanites have also invoked the "Rule of Law" in Farmers Branch and elsewhere.

"As the formulation of laws and their enforcement are disproportionately unavailable to ethnic minorities, and completely inaccessible to undocumented immigrants, the principle of Rule of Law has become a convenient weapon for the Farmers Branch middle class in their fight for status and the status quo," say Brettell and Nibbs in the article. "Add to this a bit of the legacy of Texas frontier mentality and patriotism and you have a line drawn in the sand by those who stand for the Rule of Law as something absolutely fundamental to American identity and hence perceive illegal immigrants as a threat to that identity."

In that way, the "Rule of Law" is a tool to exclude unauthorized immigrants and attempt to legislate a certain quality of life, such as English-only communication, as well as proof of citizenship to rent a dwelling, apply for food stamps or get school financial aid, say the researchers.

"Everyone is looking at race but not at class in the study of immigrants, and particularly in anti-immigrant backlash," Brettell says. "We add to this literature the analysis of 'Rule of Law' as a newly rhetorical device that excludes illegal [immigrants](#). Our article offers a new way of looking at this issue."

Provided by Southern Methodist University

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