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Immigration and the Changing Face of Rural America: Focus on the Midwestern States

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ABSTRACT

The title of this paper suggests that the population composition of rural America is changing rapidly, as Mexican, Central American, and Asian immigrants take jobs in agriculture and related industries. The paper highlights the results of a recent conference, one of a series on the impact of immigration to rural areas, that focused on the Midwest. Of particular interest to these efforts is Hispanic or Latino immigration, since Latinos comprise the vast majority of the nation's increasing rural immigrants in recent decades. The driving force behind this project is the concern that the substantial growth in rural immigration that has been in evident for some time may lead to vast new pockets of entrenched rural poverty. The key results of the conference discussions, based on current research efforts, are presented here. First, immigration to the Midwest appears not to be as extensive as media reports have suggested because many rural area settlers are merely Latino or Asian migrants from other parts of the nation rather than abroad. Second, major employers of these newcomers—mainly meat processing companies—are providing low, but generally livable, wages to these incoming workers. Most of the latter work alongside non-migrant workers and within unionized settings. Further, despite some problems, social resistance to their settling has been relatively mild, at least up to now.