

**The immigrant experience:  
Marshalltown, Iowa**

by

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## **The immigrant experience: Marshalltown, Iowa**

Immigration, particularly illegal immigration, is one of the most controversial issues brought into the national limelight. The issue has gained national attention not only because of its obvious political and economic implications, but because of its human rights aspects as well. While different stakeholders battle to define the issue to a national audience, many policy-makers wonder whether the public is informed enough to make wise choices regarding how the country should deal with this problem. In the state of Iowa, the problem is no less serious.

In the 2008 Condition of the State address, Iowa Governor Chet Culver declared, “We can all agree that companies should be held accountable for hiring illegal workers” (p. 8). Not only does this statement barely touch on the topic, it also demonstrates the lack of importance given to such a significant national issue that affects not only the (un)documented immigrants living in Iowa, but also the people within the Iowa communities where immigrants reside.

According to the Pew Hispanic Center, there were an estimated 50.5 million Latinos living in the US recorded in the 2010 Census. Narrowing in the lens from the national perspective, the Iowa Division of Latino Affairs claims that there were an estimated 126,453 Latinos living in Iowa as of July 1, 2008 and projects that there will be 361,780 Latinos living in Iowa by the year 2040.

Most news sources reporting on the issue represent the Latino immigrants in mass numbers. Although presenting the issue on the aggregate level might help a predominantly European American public to understand the issue in broad strokes, such reporting also unfortunately helps to maintain the idea of immigrants as a large group instead of individuals.

Not only does the large group idea allow the public to make generalizations about these marginalized individuals, but it also carries with it certain myths and preconceptions about them.

A few of the falsehoods state that undocumented immigrants don't pay taxes, they take jobs away from American citizens, they are equated with terrorists, and they are seen as criminals for "breaking the law."

According to the United for the Dignity and Safety of Immigrants (UDSI) organization, immigrants pay taxes by using a false social security number or an Individual Taxpayers Identification Number and have contributed more than \$420 billion in earnings. Yet even with this contribution, they cannot claim any benefits if they fall under the undocumented immigrant status (p. 1).

The immigrants cannot be blamed for their employer's decision to hire them and not US citizen workers. In most cases, US citizens do not want the jobs the immigrants are "taking" because they offer low wages or minimal benefits in poor working conditions. An example of this phenomenon occurred in Perry, Iowa. The UDSI explains that in the 1980s, Oscar Meyer paid its employees, 400 Perry residents, around \$12-13/hour. It was then bought by IBP in the 1990s which led to half the pay and poor working conditions (p. 2). Perry residents did not put up with this and quit, leading IBP to recruit workers from the South, Mexico, and even Central America. In the end, the immigrant workers simply replaced the US citizen workers who decided to stop working.

According to the UDSI, people should not classify immigrants in the same category as terrorists because their motivations for entering the country are completely different (p. 1): "Contrary to public perception, the 9/11 terrorists entered the country legally with the sole

intention of causing harm. Undocumented and documented immigrants come here to work and settle with their families.”

The final misconception of undocumented immigrants is that they are nothing but criminals for entering the US unlawfully. If the public was to be more aware of the different laws and the meaning behind them, the current image of immigrants may not be as negative. Such awareness would also help to truly understand the motivation behind those who choose to immigrate, whether lawfully or unlawfully. According to Maria Gomez, one of the immigrant participants in my project, “if it is a crime to be hungry, that’s our crime...to be immigrants to the United States...to be in dire need, to want a better future for your family” (p. 9).

There have been many instances throughout history where telling a narrative story about a social issue through photography has made the public more aware and at times, motivated people to take action. Photographer Jacob Riis investigated the horrible living conditions of immigrants in New York City and documented the inhabitants’ living quarters, family life, and where they had to try to work and make a living. The images were the catalysts for social reform in the tenement system and were published in Riis’ book “How the Other Half Lives” in 1890, which elicited an intense reaction from readers and led them to call for reform in the tenement system.

According to Ken Kobre, the inherent appeal of a narrative photo story lies in the dilemma faced and how that dilemma is resolved:

With a narrative story, readers start to care about the subject and want to know how the person is going to solve the dilemma. What is going to happen? When picture stories are done well, readers remain on the edge of their chairs, waiting to see the last picture that reveals the story’s outcome...Most importantly, the reader comes to care about the

story's protagonist...And, perhaps, if the story has merit and is well-photographed, the reader won't just give a passing glance to the pictures and move on but will remember the story, repeat it, and perhaps, show it to others. (p. 13).

In other words, the public could be better informed if it is made aware of the experiences of documented and undocumented immigrants. In Iowa, the city of Marshalltown is home to a substantial number of Latino immigrants. Are the middle class residents of this city aware of how their immigrant counterparts are doing?

This is important because if the public is unable to see the faces behind the statistics, sympathizing with the immigrants, in spite of potential differences in upbringing, becomes more difficult to do. Although there may be a language gap and cultural differences between Latinos and European, Asian, and African Americans, there are certain universal feelings, circumstances, or situations to which everyone can relate on some level.

In this creative component, I aim to communicate the immigrants' experience and histories of how they came to Marshalltown by using documentary photography reminiscent of the approach used by Jacob Riis (1890) and Lewis Hine (1909), among others. My photographs have documented the human condition and attempt to initiate social change. I have combined them with audio and subtitles to present the issue from an insider's perspective. This visual representation is more personal and intimate because audiences will be able to hear the voices of immigrants in audio clips and see them up-close in photographs.

By presenting the issue in a multimedia approach, using the combined power of images and sound to convey a deeper understanding of the immigrants' point of view, I hope that the viewer will be able to react cognitively and emotionally to the experiences of the immigrants. In

this project, will focus on telling the immigrants' stories which will help to dispel some myths perpetuated about them and the way they live in the United States.

My purpose is to reveal to the US public examples of the lives of documented and undocumented immigrants, and their families, currently residing in Marshalltown. Through in-depth interviews and photographic documentation, I show a range of themes running through the immigrants' lives. After conducting the in-depth interviews, I used the themes I found to come up with ideas for the documentary-style images I would make to illustrate those themes. With these images, I strive to represent the participants fairly and accurately as they see themselves within their families, at their jobs, or as members of the greater Marshalltown community.

### **Brief history of documentary photography**

Every so often, documentary photography is “called upon to act as a ‘witness’ and sway public opinion” to a particular point of view (Rosenblum, 1984, p. 342). It brings to light conditions needing change through public support. Some examples are poverty, homelessness, disease, and other types of social reforms. In this regard, the following photographers have become pioneers in civic-minded documentary photography due to techniques they employed.

Jacob Riis was the first major figure in America to truly believe in the idea of images serving as catalysts for social change. After traveling from Europe to the United States to be a journalist in 1870, Riis initially had a rough time finding a job. As a result, he actually experienced being jobless, homeless, and hungry like many immigrants do, some whom would eventually become his subjects (Madison, 1971, p. v). When he became a police reporter for the New York *Tribune*, he became so indignant at the horrible living conditions in the slums, he was morally motivated to “expose the cruel exploitation of these hapless victims, to agitate for sanitary improvements, windows in every room, indoor plumbing, and general tenement control”

(Madison, 1971, p. vi). This eventually led to his book titled “How the Other Half Lives” being published in 1890. These were the issues that the greedy landlords, as well the politicians, neglected and which unfortunately were out of the victims’ control.

Though not a photographer himself, he discovered that flash photography provided a new way of showing the people’s miserable lives. Consequently, he hired a photographer to follow him on his trips into the slums. After a while, he taught himself how to take pictures and documented the conditions himself, making images from certain vantage points and framing the subject so that the photograph would be “transcending the limitation implied in the title (of the book) – that of an outsider looking at slum life from across the deep chasm separating middle- from lower-class life” (Rosenblum, 1984, p. 361).

The photographs ignited the push for social reform in the tenement system and the middle-class public viewed them as “incontrovertible evidence of the existence of vagrant children, squalid housing, and the disgraceful lodgings” (Rosenblum, 1984, p. 359), therefore reinforcing and proving Riis’ case against the tenements. The photographs work together to show the poverty-stricken people surrounded by the details of their pitiful existence including the poor conditions of their living quarters, family life, and where they tried to make a living. While Riis was on a mission to demonstrate to the public the conditions of his subjects, the approach of my project will merit more focus on revealing the condition of the people within their surroundings. The project will also stray from Riis’ technique in that the participants will have more control in telling their story through photographs as well as audio clips.

This quality is present in the work of Lewis Hine, another main photographer of the twentieth century. His best known works include photographs of immigrant families arriving to America on Ellis Island and his compelling work with the National Child Labor Committee in

1906. He came up with the idea for the development of the human-interest photo story and street type photography. These concepts enriched the craft and were also responsible for its rising potential as a new tool. Hine also pioneered another important concept: he was the first to approach photography with the idea of letting the subject tell the story. Many photographers learned from his ability to convey “the common man, woman, and child in a positive light, and to incorporate their point of view, their ‘voice,’ in his captions” (Kaplan, 1998, p. 9).

Hine is also responsible for the reworking of the social photograph from being a single photograph into the more complete photo story. In addition, he realized how the caption supporting the “iconological image” (Kaplan, 1998, p. 9) and the image itself could have an impact as an “effective and compelling graphic language” (p. 9). He created “substantive, controversial images that, nonetheless, evoked qualities easily identifiable and shared: dignity, grace, and beauty” (p. 9). These are the kinds of images I hoped to create with the members of the Latino community in Marshalltown.

In any society, internal or external changes can occur: When personal beliefs force people to make changes in their behavior (e.g., going “green”), internal change supposedly occurs. Voting for or against an issue or donating money to a cause are external changes. Politically, if a project sheds light on a certain area, reform is a possible change. In the case of Jacob Riis, the public demanded legislation in order to reform the poor tenement system after he published his photographs.

Likewise, Lewis Hine’s photographs were used by the National Child Labor Committee and helped bring about “the establishment of a Children’s Bureau in both the U.S. Department of Commerce and the U.S. Department of Labor” (National Child Labor Committee, 2008, p. 1), which continued to work on banning most forms of child labor. Eventually, the NCLC also

claimed victory in 1938 when the Fair Labor Standards Act, “which contained strong NCLC-designed child labor provisions” (National Child Labor Committee, 2008, p.1) was passed.

### **Photojournalism and documentary photography**

It is important to distinguish between photojournalism and documentary photography. Photojournalism is the work of newspaper photographers who document the news as it is happening and “produce images as part of the work of getting out daily newspapers and newsmagazines” (Prosser, 1998, p. 85). Though photos were initially used only to illustrate a written story or article, today’s photojournalists look for the story-telling image that will have the most immediate impact. They are then able to tell stories through their photographs without relying on a written story.

Even with this progress, however, photojournalism continues to be suppressed by lack of available space as well as by “prejudices, blind spots, and preconceived story lines of their editorial superiors” (Prosser, 1998, p. 86). Not only that, but according to Prosser, “readers do not expect to spend any time deciphering ambiguities and complexities in the photographs that appear in their daily newspaper or news magazine” (1998, p. 86). As a result, to prevent a loss of focus from the reader, images have to be instantly readable without potentially multiple layers to interpret.

Documentary photography incorporates a different, usually subtler approach to images than photojournalism. According to Paula Rabinowitz, “the documentary...is meant to instruct through evidence; it poses truth as a moral imperative” (1994, p. 18). In other words, the documentary photographer is not only capturing the evidence of what is occurring in the present. She is also presenting it to the audience as a kind of lesson on what should or could be done in response to what the image reveals.

Because I think most media have framed the immigration issue with aggregate numbers instead of going to the people behind the statistics, I hope to frame the issue in a more personal way through documentary photographs and audio derived from the participants of the project. With this approach, the American public may have the opportunity to hear another side of the immigration issue: directly from the immigrants themselves.

### **Reporting technique**

Journalistic reporting methods, or what academics might call qualitative research methods, are appropriate for social science projects that propose to accurately portray and interpret a given social issue through the words and experiences of those who are directly affected or involved.

This approach will be taken in order to show an honest, well-rounded view of the immigrant journey. This predominantly visual documentary hopes to capture the overt or subtle differences the immigrants have had to endure due to their status or lack thereof, how they function in their everyday lives, the extent to which they have been acculturated to their new environment, and what they think the future holds for them.

The people I interviewed are immigrant residents of Marshalltown, Iowa. Atkinson & Flint (2001) caution that it is not uncommon to encounter difficulties in searching for and locating certain kinds of populations: “Groups, such as...people with unusual or stigmatized conditions (e.g., AIDS sufferers and welfare recipients) pose a range of methodological challenges if we are to learn about their lives” (p.1). As such, my reporting, or what academics refer to as the snowball sampling technique, is appropriate for documenting the lives of the people who worked with me. This reporting, or technique, consists of making contact with an

initial group of people and then gathering more potential sources through that initial group and so on.

In this project, a group of about ten immigrants of the Marshalltown community were initially contacted. After interviewing a few of them, they were asked to refer me to a few more people they thought might help me. These new sources were asked to recommend more potential participants to contact, and so on. Using a fellow immigrant as a source likely helped soothe initial doubts about participating. In other words, “trust may be developed as referrals are made by acquaintances or peers rather than other formal methods of identification” (Atkinson & Flint, 2001, p. 2). In an effort to curb the sampling bias inherent in the snowball technique, Atkinson and Flint (2001) suggest asking each participant for a decent number of referrals. Even though only three families are shown, I interviewed 10-12 individuals in order to gather enough information and then decide which stories I wanted to showcase.

### **Collecting and analyzing journalistic material**

The goal of this project is to demonstrate the struggles and the triumphs of Mexican immigrants now currently living in Marshalltown using their own words and through their own images. I will find a variety of people to participate by journalistic reporting, also known by academics as the snowball sampling technique. They will be asked for personal background information, the reasons they decided to immigrate to the United States, why they chose to live in Marshalltown, how they arrived in the US, the obstacles they faced along the way, how they earn a living in the US, the extent to which they perceive themselves as having adapted to the local culture, their goals and aspirations, and the difficulties they now face as Marshalltown residents.

Building trust is an important requirement of the qualitative interview. According to Esterberg (2002),

Even if participants do agree to an interview, they may not be willing to talk honestly or discuss intimate details about their personal lives if they do not feel some level of trust.

This is especially true in attempts to research those who are different from you or those from stigmatized groups (p. 91).

To prevent the phenomenon called “going native,” Esterberg (2002) suggests that you should “develop enough rapport to get people to talk to you, but not so much that you actually develop friendships with your participants or disclose too much about yourself (p. 92).” Because I was raised in the Mexican culture, tradition, and Spanish language, I hoped that it would be easier to gain the participants’ trust, allowing them to feel more comfortable in the process.

After an interview was conducted and digitally recorded, I listened to it, looking for themes in the answers the participants provided. Afterwards, I transcribed and translated the parts of every interview that had relevant themes which would help me build the audio for the slideshows. These transcripts allowed me to search for different ways of telling each of the immigrant family’s experiences through multi-media presentations.

The selection of participants and editing of photos depended on the variety of the immigrants’ backgrounds. Because this documentary aims for a more profound understanding of the immigrant experience, a large number of participants is not necessary as long as the few involved have different stories to tell. This project includes three immigrant families with different stories ranging from someone currently living as an undocumented immigrant to someone who has managed to keep his family together in US to someone who has recently

become a US citizen. While each family has its own unique story to tell, I delved deeply into each experience to provide the best-rounded account possible.

### **Limitations**

As with any other project, there are a few potential limitations. In the case of this project, knowing only the English language would have been a limitation. However, due to my Mexican American background and proficiency in Spanish, many people may have felt more comfortable sharing more information than they would have in English or with someone who did not claim that background. This may have worked to my benefit by allowing me to present stories that are more intimate than those that an outsider could have recorded.

It is possible that some of the participants may have felt the need to censor themselves because I am a woman, but I hope that my common language and empathetic approach opened more doors than it closed. Also, many of the immigrants were recruited through a Catholic church and all of them were of Mexican descent, so they may not be representative of the immigrant population as a whole. Finally, one of my slideshows may be seen as less credible because I have chosen to protect the identities and omit the names of the family members.

As a journalist, however, it is my responsibility to tell the story in such a way that it is truthful yet also fair to the subject. Therefore, I concluded that regardless of the omission of identities, it was more important to share the overall story of this family.

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