

## ***Tensions grip Minnesota city; Views on illegal immigration divide community looking for answers***

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### **Body**

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AUSTIN, **Minn.** -- The men watching a friendly game of Clubs at Jerry's Card Room say they welcome Hispanic immigrants -- as long as the newcomers are in the USA legally.

"If they're not, ship them out," says John Leachman, 82, a retired Hormel Foods meatpacking plant worker.

"I agree with deporting the illegals. I agree with that 100%," says owner Jerry Salisbury, 68, who grew up here and moved back after retiring from the Navy.

Their **views** are not unusual in this **city** of about 23,000, where an influx of Hispanics has made **illegal immigration** a topic of heated debate. A plane flew over the Mower County Fair this month towing a banner reading "Keep America great -- deport illegals." At a forum last week that drew 150 people, almost all of them Anglo, Ruthie Hendrycks of Minnesotans Seeking **Immigration** Reform said that if **immigration** laws aren't enforced, "anarchy is going to come. ... How many of us can commit a crime and get away with it?"

There are 14 Hispanic-owned businesses, including restaurants and stores that help make Main Street more lively than it's been in years. Last year, 17.9% of the **city's** 4,232 public school students were Hispanic. Some Hispanics are buying homes.

Like other Midwest **cities** that until recently had few minorities, Austin is struggling to adapt to big changes. The result is **tension** between two mostly separate **communities**, says Vicki Trimble, 55.

#### Growing migrant population

Acceptance "will come slowly," says Trimble, owner of a flower shop, but those who think immigrants will move away are unrealistic. "It's happening all over the United States, so why would you think they're going to leave Austin?" she says.

Gary Green, a professor of rural sociology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, says many historically white towns in the region are grappling with similar issues. "There's no doubt that it's a threat to national identity," he says, but studies suggest that **immigration** "has a net positive economic impact on these towns, and probably socially as well."

The immigrant population here is growing. The 1990 Census counted fewer than 200 Hispanics. Today, Mayor Tom Stiehm says, there are as many as 5,000 -- at least three-fourths of them here illegally. Many immigrants work for Austin's biggest employers, Hormel Foods and Quality Pork Processors.

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"All we want is to do what's right," says Linnea Burtch, an Austin resident who helped organize last week's meeting and believes illegal immigrants can be forced to leave. "It's not a race issue. It's a legal issue."

Residents are torn, says Jim Stiles, 52, owner of Super Fresh Produce. "It's obvious that we need these workers and the majority of them are hardworking people with families," he says. "You want to welcome them."

Still, Stiles says, "there's a lot of resentment." Some people complain when Hispanics move next door and object to the social services they receive. "We need to keep talking about it. It's just knocking down those barriers," he says.

Jose and Margarita Rodriguez hope so. They moved from Austin to Nebraska four years ago and returned eight months ago to open Novedades Cristal, a clothing store on Main Street. Jose Rodriguez, 32, is hurt by the lack of acceptance, but says, "The only thing is to ignore those people."

### No easy answers

Some people are less patient. Victor Contreras, a U.S. citizen who runs Centro Campesino, a workers' rights group, says immigrants are "terrorized by waves of hate." Some residents assume every immigrant is illegal, he says, and city and company officials should do more to acknowledge newcomers' contributions.

Walter Schwartz, an immigrant who is a U.S. citizen, works as an interpreter. He says tension is rooted in a "big shadow community" of illegal immigrants who pay \$900 to \$1,200 for documents that allow them to work.

Early arrivals included young Hispanics who angered residents by living in large groups and partying, Schwartz says, but that's changing as more families settle here. "As they integrate into the community," he says, "fear and anger and miscommunication will go away."

Police Chief Paul Philipp says immigrants are arrested more often for driving offenses and not having driver's licenses.

Mower County Sheriff Terese Amazi says there have been increases in driving offenses and assaults with knives. "We're having to build a new jail for a reason," she says. In the past few years, the percentage of Hispanics in the jail grew to 30% from 6%-7%, she says.

Paul Westrum, founder of the Minnesota Coalition for Immigration Reduction, says he won't rest until Austin is free of illegal immigrants. "You take all their freebies away from them and go after the people that hired them, and they're going to go back home on their own," he says.

Stiehm isn't sure that would be good for Austin. "Businesses are going to move to town because we've solved the immigration problem," he says, "not because we're battling them and throwing them out of town."

Those opposing views leave Austin divided, says Ruth Snyder, a Roman Catholic nun who works with immigrants. "There is a group who are very anti-immigration and very resistant to change. There are other people who are very understanding and want collaboration."

### Austin stats

The Hispanic population of Austin, Minn., is growing:

#### Total population

1990 21,907

2000 23,314

2007 22,947

#### Hispanic population

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1990 135

2000 1,426

2008 3,500-5,000{+1}

1 -- Estimate

Sources: Census Bureau and the city of Austin

## Graphic

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GRAPHIC, B/W, USA TODAY (Map)

PHOTOS, B/W, Bill Alkofer, USA TODAY (4)

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