

Latino immigrants changing the face of rural populations

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Trailer park near downtown Steamboat Springs, Colorado. This site has escaped re-development despite soaring property values because it is located in a floodplain. Credit: Lise Nelson, Penn State

Over the last two decades Latino immigrant populations in the United States have experienced significant growth in areas that had little previous experience with them.

Scholars refer to these places as 'new immigrant destinations.' Recent Penn State research indicates that rural growth in high-amenity areas such as Sun Valley, Idaho, or Cooperstown, New York, is an important but overlooked pull factor for low-wage Latino immigrants arriving in rural communities across America.

Lise Nelson, associate professor in the Department of Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies and the Department of Geography at Penn State, and colleagues recently published a study exploring how immigrant workers were recruited into high-amenity rural areas during the construction boom of the late 1990s and early 2000s. It also demonstrates how labor supply and demand in these places shifted as a result, creating lasting demographic and social change. "Although the 2008 housing crisis slowed this process down, the second-home and amenity real estate is on the rebound and thus these migration and labor market processes continue to deepen," Nelson explained. Their research was published in a recent issue of the *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*.

By analyzing rural amenity growth as a "pull factor" for low-wage Latino immigrant workers, Nelson and her co-authors contend that the arrival of Latino immigrants in these areas is tied to another migration stream: the movement of wealthy, mostly white, middle- to upper-class urban-to-rural migrants.

"Particularly for those who are members of the baby boom, millions of American are moving to, or building second homes in, rural destinations where they can capture a sense of rurality, relaxation and recreation not available in the big city or suburb," said Nelson.

As these wealthy newcomers flow into rural communities, property values rise, new housing construction expands and demand for a range of services in the local economy increases, from restaurants to landscaping.

"Even as the demand for low-wage workers increases, so does socio-economic inequality, as low-wage service workers are priced out of the local housing market," Nelson explained. It is this dynamic of increasing inequality even as landscapes of luxury expand that inspires scholars to describe these dynamics as "rural gentrification."

This process is happening across the country, as documented by Nelson and her team of researchers, who mapped these patterns quantitatively and conducted in-depth fieldwork research in two rural areas in two distinct regions: Rabun County, Georgia, and Routt County, Colorado (the latter home to Steamboat Springs resort).

"Between 2010 and 2012, we interviewed over 280 people—employers, immigrant and non-immigrant workers, gentrifiers, and a range of local service providers in Colorado and Georgia—to get a sense of the relationship between gentrification and the arrival of immigrant residents, as well as the nature of work, life and community in these shifting demographic contexts," said Nelson.

One key question explored by Nelson and her team was how employers found immigrant workers when the employers had no previous experience with this group of employees. The researchers found that employers in these isolated areas often "discovered" immigrant workers when they subcontracted out work to companies located in larger cities.

"Employers often hired immigrant workers right off the subcontracted crew," Nelson said. "However, what might have started out as an effort to simply find workers during a labor shortage, over time turned into a preference for immigrant workers, who were perceived as exceptionally

hard working, loyal and flexible."

Both documented and undocumented Latino immigrants are becoming a structural feature of low-wage sectors in these rural gentrifying areas. Most immigrant workers interviewed in these communities had lived in the area for eight or more years, often working with the same employer throughout that time.

"A range of employers described that their businesses are utterly dependent on having access to [immigrant workers](#), and often spoke about their anxiety at the possibility of their best workers being deported," Nelson explained. "This perspective of dependence and need contrasts starkly with descriptions of low-wage, undocumented immigrants as 'invading' or 'draining' the economy in the United States."

Nelson found that Latino immigrants face the same struggles as anyone involved in low-wage work in high-amenity areas, particularly in relation to securing decent housing. However, they also face additional challenges not faced by low-wage, non-Hispanic, "legal" residents, including language barriers, racism and assumption about their legal status.

Many immigrant residents describe a constant anxiety about their legal status or the status of family members. They live in dispersed [rural communities](#) with no public transportation, a situation that demands the use of an automobile, even as those who lack documentation are denied driver's licenses.

Nelson found that immigrant residents who are documented are not shielded from racism or assumptions about their legal status, which together often cause them to be treated as "undeserving" subjects in daily life and in the workplace.

Nelson is planning further study on growing Latino immigrant populations in rural high-amenity areas. She is particularly interested in access to and use of public space by different groups in these areas, seeing this as a way to further understand how economic recruitment and dependence works in relation to dynamics of social, racial and political exclusion.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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