

Town's-Eye View of Immigration Debate

In Ga., Influx Fills a Gap in Workforce

By Peter Slevin

Washington Post Staff Writer

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GAINESVILLE, Ga. -- Harold Hogsed wonders how his grandchildren learn anything in school, with all the time their teachers spend instructing Hispanic immigrants on basic English. A drawling Georgia native, he cannot understand what the Spanish-accented adults are saying. He sees them as a drain on his tax dollars and he wishes they would all go home.

"How many people can this country hold?" Hogsed asked. "I don't have the solution to it, but something's got to be done."

Hogsed is not alone in struggling to wrap his mind around the tide of Latin American workers who have remade this north-Georgia town. City schools are now 55 percent Hispanic. More children arrive each day with their undocumented parents, often directly from Mexico. The Yellow Pages include 41 pages in Spanish. St. Michael Catholic church, which once drew 25 people to a monthly Spanish Mass, now has 6,000 Hispanic families on its parish registry.

Their numbers show just how rooted the predominantly Mexican immigrants have become in Gainesville and throughout the South. They have put pressure on public services while becoming essential players in the local economy. Amid anxiety on all sides, neighbors, advocates and the new residents are assessing their presence and their future in a debate that resonates nationally.

Proponents of more generous accommodations for illegal immigrants staged a one-day economic boycott on March 24 that shuttered businesses and boosted morale. Business and farming leaders declared that immigrants are keeping them solvent. At a Mass on Thursday night dedicated to the immigrants, the Rev. Fabio Sotelo urged 300 parishioners to persevere, pray and write the governor.

Gov. Sonny Perdue (R) is considering a strong anti-immigration bill delivered last week by the Georgia legislature. Congress is considering significant federal legislation, with Gainesville's congressman, Nathan Deal (R), among the firmest supporters of tightened borders and toughened measures. Lawyers for U.S.-born carpet workers will argue to the Supreme Court this month that a Georgia manufacturer conspired to drive down wages by importing illegal laborers.

Gainesville advertises itself as "the poultry capital of the world" and it is the chicken-processing plants that are driving much of the city's startling growth. Since 1990, the official population has nearly doubled to 32,000 and the number of Hispanics has

quadrupled to compose nearly half the registered population -- and far more when illegal immigrants are considered.

When the shift changes at the factories on Industrial Boulevard, hundreds of workers in hairnets stream through the doors of Koch Foods and Pilgrim's Pride. Their origins are reflected in the Spanish banter, the salsa tunes blasting from car radios, and the young ice cream vendor who calls his cart La Paleteria Lulu.

"Reality speaks and it says that, absent Hispanic workers, we could not process chicken," said Tom Hensley, chief financial officer for Gainesville's largest chicken plant, Fieldale Farms. "There aren't enough native American people who want to work in a chicken plant at any wage. We'd be put out of business."

A dozen years ago, Fieldale employed fewer than 100 Hispanics. Today, Hispanics total 3,000 in a 4,700-person workforce that transforms live birds by the thousand into boneless chicken flesh. To win jobs that start at about \$10 an hour, applicants must present at least two identity documents from a government list of 18.

"If the documents appear to be legitimate, we accept them," Hensley said.

Two workers said they got jobs at Fieldale with fake documents, a practice considered an open secret. One longtime laborer, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, said he is counting on Congress -- "in a free country, a democracy" -- to design a compromise that legalizes needed and reliable undocumented residents.

Praised for excellence by President Bush in his 2004 Republican National Convention speech, Gainesville Elementary greets one new student a day in a school already 70 percent Hispanic. Nine in 10 students qualify for subsidized meals. Educators draft letters in two languages and visit homes to urge parents to support the students.

"We're not going to ask, 'Are you legal?' That's not our concern," said Principal Priscilla Collins. "We let them know that no one is going to come into our schools and do raids. That's not how America works."

Raids are much on people's minds. The telephones at St. Michael have been ringing in the past two weeks as anxious residents tracked rumors prompted by legislative activity in Atlanta and Washington. Is it true, they asked, that immigration agents grabbed 300 people at Wal-Mart? Was there a roundup of 500 along Jesse Jewel Parkway? Will agents raid the schools on Friday?

No, no and no, Lucia Martin answered.

Martin was sneaked into the country from Mexico at age 3. She remembers being tucked under the seat of a truck and told to keep quiet. Her family moved to Chicago. Twenty years ago, she arrived in Gainesville when her husband found work on the chicken line. She works at the church.

"There's a supply. There's a demand. There's an opportunity and you take it. It's human instinct," Martin said. When white residents complain that the new immigrants should wait their turn, she answers, "Did your ancestors get a visa?"

Martin's worry is that new rules will make it easier for government authorities to target immigrants unfairly -- by arresting people on a pretext to investigate their legal status. Angel Rojas, a Catholic Social Services worker, raised the same issue in advising an overflow crowd of educators and community workers to study the potential impact of proposed legislation.

"The main thing we need to understand is this affects everybody," Rojas said. He noted that one proposal would make it a crime to help an undocumented resident remain in the United States. A number of Mexicans, he said, have told him they would rather return home with their worldly goods than risk losing all during deportation.

That would be cheerful news to legislators who have said they hope to increase pressure and create a deterrent. It also jibes with the thinking of Joe Merck, a working-class Gainesville native and advocate for the homeless who describes the city as "overrun."

"I don't blame 'em coming up here, but half of 'em are illegal. We're taking care of 'em. They're having all these babies one right after another," Merck, 71, said. "You can go buy your credentials. It's a known fact, but nobody does anything about it. We need to send 'em back home."

Waiting for a ride, kitchen worker William Morton griped that he cannot obtain some restaurant jobs because he speaks no Spanish.

"This country's not right," said Morton, 38. "The economy's went down for us and gone up for them, and we're supporting Mexico."

Merck and Morton can be counted in the potential audience for the immigration proposals that have suddenly dominated the state and national debate. Deal, a seven-term congressman who received an A-plus career rating from Americans for Better Immigration, a group that favors stricter controls, said the United States is "a nation of law."

"To make sure we have the confidence of the American public behind us, we have to show we're going to enforce our law first and foremost," Deal said. The nation's estimated 11 million illegal immigrants "are going to have to go home."

Trinidad Avila, 44, is among those who consider that impossible.

Avila, who darted across the Mexican border as a teenager and later obtained residency, expects a compromise permitting workers and their families to remain, but wonders when. His two teenage children hold hands at the dinner table and pray for friends who are here illegally.

"People don't know what they're going to do," Avila said. "They're just wishing for the government to do something for them."

Julia Perilla, who studies grass-roots Latino issues at Georgia State University, describes a "love-hate relationship" between the new immigrants and many Georgians, especially business people.

"On the one hand, they want us very badly. They are very, very dependent on Latino labor. On the other hand, there's an incredible amount of xenophobia that's on the rise in Georgia," Perilla said. "It's extremes. Nobody is in the middle."

Staff writer Kari Lydersen in Chicago and researcher Don Pohlman in Washington contributed to this report.