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Latina Immigrants in Minnesota Communities:

A Comparative Survey on Demographics, Needs, Barriers, and Assets

by Margaret Villanueva, Flora Calderón-Steck, Ilia Rodríguez, and Luke Tripp

St. Cloud State University

Working Paper No. 64

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About the Authors

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Latina Immigrants in Minnesota Communities:

A comparative survey on demographics, needs, barriers, and assets

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A comparative survey on demographics, needs, barriers, and assets

Abstract

This study of 100 Latina immigrants and 58 social service providers in four central Minnesota towns contributes to the growing literature on Latinos in Minnesota by providing a demographic profile of Latina immigrants in greater Minnesota and offering insights into their social needs and the barriers to obtaining social services. It also identifies assets or skills of Latinas as well as communication issues relevant to their interactions with service providers in the public service and non-profit arenas. The report's focus on Latinas helps to close a gap in the emerging literature that ignores the gender-specific experiences and assets of Latinas. Another main goal of research is to present data that may inform future public service procedures, policies and practices through improved communications.

In order to explore this problem, this research answers the following questions: *What is the demographic profile of Latina immigrant women in central Minnesota, and how does this profile compare with the perceptions of governmental and private non-profit service providers regarding the Latina immigrant population? Do Latina immigrant women and service providers share an understanding of the most pressing social needs of immigrant women? What are the linguistic and cultural barriers identified by service providers and Latina immigrants as obstacles to effective communication and delivery of services? What personal assets do Latina immigrant women bring to the central Minnesota region? How might Latina immigrants and social service providers open up more effective channels of communication?*

Introduction

The increasing ethnic diversity of immigrants who settle in the Midwest has generated research and policy analysis in an effort to understand and respond to new demographic patterns in the region. Census 2000 results confirmed that Latinos are not only making an impact on towns and cities in the region, but that here in Minnesota the Latino population soared 166% "to almost 144,000 in 2000" (*Pioneer Press,* 2001). In keeping with the national population figures, people of Mexican origin make up two-thirds of Latinos in the state, having increased 175% between 1990 and 2000 (Nelson, 2001). These trends are expected to accelerate as we approach 2025, when the Latino population will have increased by 248% to approximately 296,000 people (HACER, 2004). Latino organizations in the state point out that over the coming decades, "Minnesota will increasingly rely on Latinos to meet social and economic needs" (ibid.).

Although Latinos are not new to Minnesota and the Midwest, historians have shown that in the past most were either migrant farm workers who did seasonal work in the region or blue-collar workers who settled in large cities (Valdés, 2000; Garcia, 1996; Vargas, 1993; Valdés, 1991). Over the past two decades, Latino settlement has moved beyond metropolitan areas into small towns and rural areas of the Midwest (Villanueva, 2002; Martinez, 2001; Naples, 2000; Brunn, et al., 1998; Gouveia & Stull, 1998). In Minnesota, ethnic populations of Latin American descent residing outside the Twin Cities metropolitan area in 2000 include 95,622 Mexicans, 1,579 Puerto Ricans, 1,000 Cubans, 845 Guatemalans, 534 Colombians, 429 Salvadorans, and 174 Ecuadorians (Urban Coalition, 2004). In 2002, record numbers of legal immigrants moved to Minnesota and, of these, 24% of Mexican immigrants settled outside the metro area (Ronningen, 2003). Today, Latino immigrants account for a major portion of rural immigrants in the nation, the Midwest region, and the state (Geller, 2001; Martin, et al., 1996).

Research on the economic and social impact of Latino immigrants and settled migrants outside the Twin Cities metropolitan area demonstrates that the major "pull factor" bringing Latinos and other immigrants to certain rural areas of the state has been employment in food processing (Fennelly, et al., 2002; Kielkopf, 2002). Such studies suggest that the new rural Latino populations face special challenges in terms of their interrelationships with long-term residents and community institutions (Bushway, 2001; Green, 1994).

As a relatively new population in rural central Minnesota, Latino immigrants may be affected differently by public policy and practices that ignore their specific social context, attitudes and experiences. More specifically, because Latino immigrants in the Midwest are more likely than those in the Southwest to receive services from non-Latino providers (Martin, et al., 1996), language and other cultural barriers are more likely to create communication gaps between public service providers and the new Latino communities. Researchers who have explored this problem have found that, for example, Latino families across the state are affected by a lack of information that produces disparities in health care access, which means that eligible families often do not apply for state programs (Blewett & Smaida, 2002). Other studies that have examined the attitudes of this population have documented how, for instance, Latinos in general and immigrants in particular place a strong emphasis on education for both children and adults. Latino families tend to be optimistic about the quality of public schools and believe that a college education is a key factor for the future success of young people, a fact that opens opportunities for outreach and intervention (Pew Hispanic Center, 2004; Kaiser Family Foundation, 2003; Thomas-Brietfeld, 2003). The goal of this research project is to document such perspectives, with a focus on the experiences of Latina women, to better understand communication gaps between governmental agencies, public schools, service providers, and Latino communities in central Minnesota.

To better understand communication gaps, we explore Latina models of communication in light of the concept of communicative action offered by German critical theorist Jürgen Habermas (1984). Communicative action has been defined as a form of dialogue whose goal is intersubjectivity or empathy among speakers in the public sphere and greater understanding—not only of the issue at hand but of the speakers involved in interaction. Habermas opposed communicative action to instrumental or strategic communication, a strategy whose end is to attain a narrow and particular goal, like, for instance, informing an audience about the availability of a specific service or program. We propose here that the communication behavior of Latina immigrants is closer to communicative action and differs from the approaches of service providers who, working under the constraints of bureaucratic forms of organization, tend to rely on instrumental or strategic forms of communication. From a strategic perspective, information is provided under the expectation that individuals will act on information based on a rational, self-interest in improving their lives. But for Latina immigrants, often residing in isolated neighborhoods in central Minnesota towns, instrumental or strategic communication might be too limited and short of meeting their needs to establish dialogue, interaction, empathy, and networking as elements of their communication behavior and needs.

In general, communication between the emerging Latino communities and local governmental agencies or other service providers are also inhibited by limited perceptions or stereotypes about Latino culture and people. In its 2004 "State of Hispanic America" report, the largest Latino policy institute, the National Council of La Raza (NCLR), emphasized the importance of increasing public knowledge about this growing population in order to "create and sustain strong communities" for Latinos and all Americans (NCLR, 2004: 3). Conducting and publishing local research can contribute to more effective public policies and practices by overcoming the inaccurate and negative images that many white Midwesterners hold about Latinos (Jackson, 1995). Raul Yzaguirre, president of NCLR, opened a major policy report with this

observation about images that impede Latinos' attempts to take on a greater social and economic responsibility in American society.

Stereotypes about our community abound, but invisibility is even more pervasive. For most Americans, Hispanics are a dimly blurred and often contradictory image. There are those who see us only as supplicants and not as decision-makers, as consumers and not as producers, as lawbreakers and not as law enforcers, as tax beneficiaries and not as tax contributors (NCLR, 2004).

It has been argued that culturally appropriate research can produce a better understanding of key components of Latino social life (health and educational status, employment, leadership development) so that future public policies and practices can be based on accurate, rather than distorted images (Marin & VanOss Marin, 1991).

While research about Latino communities in Minnesota and the Midwest has expanded rapidly in the past decade, most studies focusing on these communities have ignored the gender-specific experiences and assets of Latina women. Feminist scholars have shown that theories and policies that exclude insights from women's daily life experiences, result in partial accounts of social life (Harding, 1987). Nearly three decades of research has demonstrated that relations of race, ethnicity, class, and gender intersect and influence one another in particular ways in specific contexts; thus, it is crucial to take these complex relationships into account when carrying out social research with policy implications (Pedraza, 1991; Collins, 1990).

Understanding the perspectives of both Latina immigrants and Minnesota service providers in regards to Latina needs and assets will better inform policy for rural community development by taking into account the challenges facing a growing population in Minnesota. Because women are often responsible for linking households to service providers, development projects and policies informed by concrete knowledge and understanding of Latinas' needs and assets are more likely to be effective.

This study of women in four communities in central Minnesota will examine the extent to which Latina immigrants and service providers share common perceptions about social needs, assets, and barriers to effective communication. As a contribution to a growing body of research about Latino communities in Minnesota, this study will expand public knowledge of common patterns and cultural variations in order to develop more informed rural development policies.

Project Overview

Design and Methods

Employing a combination of individual interviews, focus groups, and survey questionnaires, this research project aimed to collect data on the demographic characteristics of the growing number of Latina immigrants in central Minnesota, to explore Latina perceptions of needs, barriers, assets, and communication issues, and to compare Latina perceptions with those of social service providers in the area. The term "Latina" and "Latina women" are used interchangeably in this report to refer to females of Latin American birth or descent living in the United States. "Latino" refers to men or to people of Latin American heritage in general, such as "the Latino community." The term "Hispanic" is used only when citing sources that employ this term in reference to the same ethnic population. The term "immigrant" refers to a person born in another country, while the term "migrant" when used in reference to Latino people means workers who move seasonally from state to state, the majority of whom are U.S.-born.

Research Questions

Two sets of primary research questions guided the investigation:

1. *Demographic profile of Latina immigrants in central Minnesota.*

What are the demographic characteristics reported by Latinas? How does the service providers' understanding of the demographic profile of their Latina clients compare with the facts reported by Latinas interviewed?

2. *Identifying needs, barriers, assets, and communication issues*

What do Latina immigrants identify as their needs, barriers to obtaining social services, assets, and communication issues? What do service providers identify as their Latina clients' needs, barriers to obtaining social services, assets, and communication issues? How do Latina perceptions of needs, barriers to obtaining social services, assets, and communication issues compare with those of service providers who have served Latina clients?

Research Sites

To address these questions, three bilingual Latina researchers studied four towns in central Minnesota where official census reports indicate that the Latino population, while still relatively small (ranging from 1% to 12.9% in towns selected), had more than doubled its numbers between 1990 and 2000. Communities studied were located in the Cold Spring, Melrose, St. Cloud, and Long Prairie areas of Stearns and Todd Counties. Even though researchers' observations and those of local leaders and social service workers interviewed confirmed that census numbers reflected a significant undercount of Latinos living in and around these four communities, census data were used for purposes of identifying patterns of Hispanic population growth. With the assistance of Latino and non-Latino local community leaders, researchers identified neighborhoods with a significant and visible concentration of Latinos. These included mobile home parks on the outskirts of towns, such as unincorporated zones outside the city of St. Cloud, and close to food processing businesses — primarily poultry and meat packing plants — and other manufacturing plants that are important sources of employment for Latinos and economic growth in the areas studied (see description of research sites in Appendix 1).

Participants

Survey participants included 100 Latinas and 58 providers of social services. Researchers used snowball referrals to select a nonrandom sample of 85 women of Latin American backgrounds who migrated to central Minnesota from Latin America or other states in the United States, and 15 women born in the United States who lived with their immigrant families in the neighborhoods studied. Participants lived in the St. Cloud, Cold Spring, Long Prairie, and Melrose. Most women interviewed were working class, employed primarily in food processing, manufacturing, and services (see detailed demographic profiles in the next section).

The sample of service providers included 58 individuals working for governmental and non-profit agencies, the majority in health care, education, and social and legal services. A total of 132 surveys were distributed in person or mailed to service providers with self-addressed, stamped envelopes included. Surveys were given to an administrator of the service agency who then distributed them to staff who have contact with the Latina/o population. The response rate was 44%. The majority of the respondents work in schools (28%) and hospitals (26%). Most work in private non-profit organizations (48%). Twenty-four respondents worked in the St. Cloud area, 18 in Long Prairie, 10 in Melrose, and six in Cold Spring. It is pertinent to note that service providers who participated in the survey were primarily self-selected individuals who work closer with Latino populations and may not be representative of all providers in the region (see service providers profiles in the next section). Likewise, it important to note that since the majority of Latina immigrants interviewed do not receive any social services, the general demographic profile of Latina women in rural towns may not be familiar to service providers. We hope that the results of this study will provide useful information to both groups for closing perception and communication gaps between them.

Research Design and Methods

The research process was divided into three stages. The first involved focus groups with seven Latina immigrants in Cold Spring and St. Cloud, and individual interviews with 12 service providers and staff of local organizations serving Latinos to identify research sites and perspectives on services available, needs and barriers to obtaining services.

The second phase focused on the administration of 12-page survey questionnaires in Spanish or English to Latinas during 1-hour individual interviews, and the distribution of an 8-page self-administered survey among providers between May of 2003 and April 2004. Questionnaires were designed to explore Latina assessments of social needs, knowledge and awareness of programs available, barriers that prevent them from seeking and receiving services, assets they bring to their new communities, and communication issues of relevance. A survey with similar sets of questions was designed for service providers to compare the perceptions of Latina residents in rural communities with those of providers who have served Latina clients. Data collected were coded and processed using the statistical analysis software SPSS (see survey questionnaires on Appendix 3).

The final phase included a discussion session sponsored by United Way in St. Cloud, where 81 service providers learned about the preliminary results of this survey and offered feedback and suggestions to improve communications. Because the audience was made up of interested service providers in general, and not those who had filled out questionnaires or had provided direct service to Latina clients, their feedback was helpful in gaining a broader perspective about providers´ perceptions. After the session, several participants requested researchers to facilitate an additional follow-up focus group with bilingual/bicultural service providers. These action-oriented components of the project generated conversation about communication gaps among service providers. Ultimately, the researchers hope that better understanding will improve future services to the region's Latino population.
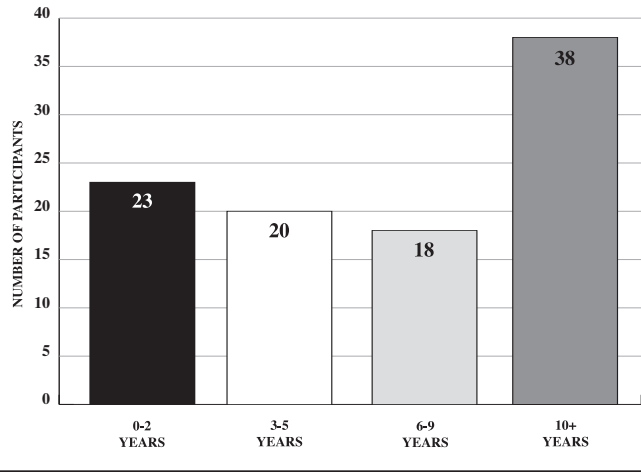
Demographic Profiles

Demographic Profile of Latinas

This summary presents key results of a survey of 100 Latinas in four communities within a 60-mile radius of St. Cloud; 34 in St. Cloud and surrounding unincorporated areas, 24 in Cold Spring, 23 in Long Prairie, and 19 in Melrose. The majority of Latina immigrants in the study was born in Mexico. The Central American countries represented were Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua. Women born in the United States are from Texas, California, New York, and Puerto Rico (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1. Place of Birth

- MEXICO
- US BORN
- CENTRAL AM.
- SOUTH AM.

1%
8%
15%
76%
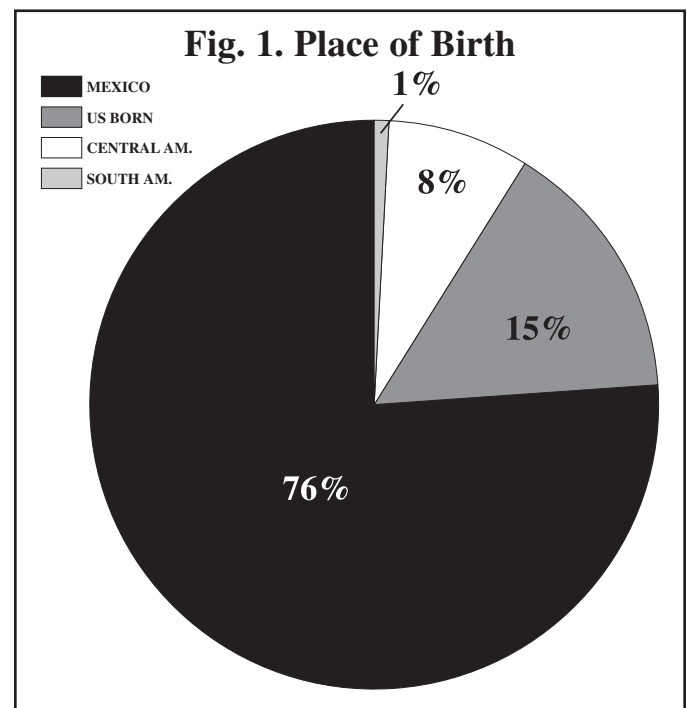
Latinas in the study have lived in the United States for a median of eight years and for a median of three years in Minnesota (Fig. 2). Drawing on the analysis of Mexican immigration by Hondagneu-Sotelo (1994), who found that three years of residency indicated the probability of permanent settlement, 76% of the Latinas in the study are likely to be permanent settlers in the United States. Residency in Minnesota, however, is more recent. While the percentage of Latinas living in the United States for two years or less is 23%, the percentage living in Minnesota for two years or less is 37%.
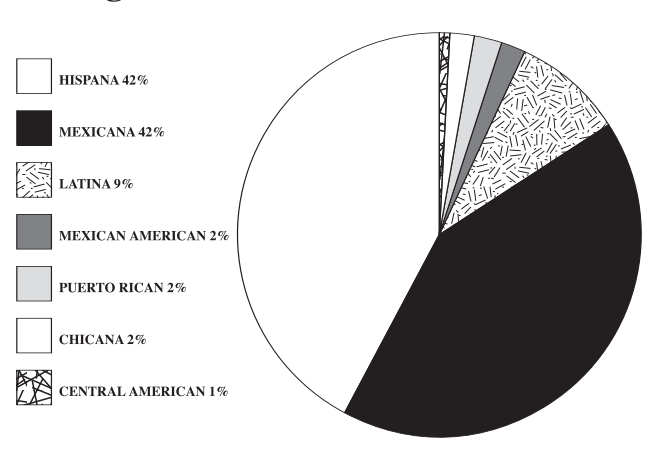
Fig. 2. Length of Residency in the U.S.

The survey included a list of reasons for moving to Minnesota, and 42% of respondents chose multiple reasons. Fifty percent of the women reported looking for work, and of these, 21% reported that they also came to join family members. Indeed, the second most frequent reason for coming to Minnesota (46% of respondents) was to join family members. The majority of respondents, 85 women, reported that they have relatives living in Minnesota beyond persons in their own households. Women who participated in the focus groups also said that they chose to live in Minnesota because it is family-oriented, safe, and calm. They wanted a place that insulates them from the dangers associated with big cities.

We asked the respondents how they identify themselves ethnically (Fig. 3). The term "Hispana" was chosen by 42% of respondents, and "Latina" by 9%. Forty-five percent of the women chose a term that reflected their place of birth. Forty-two percent

Fig. 3. Ethnic Self-Identification

- HISPANA 42%
- MEXICANA 42%
- LATINA 9%
- MEXICAN AMERICAN 2%
- PUERTO RICAN 2%
- CHICANA 2%
- CENTRAL AMERICAN 1%

of the women chose "Mexicana." Of the 15 U.S.-born respondents, three women chose to identify as "Mexicana" and three as either "Chicana" or "Mexican American."

Following the national trend for the Latino population, the Latinas in the study tend to be young [Table 1]. Ages ranged from 15 to 62, with an average of 32 years. Married women or women living with a partner are the majority (75%). All the unions in the study were heterosexual.

Table 1. Age of Latinas

15-17 YEARS	2
18-24 YEARS	30
25-34 YEARS	33
35-44 YEARS	15
45-54 YEARS	15
55+	5
N	*100*

Most of the Latina respondents (79%) are mothers and smaller families are the trend; 66% of the women have between one and four children while 13% have more than five children (Fig. 4). The children tend to be young, too. Forty-six percent of the women have children 5 years or younger, 39% have children between the ages of 6 and 12, 20% have children between the ages of 13 and 17, and 22% have children that are 18 years old or over.
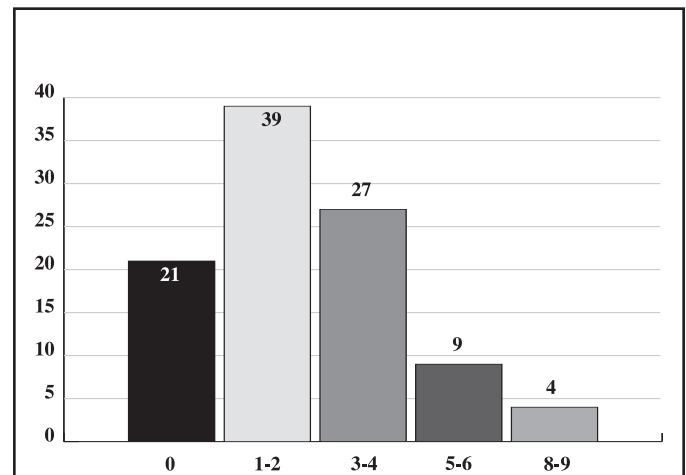
Fig. 4. Number of Children

Table 2. Perception of Quality of Children's Education

	PRE-SCHOOL	ELEMENTARY SCHOOL	JR. HIGH SCHOOL	HIGH SCHOOL	COLLEGE
Women Responding	**18%**	**31%**	**19%**	**14%**	**3%**
VERY SATISFIED	7%	10%	5%	2%	1%
SATISFIED	11%	16%	12%	11%	2%
SOMEWHAT SATISFIED	0%	4%	1%	1%	0%
NOT SATISFIED	0%	1%	1%	0%	0%

Almost half of the women (49%) reported having children in local schools. Respondents were asked about their level of satisfaction with the children's schooling. The greatest number of responses (26) were for elementary school, all of which indicated that mothers were either "very satisfied" or "satisfied" with the quality of education. Table 2 summarizes the results.

While the general perception is that Latinos have large families, only one woman in the study reported having more than 10 people living in her home. The average household size was 4.9. Just under half of respondents, 46%, reported having a household size between one and four people. The remaining 53% reported a household size between five and nine people.

Over two-thirds of the Latinas (64%) reported working outside the home. Forty-eight women worked full time, 12 worked part time, and three worked on a temporary basis. The Latinas participating in the survey had a high rate of employment in low-skill jobs. Fifty-five percent worked in food processing, 34% in services, and 11% in manufacturing. The main employers were poultry processors; 16 women were employed in turkey processing and 10 women in chicken processing. Service employers include bakeries, restaurants, credit collection agencies, social services agencies, and schools. In manufacturing, Latina women worked for companies specializing in stonework, plastics, and technology suppliers.

Demographic Profile of Agencies and Service Providers

Of 58 participants in the survey, 74% were direct service providers and the rest were administrators. Most respondents were white women. Six Latinas, one black woman, and one Latino also returned surveys.

Table 3 summarizes the type, status, and location of agencies represented in the study. Most providers surveyed work at schools (28%) and hospitals (26%). A plurality work in private non-profit organizations (48%) and many work in St. Cloud (41%).

Table 3. Agency Profile of Service Provider Respondents

TYPE		STATUS		LOCATION	
Pre-K to 12 Schools	16	Private Non-Profit	28	St. Cloud	24
Health Care	15	Public	24	Long Prairie	18
Social Services	8	Religious Non-Profit	5	Melrose	
Other	6	Volunteer	1	Cold Spring	6
Legal Services	6				
Religious	4				
Employment	2				
Housing	1				
County Government	1				
Total	*58*		*58*		*58*

Fifty-two percent of the respondents work in large agencies with more than 15 staff members; 14% work in agencies with a staff of five to 10 people; and 29% work in agencies with a staff smaller than five people. Over two-thirds (79%) of the respondents work with Spanish-speaking staff and over half of these (55%) work in agencies with a staff larger than 15 people.

Respondents were asked to identify the services offered by their agencies; 62% of respondents reported more than one service. Two common services checked were emergency assistance and interpretation; 35% of respondents checked both services.

Slightly over half of the providers indicated that they work for agencies which offer services specifically targeted for the Latino population and 48% reported that their agencies are currently planning outreach efforts. The percentages drop when the focus is exclusively on women. Twenty-four percent of respondents reported that their agencies provide services specifically targeted to Latinas, and 21% reported current planning for outreach efforts to Latinos. Fewer than half (45%) of service providers reported that their agencies collect statistical data on Latinos served; 33% reported not knowing about their agencies' data collection. Providers indicated that the number of Latinas served monthly ranges from 2-500; the mode is 20.

Comparing Latina Demographics and Providers' Estimates

This section presents a comparison of service providers' understanding of the demographic profile of Latina immigrants they serve with the information reported by Latinas interviewed. Although over half of the Latinas (63%) have lived in Minnesota for three years or longer, service providers who serve Latina clients tend to believe that their settlement is more recent (Fig. 5). Respondents had lived in Minnesota for a median of three years. Among providers, 36% estimated that Latina clients have lived in Minnesota for less than two years, while 24% estimated that Latinas have lived in Minnesota for three to five years. Only 7% of service providers

estimated that their clients have resided in the state for more than six years, even though 24% of the 100 Latinas interviewed had been residents for over six years. If a considerable portion of service providers and educators perceive that Latinas' residency is relatively recent, this could affect the types of services or educational opportunities offered to this demographic group, particularly when 24% of the service providers worked in agencies that offered services specifically targeted for Latinas, and only 21% indicated that their agencies were planning future outreach.

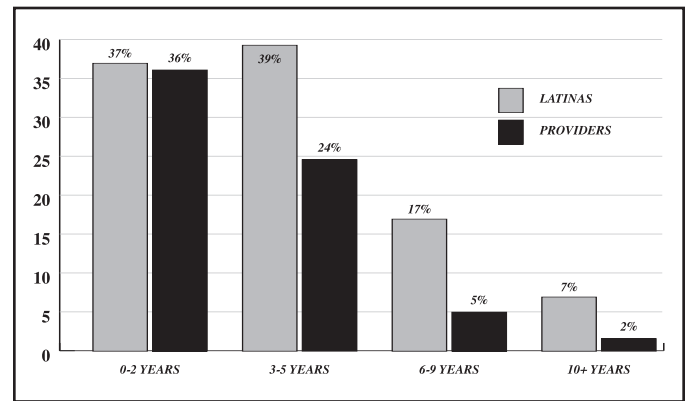## Fig. 5. Length of Residency in Minnesota

Table 4 summarizes explanations that Latinas and service providers gave for why Latina immigrants come to Minnesota. Reflecting the results of other studies documenting the rural transformations in rural Minnesota, both groups of respondents identified work and family reunification as the two main reasons for Latina migration to the area. But it is interesting to note, that while 53% of the service providers reported that Latinas they serve generally work outside the home, 21% still said they did not know. On the other hand, 64% of the Latinas reported working outside the home.

Provider estimates of the household size of Latinas they serve also differ from the reports collected from Latina respondents (Fig. 6). While 21% of providers estimated that households of Latina immigrants would be small (one to four members), 46% of Latinas reported that they live in small households (Fig. 6). While 54% of Latinas reported that more than five people reside in their

Table 4. Reasons for Coming to Minnesota

LATINAS		PROVIDERS	
Looking for Work	50%	Looking for Work	41%
Reunite with Family	46%	Reunite with Family	33%
Partner Found a Job Here	30%	Welfare Benefits are Generous	7%
Explore New Opportunities	29%	No Answer	5%
To Study	10%	Do Not Know	5%
Offered a Job Here	9%	Chose Multiple Answers	9%
Another Reason	5%		
Chose Multiple Answers	42%		
N = 100		N = 58	

Fig. 6. Household Size
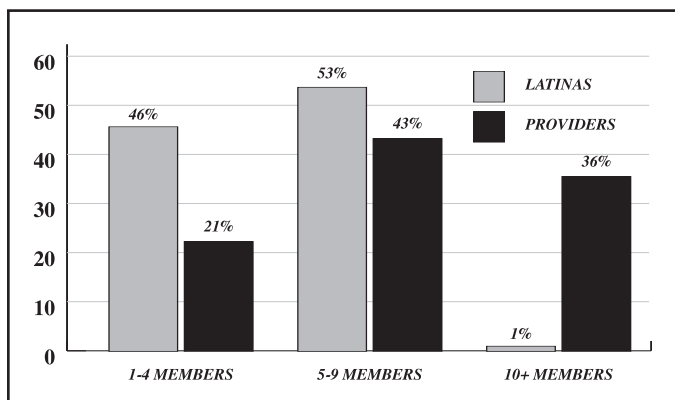
household, 79% of providers estimated that Latinas would have five or more people living in their household and, of these, over one-third of providers perceived that an average Latino household probably had more than 10 members.

In comparing providers' perception of Latinas' educational attainment with what Latinas reported, it is important to keep in mind that some of the Latina immigrants in the study received their education in their countries of origin, where the breakdown of school levels might not be identical with that of

Fig. 7. Educational Attainment
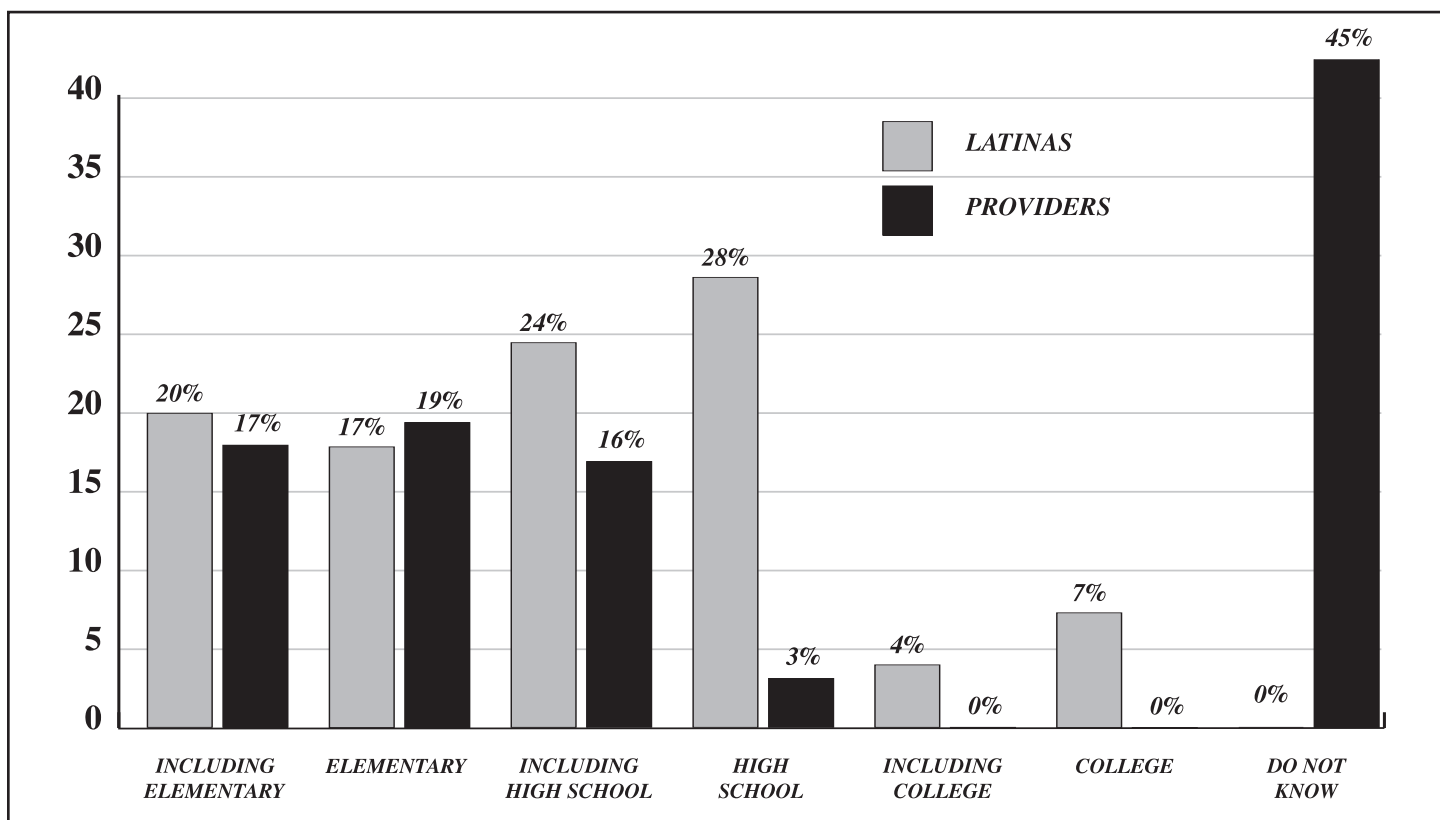
United States (Fig. 7). Two points stand out in this comparison. Nearly half of providers (45%) responded that they did not know what level of education was attained by their Latina clients. In addition, Latina respondents reported higher levels of educational attainment than estimated by providers in regard to their clients. Nearly two out five Latinas (39%) reported having a high school degree or higher. Only 3% of providers estimated that Latina immigrants they serve would have a high school degree.

Latina Social Needs and Awareness of Services

Latina Social Needs

Interviewers read a list of 16 resources and services and asked each Latina respondent whether the resource or service was "urgent," "important," or "not important" to her at the time. Figure 8 shows that less than one-third of respondents answered that they would consider any of the listed resources or

services to be a current "urgent" need. Among these, English courses and medical or health services were considered "urgent" by 28% and 27% of the Latinas, respectively. Employment, legal aid services, and public transportation were all chosen as "urgent" needs by 20% of respondents.

On the self-administered survey, service providers were asked, "Based on your knowledge and experience working with Latina women, please give us your perception of the most urgent social needs among them." Providers then chose one of four boxes marked "urgent," "important," "not important," or "don't know." Like Latina respondents, many providers also believed that English courses (41%), medical or health services (31%), and employment (29%) would be the most urgent needs for Latinas. However, fewer providers realized that legal aid services would be an urgent need for Latina immigrants; only 7% of providers compared to 20% of Latinas chose this item. As shown in Fig. 9, 28% of providers felt that Latinas
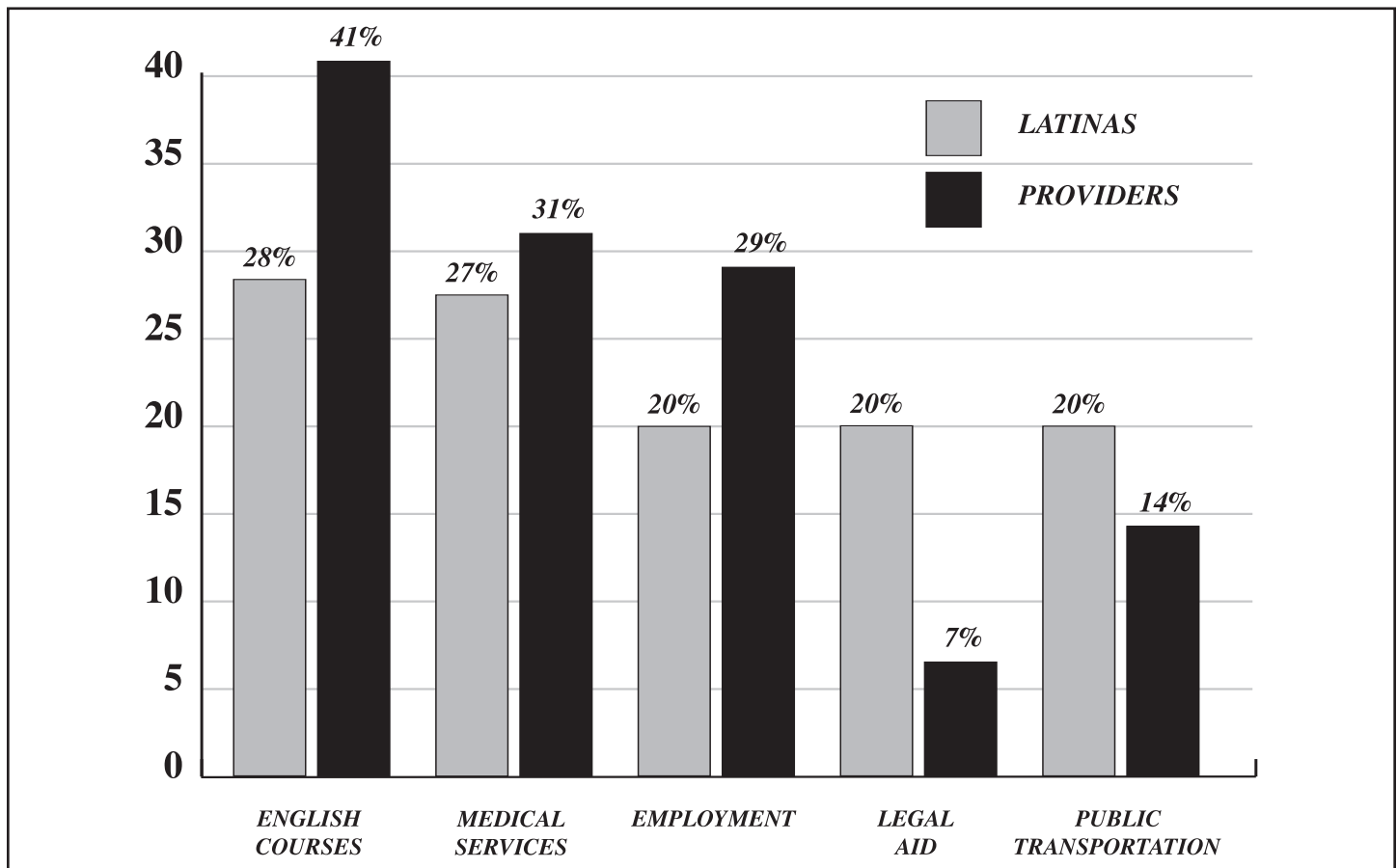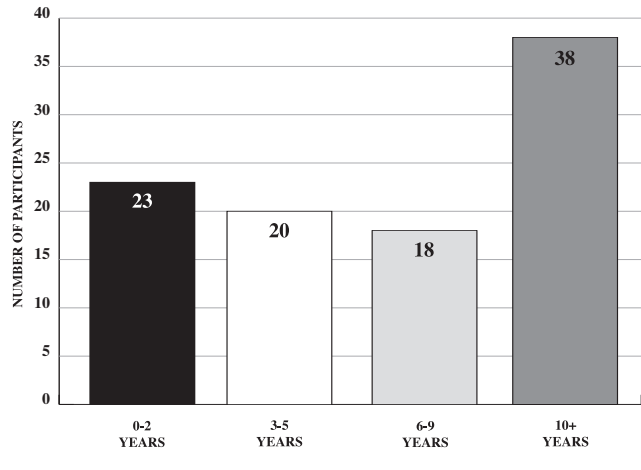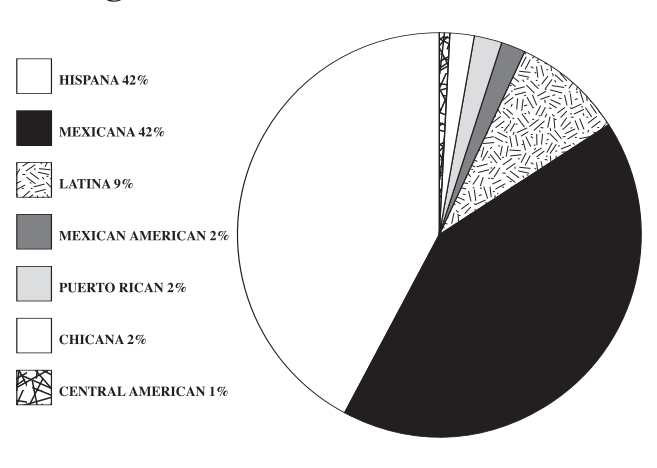
Fig. 8. Top Five "Urgent" Needs

Fig. 2. Length of Residency in the U.S.

The survey included a list of reasons for moving to Minnesota, and 42% of respondents chose multiple reasons. Fifty percent of the women reported looking for work, and of these, 21% reported that they also came to join family members. Indeed, the second most frequent reason for coming to Minnesota (46% of respondents) was to join family members. The majority of respondents, 85 women, reported that they have relatives living in Minnesota beyond persons in their own households. Women who participated in the focus groups also said that they chose to live in Minnesota because it is family-oriented, safe, and calm. They wanted a place that insulates them from the dangers associated with big cities.

We asked the respondents how they identify themselves ethnically (Fig. 3). The term "Hispana" was chosen by 42% of respondents, and "Latina" by 9%. Forty-five percent of the women chose a term that reflected their place of birth. Forty-two percent

Fig. 3. Ethnic Self-Identification

- HISPANA 42%
- MEXICANA 42%
- LATINA 9%
- MEXICAN AMERICAN 2%
- PUERTO RICAN 2%
- CHICANA 2%
- CENTRAL AMERICAN 1%

of the women chose "Mexicana." Of the 15 U.S.-born respondents, three women chose to identify as "Mexicana" and three as either "Chicana" or "Mexican American."

Following the national trend for the Latino population, the Latinas in the study tend to be young [Table 1]. Ages ranged from 15 to 62, with an average of 32 years. Married women or women living with a partner are the majority (75%). All the unions in the study were heterosexual.

Table 1. Age of Latinas

15-17 YEARS	2
18-24 YEARS	30
25-34 YEARS	33
35-44 YEARS	15
45-54 YEARS	15
55+	5
N	*100*

Most of the Latina respondents (79%) are mothers and smaller families are the trend; 66% of the women have between one and four children while 13% have more than five children (Fig. 4). The children tend to be young, too. Forty-six percent of the women have children 5 years or younger, 39% have children between the ages of 6 and 12, 20% have children between the ages of 13 and 17, and 22% have children that are 18 years old or over.
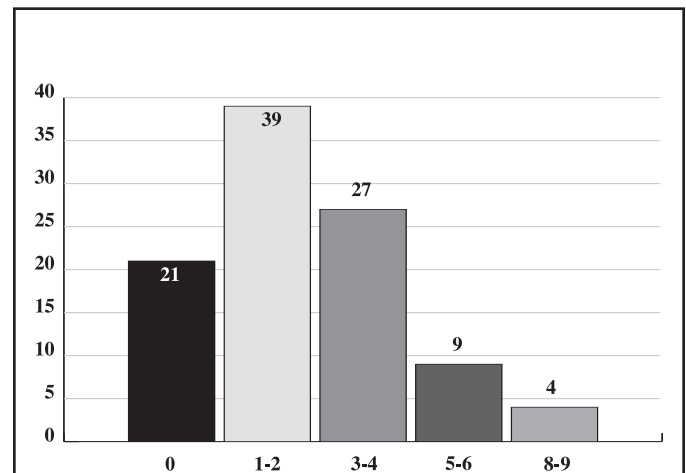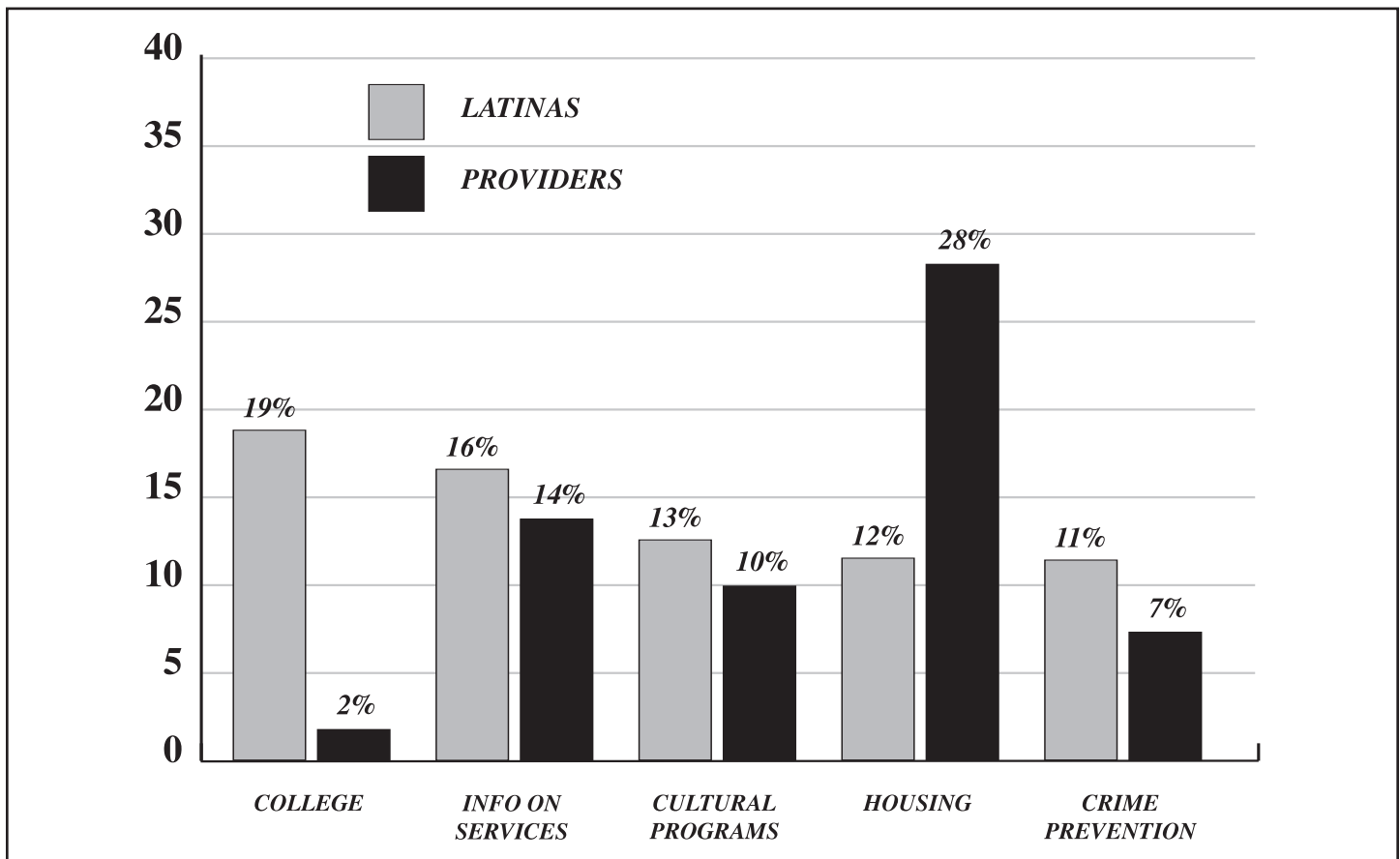
Fig. 4. Number of Children

Fig. 9. Next Five "Urgent" Needs

may consider "housing" to be an urgently needed resource, while only 12% of Latina respondents identified housing as one of their urgent needs at the time. It is noteworthy that 19% of Latina respondents identified college education as the sixth urgently needed resource (Fig. 9), while very few service providers (2%) perceived that their Latina clients would identify college as an urgent need. Latinas reported an urgent need for information about services at a slightly higher rate than service providers, and similarly, a somewhat higher of percentage of Latinas identified cultural programs or crime prevention as urgently needed resources or services.

A ranking of the top 10 (out of 16) "urgent" needs identified by about one-third of Latina respondents and those cited by service providers (see Table 5) shows general agreement.

Providers, however, tend to overestimate the general need for affordable childcare and vocational training, and underestimate the urgency of college education and crime prevention for Latina immigrants.

Figures 10 and 11 show the top 10 social needs identified by Latinas as "important" rather than "urgent" or "not important" to themselves and their families, and the percentage of service providers who believed that such were "important" needs for Latinas. In all categories, a higher percentage of Latinas, up to 77%, identified these 10 resources or services as important to them. More Latinas (77%) and providers (64%) rated the need for "information on available services in the community" as an important need (Fig. 10).

We consider this a very positive research finding, because it suggests a common understanding of the need for better communication between Latino communities and the institutions that provide health care, education, and other public services.

Table 5. Rankings of "Urgent" Needs

LATINAS	PROVIDERS
1. English Courses	1. English Courses
2. Medical Services	2. Medical Services
3. Employment	3. Employment
4. Legal Aid	4. Affordable Child Care
5. Public Transportation	5. Housing
6. College	6. Vocational Training
7. Information on Services	7. Public Transportation
8. Cultural Programs	8. Information on Services
9. Housing	9. Cultural Programs
10. Crime Prevention	10. Women's Friendship

In terms of differences in the perceptions of Latinas interviewed and service providers who serve Latina clients, a higher percentage of Latina respondents (69%) than providers (41%) rated college education as an important need. In addition, 74% of Latina respondents compared with 53% of service providers indicated that "cultural and recreational programs for the family" are important to Latinas. When focusing on the significance of education to Latina women, it is notable that Latina respondents placed higher emphasis on college education than the providers expected (19% identifying this as "urgent" and 69% as "important"). On the other hand, 19% of providers, compared to 9% of Latinas, felt that "vocational education for employment" would be an "urgent" need (Fig. 11). However, vocational training was identified as "important" by 59% of Latinas and 47% of providers.

Table 6 shows agreement between Latina respondents and service providers in the ranking of three out of four resources as the most "important" to Latinas; both groups identified information on available services, church services close to home, and friendship and support groups with other women to be important social resources.

Fig. 10. Top Five "Important" Needs

Bar chart legend: LATINAS (gray), PROVIDERS (black)

- INFO ON SERVICES: Latinas 77%, Providers 64%
- CULTURAL PROGRAMS: Latinas 74%, Providers 53%
- RELIGIOUS SERVICES: Latinas 72%, Providers 62%
- WOMEN'S FRIENDSHIP: Latinas 70%, Providers 60%
- COLLEGE: Latinas 69%, Providers 41%
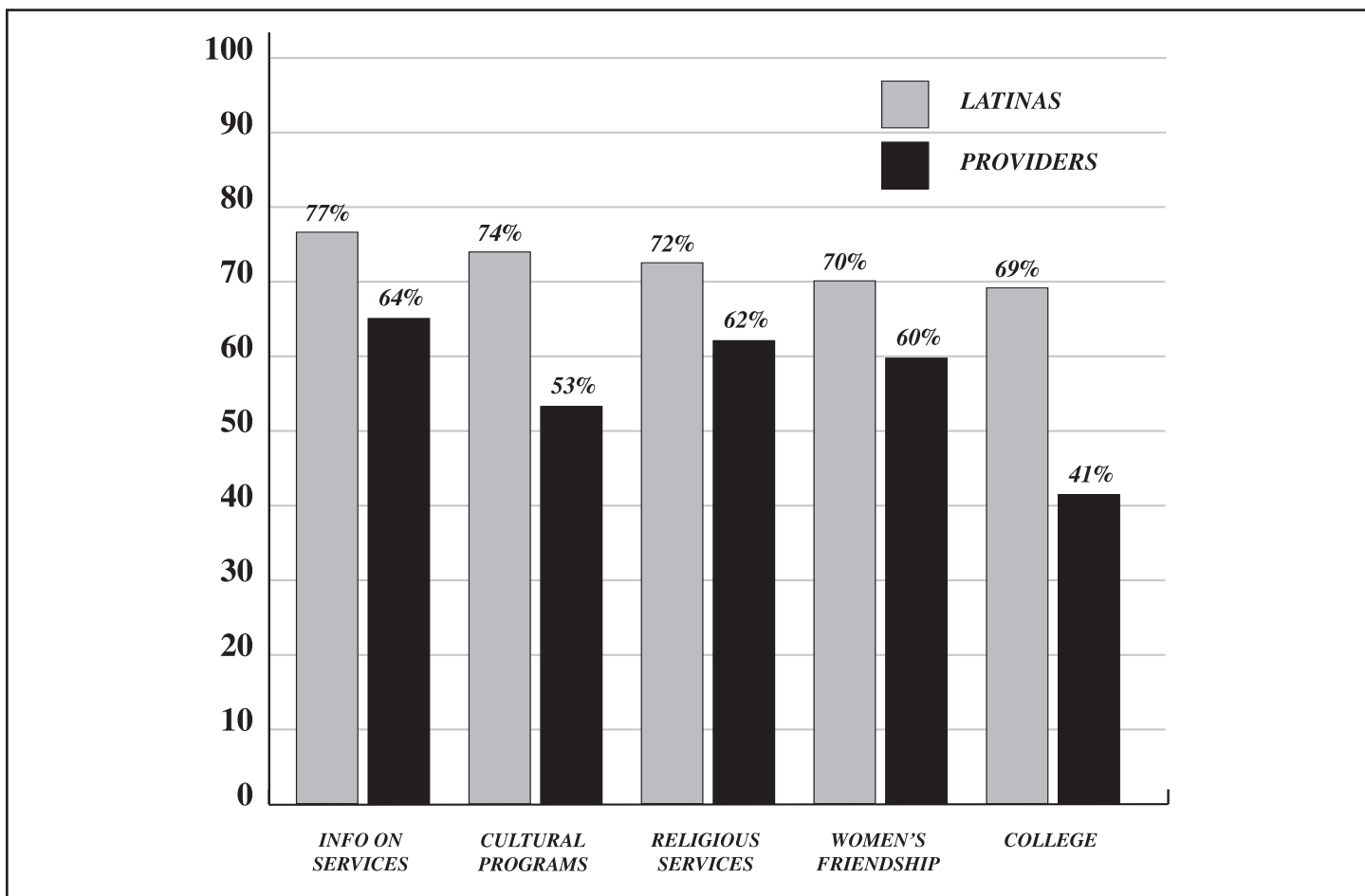
Fig. 11. Next Five "Important" Needs
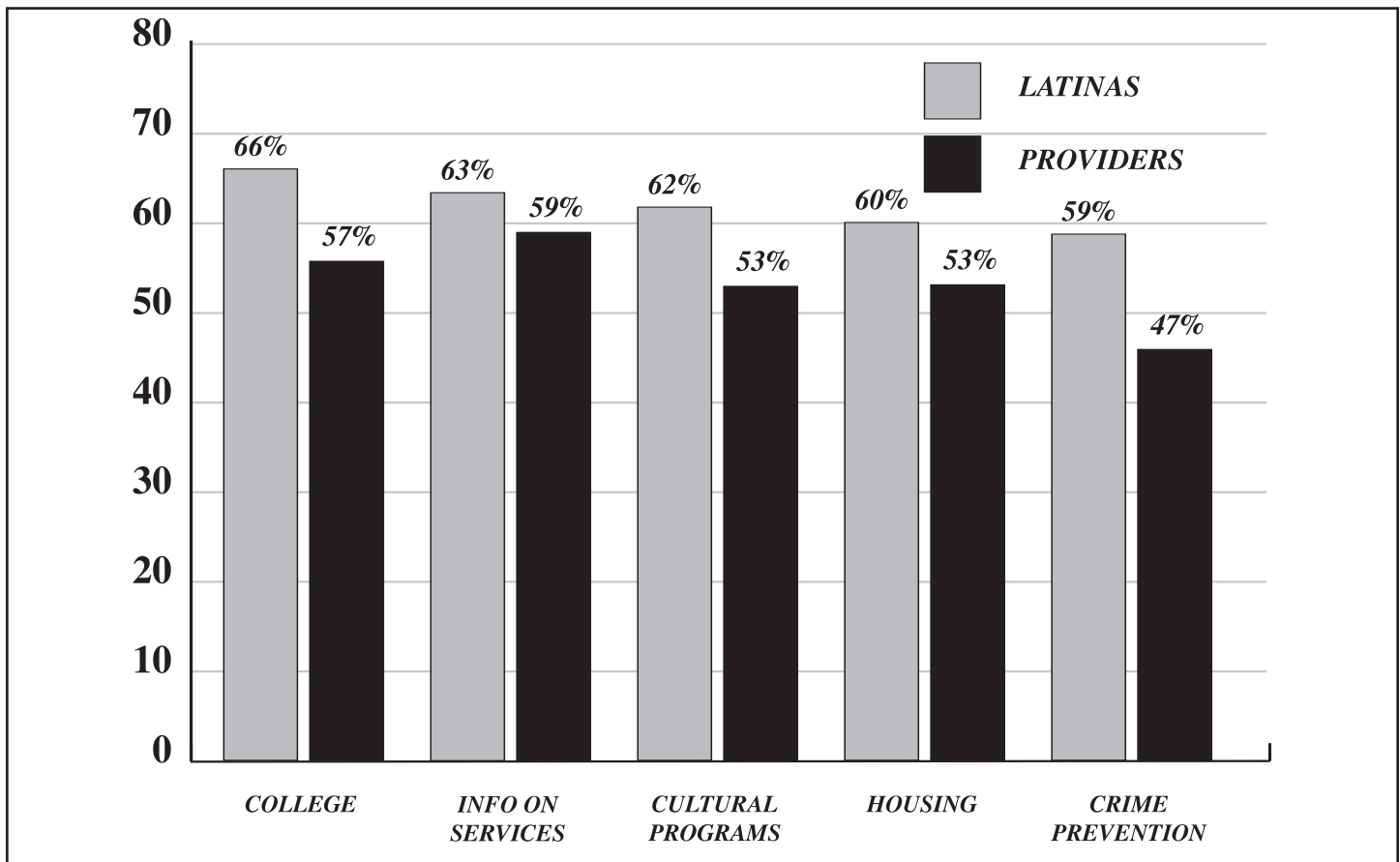
Table 6. Rankings of "Important" Needs

LATINAS	PROVIDERS
1. Information on Services	1. Information on Services
2. Cultural Programs	2. Church Services
3. Church Services	3. Women's Friendship
4. Women's Friendship	4. Legal Aid
5. College	5. Housing
6. Medical Services	6. Medical Services
7. Housing	7. Mental Health
8. Crime Prevention	8. Cultural Programs
9. Employment	9. Crime Prevention
10. Vocational Training	10. Employment

Latina Awareness of and Use of Services

Given Latina immigrant perceptions about their own and their families' needs, what do they know about available resources and services in central Minnesota, and to what extent do they access public services? To address this question, we compiled a list of 18 types of services offered by non-profit, private, city and county governments in the area and asked women to indicate whether they knew about the service and have ever used such services. Survey results show that between 42% and 75% of the women did not know about existing job training programs, public housing alternatives, energy assistance programs, homeless shelters, women's clinics, community education, shelters for victims of domestic violence, and legal aid. As suggested, Latinas showed more awareness and use of school and health services. Between 9% and 24% of the women reported using programs such as WIC, Medicaid, food shelves, school lunch programs, public library, and Head Start. However, participation in programs was still low; 68% of Latinas interviewed said that they did not receive any of the services listed. Table 7 summarizes these results.

Table 7. Awareness and Use of Services Among Latinas

	DON'T KNOW ABOUT	CURRENTLY RECEIVING
Job Training	75%	1%
Small Business Loans	68%	0%
Public Housing Assistance	65%	5%
Energy Assistance	62%	2%
Homeless Shelters	53%	4%
Women's Health Clinic	49%	14%
Private Doctor	49%	29%
Community Education	49%	7%
Legal Aid	42%	6%
Domestic Violence Shelters	42%	1%
MinnesotaCare	34%	15%
Head Start	31%	9%
Welfare	30%	6%
Public Library	26%	20%
School Lunch Program	22%	32%
Food Shelf	22%	11%
Medicaid	10%	20%
WIC	7%	24%
N = 100		

Barriers

Latinas' and Providers' Perceptions

What prevents Latina immigrants from finding the resources and services needed to improve quality of life in their new communities? In order to explore difficulties encountered by Latinas when seeking social services in their towns and counties, researchers developed a list of 20 common barriers and asked Latina respondents to indicate whether they have faced any of such barriers in their efforts to seek help for their social needs. Service providers who serve Latina women were also asked to identify, from a similar list, all the barriers that in their view were preventing Latina clients from receiving services. Barriers listed on the survey questionnaire included those mentioned by Latina participants in preliminary focus groups and by providers interviewed during the first stage of research. All respondents were also given the chance to mention any other barrier not listed on the survey. Given that the majority (68%) of Latinas interviewed do not receive social services, it is important to note their perceptions of barriers in contrast to the perceptions of service providers who serve Latina clients.

The top 10 responses of Latinas and providers show common understanding of difficulties encountered. At the top of the list for both groups appeared lack of information (68% of women and 53% of providers), not understanding the system (67% of women and 74% of providers), need of interpreters (65% of women and 74% of providers), and inability to take time off from work (44% of women and 51% of providers) (Table 8). Interestingly, however, a possible gap in perceptions is found in providers' sense that unavailability of childcare and lack of family support may be barriers for Latinas. More providers than Latinas mentioned need of childcare (54% of providers and 29% of Latinas) and lack of support (33% of providers and 17% of Latinas) as barriers. These two items appeared fourth and eighth in the providers´ top 10, but 14th and 17th on Latinas' lists. Instead, Latinas selected the view that "providers don't understand people from different cultures," (53%) and that seeking services "is embarrassing" (42%) as number four and six among the top 10. This exploration of barriers confirms the common perceptions of providers and women who find language difference, access to information and social rapport among the top needs and obstacles to accessing networks of services available in the community. Table 8 compares responses of Latinas and providers.

Discrimination as a Barrier

The topic of discrimination or unequal treatment emerged focus groups with Latinas during the initial stages of the study. Participants described instances in which they were expected to perform harder tasks at work or received poor service in stores and restaurants. They also expressed feeling "invisible" in the dominant community. The women agreed that the lack of positive images is compounded by the prevalence of negative stereotypes in the media.

We wanted to see whether experiences of discrimination were widespread among Latinas and how Latinas might interpret such experiences. Based on information from focus groups, we listed a number of locations where discrimination may occur, and a number of interpretations for why discrimination occurs. In addition, women were asked to evaluate whether people who are not Latino receive different treatment in service delivery.

Table 8. Barriers to Seeking and Receiving Services

|	LATINAS ANSWERING "YES"	PROVIDERS ANSWERING "YES"
Don't have information on available services	68%	53%
Need help in understanding the system and filling out forms	67%	74%
Don't speak English and need an interpreter	65%	68%
Service providers do not understand people with different cultures	53%	30%
Can't afford to take time off work because of lost wages	44%	51%
It's too embarrassing for them to seek public assistance	42%	25%
Don't trust government agencies	41%	30%
Don't qualify for programs based on legal status	40%	47%
Office hours are inconvenient for them	40%	30%
Can't afford the service fees	39%	33%
Don't have transportation	38%	47%
Don't qualify for programs based on income	34%	16%
Experience discrimination from providers	30%	18%
Need someone to watch the kids	29%	54%
Filing for resident status and do not want to be labeled a public burden	24%	21%
Have health problems	22%	18%
Don't have a permanent address	19%	25%
Lack support or face discouragement from family and friends	17%	33%
Spouse/boyfriend/partner don't approve that they look for outside assistance	11%	25%
Received wrong information at service providers' offices	5%	11%
	N = 100	*N = 58*

As expressed in focus group discussions, Fig. 12 shows that Latinas were most likely to experience discrimination in stores (40%) and at work (29%). Discrimination by neighbors was a close third (28%). One out of four of the Latinas reported discrimination in schools and about one in five mentioned discrimination by the police.

The questionnaire did not include a probe to elicit the ethnic/racial identity of the people Latinas perceived were discriminating against them. In their answers to why discrimination occurs in central Minnesota communities, a majority of respondents perceive that it is based upon ethnicity (77%), race (69%), or language or accent (62%). Less than half of the Latinas believe that discrimination is based on their immigration status (44%) or economic status (33%). During the interviews, a number of women explained that neither their immigration status nor their economic status are visually marked the way ethnicity or race are. Only 12% of the women thought that their gender was a factor in discrimination.

Latina respondents' evaluation of the quality of service non-Latinos receive illustrates another dimension of discrimination experienced by Latinas. The majority of the respondents believe that non-Latinos face fewer obstacles to obtain services (77%), receive more information about available services (76%), receive more polite service (71%), and receive faster service (69%).

Service providers, on the other hand, were asked to report on their observation of instances of discrimination against Latinas in their schools or agencies. Their responses correspond with the perception of Latinas, although the percentages of observed discrimination by providers who serve Latina clients is higher than that of Latinas interviewed. Thirty-five percent of providers reported having observed frequent or occasional discrimination in their own agencies and 67% reported having observed frequent or occasional discrimination in central Minnesota communities. Forty-eight percent of the providers reported that Latinas had frequently or occasionally told them

Fig. 12. Where Latinas and Their Families Experience Discrimination
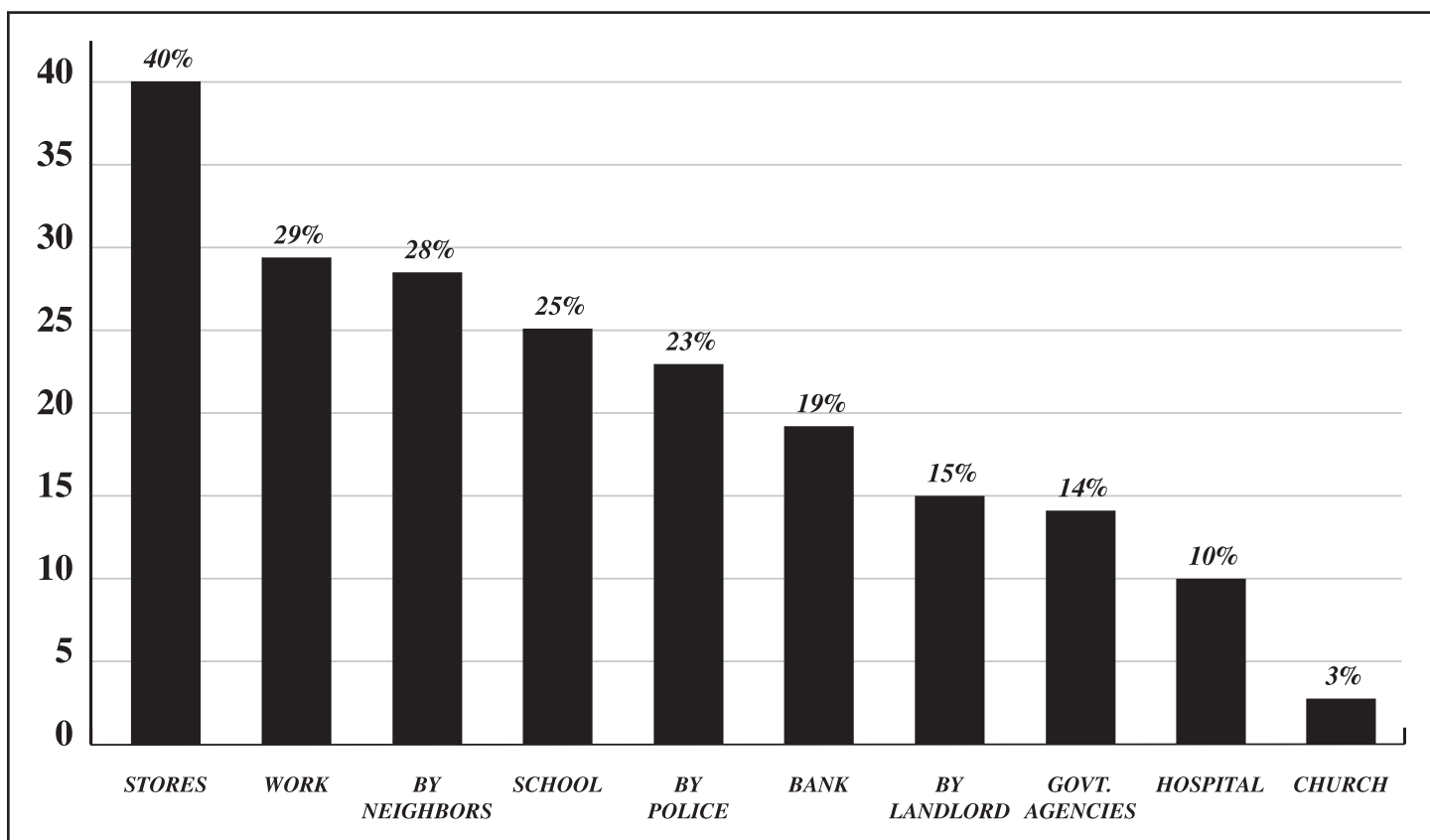
stories of how they have been victims of discrimination. Table 9 summarizes the answers given by providers. The finding that service providers share an awareness of discrimination against Latinas seems to indicate an area of empathy and understanding between these two groups, while the lower perception of discrimination as a barrier among Latinas interviewed indicates that they may underestimate problems of discrimination faced when seeking or receiving services.

Latina Assets

Self-Perceptions and Provider Perceptions

Although Latinos and Latinas have settled in increasing numbers in rural Minnesota over the past decade, the community remains largely invisible to dominant group members. A key goal of this study is to highlight the assets — conceptualized here as skills or talents, community involvement, and attitudes toward education, family, and community life — that Latinas bring to central Minnesota to fill in the knowledge gap about this demographic group and underscore the actual and potential contributions of Latinas to community life.

Table 9. Service Provider Observation of Discrimination against Latinas

	AT OWN AGENCY	IN CENTRAL MINNESOTA COMMUNITIES	HEARD STORIES FROM LATINAS
Frequently	2%	17%	12%
Occasionally	33%	50%	36%
Never	60%	19%	36%
Do Not Know	5%	14%	14%

In effect, the women who participated in the initial focus groups reflected this sense of invisibility, isolation, and even hostility towards them. They expressed that they feel that white community members do not know much about them beyond stereotypical images. Many of the women who were surveyed shared, at the end of the interview, that they hoped this study would help others learn more about Latinos in general and diminish antagonisms.

When constructing the questionnaire, researchers operationalized assets along three dimensions; personal skills and talents, participation in community organizations, and attitudes toward family, education, and community. To measure skills and talents, we created a list with 12 categories of skills and asked the women interviewed to add any talents or skills that they could use to benefit their community. Survey results show that the majority of Latina reported having skills in listening and advising others (78%), child care (77%), cooking (70%). Slightly over half of the Latinas reported having knowledge of, and a desire to share, information about their culture (54%) as well as skills in organizing events (51%). Slightly under half of the respondents reported skills in teaching (46%), sewing (45%), and caring for the sick (43%). And

about a third of the Latinas reported skills in leadership (37%) and public speaking (32%). About one in five of the Latinas reported skills in playing a musical instrument (22%), using computers (17%), or have special training (16%) in biology, computers, clerical work, nursing assistance, first aid, hairstyling, or domestic violence intervention.

To assess levels of community involvement, the survey listed types of community organizations and asked the women about their past or current involvement in such groups, and desire to become involved in the future. It is interesting to note that, generally, the women report higher levels of community involvement prior to their settlement in central Minnesota, whether that was in another state or in their country of origin. And even though survey results show that current levels of participation are low, they also indicate that interest in joining community groups was high among respondents.

In only two areas did Latinas report significant levels of involvement; churches (48%) and their children's education (28%). Yet, they expressed interest in joining a variety of organizations. The only three organizations which less than 50% of women expressed interest in were sports leagues, labor unions, and political parties (15%). These

Table 10. Level of Involvement in Community Groups and Desire to be Involved

|	ACTIVE NOW	BEFORE MOVING TO MINNESOTA	WOULD LIKE TO JOIN
Support Group for Personal Improvement	4%	10%	76%
Church	46%	54%	71%
Social Service Organization in the Community	12%	11%	70%
Women's Group	10%	10%	69%
Evnironmental Group	2%	6%	68%
Cultural Center or Cultural Avtivities	8%	19%	65%
Neighborhood Group	7%	15%	60%
Organization for the Elderly	0.0%	4%	60%
Parents' Group in Children's Schools	28%	32%	56%
Sports League	5%	13%	46%
Labor Union	2%	6%	28%
Political Party	2%	6%	15%

results suggest the need to conduct further research in order to understand the issues preventing women from achieving prior levels of community involvement, and more importantly, ways that can facilitate achieving their expressed desired levels of participation in their current communities. Table 10 presents the results.

While 36% of the providers in the study reported not knowing about the likelihood of Latinas joining local community groups, 41% of the providers thought that Latinas were likely to join both local community groups and Latino groups. Nineteenth percent of providers also thought that Latinas were likely to join women's groups. That two out of five of the service providers thought Latinas are likely to join local groups is a positive sign that could enhance future outreach efforts.

The survey also measured attitudes that can be considered assets. To measure them, a Likert scale was used to ask the women their level of agreement with statements about their commitment to family, education, and community. Providers, on the other hand, were asked to assess the level of commitment to these issues among Latinas, based on their experience working with this population (Fig. 13).

Results show that the overwhelming majority of the women have a strong commitment to their families and see themselves as capable problem solvers. The majority of service providers who serve Latina clients also reported high percentages of agreement or strong agreement in their evaluation of Latinas' commitment to family and Latinas' capacity for problem solving. A notable difference in the responses of Latinas and providers was that the vast majority of the women (97%) said they agreed or

Fig. 13. Latina Commitments
Percentage of Respondents who "Strongly Agree" and "Agree"
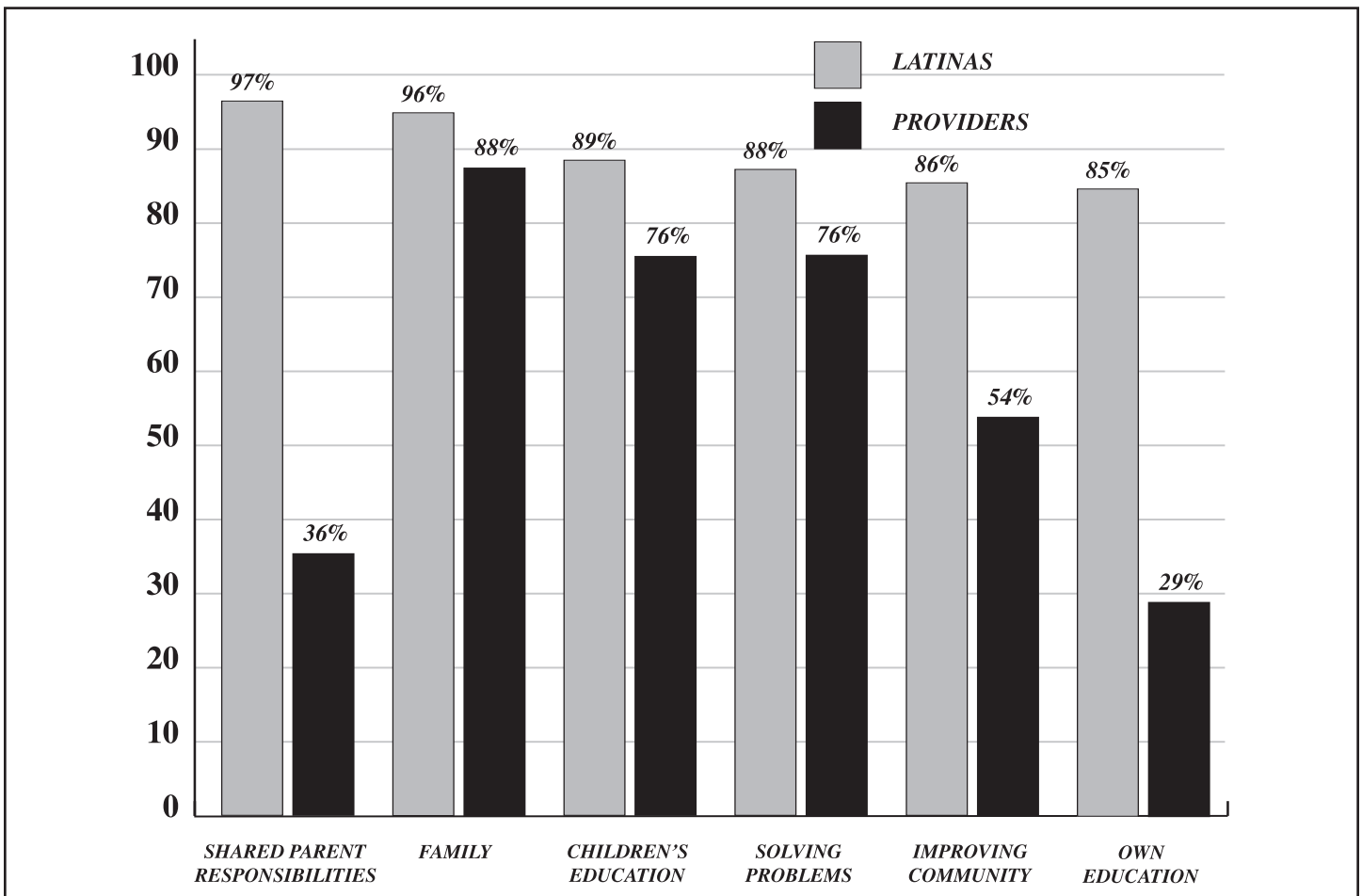
strongly agreed with the believe that both mother and father should share the responsibility for the family, and only 36% of the service providers said Latinas had such level of commitment to shared parental duties.

Following national trends of the Latino population (Pew Hispanic Institute, 2004; Thomas-Breitfeld, 2003), Latinas expressed having a strong commitment to their own education as well as that of their children; 85% of the Latinas strongly agreed or agreed with this statement. Reflecting results reported above in regards to perceptions about educational needs, service providers tend to underestimate Latinas' commitment to self-improvement by desiring to continue their education. In the survey section on Latina assets, only 29% of providers who serve Latina clients agreed or strongly agreed that Latinas are committed to their education.

The collective image that emerges from these results is one of women who are skilled and eager to use their talents for the improvement of the communities they live in. Indeed, an overwhelming 86% of the women agreed or strongly agreed with that statement, "I have strong commitment to improve the standards of living in my community." In sum, Latinas in the study see themselves as skilled, hard working, committed to their own, their children's, and their community's improvement, and willing to make contributions through local groups.

Communication Issues

One of the main goals of this research to was generate awareness and initiatives to improve communication and mutual understanding between Latinas and service providers in the communities studied. Recent research on the experiences of immigrants in Minnesota highlighted how cultural and communication gaps are one of the enduring challenges faced by immigrants and their new communities (e.g. Fennelly, 2003; Bushway, 2001). And, in effect, our preliminary focus groups with Latina immigrants and individual interviews with

providers suggested that communication, language and culture were recurrent themes in conversations about needs, barriers and assets. Hence, the survey aimed at documenting specific issues in the area of language and communication. As reported in previous sections of this report, results of this survey confirmed that access to English courses, lack of information, difficulty understanding the system, and need for interpreters and Spanish-speaking staff were identified by both Latinas and service providers as the most significant needs and barriers. The following section summarizes responses to more specific survey questions about communication issues, including language proficiencies, use of information sources and communication strategies among Latinas and service providers, and use of technology.

Language Proficiencies of Latinas and Providers

More than half of the Latinas interviewed (62%) reported that they prefer to communicate in Spanish, while 32% prefer to use both Spanish and English, and 6% prefer English. The women also described their level of English fluency; 20% said they were "fluent," 8% described their skills as "good," 13% as "adequate," 39% said they speak English "a little," and 20% said "none." Among service providers, on the other hand, 59% of providers said that they themselves do not speak Spanish, 29% reported that they spoke Spanish, and 12% indicated that they spoke "a little" Spanish.

Gaps in language fluency are a factor that may influence how some Latina immigrants perceive quality of services and fairness in treatment. When asked whether they felt mistreated by staff of government offices or community organizations because they did not speak English or spoke with a Spanish accent, 5% answered "always," 54% said "sometimes," 38% said "never," and 3% "does not apply." Language proficiencies in Spanish and English also seemingly influence the kinds of information sources used by Latinas to learn about services in the community, and the communication strategies used by both Latinas and providers.

Use of Information Sources by Latinas

When asked to identify their sources of information about social services available in Minnesota, 48% indicated that "word of mouth" — or social networks — was the source relied upon "most of the time." U.S. Spanish language television (33%) and church members (30%) were among the top three sources identified by the women. When asked to identify means of communication used by their agencies to reach Latino clients, service providers showed an understanding of the importance interpersonal networks of family and friends in Latino outreach. At the same time, providers seemed to underestimate other social networks like church or co-workers as important resources. Instead, they tended to emphasize agency staff and printed materials, as Table 11 suggests. For Latina immigrants, mass media, including Spanish-language newspapers — and with the exception of U.S. Spanish language television – seemed less important among the sources used "most of the time" to receive information about social services. And even when 22% of the women said they have a computer at home, only 2% use Internet to seek information about services. However, many more women reported using brochures (54%), bulleting boards (31%) and mass media (from 16 to 45%) as sources "sometimes." Among providers, less than 20% of respondents reported the use such media (see Appendix 2 for sources used "sometimes" and "rarely").

Table 11. Sources of Information

	LATINAS USING	PROVIDERS USING
Word of Mouth *(Family & Friends Network)*	48%	74%
Spanish Language TV	33%	28%
Church Members	30%	39%
Community or Government Program Staff	19%	63%
Announcements, Newsletters	13%	60%
Co-Workers	10%	----
English Language TV	9%	11%
Brochures, Pamphlets, Fliers in Service Centers	8%	56%
Social Workers	7%	56%
Community Bulletin Boards	6%	46%

Practices for Improving Communication

Providers and Latinas were also asked to rank from "very important" to "not important" practices that could improve communication and access to services. The similarities in the identification of practices deemed "very important" suggests that knowledge about potential strategies is shared by the two populations. Both groups identified language-based strategies such as availability of Spanish-speaking staff and interpreters, use of materials in Spanish, availability of bilingual staff, and cultural and personal rapport (patience, politeness) as very important. At the same time, an interesting difference shown in survey results is how Latinas ranked the creation of Latino organizations to help Latinos as the third most important strategy to improve communication, while providers ranked this strategy seventh. This suggests, again, an interest among Latinas on strategies based on social interaction, cultural identification and networking to gain access to services in their new communities. Figure 14 summarizes the results. More than any other strategy to improve communications, the presence of Spanish-speaking staff and interpreters was identified as "very important" by both Latinas and providers. It is worth noting, however, that language as a barrier to communication was emphasized more often by service providers than by Latina respondents. Still, only one in five of the service providers work in agencies that are planning future outreach to Latinas.

In the providers' survey, 98% of respondents reported that their agencies offer interpreter services for Spanish speakers. More than half of respondents, 59%, said that their agencies have professional interpreters under contract, and 10% reported that they use professional interpreter services by phone. In addition, 74% of providers said that staff members serve as interpreters in their agencies and 50% said that volunteers were used as interpreters. Half of the providers perceived such services as "very effective," while 27% described interpreters services as "effective," 7% as "somewhat effective," and 16% did not know or did not answer.

Fig. 14. Practices Identified as "Very Important" for Improving Communication
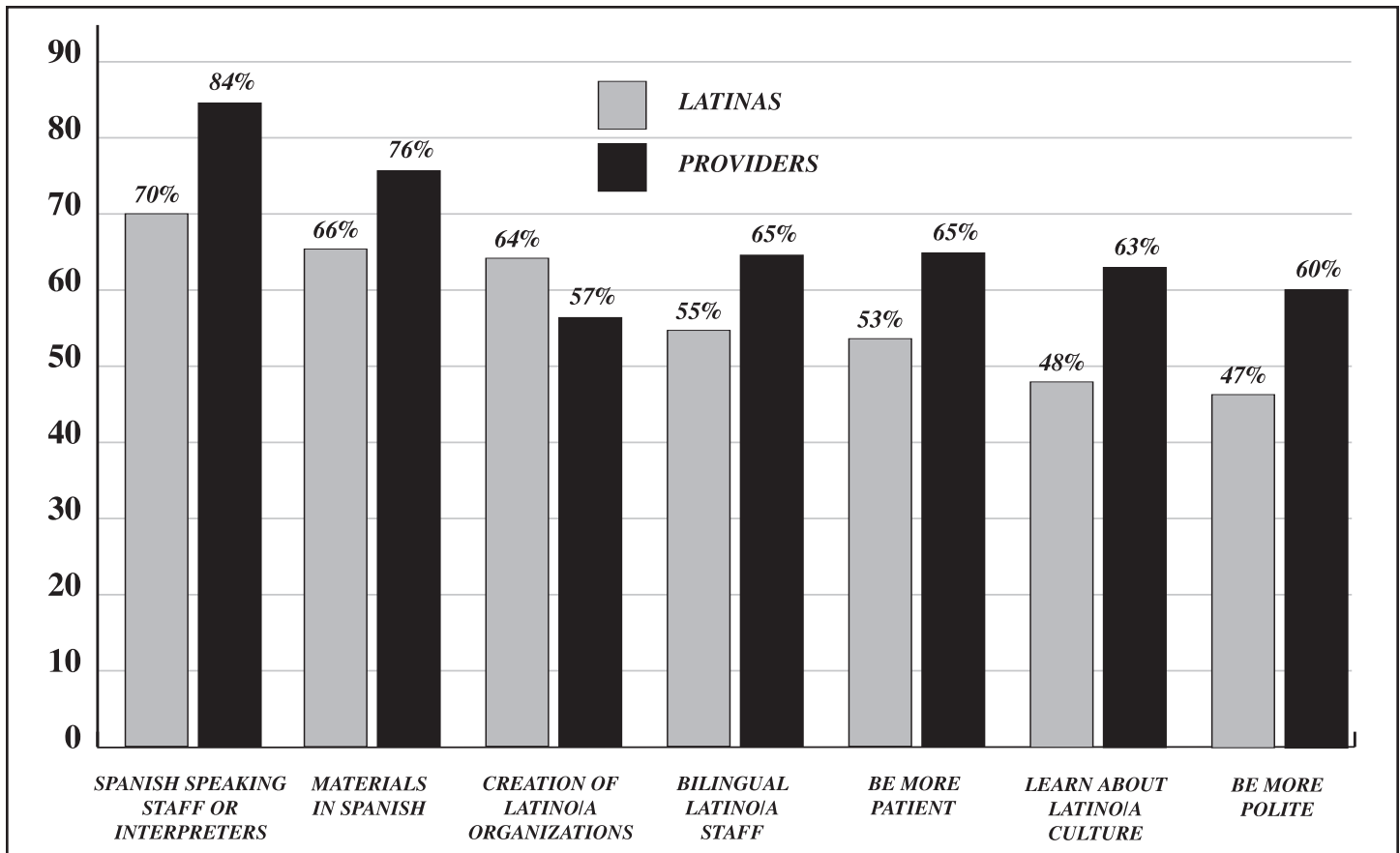
Indeed, it was apparent that social service agencies are aware of the provisions of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 which requires that interpretive services and translation of written materials to clients with limited English. However, Latina assessments of these services suggest that the mere presence of interpreters in social service agencies, even where they are available in person rather than on conference calls, is not an adequate solution. In preliminary focus group interviews, Latina immigrants raised this issue and framed the problem as one that transcends the availability of staff. For them, it is not simply a matter of having interpreters but of having trustworthy interpreters from their same cultural background; as one focus group participant stated, "Someone who will translate what I really said."

Use of Interactive Technologies

In this process, are interactive technologies being used in Latina immigrant households and by the individual women interviewed to seek information and create networks of communication? Among Latinas interviewed, the most accessible interactive technology was a telephone at home (in 92% of homes) and cellular phones, which 33% of women said they used. Still, 18% of respondents said they also used public telephones. Tables 12 and 13 present the facts reported. In terms of computer technology, Latinas reported that in 55% of the households at least one member of the family had access to a computer terminal. But only 22% of the women themselves had access to a computer at home and 10% at work. Among computer users, women follow children but lead their male partners in the use of this technology.

Table 12. Use of Telephone Among Latinas Interviewed

At Home	92%
Cellular Phone	33%
At Work	22%
Pay Phone	18%
Neighbor's House	7%

Table 13. Use of Computers

Someone in Household Uses Computer	55%
Top Five Users and Their Location	
Children at School	23%
Self at Home	22%
Children at Home	19%
Partner at Home	17%
Self at Work	10%

Table 14. Type of Agency and Number

Education *(Pre-K to Post-Secondary)*	7
Health Care	9
Social Services	14
Other or Blank	17
Legal Services	1
Housing, Community Development	1
Religious	3
Business/Employer	3
Public Library	1
County Government	1
Criminal Justice	2
Total	*59*

Feedback and Action Steps

From the earliest planning stages for this project, the researchers proposed the inclusion of follow up meetings with key stakeholders in local organizations to share research findings. The goal was to incorporate group feedback with other data to strengthen the analysis of survey results. We also thought this would generate discussion among staff of regional governmental agencies, educators, and service providers to explore strategies for improving communications through changing institutional practices and policies. Such meetings could also mark the beginning of further action projects to apply the information, resources, and networking possibilities gained through our community research.

Thus, when Betty Schnettler of United Way invited us to present an all-morning training session on March 25, 2004 — as part of the organization's ongoing diversity series in the St. Cloud area — the level of stakeholder participation rose far above what we had envisioned. More than 80 women and men registered for the training session and gathered into 19 small discussion groups to raise questions and comments about the research findings. A follow-up focus group discussion was held a month later upon the request of bilingual service providers who attended the training. This section will outline some of the key ideas and action steps that these groups contributed to our research.

Representing a variety of agencies (see Table 14), participants in the United Way training session discussed their perceptions of barriers to seeking services and offered solutions to facilitate access of Latinas to social programs. In addition, they offered suggestions on how to build on the assets of Latinas to improve communication and service delivery to this population.

Participants made reference to strengthening outreach efforts and offering more workshops to improve cultural competency of staff in social service agencies and other institutions. Other suggestions included: involving Latino/a community leaders in agencies' employee training; hiring bilingual staff persons as a top priority; employing young bilingual Latinas for translation, communication and trust-building; providing

information in various languages, building on existing Latina (social) structure to deliver messages; addressing cultural barriers to seeking services; linking agency advocates with a Latina advocate; sponsoring community and cultural events; placing community representatives on ESL planning committees; soliciting childcare volunteers for ESL classes; and addressing institutional racism and systemic change.

On May 19, 2004, five service providers, who were either Latinas or bilingual women working in health care and interpretation services, met in a focus group to further explore the perception and communication gaps identified in our survey research and recommend strategies or solutions. Suggestions offered focused on organizational policies such as: increasing the number of Spanish-speaking staff in agencies; changing the application processes in hiring to include Spanish as a necessary qualification; advertising job openings in Spanish language newsletters or church bulletin boards where Spanish language masses are held; placing bilingual persons in key positions such as receptionist to provide a welcoming atmosphere at a point where Latinas often experience their first communication barrier; offering menu choices on telephone answering messages in Spanish; creating a space in the reception area that welcomes children; and improving interpretation services. The participants made additional recommendations for systemic change, like changing the service delivery model from one where clients go to the provider to one where providers go to the client — replicating the public health model in other settings, and supporting the creation of a Latino activist/service organization to cover the need for a space to socialize and meet needs. Participants agreed that cultural differences are the main factor that explains some of the communication gaps identified by the research, and noticed that three of the important needs reported by Latinas had to do with the need for more social interaction. As Latinas or bilingual/bicultural women themselves, the participants identified with the need to connect with and enjoy the company and support of other Latinas without having to explain themselves.

Discussion and Conclusion

This research project set out to investigate the growing population of Latina immigrant women in central Minnesota with the goal of documenting its presence, needs and interactions with social service networks in local communities. Survey results reveal a demographic profile that reflects state and national trends in Latino immigrant populations. And contrary to the perceptions of many local service providers, most of the women interviewed were not recent immigrants but have lived in the United States for at least three years. The study reveals other misperceptions among service providers that parallel certain stereotypical views of Latinas in popular culture. For example, survey results show that Latina women's levels of education are underestimated by providers, while the number of persons living in Latino homes is overestimated. Some of the personal needs and aspirations of Latina immigrants also seemed to be misunderstood by many providers who appeared unaware that a large proportion of Latinas hope to achieve a higher education and contribute positively to their communities. While 85% of Latinas agreed with the statement "I have a strong commitment to my own education," only 29% of service providers identified Latinas with such commitment. These blind spots in providers understanding of the Latina immigrant demographic profiles can have a significant impact in the planning of outreach and delivery of social and cultural resources by governmental and private non-profit agencies, particularly when between 42% and 75% of women remained unaware of available programs and 68% were not using any local services.

In this sense, survey findings that indicate areas of common understandings and shared visions constitute a positive point of departure for improved communication and service. An encouraging aspect of our study is finding that service providers share three important perceptions with Latina immigrants: a shared understanding of most of the important needs of Latinas — with the notable exception of college education; identification of a similar set of strategies to improve communication: availability of Spanish-speaking staff and interpreters, use of materials in Spanish, presence of bilingual staff, and

cultural and personal rapport (patience, politeness), and working with Latino organizations and networks; and an awareness of discrimination as a barrier for Latinas, particularly in public settings.

Ultimately, gaps in understanding between Latina immigrants and service providers are also symptomatic of the social invisibility and isolation of this population in rural areas. Survey findings in all areas explored — needs, barriers, assets, and communication — seem to confirm that geographical, social, and cultural isolation marks the experience of Latina immigrant women in rural Minnesota. For instance, in the exploration of both the social needs of Latinas and the barriers to accessing services, the three most salient variables involved information, language, and cultural interaction. In effect, more women chose information about services, cultural programs, church services, friendship with other women, and college education as the top five important needs — followed by medical services, housing, crime prevention, employment, and vocational training. Likewise, the majority identified lack of information and understanding of the system, and limited language and cultural competencies as top barriers — followed by inability to take time off work. Results in the area of communication complement these findings to reiterate the importance of networks of interaction and cultural identification as resources for Latinas. For example, more often than service providers, immigrant women mentioned the creation of Latino organizations as an important practice to improve communication. Further, when compared with service providers' understanding of Latina social networks, women's definitions of the network was broader in scope to include not just relatives and friends, but also co-workers and members of their churches. Lastly, Latina responses to questions about assets, community involvement before settlement in Minnesota, and current interest in joining organizations triangulate these findings.

As shown earlier, survey respondents reported a higher level of active participation in community organizations like cultural centers, neighborhood groups, churches, sports leagues, support groups for personal improvement, environmental groups, labor unions, or political parties, before moving to central Minnesota. And in fact, when interview questions turned to skills and contributions Latina immigrants bring to Minnesota, the conversation became very animated. Indeed, this was the issue that provoked the most enthusiasm in focus groups. The discussion served to affirm the women in their identity as Latinas and helped to bring out the assets that they have individually and as a group. Among the contributions mentioned were a strong sense of family, faith, and work ethic. The women also expressed pride in their cultures, desire to share their heritage, and awareness that their presence diversifies central Minnesota.

This expressed need of and interest in cultural interaction and networking as relevant practices to improve communication among Latinas seem to contrast with the tendency of many providers to use of printed materials for outreach and dissemination of information. This strategy reinforces a linear model of communication, from provider-sender to client-receiver that can be described primarily as strategic or instrumental. It is a model that seeks an important, yet narrow, end — such as informing an audience about a particular service — and responds best to bureaucratic needs and imperatives of organizations. For Latina immigrants, instrumental or strategic communication might be too limited and short of meeting their needs to establish dialogue, interaction, trust, empathy, and networking as elements of their communication behavior. In fact, researchers noticed during focus group and interviews how Latinas welcomed these sessions as a chance to engage in conversation and cultural interaction.

Based on data analysis and feedback received from service providers and bilingual social service professionals, we have identified areas for further research. Firstly, further data analysis may clarify whether the demographic characteristics of Latinas who use services are significantly different in any category from Latinas who do not use services. That is, to what extent might the demographic profile of Latinas who receive social services differ from the demographic profile of the 100 Latinas interviewed in four central Minnesota towns? Such difference

may be important for our understanding of, for instance, misperceptions among providers about the educational achievement and aspirations of Latinas, for it is possible that qualitative differences in the experiences of Latinas who receive social services and those who do not seek services and thus remain invisible to providers may generate different levels of aspiration and commitment to higher education. Secondly, further investigation of everyday roles and actions of Latinas in family and community life should be conducted in order to evaluate the extent to which they are able or willing to reach their stated educational goals, take on decision-making responsibilities in their households, and get involved in community organizations. Finally, questions regarding communication strategies are suggested by research outcomes: If Latinas had more information about public services, would this knowledge result in increased access?

For example, we noted that 75% of Latinas lack information about job or vocational opportunities in Minnesota (Fig. 11; Table 6). Would additional information lead to greater enrollment in such programs? Similarly, we note high aspirations for college attendance, yet further research as well as community outreach needs to be done to make Latinas aware of the concrete steps required to meet these goals — such as acquiring stronger English skills and, if needed, completion of a GED before applying to colleges or universities.

We believe that the interest provoked and follow-up discussions generated by this research among service providers and bilingual professionals in the region creates a positive climate in which to pursue further action-oriented research to benefit both Latino families and the overall quality of life in central Minnesota.

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APPENDIX 1

Research Procedures

This section describes steps and procedures followed in the research process during the three phases of investigation.

Phase One: Selecting Research Sites and Targeting Participants

The initial phase of investigation encompassed three steps: 1) the selection of research sites, 2) collaboration with local organizations serving Latino population to reach potential participants and interviews with service providers, and 3) the coordination of two focus group interviews with Latina women in St. Cloud and Cold Spring.

Profile of Research Sites

Three of four towns selected were in Stearns County (St. Cloud, Cold Spring, and Melrose) and one town (Long Prairie) is located in Todd County. Many households included in the "St. Cloud" area are situated in unincorporated rural zones, with a majority of respondents living in mobile home parks near poultry processing plants. All towns have witnessed a Hispanic population growth of 50% or more between 1990 and 2000, according to the U.S. Census 2000. What follows is a brief description of selected towns.

Cold Spring, with a total population of 2,975 in 2000, was the smallest community studied. According to the U.S. census, in 2000 the Hispanic population was 1.37% (40 individuals), an increase from .28% (7 individuals) in 1990. The median age in Cold Spring was 37 years and median household income estimated at $37,500. The local economy is supported by industries such as Cold Spring Granite Company – the world's largest supplier of industrial granites – a brewery, a chicken processing plant, and a landmark bakery, all of which employ Latinos in town.

Long Prairie's population of 3,040 in the year 2000 included 9.39% (285 individuals) identified as Hispanic/Latino, compared to .43% (12 individuals) in 1990. The median resident age was 38.1 years, and the median household income was $28,237. Main industries providing employment include manufacturing (28.0%), educational, health, and social services (24.5%), and retail trade (10.7%).

Melrose, with a population of 3,091 in 2000, had 12.9% (381 individuals) of its population identified as Hispanic/Latino, compared to .78% (20 individuals) in 1990. The median household income was estimated at $34,432 and the median age at 35.5. Two major manufacturing plants and a strong agricultural base (especially turkey and dairy) form the backbone of the local community.

St. Cloud, with a population of 56,107, is the most important commercial and governmental center for the communities studied. In 2000, 1.33% (784 individuals) of the total population was identified as Hispanic/Latino, an increase from .58% (283 individuals) in 1990. In 2000, the median age was 28.2 and the median household income was $37,346. St. Cloud is home to both small and large businesses with three industries having a long history in the area: granite, printing, and lens manufacturing. Metal work, health care, and hospitality are other important employers in St. Cloud.

Collaboration with Local Organizations

Another preliminary step in the research process was the coordination of visits and short interviews with staff of local non-profit organizations and government agencies. Effort was made to build relations with contacts who could provide researchers with relevant local background and history, facilitate outreach to potential survey participants, and offer meeting rooms to conduct focus groups and individual interviews. Individual interviews with 12 service providers serving Latinos were also conducted with the purpose of probing their knowledge and perceptions of needs, barriers to securing services, communication problems and assets of Latinas served by their organizations. The information gathered in these interviews was used as groundwork for the design of some of survey questions.

Focus Groups with Latinas

Two focus group interviews with Latinas in Cold Spring and St. Cloud were coordinated. In Cold Spring, the interview was conducted in one of the neighborhoods with a high Latino concentration. Interviewers knocked on doors and personally invited local women to meet at the community center run by a local Catholic church in the neighborhood. In St. Cloud, researchers invited Latinas through a network of community organizations and met at the Women's Center operated by the local state university. The seven participants in focus group interviews included women from Mexican, Puerto Rican, and Salvadoran backgrounds whose ages ranged from early twenties to the mid fifties. They were asked to fill out a short demographic questionnaire and were informed that the conversations would be taped but that all material would be confidential. The interviews were conducted mostly in Spanish and lasted abut two hours. Participants were asked to talk about the positive and negative aspects of living in central Minnesota and to compare their experience living and working in Minnesota to that of living in other states and in their countries of origin. They were also asked to describe their experience interacting with Latinos and non-Latinos in central Minnesota. More specifically, the women were asked to rank in order of importance the social needs of the Latino community in general, and their own needs as women. They also discussed barriers to obtaining social services and problems related to communication with organizations and agencies serving the community. Finally, participants talked about the kinds of skills, knowledge and other assets Latinas bring to Minnesota. Results of the focus group interviews were analyzed by researchers and used in the design of the survey questionnaire.

Phase Two: Administration of Survey Questionnaires

With the assistance of Latino and non-Latino local community leaders in each of the towns studied, researchers identified neighborhoods with a significant and visible concentration of Latinos, which often included trailer parks in the outskirts of town or close to food processing and other manufacturing plants. The majority women lived in neighborhoods where Mexican immigrants are the majority of residents. Outside the targeted neighborhoods, other participants who had offered or received services from organizations and agencies contacted in early stages of research were invited to participate in focus groups interviews or to respond to questionnaires.

A 12-page questionnaire — with English and Spanish versions — was designed by researchers and included questions that identified demographic characteristics of respondents, social needs of women, awareness and use of social programs offered by non-profit organizations and government agencies in their communities, barriers to accessing such services and programs, communication strategies to obtain information and quality of communication with service providers, perceptions of skills and assets of women, including any special training and talents, and past and present membership in social organizations, and other social networks, and finally, a set of questions about the women's opinions regarding family life and attitudes toward gender roles and responsibilities.

Lead researchers trained six assistant interviewers – all bilingual Latinas from the towns selected for study – to help administer the survey in 1-hour interviews between June 2003 and March 2004.

Providers Survey

An 8-page questionnaire in English was designed to identify demographic characteristics of service providers and types of services offered, including any type of program tailored for the Latino community. Most of the survey questions for providers closely mirrored questions asked Latinas in order to facilitate the analysis of similarities and differences or gaps in opinions and perceptions. For instance, service providers were asked about their perceptions of the demographic profile of their Latina clients, the social needs and barriers to accessing services, perception of assets, and communication strategies used when targeting Latina clients. Examples of questions asked are: "On average, what is the educational level of the Latinas you serve?" or "Which do you think is the main reason Latina women and their families moved to Minnesota?" or "In your opinion, what are the barriers that might prevent Latina women from seeking and receiving social services from your agency?" A total 132 surveys were distributed in person or mailed to service providers; 44% were returned.

Phase Three: Feedback and Action Steps

One of the goals of this research was to collect data that could be used to generate greater understanding of the Latino community in central Minnesota and result in initiatives to improve communication strategies used by staff in organizations charged with providing services to this population. Thus, after the completion of survey administration, preliminary results were shared with service providers. The first of these meetings, sponsored with a non-profit agency in St. Cloud, attracted 81 service providers and generated discussion of results in a meeting that lasted four hours. Once the research report is published, the researchers will continue creating bilingual materials to make presentations in Spanish in local communities with invited groups of Latina women who participated in the survey.

Sources of Information Used by Latinas and Providers

	LATINAS USE MOST TIMES	*LATINAS USE MOST TIMES & SOMETIMES*	*PROVIDERS USING THESE SOURCES*
Word of Mouth *(Family & Friends Network)*	48%	87%	74%
Spanish Language TV	33%	77%	28%
Church Members	30%	70%	39%
Community or Government Program Staff	19%	50%	63%
Announcements, Newsletters By Mail	13%	54%	60%
Co-Workers	10%	54%	----
English Language TV	9%	45%	11%
Brochures, Pamphlets, Fliers in Service Centers	8%	54%	56%
Social Workers	7%	38%	56%
Community Bulletin Boards	6%	42%	46%
Radio	4%	22%	18%
English Language Newspapers	3%	22%	18%
Spanish Language Newspapers	3%	24%	16%
Workplace Bulletin Boards	2%	31%	33%
Internet	2%	16%	16%
	N = 100		*N = 58*