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## Exploring the Impact of Immigrants' Views of Public Sentiment

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## EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF IMMIGRANTS' VIEWS OF PUBLIC SENTIMENT

A project based upon an independent investigation, submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Social Work.

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2009

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  - b. Problem Justification- social workers are better prepared to empower immigrant clients when they understand the issues surrounding immigration and how individuals are affected.
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### *Abstract*

Immigration is an issue that has become increasingly important in American society. An understanding of the issue of immigration, as well as the various issues related to it, is essential in the social work profession. It is apparent through recent changes in national immigration policies that the “pathway to citizenship” is becoming increasingly difficult. The literature reveals that public sentiment about immigration strongly influences the development of these policies. In addition to the influence that public sentiment has on policy-making, it is equally important to understand the ways in which public sentiment impacts immigrants’ perceptions of themselves. This research study provides an overview of the issue of immigration, with a specific focus on the internalization of immigrants’ perceptions of public sentiment. The researcher hypothesized a relationship between immigrants’ views of public sentiment and the ways in which they view themselves. Seventeen immigrants from six different countries participated in this exploratory study. Data was analyzed by comparing participants’ responses to questions about perceived feelings of Americans with responses to questions about their views of themselves. The results did not support the hypothesized relationship. The research study demonstrates the need for social workers to increase their knowledge about the issue of immigration, as well as their awareness of the influence of public sentiment.

### *Introduction*

Immigration, defined as the entrance and settlement in a country or region to which one is not native, has been the topic of a great deal of attention over the past few years. The recent changes in U.S. immigration policies have increased awareness of the effects that these laws have on immigrants. Each year, thousands of people leave their homes, villages, friends, families, and everything that is familiar to them in order to start a new life in a new place. These people risk everything they have for the chance to pursue their dreams in the United States, a country of freedom. Unfortunately, upon their arrival, immigrants quickly learn that success does not come easily. They learn that the system seems to work against them, and they live in constant fear of deportation. In the past decade, nearly 2.2 million immigrants were deported, and more than 100,000 of these individuals were parents of native-born American citizens. (Falcone, 2009). Last year Immigration and Customs Enforcement reported that the number of people deported was as high as 220,000 (Hernández, 2008 p. 23). In particular, the state of

Rhode Island has begun to tighten its policies regarding immigration, and these changes have resulted in a large impact on Rhode Island's immigrant population.

One recent change in Rhode Island immigration policy includes governor Carcieri's May 2008 decree, which gave state police the authority to enforce federal immigration laws (State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, 2008). The issue of immigrants' rights is discussed with a focus on the laws pertaining to deportation. Research on this issue reveals that "Congress can choose any criteria for excluding foreigners- no matter how arbitrary or irrational- and the Court will uphold the decision" (Hernández, 2008, p. 28).

The purpose of this study is to explore how immigrants are affected by stereotypes and public sentiment- the "unofficial laws" of society. The purpose of understanding this is to be able to integrate the needs of immigrants within the social context provided by other members of society.

The various situational forces that these immigrants endure, both in their countries of origin, as well as in the United States, are necessary background for social work practice. Attention is given to the factors that lead to immigration to the United States, in addition to the demographics of the population of immigrants (i.e., gender, country of origin, age, number of years in the United States). It is important for social workers to be aware of how this population has changed over the years, and how these different groups integrate into American society.

A highly developed understanding of this topic is essential within the profession of social work. The United States was founded as a country of immigrants, and the number of new immigrants continues to grow. In 2004, about 362,000 new immigrants entered the U.S. (The Congress of the United States, 2006). By 2007, the population of immigrants living in the U.S. reached a record of nearly 38 million (Camarota, 2007). In Rhode Island, the number of illegal

aliens, defined as foreigners residing in the state without the government's authorization, is estimated to be between 20,000 and 40,000 (State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, 2008). This is a significant percentage of the population of Rhode Island, representing "more than the population of 32 of Rhode Island's 39 cities and towns" (State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, 2008, p. 1).

This issue provides major implications for social work in Rhode Island in addition to the national level, because other states are facing similar situations. By understanding the ways in which immigration policies affect immigrants, it is possible to develop an understanding of the situations clients may be facing. Relevant theories include social context theories, as well as the focus on how historical, cultural, and economic factors affect immigrants. In addition to a practical significance, this study also carries implications for social policy. For example, recent changes in the eligibility requirements for RIte Care, Rhode Island's Medicaid managed care program for families, have left many immigrants ineligible for health insurance. Another implication for social work is to increase knowledge about the ways in which policies are developed. Social workers would benefit from this knowledge by learning how to effectively advocate on behalf of their clients in order to make Rhode Island immigration policies fairer, more effective, and nondiscriminatory.

This research study will provide a framework necessary for recognizing patterns between immigrants' perceptions of American public sentiment and their views of themselves. It will also provide an implication for policies that improve, and those that hinder immigrants' status in American society, as seen specifically through immigrants in Rhode Island. Social workers are committed to helping marginalized groups and empowering individuals. Immigrants are prime examples of members of a marginalized group. Through developing an understanding of the

impact of social policies, social workers will be better prepared to help these individuals reach empowerment.

### *Literature Review*

#### *Historical Facts About Immigration:*

Historically, immigration has been a topic that elicits strong feelings in the general population. In the United States, immigration laws have gone through many significant changes since the country was first founded. Originally, the idea was “to welcome men and women of every national origin who wanted to share the peace and prosperity which this country had to offer” (Wittke, 1949, p. 5). As the nation grew, policies eventually became stricter, and began to prohibit individuals from entering.

The first important date in immigration history comes with the passage of the Naturalization Act in 1790. This law granted permission to “any alien, being a free white person, [to] be admitted to become a citizen of the United States” (U.S. Immigration History, 2008, p. 2). This Act extended the requirements for citizenship from five to fourteen years, which can be seen as discrimination against the “many immigrants and political refugees from Europe who had entered the United States since 1789 during the period of the French Revolution” (Wittke, 1949, p. 7). Furthermore, the “anti-foreign movement of the period before the Civil War reached a climax in the Know-Nothing Party of the 1850s” (Wittke, 1949, p. 9). Over the years, most of the laws that were passed restricted immigration in some way. Eventually, the quota system was put into effect, which is most similar to today’s system (U.S. Immigration History, 2008).

In 1950 came the passage of the Internal Security Act which put the “green card” into effect, which is still used today (U.S. Immigration History, 2008). The current U.S. immigration

system was established in 1952 with the quota system through which limits are placed on a per-country basis. Furthermore, this Act gave preferential treatment to family members and individuals with special skills (U.S. Immigration History, 2008). With the emphasis on civil rights in the mid-1960s, greater attention was given to the ways in which immigrants were affected by discrimination. The 1968 Immigration Act prohibited U.S. immigration discrimination based on race, place of birth, sex and residence, in addition to putting an end to restrictions on Asian U.S. immigration (U.S. Immigration History, 2008).

Years later, the focus shifted from the restrictions being put on legal immigration to the overall issue of illegal immigration. This eventually led to the legalization of hundreds of thousands of illegal immigrants under the 1986 Amnesty Act. Signed by former President Ronald Reagan, the bill was designed to create a “clean-slate” by legalizing the current illegal immigrants and providing stricter employment regulations (Swarns, 2006). In addition to providing amnesty through legalizing these individuals, the Act established “employer sanctions which fines employers for hiring illegal workers, and passed tough laws to prevent bogus marriage fraud” (U.S. Immigration History, 2008, p. 2).

The U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), created in March of 2003, reconstructed the immigration system and incorporated the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) into the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) (U.S. Immigration History, 2008). The new system, USCIS, obtained control over “immigration services and benefits, including citizenship, applications for permanent residence, non-immigrant applications, asylum, and refugee services” (U.S. Immigration History, 2008, p. 3). This transformation occurred as a result of the attacks on September 11, 2001, and is considered to be the one of the most extensive restructurings of the Federal Government (American Geological Institute, 2002). The Homeland

Security Act of 2002, signed by former President Bush on November 25, 2002, called for these changes to be made to the immigration system (American Geological Institute, 2002).

*Current Reasons for Immigration to the U.S.:*

Depending on the historical context, there have always been many different reasons for immigrants to come to the United States. Similarly, present-day immigrants have a variety of reasons to start a new life in this country. One reason, which is especially significant in the presence of domestic violence, is asylum. The term refers to the “protection granted to individuals in the United States who have been persecuted or fear they will be persecuted on account of their race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion” (USCIS, 2008, What is Asylum section, para. 1). After being granted asylum, immigrants are “eligible to apply to adjust their status to that of a lawful permanent resident” (USCIS, 2008, What is Asylum section, para. 1). Unlike other areas of immigration, there are currently no quotas on the number of immigrants who can receive asylum, and it is not dependent on an individual’s immigration status. Immigrants who are granted asylum become eligible to work in the United States regardless of their possession of an employment authorization document. This document is valuable not only for employment purposes, but also for identification. It serves as “evidence of alien registration, which is required by law to be carried by registered aliens at all times” (USCIS, 2008, What is Asylum section, para. 3). Being granted asylum can help immigrants to find jobs through “job search assistance, career counseling, and occupational skills training” (USCIS, 2008, What is Asylum section, para. 5). Additionally, they can apply for derivative asylum status for any spouse or child.

In addition to asylum, immigrants may be granted permission to remain in the U.S. under the status of “refugee.” These individuals “must be of special humanitarian concern and

demonstrate that they were persecuted, or have a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group” (USCIS, 2008, Refugees section, para. 1). Unlike asylum, each fiscal year has a “ceiling for refugee admissions” (USCIS, 2008, Refugees section, para. 1). Furthermore, admissions are “allocated to various geographic regions” (USCIS, 2008, Refugees section, para. 2).

*National Statistics, Services, and Recent Changes:*

There is a steady rise in the number of immigrants residing in the United States. According to the 2007 Current Population Survey, this number reached a record of 37.9 million (Camarota, 2007). Also indicated was the 10.3 million immigrants, both legal and illegal, that “settled in the United States between January 2000 and March 2007” (Camarota, 2007, p. 3). These statistics are the highest ever, even compared to the immigrant population during the “great wave of immigration” at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which was only half of what it is today (Camarota, 2007). More specifically, illegal aliens make up 30 percent of the total foreign-born population (Camarota, 2007). It is apparent through recent changes in national immigration policies that the current government is making the “pathway to citizenship” extremely difficult for immigrants.

A law put into effect in October 2008 raised the cost of the U.S. citizenship test from \$675 to over \$800 (personal communication, September 26, 2008). In addition to increasing the cost, test questions were made much more difficult. It is easy to see how these changes affect an immigrant’s ability to become a citizen. Even immigrants who have been living here for most of their lives are discouraged by these high costs, and therefore fail to benefit from citizenship in important areas such as voting rights. Policy makers need to examine how these national laws

affect immigrants across the country. In addition to national statistics and results, it is also necessary to consider immigration on a smaller level: Rhode Island immigration.

*Rhode Island Statistics, Services, and Recent Changes:*

Compared to the national averages, Rhode Island's immigrant population is similar relative to the size of the population of the state. Immigrants make up 13.3 percent of the population of Rhode Island, compared to the nation's average of 12.6 percent (Camarota, 2007). Rhode Island is listed among the states with a statistically significant growth in immigrant population between 2000 and 2007 (Camarota, 2007). This percent increase is reportedly 60.9 percent- much higher than the nation's average of 24.3 percent (Camarota, 2007).

With a growing immigrant population, it is essential that the state government adjust certain policies to account for the needs of these immigrants. The state of Rhode Island has several proposed policy options for 2008. One of these policies is based on the idea that "long-term investments in education and health care will pay off with a more skilled and healthy workforce in the future" (Progressive States Network, 2007, p. 17). This policy would increase healthcare coverage for children who are ineligible under Title XIX of the Social Security Act because of their status. An additional policy would extend assistance to lawful immigrants who are ineligible for federally funded services on the basis of certain restrictions, such as the five-year waiting period (Progressive States Network, 2007).

Another policy option is closely related to the Rhode Island governor's recent decree which gave state police the authority to enforce immigration. Under this decree, state police work alongside U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement. Carcieri also supports two pending bills which "make English the official state language, and make it a felony to rent a home to an illegal immigrant" (Henry, 2008, p. 1). The proposed state policy would "prohibit the use of

state and local law enforcement agencies for the purpose of detecting or apprehending persons whose only violation of law is that they are persons of foreign citizenship who are in violation of federal immigration laws” (Progressive States Network, 2007, p. 21). This policy was proposed on the basis that turning local law enforcement into immigration enforcement “undermines community policing and other known effective law enforcement approaches” (Progressive States Network, 2007, p. 21).

Issues related to immigration are important in terms of policy development. Domestic violence, an issue very closely related to immigration, inspired Rhode Island HB 5237, which was designed to “promote immigrant assistance in crime fighting by protecting the identity of such immigrant victims and witnesses of crime” (Progressive States Network, 2007, p. 22). The idea behind this bill was to encourage immigrant women to report incidences of domestic violence instead of living in fear of both their abusers and the law.

Changes that have been implemented in Rhode Island immigration policy can also be seen in the area of healthcare. RItE Care, Rhode Island’s Medicaid managed care program, has gone through many changes in recent years. Before 2001, RItE Care provided healthcare only to children less than five years-old (personal communication, September 26, 2008). That year, the program eligibility requirements were expanded to include all children up to 18 years of age regardless of their immigration status. In 2007, the program eliminated all new undocumented immigrant children, but allowed children who were already enrolled to continue receiving these services. In March of 2008, the program was shut off to all undocumented immigrants, even if they were already in the system (personal communication, September 26, 2008). Three months later, RItE Care was restricted to only citizens and Legal Permanent Residents who have been in the country for more than five years (personal communication, September 26, 2008).

*Poverty, Education, and the Uninsured:*

Compared to native-born Americans, immigrants are more likely to be living in poverty. Notably, “15.2 percent of immigrants compared to 11.4 percent of natives lived in poverty in 2006” (Camarota, 2007, p. 16). In addition, near-poverty is also much more common among the immigrant population than among native-born Americans (Family Violence Prevention Fund, 2008). Therefore, immigrants are in high need of welfare services and often are not able to receive them. The changes in the welfare system that arrived with the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) created a “work-first” approach to welfare in the form of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (Family Violence Prevention Fund, 2008). Additionally, the Act narrowed immigrant eligibility for federal and state benefits, such as Food Stamps, SSI, Medicaid, and public housing (Family Violence Prevention Fund, 2008).

The lower income levels and lack of health insurance found among immigrants is due in part to immigrants’ lower education levels. Compared to 8.4 percent of natives, immigrants lacking a high school diploma account for 30.6 percent of the immigrant population ages 25-64 (Camarota, 2007). Since level and quality of education is so strongly linked to economic success, it is not surprising that immigrants are at a disadvantage economically. Studies show that “immigrants who have legal status, but little education, generally have low incomes and make heavy use of welfare programs” (Camarota, 2007, p. 38). This further demonstrates that legalization is no guarantee of success for immigrants. The high rates of welfare use, poverty, and rates of the uninsured among immigrants are more related to the level of education that these immigrants have than to their immigration status.

Healthcare is another issue closely related to immigration. Overall, “33.8 percent of the foreign-born lack insurance, compared to 13 percent of natives” (Camarota, 2007, p. 17). This 33.8 percent does not include U.S.-born children of immigrants, since they qualify for Medicaid. Moreover, the growing rates of the uninsured can be linked to the rise in immigration (Camarota, 2007).

*Domestic Violence:*

Domestic violence is another issue that needs to be examined in the context of immigration. The immigration status of women is a definite risk-factor in domestic violence. Aside from living in fear of their abuser, these women are burdened by the constant fear of deportation. An immigrant woman is likely to stay in an abusive relationship because it has the potential to help her improve her immigration status. In addition to their vulnerability, many immigrant women are manipulated into staying in these abusive relationships because they fear the possible repercussions of notifying the police. This is especially understandable given the context of the new Rhode Island law that gives state police the authority to enforce immigration laws. Immigrant women are further isolated by language barriers and are hesitant to get any sort of help for fear of deportation (Littlefield, 2008). Abusers are aware of their spouses’ vulnerability and use this as a way to maintain control over them.

The “battered spouse waiver” was created by the Immigration Act of 1990 (Family Violence Prevention Fund, 2008). This law grants permission to an immigrant spouse of a U.S. citizen or permanent resident to obtain permanent resident status without the help of the victim’s spouse under certain conditions. It must be evident that the “spouse already filed an application for [the victim] to become a permanent resident, and has assisted her in obtaining her conditional

residency, but has failed to take any further steps to remove the conditions” (Family Violence Prevention Fund, 2008).

The Violence Against Women Act, which was renewed in 2000 and again in 2005, took this one step further. The purpose of the law is to protect women and help them reach a more stable immigration status. Under certain conditions, these immigrant women are eligible to apply for green cards (Littlefield, 2008). Women who can demonstrate that they have suffered domestic violence in the United States by a U.S. citizen or legal permanent resident are eligible for the battered spouse waiver, VAWA self-petition, and VAWA cancellation of removal (Bhuyan, 2008). Defensive applicants for “cancellation of removal,” which protects an individual from deportation, may have to take extra steps in proving their good moral standing in order to qualify for a change in status to legal permanent resident (Bhuyan, 2008). Individuals who may self-petition include abused spouses of U.S. citizens or lawful permanent residents, parents of children who have been abused by a U.S. citizen or lawful permanent resident, and children who have been abused by a U.S. citizen or lawful permanent resident (USCIS, 2008).

An important factor regarding the eligibility for protection is that women who have never reported domestic violence will not have legitimate proof of the abuse, and likely will not qualify. This is precisely what puts immigrant women at such high risk. These women essentially become “left outside the parameters of standard domestic violence advocacy and support” (Bhuyan, 2008, p. 154). This provides an important implication for policy change. It is important that immigrant women suffering from domestic violence have access to a safe place to report incidences of abuse without the fear of being deported. In domestic violence situations, it is difficult for victims to feel comfortable enough to openly discuss their abuse. Many victims fear speaking openly about their abuse because of the possible repercussions by both their

abusers and the law. Immigration is an added risk factor for domestic violence, and it is important that women in this situation get the appropriate services and support.

*Stereotypes about Immigrants:*

Aside from the difficulties that immigrants face in dealing with the system, immigrants endure discrimination at many levels that is fueled by negative public sentiment. This negative sentiment not only affects the development of policies, but also how immigrants view their role in society. The result is that immigrants are affected in numerous ways by public sentiment about immigration.

Most of the negative feelings that the public has about immigrants are based on fears. One popular fear is the notion that immigrants are soaking up the United States' limited resources without contributing to the system. The belief is that "immigrants take jobs away from hard working native-born Americans, drain America's health care and educational resources, and increase our criminal rates" (Reeves, 2008, p. 1). Those who carry this fear view immigrants as cheap competition and detrimental to the wages of legal immigrants and citizens (Altman, 2007). Furthermore, the view is that immigrants hurt the economy by accepting low-wage jobs and "under the table" salaries and by not paying taxes (Reeves, 2008).

Although the fears are present and the stereotypes exist, many Americans tend to disguise their prejudices by attributing their biases to other non-racial factors. Magaña and Short (2002) found that Americans were more likely to attribute negative feelings toward Mexican immigrants with several traffic violations than to other non-Hispanic immigrants with the same "criminal" record. This proves their hypothesis that "people are reluctant to voice prejudicial attitudes unless they can do so in ways that cannot be attributed to race, thereby keeping intact the perception that their self-concept is fair, egalitarian, non-prejudiced, and so forth" (Magaña &

Short, 2002, p. 708). The implication is that even people who claim to be non-biased toward Hispanic immigrants may, in fact, possess a certain degree of bias that they claim is due to factors other than race. Nevertheless, immigrants are affected by prejudices, and the denial of these prejudices only makes it more difficult to break down these barriers. Another issue that the study addresses is the reality that even legal immigrants suffer from the stereotypes and prejudices against undocumented immigrants, because they “share a phenotype with this stigmatized group” (Magaña & Short, 2002, p. 709).

Although widely accepted, many of the stereotypes about immigrants are entirely false. The reality is that immigrants commit fewer crimes than native-born Americans, are less likely to be imprisoned, and do not put a strain on the health care system (Reeves, 2008). Additionally, they pay taxes and are less likely than legal-immigrants and native-born Americans to benefit from federal or state public benefit programs (Reeves, 2008, p. 2). Despite what many Americans believe, immigrants consume less than what they contribute in the social security system.

Further arguments include evidence that immigrants actually enhance economic growth. A recent report from the White House revealed the following three findings: that “immigrants tend to complement natural born citizens, raising their productivity and income; immigration has a positive influence on America’s long-run fiscal effect on [the] nation, and; skilled immigrants contribute to innovation and have a significant positive fiscal impact” (Reeves, 2008, p. 2). Opponents of immigration tend to overlook the fact that immigrants sustain the economy by filling jobs that many citizens would not take. There are many more of these types of jobs than the quota for legal immigrants permits (Altman, 2007). For example, over the next five years, the work force will require over a million new workers. It is reported that “about 60 percent of

the new workers coming into the industry are Hispanic or Latino, [which means that if 600,000 of the workers are not available], it puts a bit of a stretch on [the] labor force” (Altman, 2007, p. 2).

Stereotypes about immigrants also have an important implication for policy making in that they “influence information processing and decision making” (Burns & Gimpel, 2000, p. 204). One study reveals that “attitudes on immigration policy are highly contingent upon stereotypical beliefs about the work ethic and intelligence of other groups, especially among whites” (Burns & Gimpel, 2000, p. 222).

In addition to existing prejudices, the state of the economy is strongly associated with public sentiment about immigrants. In a successful economy, Americans are more likely to support immigration, and during periods of recession, Americans are more likely to have anti-immigration views resulting from fears that immigrants will be taking jobs away from citizens (Burns & Gimpel, 2000). Burstein (2003) found that “public opinion influences policy most of the time, often strongly. Responsiveness appears to increase with salience, and public opinion matters even in the face of activities by interest organizations, political parties, and political and economic elites” (p. 29). In recent years, immigration has attracted a great deal of attention evident in the emphasis of the issue in the recent presidential election. This serves as further evidence of the importance of exploring the relationship between sentiment and policy during this period of economic recession. It is clear that many stereotypes and prejudices exist about immigrants, and it is important that we be aware of how this sentiment affects immigration policy, as well as immigrants themselves.

It is important to include not only the “American” public sentiment, but also the opinion of immigrant groups regarding immigration. Research shows that the “level of acculturation and

perceived economic threat influence Hispanic opinion on legal immigration” (Hood et al., 1997, p. 627). It is understandable that this group would be intimidated by the system. The tightening of immigration policies and stronger enforcement demonstrate that Americans view immigration as a societal problem. Not surprisingly, this sentiment effects how immigrants themselves perceive the issue.

### *Hypothesis*

The literature reveals that there is an association between public sentiment and policy making. It is hypothesized that in addition to this relationship, there is a relationship between public sentiment and the ways in which immigrants view themselves. The specific question that this study aims to explore is: to what extent are immigrants’ views about themselves affected by their perceptions of public sentiment about immigration? It is hypothesized that the immigrants who believe that native-born Americans have negative feelings about immigrants will be more likely to respond with negative feelings about themselves and their roles in society than those immigrants who have more positive feelings about the ways in which they are seen by native-born Americans. The purpose of the study is to demonstrate how immigrants can be affected on a personal level by the ways that they are treated in society.

### *Methodology*

This qualitative study aims to explore the ways that immigrants’ perceptions of American public sentiment affect the views that they have about themselves and their roles in society. The goal was to obtain a sample of 20 participants. Participants were asked to complete a survey exploring both the individual’s views about Americans’ perceptions of immigration, as well as the individual’s views about immigration. A sample of convenience was used: it consisted of 17 Hispanic immigrants enrolled in an urban English language program in Rhode Island. Because a

sample of convenience was used, generalizations to populations should be made with caution. Additional participants were obtained through snowball sampling: one of the participants agreed to distribute the survey to her immigrant friends.

Participants were provided with informed consent (See Appendix A). The purpose of the study and the ways in which the information would be used were explained. The survey was completely anonymous: participants were asked to place their completed surveys in a folder. A simple survey design was used to collect data from the sample population (See Appendix B). Participants were given both informed consent and the survey in Spanish to ensure the validity of their responses (See Appendixes C and D). The questionnaire distributed used a Likert Scale to rate participants' thoughts about the ways in which they are perceived by native-born Americans, as well as their thoughts about themselves and their roles in society. A demographics page was used to group participants by gender, country of origin, years in the United States, etc. This information was explored in the data analysis as possible factors affecting the ways in which immigrants perceive either public sentiment or their roles in society.

Data was analyzed by comparing responses to questions about perceived feelings of Americans with responses to questions about their views of themselves. In addition, relationships between the demographic variables and these responses were also explored. The study aimed to find possible reasons for the relationships between these variables.

### *Findings/Results*

#### *Demographics*

The age of participants ranged from 21 to 60. Participants' ages and countries of origin were both determined by self-report. One respondent did not provide her age. Another respondent did not answer the questions on the back of the page which focused on the

individual's self perceptions. At the request of the program in which the participants were involved, the survey did not ask about immigration status. The program coordinator explained that immigrants often feel uncomfortable when asked questions about their status. Participants' years of arrival to the United States ranged from 1978 to 2007. The majority of participants reportedly arrived between 2000 and 2005. Seven participants (41.2 percent) reported having kids who currently attend school in the United States. This question was asked because it was hypothesized that the men and women who are involved with the school system would feel a stronger connection to American society. This hypothesis was not supported: nearly 53 percent of all respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement "I feel that I am treated unfairly in my job or community because of my immigration status," yet of participants with kids in school, only 42.9 disagreed with the statement.

#### *Immigrants' Perceptions of American Public Sentiment*

In response to the questions about immigrants' perceptions of American sentiment, 41.2 percent of respondents believed that most Americans have positive views about the issue. Thirty-five percent of participants were undecided about Americans' interest in the immigrants' votes in the 2008 Presidential Election, and another 23.5 percent either disagreed or strongly disagreed that Americans were concerned with immigrants' opinions.

#### *Immigrants' Attitudes*

Nearly sixty percent of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "I have generally positive views about immigration in the United States." While the majority had positive views about immigration, most immigrants (76.4 percent) reported wanting to maintain the customs and traditions of their countries of origin. The majority (64.7 percent) of

respondents did not believe that their life would have been easier if they had been born in the United States.

The survey contained one qualitative question which asked participants to list any stereotypes about immigrants of which they were aware. Seven of the participants left this question blank. The majority of responses referenced positive stereotypes about immigrants, such as their dedication to hard work, family, community, and culture. It is interesting to note this primary focus on the positive generalizations as opposed to negative stereotypes about immigrants that are at the root of bad public sentiment. Other answers referred more to the ways in which immigrants are treated in society, such as: “There is a lack of respect to the immigrant people. Some are treated badly in their jobs and there is discrimination by the police.” Another response explained that immigrants are very dedicated and persistent, despite being treated unfairly. One participant described the stereotype that “many immigrants cannot or do not know how to fill out their taxes without reporting whether or not they have a social security number.”

### *Conclusion*

While 58.1 percent of total respondents reported having positive feelings about immigration, 57.1 percent of the participants who believed that Americans have positive feelings about the issue reported positive feelings about the issue. These two questions most directly relate to the hypothesized relationship between immigrants’ perceptions of American sentiment and their feelings about immigration. These findings do not support the hypothesized relationship between the two variables.

Consistent with Reeves’s (2008) findings was one participant’s mention of the stereotype that immigrants do not know how to file their taxes without reporting whether or not they have a social security number. Further examination of the stereotypes provided by participants revealed

that immigrants have a different view of the “stereotypes” about themselves than what is usually reported in the literature. Participants spoke more to character stereotypes about immigrants than to the stereotypes about the ways in which immigrants “use the system” or “take away jobs.”

Although immigration status was not provided, it is assumed that there was a mixture of undocumented immigrants and legal residents. With this information, the study could have further explored what the literature revealed about legal immigrants suffering from existing stereotypes and prejudices against undocumented immigrants. The inability to request this information acted as a major limitation to the study. The intent was to explore in greater depth the connection that immigrants felt to society and to examine how this contributed to their views about themselves. Immigration status would have been not only indicative of immigrants’ feelings of connectedness, but also could have been used as another factor in comparing results.

Other limitations of the study include the nature of the responses. While the Likert Scale was an efficient method which allowed individuals to participate in the study in the limited time that they were available, it also left a lot of room for interpretation. For example, many of the respondents marked somewhere in-between two statements instead of circling their responses. This could have affected the validity of the data as well as the interpretation of results. In addition, many participants did not respond to the open-ended question, which limited the potential of the findings. The open-ended question was intended to generate more discussion about immigrants’ perceptions of American public sentiment. Most of the immigrants who did respond to this question seemed to report their own perceptions of the immigrant population with responses such as “there is a lack of respect,” or “community is very important.” If more participants had responded to this question, there would have been a greater possibility of exploring immigrants’ perceptions of the native-born stereotypes about the immigrant

population. While the responses were useful in that they provided insight into immigrants' concepts of stereotypes, the intent was to explore more fully the stereotypes that many Americans have about immigrants and to examine immigrants' awareness of these misconceptions.

Another limitation was the unavailability of research. A review of similar studies would have enriched the findings of this study, as well as provided more opportunity for discussion. It is difficult to find participants for studies with similar focuses, especially when immigration status is a factor. Since there was little previous research on the exact topic presented in this study, the researcher explored the literature related to immigration as an overall issue, eventually narrowing the focus to stereotypes and public sentiment.

There were also many strengths of the study. One example is the diversity of the sample. Although the sample size was small, it was relatively diverse. Six countries were represented among the sample population. Additionally, years since participants' immigration to the United States ranged from two to 31 years. Both of these characteristics provided variation within the sample population, which allowed it to be more representative of the diversity within the Latino population.

Another strength of the study was that the survey was given to participants in Spanish. While many of the participants had at least a basic understanding of English, giving participants the opportunity to complete the survey in their native language ensured a greater level of validity of their responses.

#### *Implications to Social Work Practice, Policy, and Research*

The study carries important implications to social work practice. It is essential for social workers to understand not only the ways in which clients are affected by policies, but also how

they are impacted by the “unofficial laws” of society- “public sentiment.” An understanding of the ways in which immigrants’ views of public sentiment affect their self perceptions can provide an opportunity for social workers to break through barriers that exist for immigrant clients. Additionally, greater knowledge about these stereotypes allows social workers to empower this population by helping immigrants to confront these issues and dispel the negative stereotypes that exist.

In addition to understanding how stereotypes influence immigrants’ self perceptions, it is equally important for social workers to understand how public sentiment affects policy change. As the literature revealed, “attitudes on immigration policy are highly contingent upon stereotypical beliefs about the work ethic and intelligence of other groups” (Burns & Gimpel, 2000, p. 222). These stereotypical beliefs not only influence attitudes about policy, but impact the policies themselves. The literature also described that public sentiment often changes according to the nation’s economic success. This further evidences the crucial need for more research of this issue, especially during this time of economic recession. The implication is that public sentiment may become increasingly negative as native-born Americans start to see immigrants as competition in this impossible job market. More research is needed to examine the direct impact of stereotypes on public policy. Further exploration of this issue will help to focus legislative attempts on protecting immigrants from bias and prejudice. Educating immigrants about these issues can help them not only to become aware of how their perceptions of American sentiment affect their own thoughts, but also that confronting negative stereotypes is an important aspect of successful policy change.

### **Appendix A: Informed Consent**

The following survey is being used in a research study about the relationship between immigrants' perceptions of public sentiment and their views about themselves. The study is being conducted by Jacqueline Salaway, a social work student at Providence College, and is not affiliated with the program in which I am involved. The information that I provide is completely anonymous and confidential, and will not be used for any other purpose other than the research study. I am free to decline participation in the survey without affecting my involvement in this conversation program in any way. If I have any questions or concerns about the survey or the research study, I am to call Jacqueline at (631)255-3932.

\_\_\_\_\_ I have read the above statement

\_\_\_\_\_ I agree to participate in the study

Signature:

\_\_\_\_\_

Date:

\_\_\_\_\_



5. I feel that most Americans cared about immigrants' opinions in the 2008 Presidential elections.

Strongly-----Disagree-----Undecided-----Agree-----Strongly  
Disagree Agree

6. Please list any stereotypes about immigrants that you are aware of:

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**Please select a response for each statement provided.**

1. I have generally positive views about immigration in the United States.

Strongly-----Disagree-----Undecided-----Agree-----Strongly  
Disagree Agree

2. I want to make sure that my children know the Spanish language. (If you do not have children, please indicate here: \_\_\_\_\_No Children

Strongly-----Disagree-----Undecided-----Agree-----Strongly  
Disagree Agree

3. I plan to continue practicing the customs and traditions of my home country, and to keep my culture part of my everyday life.

Strongly-----Disagree-----Undecided-----Agree-----Strongly  
Disagree Agree

4. I feel ashamed when I cannot understand someone speaking to me in English.

Strongly-----Disagree-----Undecided-----Agree-----Strongly  
Disagree Agree

5. I think my life would be easier if I were born in the United States

Strongly-----Disagree-----Undecided-----Agree-----Strongly  
Disagree Agree

\*\*\*\*\*THANK YOU FOR YOUR PARTICIPATION IN THIS STUDY\*\*\*\*\*

### **Appendix C: Spanish Translation of Informed Consent**

El cuestionario siguiente va a ser utilizado para un proyecto de investigación sobre la relación entre los pensamientos que los inmigrantes tienen sobre el sentimiento público de inmigración y las maneras en que estos inmigrantes ven a sí mismo en la sociedad americana. La investigación será hecha por Jacqueline Salaway, una estudiante de trabajo social en Providence College. La investigación y no tiene nada que ver con las ideas de Inglés en Acción. La información que usted proporciona es completamente anónima y confidencial y no será utilizado para cualquier otro propósito de otra manera que el estudio de investigación. Usted tiene la opción para decidir no tomar parte en el estudio de investigación, y no tendrá cualquiera afecta en los servicios que usted recibe de Inglés en Acción. Si usted tiene alguna pregunta, puede llamar a Jacqueline a este número: (631) 255-3932.

\_\_\_\_\_ He leído la información arriba.

\_\_\_\_\_ Quiero tomar parte en este estudio de investigación.

Firme aquí:

\_\_\_\_\_

Fecha:

\_\_\_\_\_

### Appendix D: Spanish Translation of Survey

#### Responda por favor a las preguntas siguientes:

1. Género: \_\_\_\_\_ Hombre \_\_\_\_\_ Mujer
2. Edad: \_\_\_\_\_
3. ¿De qué país es usted?: \_\_\_\_\_
4. ¿En qué año vino a los estados unidos?: \_\_\_\_\_
5. ¿Tiene niños que asistir escuela aquí en los estados unidos? \_\_\_\_\_ Sí \_\_\_\_\_ No
6. ¿Ahora tiene trabajo? \_\_\_\_\_ Sí \_\_\_\_\_ No
7. Indique su nivel de inglés:  
 \_\_\_\_\_Malo \_\_\_\_\_Regular \_\_\_\_\_Bueno \_\_\_\_\_Excelente

#### Escoja por favor una respuesta para las declaraciones siguientes:

1. Siento que muchos americanos tienen sentimientos positivos sobre la inmigración.  
 Totalmente-----Desacuerdo-----Indeciso-----De Acuerdo-----Totalmente  
 Desacuerdo De Acuerdo
2. Siento que la mayoría de los americanos son muy amables a mí.  
 Totalmente-----Desacuerdo-----Indeciso-----De Acuerdo-----Totalmente  
 Desacuerdo De Acuerdo
3. Siento que americanos reconocen las contribuciones que hago a la sociedad.  
 Totalmente-----Desacuerdo-----Indeciso-----De Acuerdo-----Totalmente  
 Desacuerdo De Acuerdo
4. Siento que soy tratado **injustamente** en mi trabajo o comunidad a causa de mi estatus de inmigración.  
 Totalmente-----Desacuerdo-----Indeciso-----De Acuerdo-----Totalmente  
 Desacuerdo De Acuerdo
5. Siento que la mayoría de los americanos tuvieron interés en las opiniones de los inmigrantes en las elecciones presidenciales en el año pasado.  
 Totalmente-----Desacuerdo-----Indeciso-----De Acuerdo-----Totalmente  
 Desacuerdo De Acuerdo

6. Describa por favor algunos estereotipos sobre los inmigrantes que usted conoce.

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**Escoja por favor una respuesta para las declaraciones siguientes:**

1. En general, tengo sentimientos positivos sobre inmigración en los estados unidos.

Totalmente-----Desacuerdo-----Indeciso-----De Acuerdo-----Totalmente  
Desacuerdo De Acuerdo

2. Quiero asegurarme que mis niños aprendan español. (Si usted no tiene niños, responda con “no niños” aquí: \_\_\_\_\_No Niños

Totalmente-----Desacuerdo-----Indeciso-----De Acuerdo-----Totalmente  
Desacuerdo De Acuerdo

3. Quiero seguir practicando los costumbres y las tradiciones de mi país, y mantener mi cultura como parte de mi vida.

Totalmente-----Desacuerdo-----Indeciso-----De Acuerdo-----Totalmente  
Desacuerdo De Acuerdo

4. Me da vergüenza cuando no puedo entender alguien que está hablando inglés.

Totalmente-----Desacuerdo-----Indeciso-----De Acuerdo-----Totalmente  
Desacuerdo De Acuerdo

5. Yo creo que mi vida fuera más fácil si yo hubiera nacido en los estados unidos.

Totalmente-----Desacuerdo-----Indeciso-----De Acuerdo-----Totalmente  
Desacuerdo De Acuerdo

\*\*\*\*\*¡¡Gracias por su participación en este cuestionario!!\*\*\*\*\*

### Appendix E: Demographic Characteristics of the Participants

Characteristic	Number	Percent
Gender:		
Male	11	64.7
Female	6	35.3
Country of Origin:		
Guatemala	8	47.1
Bolivia	3	17.6
Dominican Republic	2	11.8
Mexico	2	11.8
Puerto Rico	1	5.9
Colombia	1	5.9
Year Arrived to U.S.:		
1978	1	5.9
1989	1	5.9
2000	2	11.8
2002	2	11.8
2003	2	11.8
2004	3	17.6
2005	5	29.4
2007	1	5.9

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