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## **Immigrants in the Delmarva Poultry Processing Industry: The Changing Face of Georgetown, Delaware and Environs**

*by Roger Horowitz  
Hagley Museum and Library  
and  
Mark J. Miller  
University of Delaware*

**Occasional Paper No. 37**  
*January 1999*



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# Immigrants in the Delmarva Poultry Processing Industry: The Changing Face of Georgetown, Delaware and Environs

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The Julian Samora Research Institute is the Midwest's premier policy research and outreach center to the Hispanic community. The Institute's mission includes:

- *Generation of a program of research and evaluation to examine the social, economic, educational, and political condition of Latino communities.*
- *Transmission of research findings to academic institutions, government officials, community leaders, and private sector executives through publications, public policy seminars, workshops, and consultations.*
- *Provision of technical expertise and support to Latino communities in an effort to develop policy responses to local problems.*
- *Development of Latino faculty, including support for the development of curriculum and scholarship for Chicano/Latino Studies.*

## Immigrants in the Delmarva Poultry Processing Industry: The Changing Face of Georgetown, Delaware & Environs

An October 1993 tragedy involving the death of a Georgetown-area cheerleader in a car accident sparked a spate of reports, commentary, and soul-searching about the influx of immigrants into the Georgetown area. An immigrant who worked in a local poultry-processing plant to support his wife and children in Guatemala pleaded guilty to first-degree vehicular homicide and second-degree assault. He was sentenced to over four years in prison. Authorities determined that he was intoxicated at the time of the collision, driving without a valid license, and uninsured. (*Wilmington News-Journal*, March 5, 1994.)

For many Delawareans, this tragedy alerted them to a profound socio-demographic transformation that heretofore had not given rise to extensive scrutiny. Georgetown and environs were experiencing an influx of immigrants, many of whom took up employment in poultry-processing firms. In less than five years the fabric of day-to-day life in the area had changed. To paraphrase a local historian, the influx of Mexican, Guatemalan, and other Central American immigrants constituted the most important change in the city since the colonial era. The centuries-old question of the relationship between the African American minority and the European-origin majority had been superseded by a new question of how to live together with the Central American immigrants about whom so little was known.

By 1994, immigration-related tensions in the Georgetown area were palpable. The Guatemalan arrested in the death of the local cheerleader was beaten by other prisoners. In addition to worry over immigrant ignorance of driving rules, there was concern over housing. Many immigrants found lodging in subdivided housing and frequently slept in shifts. Many of the immigrants seemed unaccustomed to the ways and mores of this sedate, tradition-bound city of 4,500. They clustered on the streets to converse and while away their free time. They seemed to have little constructive to do with their free time. Established residents became fearful of their new neighbors, both because of tangible worries about property values and more abstract concerns about these people who seemed so different.

A series of public meetings and interventions by authorities and private groups have since eased the tensions. There are now Spanish-language publications, radio stations, and television programs. But a long-term integration question remains.

It is difficult to overstate the sudden and dramatic immigration-related changes in the Georgetown area. Incredibly, the 1990 state census for Delaware enumerated no Guatemalans. No one knows for certain how many immigrants have arrived in the area since that time. Estimates vary widely. The lowest numbers come from the U.S. Bureau of the Census, which estimated in 1994 that there were 9,000 Hispanics on Maryland's Eastern shore and in Delaware's two lower counties, Kent and Sussex. Table I disaggregates U.S. Census Bureau estimates for Sussex County, where Georgetown is the county seat, and reveals a 25% increase in the county's Hispanic population between 1990 and 1994. However, the Delaware Population Consortium estimated a much more rapid Hispanic population growth in Sussex County. It estimated an increase of 242.3%, from 2,317 in 1990 to 7,932 in 1995, with Hispanics comprising 6.2% of Sussex's population (*Wilmington News-Journal*, April 17, 1997).

Local observers have made even higher estimates. A Roman Catholic priest estimated in 1996 that there were 20,000 Hispanics in lower Delaware and 7,000 on Maryland's Eastern Shore. The mayor of Georgetown estimated that there were 1,200 to 1,500 Latinos in Georgetown alone in 1996 (*Baltimore Sun*, Oct. 13, 1996). The Georgetown mayor and a Sussex County executive currently estimate that Hispanics, most of whom have arrived in the area since 1990, comprise about one-quarter of the population of their respective governmental units.

No one disputes that the poultry industry has been the major source of employment for these new migrants. Poultry firms in the Delmarva area employed at least 3,200 immigrants by 1996, and non-citizens comprise between 40% and 60% of workforces in some processing plants (*Baltimore Sun*, Oct. 13, 1996). There may be as many as 1,000 asylum-seekers residing in Southern Delaware, most

of whom are Guatemalans and employed in poultry-processing. As a result, concerns and conflicts over the new immigrants have become enmeshed in debates over this industry, its employment policies, and relationship with the larger community. This has heightened existing tensions over the immigrant population in the greater Georgetown area.

This paper seeks to provide an overview of and background to the integration questions arising from the immigrant influx of the 1990's. It is based on interviews conducted over the summer of 1997, and newspaper reports, books, and documents pertaining to the poultry-processing industry and immigration to the U.S. respectively. The focus of the research has been upon Georgetown and environs in Delaware to provide insights into broader changes affecting the Delmarva peninsula. The paper is comprised of five segments: first, an overview of the poultry-processing industry in the region and its growing use of immigrant workers; second, a discussion of the dynamics of the immigrant influx of the 1990's; third, a sketch of the immigrant population and its impact on the Georgetown; fourth, implications of this case study for federal immigration policy; and fifth, discussion of state and local immigrant integration measures.

## The Delmarva Poultry-Processing Industry

The primary source of employment for the new immigrants, the poultry industry, is a post-World War II phenomenon. Prior to that time, broiler or frying chickens — young chickens tender enough to be cooked without extensive stewing — were highly seasonal and more expensive than red meat. The old campaign slogan, “Acar in every garage and chicken in every pot,” reflected how access to chicken dinners was a measure of affluence for Americans in the 1920's and 1930's.

Following the war, a new cohort of firms displaced older poultry businesses and revolutionized the industry. Most were established by men such as Arthur W. Perdue, founder of the Perdue company and father of the more famous Frank, who came from the agricultural side of the business. Between 1945 and 1965, these firms transformed and modernized the industry by creating integrated companies which managed the production of chickens from egg to dressed bird. In place of a fragmented system of egg

growers, farmers, feed producers, and processors, the new breed of firm owned the chicken from the day it was conceived to its sale to a retail store. Instead of farmers raising chickens and selling them to the higher bidder, they “contracted” with particular firms to raise chicks — owned by the firms and not the farmer — under terms and conditions specified by the company.

These changes were accompanied by a dramatic transformation of processing techniques. Well into the 1950's, most chicken left the processing plant as “New York Dressed” poultry — defeathered, drained of blood, and sometimes with the head and feet removed, but not eviscerated. The processing plants, consequently, were primitive operations with relatively low labor demands, and able to rely largely on female workers from nearby rural areas. The expansion of processing to include evisceration and better cleaning of the carcasses, stimulated by the advent of federal inspection in the early 1960's and the growing use of chain supermarkets to sell chickens, resulted in the construction of new facilities and much greater demand for workers.

After 1970, three additional factors led to a dramatic expansion of the industry into the form we see today. First, the advent of fast food chicken with the establishment of Kentucky Fried Chicken gave producers direct access to consumers. Second, health concerns with the fat content of red meat, an outgrowth of the health and consumers movement, resulted in consumers shifting their meat eating preferences from beef to chicken. (It is, of course, ironic that two contradictory trends in American foodways rebounded to the benefit of the poultry industry.) Third, firms began direct marketing campaigns for the chicken products, trying to establish brand loyalty for chickens similar to processed pork products like bacon and ham. As Table II indicates, the result was a business that had once been a sideline to the main food industries became a juggernaut unto itself.

Data on chicken consumption is enlightening. As Table II indicates, chicken went from an occasional meal before World War II to a staple part of a family's diet by the early 1960's, and then to a food eaten several times weekly.

The form in which chicken was sold also changed, with dramatic consequences on the labor

demands of processing operations. As Table IV reflects, the demands of the fast food industry and the consumer, meant that chicken increasingly left the plant cut into pieces or processed into products like chicken bologna, rather than as eviscerated broilers. This entailed establishing production lines following the removal of head, feet, feathers, and intestines, to cut the carcass into smaller pieces, and, in some cases, the elaborate stage of de-boning the chicken.

The impact on the labor needs of this industry were dramatic, as indicated in Table V. Employment has grown by an average of 5,500 workers per year over the past 10 years, at a time of increasingly tight labor markets in the United States.

Exacerbating the labor shortage were two additional factors: the rural location of processing operations (as they are situated as close as possible to chicken growers), and impediments to mechanization posed by the discontinuous production line and irregular size of the animal.

Chicken processing plants are located in rural areas for reasons of economy and control. The closer plants are to farms, the less weight is lost by the birds before slaughter. Conversely, it is more efficient to ship dressed carcasses than live chickens to retail outlets. In addition, the plants need to remain close to the farming operations because of the extremely fine controls exercised over growing chickens, especially the timing of bringing them to slaughter. Firms strive for chickens to enter the processing operation at a uniform weight and size for two reasons. First, fast food companies count on chicken parts to be of the same weight and thickness so that they cook evenly in their automated frying vats. Second, chickens of uniform size facilitate mechanization of the production processes and minimize the need for attention from line workers. Hence, the contracts with farmers contain detailed specifications on all aspects of chicken raising: feed content, the structure of the chicken houses, and the average weight of the chickens at the time of delivery to the plant. These factors mitigate against firms locating plants near urban population centers which would have a more readily available labor force.

Limits on mechanization also increase labor needs. Despite the best efforts of the companies, the chicken remains an irregular natural product. In the

“modern” processing plant, mechanical devices are extensively applied in a wide variety of cutting operations once performed by workers with knives. Separating the carcass into quarters, for example, is accomplished by machines which perform the necessary cutting operations, rather than a cleaver wielded by a butcher. But the chicken still needs to be inserted into the machines and positioned properly for the cuts to be applied in the right place; a worker performs that task by lining up the carcass on a conveyor belt. Labor may have been deskilled, and the number of knife workers reduced, but the need for labor remains in the many positioning and transitional stages of the dismembering and cutting operations, as well as hand and eye tasks such as inspecting and separating kidneys and hearts. The increasingly important deboning operations remain the province of relatively skilled workers equipped with sharp shears and knives, rather than machines. Despite impressive advances in mechanization of cutting and packaging operations, the modern poultry processing plant bears little resemblance to the highly automated “flow” operations in foods like pretzels, cereal, or hot dogs. It is unlikely that these technological barriers will fall in the near future.

At the same time as firms’ labor needs expanded, they also faced imperatives to control wage costs and to maintain a rapid production tempo. These dynamics impeded two plausible strategies for increasing labor supply: raising wages and making work less rigorous.

Pressures to control labor costs and production speeds stem from the integrated character of the modern poultry firm. Ownership of the bird from conception both guarantees a constant supply for the plant and increases exposure to risk. Minor fluctuations in feed or transportation expenses, labor costs, and retail chicken prices can have devastating effects on profits, as the firms have great difficulty reducing production levels without allowing chickens to exceed optimal weights. Moreover, once the animal was killed, the natural process of decay imposed strict time limits on the speed of processing operations. With workers forming critical links in the transitional nodal points, firms have an incentive to control labor as much as possible, to speed up production to its maximum sustainable level, and to prevent any disruptions in the movement of chickens from the farm to the supermarket or fast food outlet.

Competition and low profit margins also exert constant pressure on firms to hold the line on labor costs. Despite the presence of several large companies in this industry, chicken processing remains highly competitive. The four leading firms controlled 42% of broiler production in 1994, significant market power but a long way from a monopoly (*Poultry Tribune* September 1995, 18). Successful firms generally average 1% to 2% return on sales, with the median profit on net worth hovering between 5% and 6% (Dun & Bradstreet, *Industry Norms and Key Business Ratios*, 1997, 25). As these companies compete in a national market, low wages in one region act as a depressant throughout the country, as firms with even a modest labor cost advantage are in a superior competitive position.

The incentive then, regardless of management's preferences, is to keep wages at a low level, at least the minimum standard for the industry, and to exercise close control over the production process. As Table VI indicates, hourly wages for poultry workers have remained at a remarkably consistent 60% of the U.S. manufacturing average for two decades. Naturally, this makes recruitment of workers a constant challenge, especially in the low unemployment environment of the late 1990's.

The poultry industry on the Delmarva peninsula shares many of the characteristics of the national industry, but also faces some peculiar constraints because of its geographical location. The region, which incorporates all of Delaware, the eastern shore of Maryland, and one Virginia county, is bounded by water on its south, east, and west shores. Consequently Delmarva producers are oriented to the north, to markets in northern Maryland, eastern Pennsylvania, the greater New York City metropolitan region, and New England. It is the fifth largest poultry producing region in the U.S., following Arkansas, Georgia, Alabama, and North Carolina, and contributes about 9% of the broilers grown nationwide.

Poultry firms on the Delmarva Peninsula have artfully managed to maximize the productivity of the strictly limited land area for chicken and necessary feed crops; indeed, Sussex County is the top broiler producing county in the U.S. Delmarva is the headquarters of the third largest poultry processor in the United States, Perdue Farms, as well as Townsends

(9th), Allen Family Foods (13th), and Mountaire Farms (25th). Other leading national firms also operate processing plants on the Delmarva Peninsula, including Tyson Foods, the industry leader, and ConAgra, fourth in poultry production and one of the country's largest meatpacking concerns. The 13 processing plants operated by these companies slaughter approximately 11 million chickens each week, and employ around 21,000 men and women.

Despite amicable cooperation between Delmarva Poultry Industry, Inc. (the regional trade association) and the Extension Service, there is strenuous competition among Delmarva poultry firms, and between the Delmarva region and other states. Expanding poultry production in North Carolina is a particular source of concern for Delmarva-based firms, as the wage rates there are lower and there is far less regulation of labor conditions and plant effluent. In the last 5-10 years, firms have tried to remain competitive by expanding their operations to include greater finishing of chicken products, where there are more opportunities to control niche markets and increase the value-added component of their products. This has included expanding boning operations and prepackaging roasters for sale in retail outlets. Allen Family Foods has established a relationship with Boston Market to provide chickens for the fast growing chain, which are injected with Boston Market's distinctive marinade in the final stages of processing in Allen's Delaware plant. Throughout the Delmarva industry, today there is constant discussion about, and experimentation with methods of developing new value-added products which can preserve the region's competitive position.

Consequently, the labor demands of Delmarva producers mirror national trends. This has occurred at the same time as an alternative source of employment grew dramatically — the burgeoning coastal tourist industry based in Rehobeth Beach, Del., and Ocean City, Md. Situated just a few miles from the poultry plants, these service jobs have attracted many African American workers who once provided the key labor supply for chicken processing.

By the end of the 1980's, Delmarva poultry producers clearly needed a larger labor pool. As Table VII indicates, in 1990 the unemployment rate in Sussex County fell to just 3.8%, with only 2,300 workers



listed as unemployed. Over the next five years the unemployed labor pool remained below 3,600, leaving firms little room for expansion of their labor force.

Delmarva poultry processing firms found it increasingly difficult to hire workers from surrounding areas at proffered wages and working conditions. Recruitment of agricultural migrant workers became harder and younger African Americans seemed more reluctant to take poultry-processing jobs than in the past. Certain human resource management innovations may have also contributed to this problem. Several firms instituted mandatory drug testing in the 1990's. At one plant, immigrants were less likely to fail the test than were U.S. citizens.

Human resources managers point to the low unemployment, rapid growth in employment in the state of Delaware in the 1980's and 1990's, and a 30% dip in the aged 15 to 25 population cohort as factors contributing to persistent labor shortages. In 1980, there were 250,000 jobs in the state of Delaware. By 1997, there were 389,000 jobs - an increase of over 50%. Unemployment in Delaware in the 1990's has been significantly lower than the national and regional average rates.

Despite these constraints on available labor supply, broiler production continued to expand for domestic consumption and for new international export markets, especially Russia. Between 1985 and 1995, according to Delmarva Poultry Industry data, annual broiler production increased from 497 million birds to 623 million birds, whereas, total employment rose only from 20,587 to 20,800. In other words, broiler production grew 25% while employment increased just 1%. Labor shortages became so palpable that one firm hired a Wilmington employment agency to bus in temporary workers while another sought workers among inmates at a local correctional institution.

Labor turnover made the employment shortage far worse than these numbers indicate. One plant currently hires several hundred workers per week. New hires are given two days of orientation and then begin the often repetitious, physically demanding, and dangerous work. As a result, turnover in many of the poultry-processing factories generally is quite high, approaching 100% in one facility.

Tensions over working conditions has increased at the same time as the firms have faced labor shortages. There are allegations that production tempos have increased in recent years with resulting higher risks of injury. A serious injury suffered by one immigrant worker in a nearby plant in 1996, catalyzed a work stoppage and demonstration mainly involving immigrants. The firm fired the injured worker when management determined he was illegally employed.

Unionization efforts also have sharpened the debates over immigrant workers. Some Delmarva plants are unionized while others are not. Several firms abhor unions and have resisted unionization efforts. Tensions between pro-union and anti-union pro-management opinions were running very high in the summer of 1997. Several unions are pursuing unionization drives targeted at immigrant workers in the poultry-processing plants. From a union perspective, much can be done to make poultry-processing work more appealing. Union officials believe immigrants often do not know their rights or benefits to which they are entitled.

Located at least two hours from the nearest urban centers, Delmarva poultry producers have had a hard time finding alternative sources of labor. It is not surprising that they have extended a warm greeting to the Mexican and Guatemalan workers drawn here after 1990, much later than in the poultry producing regions further south (Griffith 1993, 151).

### **The Immigrant Influx of the 1990's**

No single factor appears to account for the tremendous upsurge in employment of immigrant labor by poultry-processing firms in the 1990's. Currently, between 40% and 60% of the workforces in various plants are thought to be non-citizens, the bulk of whom are Mexicans and Guatemalans. But this group, seemingly undifferentiated to Anglos, is actually comprised of several different and distinct migration streams.

A major barrier to immigrant integration in the area arises from the perception that many of the immigrants who arrived in the 1990's illegally. Most immigrants came to the Delmarva region legitimately as legally-admitted resident aliens, aliens legalized by IRCA, as asylum-seekers who, until 18 months

ago, were routinely given permission to take employment after applying for asylum, and as aliens granted temporary haven in the U.S. due to court rulings or out of U.S. foreign policy considerations. There are Salvadorans in the area and they are one of five groups designated for Temporary Protected Status (TPS) by the U.S. government.

The first Guatemalans to take jobs in poultry-processing were agricultural workers who had joined the East Coast migratory stream from Florida. Historically, a number of migrant agricultural workers “fell out” of the stream each summer, preferring year-round employment in poultry-processing. A Guatemalan poultry worker network quickly developed linking Georgetown and environs with Guatemalan communities from Florida to Texas, in Mexico, and Guatemala itself. It is unclear how many of the Guatemalans currently living and/or working in the area came directly from Guatemala and how many came after extended stays elsewhere in the U.S., for example in Guatemalan communities in other poultry-processing regions or in cities like New York. It is also unclear how many of the Guatemalans had previously lived in Mexico as quasi-refugees.

Among the Mexican and Guatemalan workers are many uneducated Mayan or Mayan-speaking Indians who do not speak Spanish, and are seeking legal status under the refugee clauses of American immigration laws. The Guatemalan city of San Marcos and environs, is the home of origin for much of this cohort. This area was affected by the civil war that took an estimated 160,000 lives since 1970. The U.S. was deeply implicated in the Guatemalan strife which had Cold War and ethnic dimensions and which only recently has come to a halt, however tenuously. The bulk of the victims were Indians who comprise 60% of Guatemala’s population of 10 million, but who are largely excluded from politics. Hundreds of Guatemalan Indians employed in poultry-processing firms in the area have applied for asylum in Newark, New Jersey, but very few of the applicants have been recognized as bonafide refugees. Many of the applications appear to be of the boilerplate variety which rarely are accepted. However, adjudication of many cases has been delayed for a myriad of reasons from legal challenges, to the INS, to U.S. foreign policy considerations. The Clinton Administration recently pledged

not to engage in repatriations of Central American-origin populations. The evolution of Mexico’s policies towards strife in Guatemala and the spillover of refugees to Mexican territory have possibly been factors behind the influx.

The two Guatemalan emigre populations, (Guatemalans arriving directly from Central America and those coming from other areas in the U.S.) often are quite distinct with political and ethnic activism characteristic of the former but not the latter. One informant estimates that 2,000 Guatemalans arrived in the Georgetown area, mainly in 1992 and 1993, and that over half of them arrived directly from Guatemala and a quarter of them after a sojourn elsewhere in the U.S., principally Florida.

It appears that some of the Guatemalan and Mexican immigrants have arrived in the area directly from their homelands after being smuggled into the southwestern United States by *coyotes*. Guatemalans from the San Marcos area who have heard of employment openings in poultry-processing, reportedly pay between \$1,500 and \$2,000 to be smuggled into the United States. This sum represents a fortune to most of them. However, the prospect of earning \$15,000 annually in a poultry-processing factory constitutes a considerable lure. Immigrants can earn from \$200 to \$300 per week and many remit \$800 to \$1,000 home per month. Once in the U.S., it is relatively easy to purchase fraudulent documents. Some immigrants circumvent the law by renting bonafide documents from individuals who resemble them.<sup>1</sup>

The role of the poultry firms in the immigrant influx has been hotly contested. Several firms in the region have been fined by INS for violations of I-9 paperwork requirements and there have been INS raids upon poultry-processing plants, which have resulted in detentions and deportations. There are widespread charges that some labor-starved firms indirectly recruited Guatemalan and Mexican workers without employment or residency authorization in the U.S. Several informants claim to have seen handbills distributed in Guatemala and Mexico advertising jobs in Delmarva poultry processing plants.

These allegations are strenuously rejected by the poultry firms who claim to have made considerable effort to abide by the law. It is clear that INS enforcement activities have spurred extensive and quite

costly efforts to comply with the law. One plant in the area, for instance, has four levels of administrative review to ensure compliance with IRCA and has a full-time secretary processing I-9 compliance files. Over the last year or so, a number of poultry-processing firms voluntarily agreed to join the INS employment eligibility verification pilot system. Industry representatives frequently cited cooperations with the INS as proof of employer intent to comply with IRCA requirements.

These immigrants are highly prized as obedient and industrious workers by poultry firm management. They are viewed as superior workers because of their work ethic, a quality which many U.S. citizen workers reportedly lack. Immigrants reportedly have responded to demanding requirements concerning lateness and absences. One firm uses a point system where an employee loses one point for an absence and a half-point for tardiness. The employee can gain points by showing up for work punctually during a month and leaves of absences are granted. Despite the difficulty of the work, it is not unusual for Central Americans to work one shift for one poultry processor and an additional one for a different firm. Part of the explanation for high rates of turnover in some plants is that employees will shift firms to earn slightly more elsewhere.

### **Characteristics of Immigrants and Their Effects Upon the Community**

Social tensions surrounding immigrant workers in the poultry-processing firms involve complex issues similarly found in other industries and areas heavily affected by immigration. Sources of tension include crime, housing, recreation, social services, the responsibilities of private firms and government, unions, and the effect of immigrants on working conditions and wages.

Most of the immigrants who arrived during the 1990's were single, young men who were sending money home to families in Central America. Some have since been joined by family members and put down roots. There are growing numbers of children, a share of whom have been born in the U.S.<sup>2</sup>

The majority of workers remain oriented towards their homeland. They have emigrated with an expectation of returning home. Typically, they strive to

save in order to send money home. Some of these remittances support construction of homes. Other remittances sustain families. It is much easier and safer for the Guatemalans to send money home today than three or four years ago thanks to innovations by banks and credit unions. This has helped decrease robberies committed against immigrants.

The most frequent and significant transgressions by immigrants appear to involve driving without a license. However, some immigrants, especially Haitians, many of whom arrived in the area in the late 1970's, have been arrested for selling drugs and there has been growing drug-related criminality, including theft. Despite perceptions of a link between immigrants and crime, they are much more frequently victims of theft or robbery than perpetrators.

Housing has been one of the major flashpoints of conflict between immigrants and native born residents. Single male immigrants tend to share housing where they frequently sleep in shifts. They thereby are able to reduce expenses and perhaps send more money home.

As more and more immigrant workers arrived, a number of private residences were subdivided and rented out to the immigrants for what were widely perceived as exorbitant rates. Most local governments in the area adopted laws restricting the number of unrelated persons able to live together in a lodging. However, these measures have proven difficult to enforce. A way of circumvention is for the immigrants to declare that they are family members. It is difficult for authorities to prove the contrary. However, a new building inspector was hired in Georgetown and it is possible that there will be more stringent enforcement of housing codes in the future. Nonetheless, in the absence of alternative housing arrangements, evictions of tenants from buildings not in compliance with codes only serves to create a homeless population, doubtless increasing social tensions.

Perhaps because of their less than desirable housing situations, many of the immigrants stay outside during their leisure periods and this is disconcerting, if not threatening, to elements of the non-immigrant population. Disjunctures between the immigrant populations mores and habits and those of the indigenous community contributed importantly to tensions felt several years ago.

The housing problems of immigrant workers are shared by white Sussex County residents. About half of the population in Sussex county is thought to live in mobile homes, and there are also clusters of immigrants living in mobile homes. Many, both citizen and non-citizen, simply cannot afford better lodging. Concurrently, several cities in the region in addition to Georgetown, are undergoing gentrification by retirees from nearby metropolises. Whether suitable, affordable housing for the immigrant workers, and increasingly their families, can be found will importantly influence long-term outcomes.

The poultry-processing firms do not provide housing, and employees are required to make their own living arrangements. Several firms experimented with company housing arrangements in the past, but these fared poorly and were discontinued. Bill Satterfield, executive director of Delmarva Poultry Industry, Inc. (DPI) summarized the industry's viewpoint as follows:

*None of the companies are providing housing to their non-English speaking workers, just as they are not providing housing to the English speaking employees. These companies are in the business of producing chickens. They are not in the housing business. It is unreasonable to expect the poultry companies to provide housing to their employees when other major employers in the state are not expected to provide housing for their workers. At least two companies offered housing to their workers several years ago and it was a disaster. The units were not maintained by the tenants and it was just a bad situation. (Diamond State Granger, November 1995, p.9)*

The immigrant influx of the mid-1990's transformed an area of Georgetown located along the railroad tracks, known as Kimmytown. Absentee home owners in this area subdivided them into apartments for immigrants, provoking concerns that property values would decline throughout the city and that Kimmytown would become a ghetto.

From the standpoint of the immigrants, however, Kimmytown has become a vibrant center for their community. A number of grocery stores and restaurants catering to immigrants have opened, creating a

“Little Guatemala” or “Little Mexico” effect near the heart of this colonial city. The presence in Kimmytown of these small businesses, a church frequented by the Central Americans, and several centers staffed by religious orders which provide services for immigrants, spatially define the immigrant neighborhood. In the last few years, the establishment of Spanish language television, radio stations, and a Spanish language newspaper have greatly encouraged consolidation of an immigrant community in Georgetown.

The strong family values of the immigrants is a quality that resonates well with the local non-immigrant population. And family formation is taking place. There are more female immigrants and children than several years ago. Judging from what is known about immigrant families nationally, it seems highly likely that many of the immigrant families include members with variable legal status—say a husband who is a permanent resident, a spouse who is illegal, and a child who is illegal, and one who is a U.S. citizen as he or she was born in the U.S. However, there is no credible or systematic information concerning the legal status of immigrants in the area. Many, if not most, have been legally admitted to the U.S. or are asylum applicants. U.S. authorities have tolerated mixed legal status family situations in the past as under the family fairness doctrine pursuant to the IRCA- authorized legalizations. The actual population residing in the area in contravention of U.S. immigration law is probably far less than widely thought. There is a well-known tendency to conflate legal and illegal resident aliens. U.S. citizens of Mexican or Central American background are also commonly mistaken for unauthorized entrants.

Immigrant settlement and family formation have raised additional integration questions. Local schools have scrambled to provide English as a Second Language (ESL) education. This is expensive for school districts which have borne the cost without state support. The Delaware state legislature is considering a measure to help defray these ESL costs at the local level.

The cultural gap between immigrants and the indigenous population is considerable. Many of the immigrants hail from primitive settings, can neither read nor write, and understand little about modern American life. Perhaps the most dangerous aspect of this involves driving. There is little public trans-

portation in the area. Many of the immigrants need to drive miles to work. A recurrent problem is immigrants driving without a license or insurance. To make it easier for Spanish-speaking immigrants to pass the drivers test, a Spanish language exam was instituted by the Delaware state government.

As awareness of the scale of immigration to the area grew, numerous organizations and government agencies responded to the perceived needs of the immigrant community. First and foremost, various religious orders and communities helped create institutions to assist the immigrants with problems ranging from immigration status to nutrition and education. These institutions have done much to foster the integration of the immigrants and to reduce immigration-related tensions within the city and environs. But much more needs to be done to integrate these new immigrants into Georgetown and its environs.

## Policy Implications

Field research conducted in the area in 1979 and 1980 on agricultural migrants suggested that there were relatively few illegal immigrants in the area. Most of the poultry-processing labor force back then was African American with a minority of whites and a sprinkling of Hispanics and Haitians. Virtually all poultry workers appeared to be U.S. citizens or employment-authorized resident aliens.

Nearly twenty years later, much has changed and U.S. immigration law and policy developments have had much to do with that. Many millions of immigrants have been legally admitted to permanent residency in the U.S. under immigration law which facilitates family reunification. Millions of refugees have been admitted, granted residency, and many have become U.S. citizens. Some three million illegally resident aliens became legal as a result of the 1986 immigration law. Many of them have since become citizens.

Mexicans and Guatemalans were major beneficiaries of federal immigration policies. Additional hundreds of thousands have entered the country since 1986 and applied for asylum. Until quite recently, asylum seekers were routinely granted employment authorization, and federal officials were ill-prepared for the huge upsurge in applications which meant drawn out adjudication periods for many asylum

applicants. Recent changes have ended automatic extension of employment eligibility to applicants, increased the number of judges available to hear applications, and streamlined procedures. Critics contend that some of these changes make it more difficult for bonafide refugees to obtain asylum in the U.S. On the other hand, there appears to have been many frivolous claims where applicants succeeded in circumventing immigration restrictions and obtained employment eligibility on fraudulent grounds. Reforms of asylum procedures and regulations several years ago and the 1996 immigration law were intended to close the door to such abuse.

Additional hundreds of thousands from strife-torn Central America were granted temporary haven in the U.S. while court orders banned the repatriation of tens of thousands of others. On top of all of this, illegal immigration has persisted despite the 1986 law and reinforcement of the federal government's ability to prevent and punish unauthorized entry and employment. There currently are an estimated five million illegal aliens in the U.S.

In view of the magnitude of legal and illegal immigration over the past two decades, it would be more surprising if it had not greatly affected the poultry-processing industry. After all, poultry-processing work is difficult and relatively poorly paid. There is relatively little potential for career advancement, although there's a wage hierarchy. The area's labor market was very tight. Unskilled native-born workers could find better paying, more attractive work elsewhere. Arrival of immigrants accentuated social stigmatizing of poultry-processing work but didn't begin it.

To the extent that lawful immigrants took work in poultry-processing firms, their employment has no bearing on evaluation of the effectiveness of IRCA's deterrent provisions, such as penalization of unlawful hiring of aliens. It is difficult to substantiate or dispute rumors to the effect that many immigrants were able to circumvent the intent of the 1986 law through use of fraudulent documents. INS enforcement services have levied substantial fines against several firms for I-9 paperwork violations and factory raids have resulted in the detention and deportation of up to 124 individuals, mainly Mexicans and Guatemalans, in a single raid. But there appears to be no "smoking gun" evidence of large-scale violations of the 1986 law.

Reportedly there is a fraudulent document market and industry in the area, although, illegally entering Guatemalans often appear to purchase their fake papers in Texas. Especially following INS raids, local poultry-processing firms appear to thoroughly vet documents which establish employment eligibility. The employment verification pilot system has helped the firms comply with the law. Applicants who cannot establish employment eligibility usually vanish, perhaps to seek employment elsewhere.

The 1986 employer sanctions provision of the law was portrayed by many of its detractors as draconian and inherently discriminatory against Hispanics and other minorities. In light of the dramatic expansion of Hispanic immigrant employment in the region's poultry-processing firms over the past decade, there would appear to be little reason to grant credence to criticism.

INS activities have worried the immigrant community to a far greater degree than occasional enforcement forays and raids would suggest to outside observers. INS enforcement activities have inspired widespread fear in the immigrant community in Georgetown and environs. Enrollment in English language classes plummeted at a nearby immigrant resource center in the wake of INS enforcement activities. The INS presence is felt much more in the area today than was the case twenty years ago. Local pro-immigrant activists have adopted staunchly adversarial positions against INS enforcement activities. Even the Mayor of Georgetown recently ordered city police not to participate in INS enforcement actions.

Early in 1997, the INS and officials from several other agencies investigated a nearby poultry-processing plant. The production line was halted which resulted in costly wastage of the chickens. Employees were separated by physical appearance and mainly Hispanic-looking employees were questioned. As a result, some 125 were detained and deported although one, a woman, was subsequently released. Enforcement operations of this scale appear relatively rare but have had a deterrent effect and leave a deep imprint on the memories of immigrants in the area.

The INS presence in the Georgetown region will doubtlessly increase. As a result of hearings held in 1996 by U.S. Senator Joseph Biden (D-Del.) an INS

agent was stationed in the area. Soon an INS office will open in Dover, about one half hour's drive north, in conformity with 1996 legislation. Opening of the Dover office could benefit some immigrants, particularly asylum-applicants, who previously had to travel to the regional INS office in Philadelphia to process their paperwork. On the other hand, the immigrant community generally fears more extensive enforcement activity as a result of greater INS presence. It is difficult to reconcile these perceptions amongst immigrants in the Georgetown area with the prevalent academic viewpoint that enforcement of immigration law is symbolic and ineffective.

A number of informants have voiced support for a legalization policy, especially for Guatemalan asylum-seekers whose cases have been in limbo for many years. Many of these Guatemalans work in the poultry-plants and are viewed by all parties as exemplary workers. There also has been discussion within poultry-processing management circles of temporary foreign worker recruitment. However, this option has not been backed for fear of litigation.

Immigration has changed the face of rural Delaware but there is a lag in understanding why this is so. If anything, U.S. immigration policy and law probably have been more generous than many Americans know, or would want to know. There is widespread ignorance or misunderstanding of legal immigration policies and policies pertaining to refugees, being that asylum-seekers and temporary entrants foster confusion. Misunderstanding of federal immigration policies constitutes a major barrier to successful integration of a population, which for the most part, appears destined to remain in the area.

The generosity of federal policies is more striking, on the whole, than their restrictive and punitive aspects. In scholarly and public policymaking circles, since circa 1980, there has been a great deal of writing and talk about the U.S. closing the door to immigration. IRCA, in particular, was castigated as a draconian restrictionist legislation. A little more than a decade later, it seems that IRCA was not as harsh as sometimes portrayed. It did accomplish much by making illegal alien employment a punishable offense.

Some informants in Georgetown contend that IRCA enables employers to better "police" workers and to obstruct pro-union activists. One of the major

paradoxes in the Georgetown area is that a measure generally supported by unions - employer sanctions - is an anathema to local union activists. The adversarial climate that prevails between INS enforcement agents, local union activists, and pro-immigrant organizations does not bode well for the future.

### Local and State-Level Integration Measures

In the past few years there have been a variety of initiatives to integrate immigrant workers into the Georgetown community. By and large, local and state officials strive to achieve immigrant integration, not exclusion. While tensions remain quite high, there are programs and organizations in place which are taking action to improve community relations and the conditions of immigrants' lives. A great deal however, remains to be done.

An ad hoc group including several University of Delaware extension specialists began meeting to identify problems and concerns affecting the recent immigrants. This group has performed a vital service and has been instrumental in bringing about changes which have helped foster immigrant integration. An offshoot of this initiative has been a proposal to establish *Primeros Pasos*, a child care center for immigrant children: A survey (cited in the proposal) of 59 Georgetown area Spanish-speaking families found that in 30, both parents worked.

Municipal and county governments also have been quite active. On the state level, the Delaware Governor's Council for Hispanic Affairs has played an important role in sensitizing various state agencies, and the population of the state, to the special needs and problems of the largely Hispanic-origin immigrants in Delaware.

Religious orders and bodies have played a critical role. Two religiously affiliated resource centers have been established in Georgetown to assist immigrants. *La Casita*, and the more recently formed *L'Esperanza*, provide a multitude of services to immigrants ranging from English language tutoring, to transporting immigrants to Philadelphia or Newark INS offices, to helping immigrants fill out asylum application forms. Clergy appear to comprise the backbone of institutions serving immigrants in the area. There is a high degree of ecumenical cooperation in this.

In the wake of an INS raid, which was assisted by local and state police, a group of clergy formed a committee to question certain INS procedures and, more generally, to promote immigrant integration. It has since convened several times and has identified securing professional legal assistance from lawyers trained in immigration law as an urgent priority. There apparently are only one or two immigration lawyers in the state of Delaware and none in Sussex County. There is a Legal Services office in Georgetown but it does not provide assistance on immigration matters per se. It helps immigrants who pay exorbitant rents or who are taken advantage of in business transactions, etc. By and large, an immigrant would have to go to Philadelphia, more than two hours by car away, for assistance from an immigration attorney. Delaware does have a small Office for the Foreign Born in Wilmington which provides assistance, but that is one 90 minutes away.

Medical care for immigrant mothers, day-care for immigrant children, and immigrant access to medical services more generally comprise additional priority concerns. A grant has been written for a new medical services center for immigrants in Georgetown. Poultry-processing firms have pledged monetary support for a medical services center. The 1997 session of the Delaware legislature was marked by a debate over provision of health care to illegal resident aliens, particularly pre-natal care.<sup>3</sup>

Housing is another priority. Many immigrants live in substandard conditions. Public authorities face a quandary. Where will immigrant tenants go if housing codes are more strictly enforced? There are no apparent plans in place to increase rental housing stock in the poultry areas, or to facilitate home ownership even though some immigrants have been able to purchase housing and "for sale" signs near Georgetown sometimes appear in Spanish.

Several of the poultry-processing firms provide English language and survival Spanish classes for employees on company time. The state of Delaware gives a tax credit to firms to encourage this, and similar legislation is under consideration in Maryland.

The future of African American and Hispanic relations constitutes a major question mark. Delaware was deeply segregated until the 1950's. That legacy weighs heavily upon the state and was

manifest in the commonplace derogatory comments about African Americans heard in many interviews. One of the most delicate tasks ahead is how to achieve immigrant integration when the gap between white and black Delawareans remains so large. Immigrant and African American integration cannot be viewed as elements of a zero-sum game. They must be viewed as complementary goals for Delaware to achieve in the next century.

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Immigration concerns have not loomed large in local or state politics, but that situation may not endure. There are growing numbers of Hispanic voters throughout Delaware and a voter registration drive for newly naturalized Hispanics was conducted in 1996. Moreover, immigrants are here to stay, and the prevailing mood now seems to be that immigrant and non-immigrant Delawareans must learn to live together. It will take some time and timely interventions by public authorities and others will be needed to ensure that immigrant integration is achieved.

## Endnotes

1. There are well-known and trusted coyotes. Nevertheless, it is frequently difficult and perilous to emigrate from Guatemala to the poultry-processing firms. There have been many killings and robberies at the Mexico-Guatemala border, many of which are connected to the strife in Guatemala (*The Mustard Seed*, Spring, 1996 and *Le Monde*, April 12, 1996). Some illegally-entering Guatemalans are detected at the U.S.-Mexico border or en route once past the border.
2. Circa 1975, W.R. Boehning, now the International Labor Organization's chief migrant specialist, developed a conceptualization of immigration. The four stages progress from an initial stage in which typically young male migrants arrive abroad with every intention to return home to a fourth stage in which repatriation is no longer desired, family reunification has occurred and the immigrants have settled and become a permanent part of the society in the land of immigration. In the area being studied, individual immigrants could be classified in all four stages.
3. That same session also witnessed revival of an attempt to pass an English-only law, a measure that had been vetoed by the Governor in the previous session. The lower house adopted a slightly modified version but the Senate took no action on it prior to adjournment.



## Appendix A-Tables

**Table I: 1994 Race and Hispanic Origin Population Estimates for Sussex County Change, 1990-1994**

	<i>1990</i>	<i>1991</i>	<i>1992</i>	<i>1993</i>	<i>1994</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Percent</i>
White	92,189	93,983	95,965	97,998	99,543	7,354	8.0%
W. Hispanic	1,170	1,237	1,312	1,391	1,485	315	26.9%
Black	19,221	19,965	20,705	21,410	22,506	3,285	17.1%
Indian, Eskimo	650	664	683	693	720	70	10.8%
Asian	607	655	716	755	832	225	37.1%
Hispanic (any race)	1,491	1,566	1,651	1,748	1,863	372	24.9%

*Source: US Census Bureau*

**Table II — Broiler Chicken Production, 1935-1995**

<i>year</i>	<i>number (thousands)</i>	<i>year</i>	<i>number (thousands)</i>
1935	34,030	1970	2,987,098
1940	142,762	1975	2,932,711
1945	365,572	1980	3,963,211
1950	631,458	1985	4,469,578
1955	1,091,684	1990	5,864,150
1960	1,794,933	1995	7,017,540
1965	2,334,45		

*Source: Poultry Tribute, Sept. 1995, 8-9.*

**Table III: Annual Consumption of Broilers 1935-1955**

<i>year</i>	<i>broilers (lbs)</i>
1940	2.0
1950	8.7
1960	27.9
1970	40.5
1980	48.8
1990	63.0
1995	75.0

*Source: U. S. Department of Agriculture, Egg and Poultry Statistics Through 1957, Statistical Bulletin 249 (Washington D. C.: May 1959), 8, and Delmarva Poultry Industry, Inc.*

**Table IV How Broilers Are Marked — In Percent**

<i>year</i>	<i>whole</i>	<i>cut-up</i>	<i>processed</i>
1962	83.0	15.0	2.0
1970	70.0	26.0	4.0
1980	50.0	40.0	10.0
1990	18.0	56.0	29.0
1994	12.0	55.0	33.0

Source: Figures courtesy of Delmarva Poultry Industry, Inc., drawn from USDA sources.

**Table V — Employment Poultry Industry, 1972-1994**

<i>production year</i>	<i>increase from female workers</i>	<i>previous year</i>	<i>employees*</i>
1994	198,300	4,900	97,400
1993	193,400	6,600	95,500
1992	186,800	5,200	94,300
1991	181,600	3,000	92,700
1990	178,600	7,700	92,400
1989	170,900	8,900	91,500
1988	162,000	7,400	87,600
1987	154,600	11,200	84,100
1986	143,400	9,700	78,700
1985	133,700	8,800	73,300
1984	124,900	6,900	68,600
1983	118,000	2,700	66,400
1982	115,300	-1,000	66,000
1981	116,300	900	67,300
1980	115,400	1,100	66,500
1979	114,300	10,200	65,400
1978	104,100	4,300	59,900
1977	99,900	2,700	57,700
1976	97,200	6,100	56,500
1975	91,100	-4,400	54,300
1974	95,500	-2,100	57,300
1973	97,600	0	58,000
1972	97,600	57,900	

\* includes production and non-production workers

Source: U.S. Department of Labor, Employment, Hours, and Earnings - United States, 1990-1995, Bureau of Labor Statistics Bulletin 2465 (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 1995), 128. U.S. Department of Labor, Employment, Hours, and Earnings - United States, 1981-93 Bureau of Labor Statistics Bulletin 2429 (Washington, D.C.: Aug. 1993), 204-5. U.S. Department of Labor, Employment, Hours, and Earnings - United States, 1909-90, Vol I Bureau of Labor Statistics Bulletin 2370 (Washington, D.C.: March 1991), 423-4.

**Table VI Hourly Pay, Poultry Industry vs. U.S. Manufacturing, 1972-1992**

<i>year</i>	<i>poultry</i>	<i>US manufacturing</i>	<i>% poultry/man.</i>
1992	7.26	11.95	61
1990	6.84	11.25	61
1985	5.75	9.94	58
1980	4.53	7.41	61
1975	3.03	5.04	60
1972	2.40	3.95	61

Source: U.S. Department of Labor, Employment, Hours, and Earnings - United States, 1990-1995, Bureau of Labor Statistics Bulletin 2465 (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 1995), 128. U.S. Department of Labor, Employment, Hours, and Earnings - United States, 1981-93 Bureau of Labor Statistics Bulletin 2429 (Washington, D.C.: Aug. 1993), 204-5. U.S. Department of Labor, Employment, Hours, and Earnings - United States, 1909-90, Vol I Bureau of Labor Statistics Bulletin 2370 (Washington, D.C.: March 1991), 423-4. U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Wages, Annual Averages, 1993, Bureau of Labor Statistics Bulletin 2449 (Washington D.C.: Oct. 1994), 1-254.

**Table VII Employment and Unemployment, Delaware and Sussex County, 1990-1996**

*State of Delaware*

	<b>1990</b>	<b>1993</b>	<b>1996</b>
civ. labor force	358,900	374,400	382,400
employed	340,200	354,400	362,700
unemployed	18,700	20,000	19,700
unemployment rate	5.2%	5.3%	5.2%

*Sussex County*

	<b>1990</b>	<b>1993</b>	<b>1996</b>
civ. labor force	61,400	65,800	67,900
employed	59,100	62,200	64,800
unemployed	2,300	3,600	3,100
unemployment rate	3.8%	5.5%	4.5%

Source: U.S. Department of Labor