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This policy brief is a product of the 2010 Chicago Area Study.

Public Policy Brief

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Immigration Ambivalence in Suburbia: Evidence from Lake County

By Maria Krysan, Matthew Hall, and Patrick Washington

The Chicago metropolitan area has long been the destination of immigrants from around the world. One of the features of the most recent wave of immigration is that immigrants are moving not just to the city of Chicago, but also to its suburbs—with some moving from the city to the suburbs, but many moving directly into the suburbs from their home countries. Researchers, community leaders, and residents themselves are interested in what this means for their communities and immigrant/non-immigrant relations. Lake County, Illinois has been one of these 'new' destinations, more than tripling (+332%) its (largely Latino) immigrant population since 1980. Lake County therefore provides a window into the landscape of communities that are experiencing rapid increases in immigrant populations.

At the same time, our nation has been engaged in debates at the local, state, and national level about immigration policy. Indeed, the lack of national leadership on immigration policy is regularly cited as prompting the patchwork pattern of state and local policies attempting to prevent, reverse, or in some cases, encourage immigration. Most recently, upon his re-election, President Obama and Congressional leaders are promising new action on a comprehensive plan that deals with the 12 million undocumented immigrants in the country today and regulates flows of future migrants. This research brief reports basic results from a 2010 survey of residents in six communities in Lake County, IL. We provide these data as one window into the context in which the policy debates, and policies, have and will be playing themselves out.

In 2010, a team of researchers at the University of Illinois at Chicago¹ began a large, multi-faceted study of how immigration was being experienced in six communities in suburban Lake County, IL.² This project included in-depth interviews with residents, community leaders, and advocates as well as a large-scale representative survey of residents. Respondents were interviewed either in person or by telephone, and asked a number of questions about their attitudes toward and experiences with immigration and immigrants.

¹The researchers included the first author as well as Nilda Flores-Gonzalez, Andy Clarno, Pamela Popielarz, Xochitl Bada, and Amalia Pallares. Funding for the 2010 CAS was provided by the University of Illinois at Chicago, the University of Illinois Institute of Government and Public Affairs, and the National Science Foundation.

²The communities included in this study are Highland Park, Highwood, North Chicago, Round Lake/Round Lake Beach, and Waukegan.

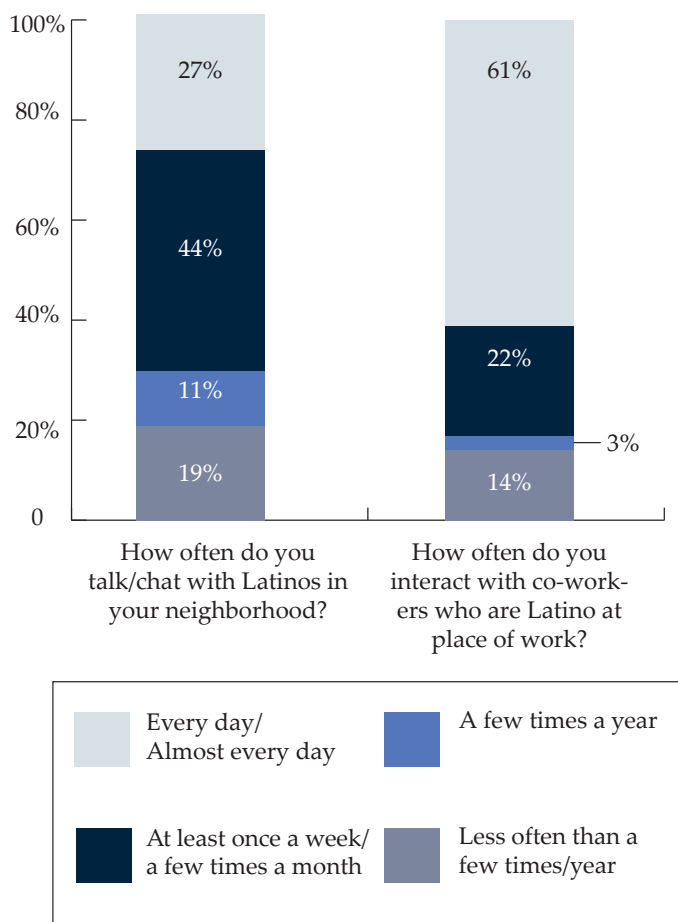
This research brief provides a portrait of the survey data that were collected during this project. Our report is limited to the results for the native-born residents of these communities.

The overall message from our survey data is that there is deep ambivalence among native-born Lake County residents about immigration: immigrants and immigration are simultaneously admired, resented, and distrusted. At the same time, immigrants are part of the fabric of community life for the residents we talked to: Latinos are neighbors, co-workers, employees, and friends. And perhaps in part because of this, there is much ambivalence about what to do about immigration policy: some restrictive measures are supported at high levels; but so are those programs that seek to help immigrants make their way in their new country. In this research brief, we present a selection of results from our survey that demonstrates this ambivalence in suburbia.

Contact with Latinos

In Lake County, immigrants and Latinos are largely synonymous. That is, the vast majority of immigrants in the Lake County communities we studied are Latino; and,

Figure 1: Contact with Latinos



Source: 2010 Chicago Area Study

conversely, most Latinos are either immigrants themselves or the children of immigrants. Our survey questions varied somewhat as to whether we asked respondents about their attitudes toward immigrants or toward Latinos; we are always specific in our reporting so that the reader is aware of which term was used for which survey question.

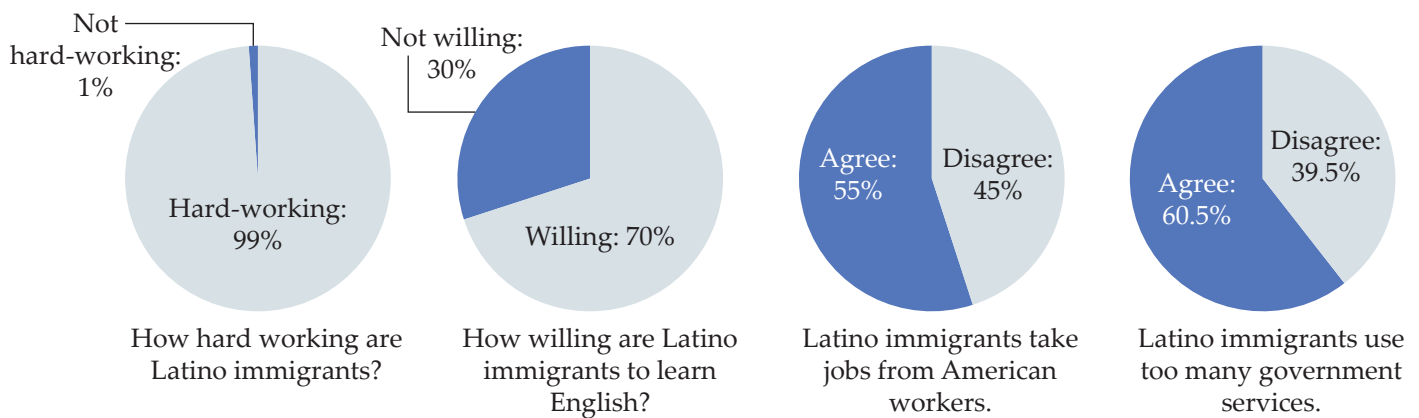
Residents living in these six communities have a substantial amount of contact with Latinos and/or immigrants. This includes living near, working alongside, and employing Latinos or immigrants in quite high numbers. Figure 1 shows the extent to which residents chat with neighbors, or interact with co-workers who are Latino. For example, more than 4 in 10 residents talk with Latinos in their neighborhood “at least once/week or a few times/month” (and just over 1 in 4 do so about everyday). Perhaps not surprisingly, there is more contact in the workplace: 61 percent of residents report interacting with Latino co-workers “everyday” or “almost everyday”. Another 22% report monthly or weekly contact with Latino co-workers. In addition, nearly one-half of the residents we interviewed (45%) reported that they had directly hired a Latino immigrant to “do work around the house” (results not shown). Thus, not only have native-born Lake County residents witnessed the rapid growth of the Latino immigrant population, they have considerable contact with them in their day-to-day lives.

Perceptions of Latino Immigrants

Despite fairly high levels of interaction with Latino immigrants, native-born residents in these suburban communities have inconsistent attitudes and perceptions toward them. Natives’ uneven attitudes toward Latinos and immigrants are shown in Figure 2. On the one hand, just 1 of every 100 of our respondents describe Latino immigrants as ‘not very’ or ‘not at all’ hardworking (chart 1, Figure 2). In other words, our respondents clearly perceive the productivity and perseverance of Latino immigrants. And despite the abundance of anti-immigrant sentiment and politicizing around the topic of whether or not immigrants want to learn English, only a minority of our respondents (just under one-third) endorse the belief that Latino immigrants are “not willing or not at all willing” to learn English (chart 2, Figure 2). To be sure, this perception is embraced to a higher degree than a perception about unproductivity; but it remains a view held by a minority of the population in these communities.

Despite natives’ views of Latinos as industrious and willing to adopt English, these suburbanites appear to resent certain aspects of Latino immigrants (see Figure 2, charts 3 and 4). For example, a majority agree that “Latino immigrants take jobs from American workers” and an even higher percentage—61 percent—endorse the statement that “Latino immigrants use too many government services.” Clearly residents are conflicted—interpersonally, they report characteristics of immigrants that are admirable; they are trying to learn English, and they are certainly extremely hard-working. But they also perceive in quite substantial numbers that immigrants are competing for jobs and a drain on the resources of the United States.

Figure 2: Perceptions of Latino Immigrants



Source: 2010 Chicago Area Study

Perceptions of the Impact of Immigration

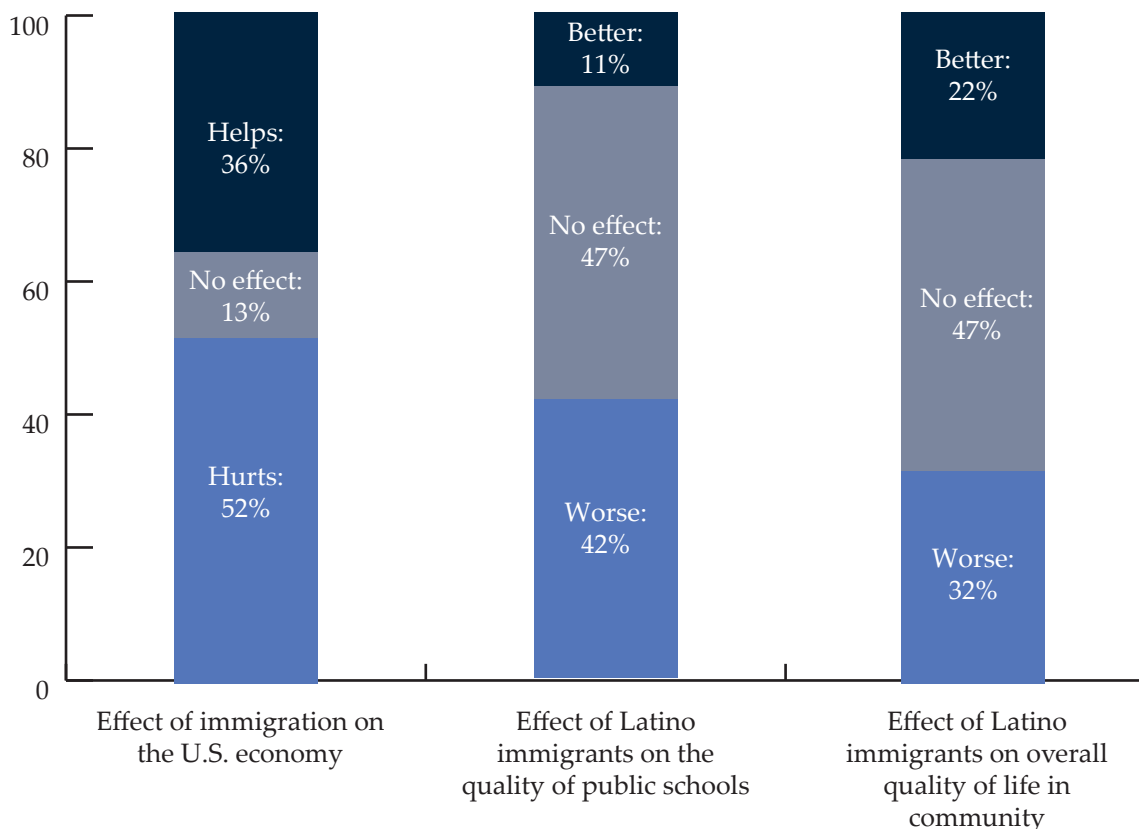
Native-born Lake County residents’ attitudes about how immigrants drain resources and take jobs are also reflected in their views about the impact of immigration on major institutions. These questions, displayed in Figure 3, ask residents for their opinion about the consequences of immigration for the country and respondents’ specific communities. There are multiple ways to interpret these data. One reading emphasizes that a majority (52%) of residents believe that immigration hurts the U.S. economy and a near-majority (42%) also believe that Latino immigrants negatively affect the quality of public schools. Another interpretation is that most natives in these areas

view immigrants as having either no effect or beneficial ones on school quality and overall quality of life in their community. To us, a more complete reading is that Lake County residents are split in their view about the impact of immigration, tending to believe that it adversely affects economic conditions but improves (or has a minimal impact) on overall quality of life.

Immigration Policy Attitudes

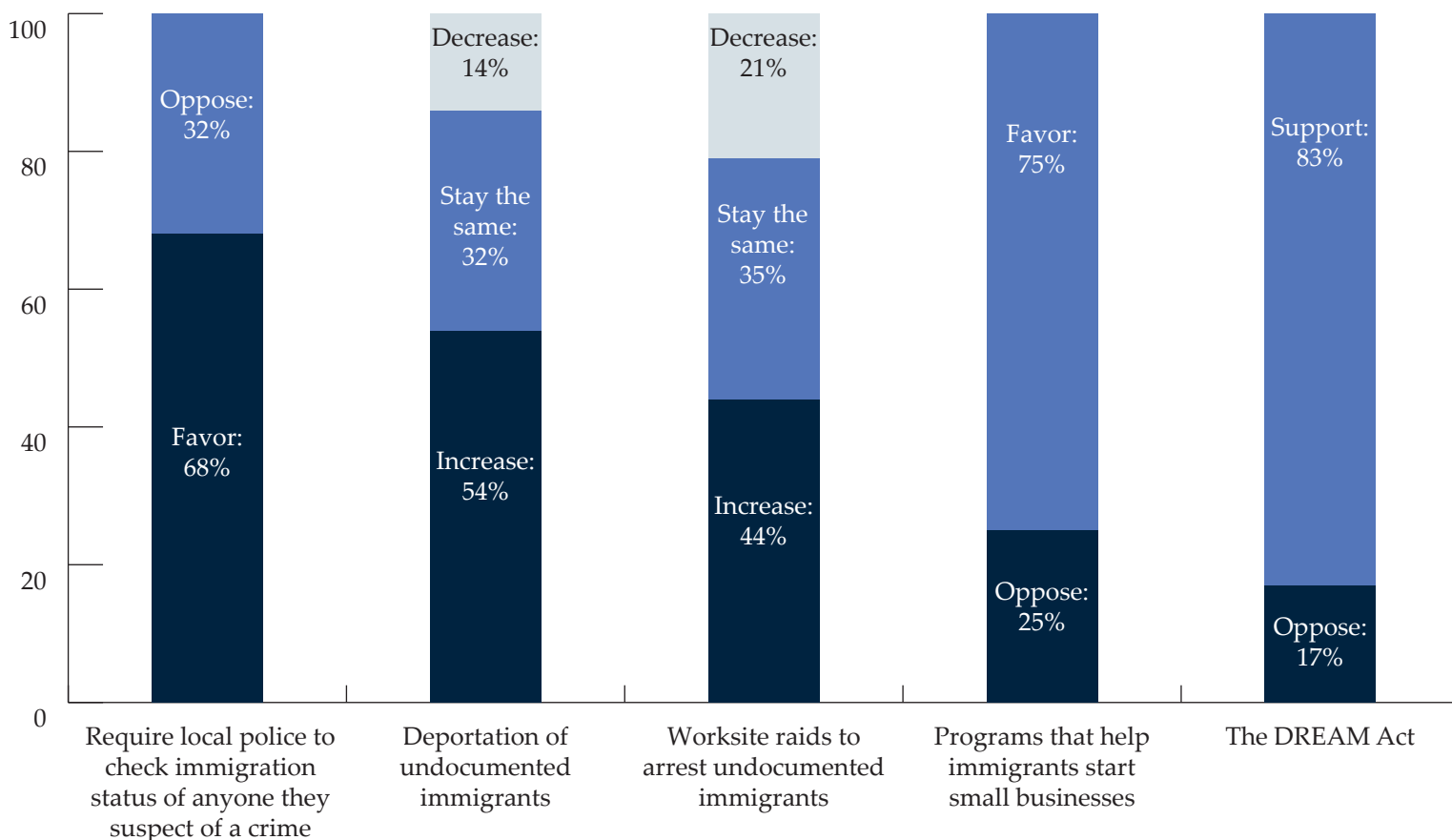
Immigration policies run the gamut from what to do about undocumented immigrants at the national level, to local and state policies that are either punitive or supportive toward immigrants. Our survey included

Figure 3: Perceptions of Latino Immigrants



Source: 2010 Chicago Area Study

Figure 4: Immigration Policy Attitudes



Source: 2010 Chicago Area Study

questions asking about specific policies that covered this range, and the results reveal additional complexity about how natives think about immigration. Figure 4 shows, for example, that nearly seven in ten residents support a policy requiring police to verify the immigration status of anyone they suspect of a crime. Increased deportations and worksite raids are favored by lower percentages—but still substantial numbers of residents. Thus, there appears to be considerable support for punitive policies toward illegally-residing immigrants among native-born Chicago suburbanites.

Yet, policies that are directed toward increasing the productivity of immigrants—either through small business support or education—are also extremely popular among native born residents. The DREAM act, which provides educational opportunities for the children of undocumented immigrants, is supported by the vast majority (83%) of our respondents (column 5, Figure 4). Also very popular are programs that would provide Latino immigrants with assistance in starting small businesses (70% are in favor). Clearly, immigrant policy attitudes are not monolithic: while restrictive policies are endorsed, to varying degrees, by substantial numbers of residents, there is also a striking level of support for programs that would give a helping hand to our newest residents.

What about differences by race/ethnicity and education?

In addition to the ambivalence across different types of issues and questions in the overall sample of respondents, there is also variation in attitudes toward immigrants and immigration depending on the background of the resident—across such characteristics as education and racial/ethnic identity.

Perhaps not surprisingly, native born Latinos are substantially more opposed to punitive policies and in favor of supportive ones; they also are significantly more likely to view the impact of immigration as positive at both the national and local level. Comparing the attitudes, experiences, and perceptions of native-born whites and blacks reveals a number of striking differences. On the one hand, African Americans experience substantially more contact with Latinos in their neighborhoods and workplaces than do whites—but it is whites who are more likely to employ Latino immigrants to do jobs around the house. On the other hand, African Americans hold more negative policy attitudes, and perceive greater negative impacts of Latinos and immigrants on the country and community.

A resident’s level of education has an impact on many of the perceptions of immigrants and immigration policy

attitudes we examined. In general, respondents who had at least some college were less supportive of restrictive immigration policies, held less negative perceptions of immigrants, and were less threatened by immigrants and immigration. At the same time, it is noteworthy that those residents with no college experience were substantially more likely to have contact with immigrants in their neighborhoods and workplaces than their better-educated counterparts.

Conclusion

National level data on attitudes and perceptions of immigrants—which tends to shape the debates about what Americans think about immigration—includes people who live in communities with substantial numbers of Latinos, but it also includes substantial numbers of Americans who live their daily lives far removed from the population centers where Latino immigrants have settled. The 2010 CAS dataset provides a rare glimpse into a representative sample of residents whose communities have most certainly been touched by this most recent wave of immigration. These are individuals who are living around, working with, and employing in great numbers, Latino immigrants. Our

portrait reveals a level of ambivalence that belies the often stereotypical views on immigration attitudes portrayed in the media or by political pundits. While ambivalence could be a sign of indifference or uncertainty about the role of immigrants in American life, it likely reflects recognition on behalf of native residents that immigration both contributes to and challenges major U.S. institutions in important ways.

Speaking to everyday people, we have found evidence of support and opposition; of admiration and resentment. As the President and Congress craft immigration reform, the equivocation expressed by residents in one suburban new destination likely reflects a desire for truly comprehensive reform that curtails future growth in undocumented migration but does so in a way that provides flexibility and compassion to those already in the country.



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