

# Research & Policy Brief Series

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## Community Response to Immigrants in New Destinations\*

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### What is the Issue?

Immigration brings a variety of challenges to local communities. These challenges are often articulated in national immigration policy debates, but the consequences of immigration are most intensely experienced at the local level. Even the best conceived national level policies cannot deal with the diverse needs of communities attempting to better integrate immigrants into local social and economic life (Pfeffer 2008).

In new destination areas with a small and relatively new immigrant community, assistance provided by the immigrants' own ethnic community is more limited, and conditions in the host community are more consequential for immigrant integration (Pfeffer and Parra 2008; 2004). But opportunities to satisfy these needs can vary considerably depending on the local context. Localities may differ in the receptivity of the host community and the degree of competition between immigrants and local residents for housing, employment and other resources.

### State and Local Response to Immigration

In response to the continued rapid growth of the unauthorized population in recent decades and the failure of federal policies to effectively regulate such immigration, many state and local governments have recently begun to develop their own immigration policies. In 2007, state legislatures nationwide introduced more than 1,500 immigration-related bills on education, health, access to public benefits, law enforcement, employment and personal identification among other areas (as a result, 240 laws were enacted across 46 states - see Figure 1).

In addition to state legislation, in recent years localities (i.e. counties, towns and villages) were active in proposing restrictive ordinances. Some observers claim that local ordinances are often more restrictive than state legislation (Broader 2007). For example, a large number of the proposed ordinances attempted to regulate the employment of unauthorized workers or relations between landlords and undocumented immigrants (see Table 1). Many of these ordinances also empowered local police to work with immigration authorities and mandated English as the locality's official language. As indicated in Table 1, only a small number of the identified local ordinances (14%) were supportive of immigrants.

**Table 1: Proposed Ordinances Specifically Regulating Immigrants or Relations with Immigrants Since 2006**

Content of Ordinance	Ordinance	
	Restrictive	Supportive
Employer Sanctions	45	-
Sanctions Against Landlords	31	-
English as Official Language	28	-
Police Support Immigration Authorities	25	5
Restrictions on Day Labor	9	-
Other	7	18
<b>Total</b>	<b>145</b>	<b>23</b>

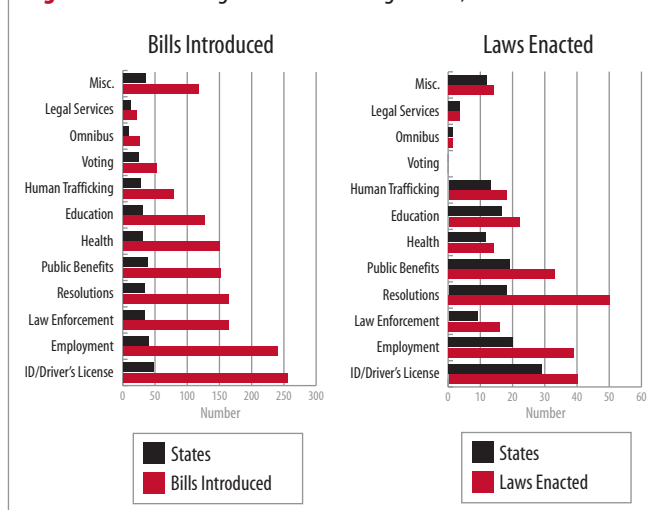
Source: Web Search by Pilar A. Parra and Michelle Leveillee, April 2008

The largest numbers of restrictive local ordinances were in the South and Northeast. These ordinances have been proposed by many communities that until recently have not been concerned with immigration. But with the dispersal of immigrants across the American landscape, immigration has become a salient issue outside the immigrant gateway cities in small town America (Lichter and Johnson 2006; Capps et al., 2003; Fix and Passel 2001; Foner 2001; Kraly and Miyares 2001; Duchon and Murphy 2001). Many of the proposed local ordinances have focused explicitly on unauthorized immigrants, e.g. sanctions against employers who hire unauthorized workers or landlords who rent to unauthorized immigrants.

### The Case in New York State

New York is an interesting state in which to gauge the opinions of people living outside large centers of immigration like the New York City metropolitan area. Each year Cornell University fields the Empire State Poll, surveying 1,100 people across the state, and in recent years the poll has included a series of questions about immigration. The poll included several questions relevant to the questions of local support for immigrants: 1) If immigrants settled in your community, how important is it for the city or township you live in to help immigrants find affordable housing? 2) If immigrants settled in your community, how important is it for the city or township you live in to provide English language training for immigrants? 3) If immigrants without immigration documents, or illegal immigrants, settled in your community, how important is it for the city or township you live in

**Figure 1: State Immigration-Related Legislation, 2007**

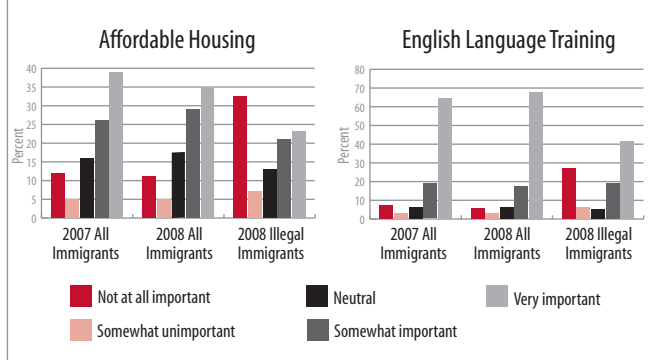


Source: National Conference of State Legislatures 2008

to help these immigrants find affordable housing? 4) If immigrants without immigration documents, or illegal immigrants, settled in your community, how important is it for the city or township you live in to provide English language training for these immigrants?

Between 2007 and 2008 there was little change in New Yorkers' opinions about their city or town providing assistance to immigrants in finding affordable housing or learning English (see Figure 2). Almost two-thirds of survey respondents said it was important for localities to provide immigrants with assistance in finding affordable housing. By 2008, 9 out of 10 respondents thought that their city or town should provide English language training for immigrants. But when asked about such assistance for unauthorized (or illegal) immigrants, they were more likely to say that the assistance is unimportant. In particular, most New Yorkers considered local assistance to help unauthorized immigrants find affordable housing to be unimportant. Fewer New Yorkers considered it important for their city or town to provide English language training for unauthorized immigrants, but still a majority of respondents considered such assistance to be very or somewhat important.

**Figure 2: Support of Local Assistance for Immigrants, New York State, 2007 and 2008**



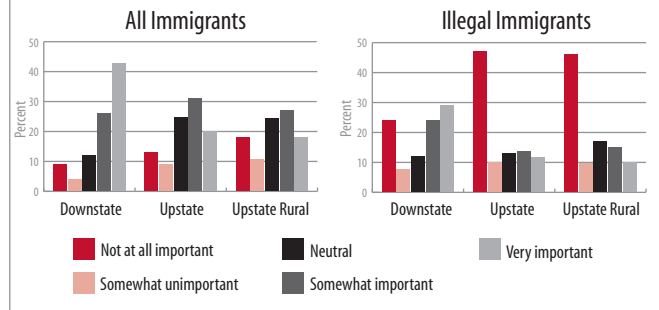
Source: Empire State Poll, Cornell University 2007, 2008

The findings for NYS are highly influenced by the New York City (NYC) metropolitan area where 37 percent of the population is foreign born, and 3 out of 4 persons report that they personally know an immigrant that they are not related to. This contrasts significantly with Upstate New York where only about 5 percent of the population is foreign born, and only about half of survey respondents report personally knowing an immigrant. Upstate respondents are much less likely to think that their city or town should assist immigrants, although more people think that such assistance is important than think it is unimportant (Empire State Poll 2008; Fiscal Policy Institute 2007). However, the majority of respondents living outside the NYC metropolitan area feel it is unimportant for their city or town to provide affordable housing for *unauthorized* immigrants (see Figure 3), and almost half think that it is unimportant for their city or town to provide English language training to *unauthorized* immigrants (see Figure 4). Survey respondents living outside the NYC metropolitan area appear to be divided about how important it is for their city or town to provide English language training to unauthorized immigrants.

### What Should Be Done?

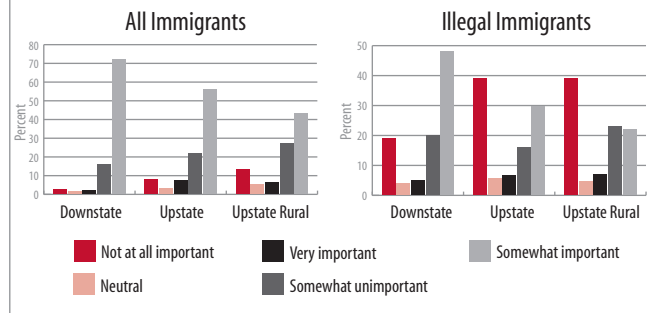
Community efforts to promote language and certain types of technical training can play an important part in furthering the social and economic integration of immigrants into the community. English language proficiency helps immigrants to be more self-reliant, and this ability is especially important in the context of federal, state and local legislation that limits immigrants', especially unauthorized immigrants, access to public services. Our research in upstate New York indicates that most immigrants and other community residents

**Figure 3: Support for Local Housing Assistance for Immigrants, Downstate, Upstate and Rural New York State, 2008**



Source: Empire State Poll, Cornell University 2008

**Figure 4: Support for Local English Language Training for Immigrants, Downstate, Upstate, and Rural New York State, 2008**



Source: Empire State Poll, Cornell University 2008

lack ongoing interactions with one another. Interactions not only improve other community residents' understanding of immigrants, they also help immigrants become integrated into the social and economic life of the community in some material ways such as the purchase of a car or home (Pfeffer and Parra 2005). Immigrants benefit materially from social ties to non-immigrant residents, and English language proficiency is a cornerstone in the formation of such ties.

### What Can Be Done?

English language ability is clearly related to immigrant self-reliance and success. Programs that provide English language training can play a critical role in helping immigrants become integrated into the social and economic life of communities. Indeed, the wave of local ordinances proposed in recent years has called for immigrants to speak English, and our assessment of public opinion in NYS indicates that there is fairly strong support for local programs providing English language training. Assuming that immigrants are more likely to make positive contributions in these communities if they are self-reliant, providing English language training seems logical.

Many churches already provide English language training programs, and various schools and colleges offer English as a second language classes. Workers sometimes find it difficult to attend classes due to work-related time constraints and expense. Employers can play an active role in adjusting work schedules and providing other forms of support (e.g. transportation, tuition, etc.) to facilitate immigrant English language training.

\* Based on a paper prepared for the conference on Immigration Reform: Implications for Farmers, Farm Workers, and Communities Washington, D.C. May 9, 2008. The full paper, along with references, is available on the CaRDI website with this publication.

