Challenges and strategies rural low-income Mexican immigrants use to meet housing needs
The growth of the Latino population has prevented population loss in rural communities. A large portion of the Latino population in the United States originates from Mexico.

What we know about housing in rural America? Previous research has shown that poor rural families face more severe housing deprivation than those in urban areas. Overcrowding is a problem among rural Latino households that occupy 25% of all crowded housing units in rural areas. The latest wave of Latino immigrants has increased the magnitude of the housing shortage in small and mid-size communities. Substandard housing, which may have stood vacant, is pressed into use and may not meet minimum health and safety codes. Although the cost of housing is substantially lower in rural communities, more than four of every ten rural poverty-level households pay over 50 percent of their incomes for housing.

Why should we care about housing? The lack of affordable housing can be an important structural barrier to achieving economic self-sufficiency for low-income families. Affordable rental units are often older mobile homes or trailers that are in poor condition. Families are often faced with either doubling up with other family members or friends, or trading quality for affordability. Unmanageable energy costs associated with substandard housing can lead to chronic mobility that can undermine social networks and simply result in exchanging one costly housing problem for another.

The link between substandard housing and poor health (such as allergies, asthma, high blood lead levels, neurological damage, poor nutrition) has been confirmed. Low income families reduced their expenditures on food in response to cold weather and high utility costs.

Previous research indicates that it is common for Latino immigrants to live in crowded housing conditions and in spatial isolation from non-Latinos. As a result of this isolation and lack of knowledge and availability of housing and food resources, new Latino immigrants often do not access available community food and housing resources. In addition, they often have few or no financial resources, no credit history, and a mistrust of financial institutions. Furthermore, language barriers and limited skills result in low wages and seasonal employment.
Why this study?
Little is known about housing hardship and food security among recent rural Latino immigrants and they strategize to obtain and afford available housing while meeting their families’ food needs.

Prior research has focused on low income families in general and not specifically on low-income Latino immigrant families. Previous studies do suggest that multiple forms of social support contribute to the economic and social well-being of low income families and their ability to “make ends meet” (Edin & Lein, 1997; Greder & Brotherson, 2002; Henley, Danziger, & Offer, 2005; Stack, 1974).
The data used in this study were from Rural Families Speaks. Qualitative and quantitative data were drawn from two project states, Iowa and Oregon, which specifically interviewed 48 Latino mothers (31 in Iowa, 17 in Oregon) who had immigrated to the U.S. within the last 15 years. Common challenges and strategies of these families as they strive to meet their food and housing needs were identified.

In-depth Interviews were conducted in three counties: two in Iowa and one in Oregon. Bilingual Mexican women who resided in the counties were trained to recruit and interview participants. Purposive sampling was used to identify mothers age 18 and older with at least one child 13 years old or younger, and whose family incomes were at or below 200% of the federal poverty line. Contact was made with potential participants through public assistance and education programs.

Various standardized survey instruments and a semi-structured interview protocol was used to conduct the interviews.

Instruments included the CES-D (Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale) (Radloff, 1977), Life Skills Assessment, Knowledge of Community Resources (Richards, 1998), and Food Security Module (Nord & Andrews, 1999).

A Mexican graduate student majoring in linguistic studies translated the protocol and survey instruments from English to Spanish.

Almost all of the interviews were conducted in Spanish in the mothers’ homes. Interviews were audio taped and transcribed verbatim.
In Oregon total number of hh members was 6.5
In Oregon, wage per hour less (mothers- $6.79 ; partners $8.87)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographics</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mother’s age</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total # hh members</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annual hh income</td>
<td>$25,366</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mothers</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wages/hr</td>
<td>$7.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working hrs/wk</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Partners</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Wages/hr</td>
<td>$9.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working hrs/wk</td>
<td>43</td>
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N= 48; means listed in table
In one county in Iowa only 1 mother was employed (1 out of 15); other counties ¾ of mothers employed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographics</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mothers - Employed</td>
<td>23 (47.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partners - Employed</td>
<td>45 (93.8%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>45 (93.8%)</td>
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**Mothers’ Education**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Education</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8th grade or less</td>
<td>32 (66.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some high school</td>
<td>8 (16.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school or GED</td>
<td>4 (8.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college or degree</td>
<td>4 (8.4%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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N=48
Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of the study communities.

Manzanita County, Oregon, is the largest of the three study counties.

Linden has the largest Latino population accounting for almost one-fifth of their population.

The economic picture in each county is unique.

Poverty among all persons was about 11% in all three counties, however, the percentage of children living in poverty was much higher in Manzanita (18%) than in the other counties (12%).

While homeownership rates were loosely similar, the median values of owner-occupied housing units in Manzanita was more than double that of Linden and Dogwood in 2000. Rents were higher in Manzanita, as well. The median year of construction for all housing structures varied greatly between Manzanita and the other two counties.

### Study Communities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>OR-Manzanita</th>
<th>IA-Linden</th>
<th>IA-Dogwood</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>County Population</td>
<td>24,590</td>
<td>20,205</td>
<td>17,876</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino Population</td>
<td>1,578</td>
<td>3,486</td>
<td>755</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment</td>
<td>6.6%</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
<td>10.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poverty</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median Home Value (2000)</td>
<td>$143,900</td>
<td>$64,900</td>
<td>$64,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median Rent (2000)</td>
<td>$460</td>
<td>$320</td>
<td>$305</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Interview responses were examined to understand the challenges and strategies experienced by rural Latino families in meeting their housing needs. Since the ability to feed one’s family is critical to its well-being, and since housing expenditures can deprive families of money for food, we initially examined the food security status of families. By examining housing strategies by food security status, we were able to identify the role of social support in providing food and shelter.
Families were sorted by their food security and food insecurity status based on quantitative responses to the 18 item Food Security questionnaire. Transcripts were read multiple times to develop sub-codes related to housing and social support. The research team then reviewed the coded data several times to identify types (e.g., cash, emotional support, food) and sources (e.g., family, friends, agency/organization, government) of support received by families.
Food Insecure

In the U.S...
20% of all food insecure households are headed by a Latino person

In our study...
58% were food insecure (82% OR; 45% IA)

58% = 28 families were food insecure
42% = 20 families were food secure

Oregon had a much higher rate of food insecure families in this study compared to Iowa
Past studies reveal that social networks composed of family and friends are linked to improved well-being. Social support aids households in meeting their food and housing needs. Furthermore, social support networks, especially those that include kin, have been linked to improved self-management of chronic health conditions, decreased depression and better general health among women.

Past studies reveal the most important Latino immigrant networks are based upon kinship, friendship, and commonality in country of origin. Through economic and social support, networks facilitate immigration and accommodation.

It is common among Latino immigrant families to have extended family members living together in the same household. In general, the economic and job-related effects of extended family members and social networks contribute to economic opportunity and job acquisition. However, ethnic-based informal social networks tend to channel immigrants - especially those who are undocumented - into the rapidly growing informal economy.

Social Supports

In general, "those who have diverse and resourceful social networks tend to do better" (Harknett, 2006)

For Latinos, the most important social network relationships are based upon kinship, friendship, and commonality in country of origin. Through economic and social support, networks facilitate immigration and accommodation.
In regards to social support this study found that rural Mexican immigrant households that were food insecure commonly received several types of social support (i.e., shared housing; child care; transportation; food; money for medical bills, rent, utilities) from multiple sources (i.e., family, friends, church, agencies) as illustrated by these quotes from mothers:

“When we didn’t have money to pay the light bill…one time they even shut it off on us because we didn’t have any money to pay, and well my husband asked [a friend] to borrow money to put it back on”

“… right now it [paying rent] has been hard. My sister let us borrow [money].”

“I had to borrow $200 once for the rent and some other times just for groceries.”

In contrast food secure households relied little on financial support from family and friends to make ends meet. They relied more on formal supports (e.g., WIC, food pantries) to help them meet basic needs.

It is interesting to note that very few of the families in the study received subsidized housing or energy/fuel assistance.

Nearly all families indicated that they had lived with relatives when they first arrived in the U.S. Furthermore, housing reciprocity endured after arrival when families moved from one state to another; families relied on their extended family networks to get started.
In this study we identified 4 key themes related to housing issues experienced by Mexican immigrant families.
Strategy to home ownership

“...when we bought this place he made improvements...it was very small...it had no electricity, no water, no utilities...it was only this one (bedroom) and the small one...he made the bathroom... the kitchen... another two rooms...little by little”
Housing Themes

Home ownership higher for families who...

- were food secure
- had lived in U.S. longer
- had higher monthly incomes
- had higher satisfaction with life
- were more knowledge of community resources
- had higher life skill score
- lower basic risk score

In this study half (10 out of 20) of the food secure families were home owners compared to 7% (2 out of 28) of the food insecure families.
Families adjust their housing in response to deficits by moving to a new home, remodelling their current home or restructuring their household – someone moves in to help pay the rent or someone moves out to reduce space shortages.

"California for two years (and moved) because I was told that I could have a better future in Kansas... there would be more jobs. (In California) I worked only six months of the year."

In Kansas, she stayed with a friend for four months before leaving for Iowa. There were no jobs.
For those who rented, food insecure families paid a greater proportion of their income to rent (21%) than the food secure families (16.6%).

Unaffordable housing is when housing expenses (rent or mortgage payments plus utilities) exceed 30% of household income. Unaffordable housing reduces the resources available for other necessities such as food. None of the mothers were likely to receive housing, energy or fuel assistance. Possible reasons for this included a lack of knowledge, and being undocumented.

Mothers in this study suggested that they choose to pay lower rents at the expense of meeting family space needs. Furthermore, the data suggest that families often move to secure housing that is less expensive and downsize to reduce housing costs. Though we can only conjecture regarding motives, one might argue that reducing housing costs is part of an overall strategy families have to stretch limited resources to meet all needs, including housing and food.
Housing inadequacies including concerns about lead paint, moisture from roofs that need repair, plumbing problems, vermin and rodents, leaky windows, and furnaces that didn’t work. Families experienced “serial housing inadequacy”; that is, moving from place to place that results simply in exchanging one housing quality problem for another.
Food acquisition and housing challenges faced by the recent rural Mexican immigrant families in this study are numerous and complex. The strategies they employ to meet their needs, including relying on social support, are multifaceted as well. Throughout this study it was clear that participants see their current circumstances as the next stop on their quest to attain a better life for themselves and their families.
Conclusions

Families live with relatives when come to U.S.

Families double up, live in substandard, deteriorating housing to accommodate family needs.
Families in Iowa had higher rates of home ownership than families in Oregon.
Families in Oregon paid a higher proportion of their income for rent than families in Iowa.
Families in Iowa had lower rates of food insecurity than families in Oregon.
Families in Iowa stated they felt safe in their neighborhoods and their children had places to play. Families in Oregon did not believe they had adequate, safe places near their homes for their children to play.

Conclusions

Families’ experiences are place bound.

*Location “creates and limits individual and collective opportunities and outcomes” (Tickamyer, 2000)*