

Fear of the Unknown: Views on Immigrants in Metropolitan St. Louis

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New Immigration

- More immigrants are now attending suburban and rural schools not accustomed to instructing English language learners (Wortham, Murillo Jr., & Hamann, 2002).
- The Greater St. Louis area has a very small Latino population for a city of its size, but it is growing (Jennings, 2008).
- **What is the response of the community to this new group of immigrants in a place of new immigration?**

The Study

- 30 semi-structured interviews with area residents who were second generation Americans or beyond, many having lived in the area their “whole lives”
- Purposeful sampling (at public places), carried out over the course of 4-5 months in late 2009 and early 2010
- Representing 8 counties
- Utilized grounded theory using HyperResearch and open coding

Preliminary Themes Found

- About Immigration Law and Process:
 - ◆ Little or no knowledge.
- About Immigrants:
 - ◆ Knowledge is based upon personal experiences.
 - ◆ Immigrants are hard-working, low-wage, low-skill.
 - ◆ Unsure about undocumented children pursuing higher education.
 - ◆ Burden of integration lies with immigrants.

How does immigration work?

- Most responded very honestly that they didn't know.
- When asked about specific laws regarding immigration in MO being passed, only 1 person mentioned the “Only English” movement.

How does immigration work?

“Um, you know, I probably don’t know a lot about the immigration laws per se, um, I think things are too lax.”

“I know they’re required to have some kind of passport or documentation that they were, including birth certificate that are required for them to transfer from one country to another, but I am not sure about the legal process beyond that.”

Who are immigrants?

- Not born in the U.S., come here to work, live and have a better life.
- Some see immigrants as similar to previous generations, some believe that they are less hard-working now.
- Over all, knowledge of immigrants/immigration is based upon personal experience: where they live, who they work alongside, who they personally know, etc.

Who are immigrants?

- “Someone who has come from one country to our county in the United States for one reason or another.”
- “A lot of Bosnians that I deal with, very much go-getter’s. They do a lot of trucking and they buy, you know, their rigs and that and do their leasing through companies, um ... The Mexicans that generally come in, lots of landscapers, they are willing to work, they want to work, you know.”

What jobs do immigrants do?

- Overwhelmingly, participants said that immigrants are “laborers,” in “construction,” to “landscaping,” to “fast food.”
- They have the worst jobs, but they work “hard.”
- Less than 1/4 of the responses suggested that particular groups of immigrants hold higher-skill, higher-wage jobs, e.g., nursing (Philipino) and IT (Indian).

What jobs do immigrants do?

- “Lawn care...um...I would have to say restaurants. Um, I think a lot of skilled trades, dry-walling, carpet-laying, you know, carpenters, electricians, that kind of stuff.”
- “Only thing they let them do is work, and you know, they don’t really pay them as much as they deserve because they [are] hard working if you ask me.”

Immigrants' access to college?

- About 50% felt that undocumented children who graduated from Missouri high schools should receive access to college at in-state tuition rates.
- However, participants were very confused about the question and the language used (undocumented vs. illegal).

Immigrants' access to college?

I: Do you think that the children of undocumented immigrants, who graduate from high school in the U.S., should have access to public higher education system in Missouri?

R: Yes they should. ... My best friend, actually. Her mother is actually Brazilian. Her mother had to go through all the citizenship things and then she graduated from high school, went to college, everything was in state. I think it worked for everyone."

Another respondent: "I don't understand how a child could be born in the U.S., undocumented, lived here for eighteen years and graduated from a public school and not be documented. I don't understand how that would happen."

What about integration?

- Several conflicting ideas on this issue:
 - ◆ U.S. is (proudly) a nation of immigrants.
 - ◆ Immigration is “out of control,” especially along the Mexican border.
 - ◆ We should both limit and welcome immigrants in our communities.
 - ◆ But full integration is largely up to immigrants themselves.

Suárez-Orozco, C., & Suárez-Orozco, M. M. (2001). Children of Immigration. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

What about integration?

- “I think the burden is on them. My understanding of how it’s worked forever is that when a particular group came here, through their efforts [they] learned what they needed to know to be productive and get the jobs they wanted, etc. I don’t think it should be a burden on current society to accommodate them; it’s up to them to fit in or not fit in.”

Summary of Findings

- There is a startling lack of knowledge about legal immigration, enforcement, and the challenges that immigrants face.
- Yet, there are many opinions about immigrants from ...
 - ◆ negative perceptions on “illegals” to ...
 - ◆ positive impressions of “hard workers.”

Implications

- Overcoming the knowledge and network “gaps” of both the general public and social agencies will be important as organizations address increased immigration to the area.
 - ◆ Marketing efforts to dispel myths
 - ◆ Support for social service agencies and information sharing across institutions

Questions?

- Thank you
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