

Immigrant Latinos in rural Illinois have unique child care needs

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Finding good child care and being able to engage easily in important interactions with your child care provider are critical to any mother's ability to work outside the home.

"Suppose you're living in the rural Midwest and you don't speak English very well. Can you imagine leaving your child with a child care provider if you couldn't communicate well with that person?" said Angela Wiley, a University of Illinois associate professor of applied family studies.

"The immigrant moms we interviewed for this study faced just this dilemma," she said.

Immigrant Latino mothers in rural areas need child care that meets a certain cultural comfort level, is affordable for them, and is available during [shift work](#), she said.

Why the urgent interest in rural Latino families' child care needs? In non-metropolitan areas of Illinois, the [Latino population](#) grew by 71 percent between 1990 and 2000, and it has continued to grow. In Champaign County alone, the number has more than doubled.

These statistics caught the eye of administrators at the U of I's Child Care Resource Center in 2008, and they began to study the needs of rural Latino mothers.

As co-investigators on The Latino Families in Central Illinois Project,

Wiley and U of I professor Marcela Raffaelli hired Spanish-speaking U of I students to interview 112 mothers with at least one child under age 12 in Champaign, Douglas, Iroquois, Macon, and Vermilion counties.

"Latino immigrants in these counties mainly come from the poorest parts of Mexico. Many have worked in a community for several summers, became familiar with it, and settled there. Arcola is an example of a town that sees an influx of Spanish-speaking seasonal workers who find employment in its broomcorn factory," Wiley said.

Sadly, most remain near the poverty line even if they've lived and worked in an area for 10 years or more, she said.

For these Latinos, basic employability and access to higher-paying jobs are affected by two key challenges: learning English and accessing child care that families feel comfortable with and can afford, she said.

The survey reported that 47 percent of the mothers had taken classes to learn English, but the vocabulary covered in the courses was very basic. And the inability of rural Latinos to communicate well in English increases their isolation, the researcher said.

"The families we interviewed stuck together in tight-knit communities, with the average interviewee knowing only seven non-related adults, who also spoke mainly Spanish," she said.

A reluctance to seek child care outside the family circle hampers the ability of both parents to find steady work. Although nearly 95 percent of the families would be eligible for child-care subsidies because of their income, only 10 percent of the families report using them, she said.

"Mothers typically commented that they can't find work that lets them share child care with their spouse. Or that they'd need to find work on a

different shift than their husband for the situation to work. Complicating the issue, many of their spouses are working two shifts," she said.

Fewer than half the mothers interviewed worked outside the home, either full- or part-time. About a third wanted to work but were unable to do so.

"Most of the women we interviewed have a sense that child care centers are better in this country than in their home countries, but they are worried about the cost and the paperwork," she said.

"A common theme was concern about being considered a government charge. Many immigrants have heard that applications for citizenship can be denied if the record shows that applicants have received certain kinds of government support, so mothers are wary about using subsidies. They may apply for food stamps for their children but not for themselves," she added.

In the year remaining in the project, the researchers would like to recruit and train Spanish-speaking women to provide child care in communal coops. "This would provide income in the community and address the mothers' need for flexible, affordable [child care](#) that's in their comfort zone," she said.

More information: A report, "Strengths and Challenges of Latino Families in Central Illinois," published by the University of Illinois Family Resiliency Center in its Department of Human and Community Development, is available online at familyresiliency.illinois.edu/.../IllinoisMay2010.pdf

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