

# Migrant women adapt in economic crises

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With the global recession and the food price spike of 2008, one would expect migrants to be particularly affected, but a recent University of Illinois study revealed migrants in at least one Central Illinois county to be surprisingly resilient in their ability to control their environment through work, particularly women.

"Women appear to be more flexible and resourceful. When they lose their [jobs](#), they start looking for other options," said Gale Summerfield, U of I community development and gender specialist.

"They took jobs in [child care](#), cleaning houses and businesses, and cooking, jobs with less overhead. Men tended to look for jobs in gardening and auto mechanics that require tools. They didn't see cooking, cleaning or babysitting as a man's job.

"It was somewhat surprising to find that [respondents](#) stated repeatedly that women were better at coping with the recession through their self-employment because they could 'sell tamales or clean houses,'" noted graduate research assistant Paola León.

The study drew from 20 in-depth interviews with migrant men and women in Central Illinois. Many originally settled in Illinois because of relatives and friends who were already working there and stated that they came to Central Illinois because they found it peaceful and a good place to raise children.

"Going back to their homeland was not an option because there are no

jobs there, not even temporary or low-paying jobs," Summerfield said.

"We saw a strong sense of entrepreneurship as a viable way for some [migrants](#) to weather the crisis as well as being part of their long-term strategies. For instance, one interviewee had opened a restaurant."

U of I economist Mary Arends-Kuenning said that the area of the Midwest in which the interviews were conducted lies outside of the traditional metropolitan areas and has not been as hard hit by the economic crisis as Chicago. The non-traditional area offered a diversified economy, allowing migrants to maintain their lifestyle slightly better than the traditional Chicago area, which experienced greater unemployment and housing problems. In Illinois the statewide unemployment rate was 12.2 percent in 2012, but in the Central Illinois county of study, it was only 10.8, still high, but not as high as in other parts of the state.

"There is also a cultural expectation for migrants that they will send money, remittances, to their family in the homeland on a regular basis, usually between \$100 and \$800 per month," said Arends-Kuenning.

"Many of the interviewees said that when their income decreased and they couldn't be as faithful, they felt that they were failing to meet their responsibilities."

Illinois is the largest recipient state for transnational migrants in the Midwest, and the number of migrants from Latin America to the area has been growing over the last decade. Migrants comprised 42 percent of the 1.96 million Latinas/os in the state in 2009.

"We found that most of the interviewees reported their hours and pay had been cut during the recession. Their coping strategies, in addition to cutting back on remittances and self-employment, were to make use of some support programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance

Program," said Arends-Kuenning.

Although none of those interviewed had applied for unemployment, they mentioned an inability to access the benefits. Those who did qualify for unemployment benefits could not maintain their benefit because they lack the language skills to report through an automated service every week. Arends-Kuenning suggested that the Department of Labor could improve their service by adding the most commonly spoken languages in the state of Illinois to their automated phone service.

"Exploring Latina/o Migrants' Adaptation to the Economic Crisis in the U.S. Heartland: A Capability Approach" will be published in the *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities*.

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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