

Iowa sees evolving immigrant workforce

A wave of Latino migration has given way to an influx of Asian refugees, posing new challenges in education, language and customs.

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The face of Iowa's meatpacking towns is changing once again, as communities that adapted to new residents from Mexico and other Latino countries now see a surge of refugees from Southeast Asia.

The shift has prompted some businesses that catered to Latinos to close and has introduced unprecedented language barriers in these rural communities. But it's also bolstering rural populations and creating new opportunities for businesses that serve the newcomers.

The demographic change follows a 20-year era of immigration in which the Hispanic population in Iowa quadrupled. Many of the immigrants arrived in Iowa to work at lower-paying jobs in meatpacking plants.

Over the past 18 months, towns like Columbus Junction, Marshalltown, Perry and Postville have received an influx of refugees, particularly from Myanmar, formerly Burma, a southeast Asian country struggling to establish democracy after years of dictatorship.

The stream of refugees comes at the right time for companies looking for workers.

Refugee status requires official recognition from the federal government. It generally applies to people outside of their country who are unable or unwilling to return home because they fear serious harm, such as persecution on account of race, religion or social group.

"What this does is produce a very diverse workforce that's in the country legally, so we escape all these concerns about the undocumented workforce," said Mark Grey, a University of Northern Iowa anthropology professor who calls the demographic shift a "post-Latino" immigration era. "Of course, the challenges now have to do with the tremendous diversification of the languages and ethnicities."

The federal government in recent years has clamped down on illegal immigration, and employers have turned to legal populations such as refugees and residents from U.S. territories in the South Pacific to fill jobs, said Michele Devlin, a UNI public health professor who studies Iowa immigration trends.

The result, she said, is an unprecedented mix of people settling in Iowa from across the globe: Sudanese refugees from a variety of tribes who speak more than 100 languages; refugees from Myanmar, where there are dozens of dialects; and South Pacific islanders fluent in languages spoken by just a few thousand people.

It's a challenge for cash-strapped small towns and schools to help new residents find a place to live, set up utilities and register children for classes. Even professional telephonic interpreter services sometimes have had trouble finding someone who speaks a language, Devlin said.

The language barriers rarely make headlines until tragedy strikes. In July, three Myanmar refugee children drowned while swimming in a Marshalltown river. The police contacted a volunteer Burmese interpreter to assist the grief-stricken family, but the family and the interpreter spoke different languages. As a result, it took police more than 12 hours to confirm the identities of the children, and longer than normal to arrange funerals.

"It's not that we just have a vast variety of languages, but many of these languages are classified as rare, and relatively few people speak them in the world," Devlin said. "What do you do in the event of emergencies or health care or finding a place to live?"

Although minority populations have grown dramatically over the past 20 years in Iowa, the state remains overwhelmingly white. As of the 2010 census, whites made up 92.9 percent of the population. Latinos were the largest racial or ethnic group, at 5 percent; blacks, 2.9 percent; and Asians, 1.7 percent.

In recent decades, Iowa's immigrants have spoken just a handful of languages. In the mid-1970s, refugees from Southeast Asia settled in Iowa communities with meatpacking plants. The influx of legal and illegal immigrants from Mexico and Central and South America began a decade later.

Now, as immigration from Mexico slows, a new mix from around the globe begins to build.

"Diversity has come to mean something else than it even did 10 years ago," Grey said.

New stores serve new patrons

Main street storefronts offer a window into Iowa's recent immigration history.

Two Latino-owned shops in Columbus Junction have recently closed, but a grocery store that serves refugees from Myanmar has opened. Mexican grocers in towns such as Perry have noticed fewer new faces walking their aisles, and sales have dropped, they said.

School enrollment tells a similar story. Columbus Junction has seen the number of Latino students decline the past five years. Other districts have reported a stagnating or declining number of nonproficient English speakers from Mexico and other Latino countries, an indication that fewer people from there are immigrating to the United States.

About five years ago, the Storm Lake school district saw as many as 15 children arrive from Mexico each month. In all of last year, the middle school counted 30 children who arrived from another country, said Lori Porsch, the district's curriculum and special education director.

“We are not seeing as many that are coming directly to us from Mexico or Central America,” Porsch said.

This shift is occurring nationwide. For the first time since a wave of Mexican immigration began 40 years ago, about the same number of Mexicans are returning to their home country as are arriving in the U.S., according to a Pew Research Center study released this spring.

Experts point to two factors for the reversal: lack of jobs and stepped-up enforcement of federal immigration laws.

The U.S. has deported a record number of illegal immigrants in recent years, strengthened border patrols and conducted more audits of company records to ferret out illegal immigrants on payrolls. Meanwhile, the number of jobs available for Latinos has declined. The struggling economy likely plays a role — Latino newcomers often found employment in construction, for example — but so does the drive to ensure a legal pool of workers, said Grey, the UNI anthropology professor.

The boom in non-Latino immigration reverses a particularly long tradition of Mexican immigration in Columbus Junction, which began decades before the 1990s wave that filled other meatpacking towns. The town is located along a corridor in eastern Iowa with a high minority population dubbed Iowa’s “Hispanic Highway.”

Tyson Foods says about 17 percent of the 1,200 employees at its pork processing plant in Columbus Junction are Burmese. Before 2008, no Burmese were on the payroll.

Census data show Columbus Junction’s population has increased slightly from 2006 to 2011, and faster growth may lie ahead. In the past six months, Myanmar refugees have starting bringing wives and children, school officials said.

The number of Asian and Pacific Islander students in the district increased from two to 15 students over a five-year period, and is expected to increase this fall as more Myanmar families come to work at Tyson, said Marlene Johnson, the school district’s superintendent.

“We’re working on providing documents and translating them into their language,” she said.

Varied languages erect barrier

Susan Pretz, a white Iowan born and raised in Columbus Junction, graduated from high school in 1979 with three Mexican classmates. Their families arrived to work at a tomato plant and never left. They’ve been here so long, Pretz said she considers them natives.

Because of that history, many in town didn’t expect to accommodate immigrants who spoke a language other than Spanish, she said.

Pretz, a teller at one of the two banks in town, remembers when the Myanmar refugees first came to her window and wrote down the dollar amount they wanted to withdraw. Hardly a word was spoken.

“There’s no chatting like some of the old-timers who want your life history and what you’ve been up to lately,” she said. But the town is growing, and “we seem to be adapting to change,” she said.

Two years ago, so few Myanmar refugees lived in town that Jany Moreno, 62, said she felt sorry for them. They traveled halfway across the world to “only see Mexicans,” said Moreno, who is from Mexico but has lived in Columbus Junction for 21 years.

Now that so many refugees have arrived, she has some concerns about the future of her clothing business, Fandango’s Erika, and the town, she said.

Moreno sees Columbus Junction at a crossroads. With no new Latino customers arriving with cash earned from the plant, she earns just enough to pay the bills and eat, she said.

“Instead of bringing Mexicans ... they’re bringing Asians, just Asians,” she said. “Along the (Mexican-U.S.) border, there are people without jobs. Instead of bringing them here, they’re bringing these others. It’s too bad.”

Workers pour out of the plant on weekdays between 4 and 5 p.m. to shop at places like the New York Dollar Store Plus. The owner, a Mexican mother of two, Adela Sosa, 45, has started buying energy drinks by the case, some from Asia and some familiar U.S. brands such as Monster. Energy drinks are to the Myanmar refugees what Coca-Cola is to Mexicans, she said; they can’t drink enough of them.

Lai Luai Cinnzah, 30, said he arrived five years ago with a few friends as one of the first Burmese in the area. (Like many refugees here, he calls himself Burmese because he calls his native country Burma.) He likes the rural setting better than Chicago, where he lived for two months, because it reminds him of home.

Cinnzah said he can’t believe that hundreds of Burmese have arrived in just the past two years. Columbus Junction now reminds him even more of home, he said.

“Now it looks like (an) Asian town,” he said.

A repeat of low literacy levels

The more things change in Marshalltown, the more they stay the same.

Fifteen years ago, the town received thousands of Mexicans from a small town in the state of Michoacan. They had little or no formal education. The staff at the Iowa Valley Education and Training Center set out to teach them how to read and write in English, a challenge because many were illiterate in their native Spanish.

Now the arrivals from Myanmar refugee camps have similar levels of education. Most have spent much of their lives with an estimated 150,000 refugees living in camps along the Myanmar-Thailand border.

About 80 percent of students come with less than a sixth-grade education level, and most top out at third grade, according to statistics compiled by the center.

“It almost seems like history is repeating itself,” said Jennifer Wilson, director of adult literacy programs.

To bridge the divide, the community leans on people like James Taw, 40, as culture liaisons and interpreters.

He’s one of the better English speakers, though he still attends classes at the center on most days. He interprets for newcomers at his job at the town’s meatpacking plant.

Taw last saw his wife and son three years ago in refugee camps along the Myanmar-Thailand border. He said he misses them — he carries their pictures in his bag — but he needed to move here to help them survive.

“It’s hard. They don’t get enough,” he said. “I decided to support them and come here.”

More students are advancing from pre-literacy to basic English classes, but the center is still working on integrating its new neighbors into the community.

Building a sense of community can help people in everyday life and in times of tragedy, such as when the three refugee children drowned, Wilson said. The distraught mother of two of the children tried to throw herself out of an upper-level window in her apartment, a friend said. Community members, eager to assist, felt helpless.

“We want them to feel this is a community,” Wilson said. “Because of situations like this summer, we want them to come here and get the support they need.”

<http://www.desmoinesregister.com/article/20120805/NEWS/308050067/Iowa-sees-evolving-immigrant-workforce?News>