'What home means': COVID-19 highlighted racial divisions in one midwestern hotspot

Grand Island -- Carlos Barcenas has lived in this city in the center of the country since 1994, when his father moved his family from Guerrero, Mexico, to take over as pastor of a local church.

Although he didn't speak the language, Barcenas soon settled in, determined to contribute to his new town. He painted over graffiti on overpasses and, when his English improved, wrote letters to the editor of the local paper. He grew up to be a father of four, volunteer at his church, member of the school board, and a recent participant in a COVID-19 vaccine trial. He got the placebo.

In his 26th year in his adopted hometown, however, Barcenas says he feels a new level of unease — a consequence he partly attributes to divisions highlighted by the coronavirus pandemic. Many in the community blamed the outbreak, which shut down the city for weeks, on workers at the local JBS meatpacking plant and on immigrants more broadly.

Carlos Barcenas of the Grand Island School Board. 'It became an 'us versus them.' Credit: The Independent.

"It became an 'us versus them,'" Barcenas said.

Grand Island remains "near and dear" to his heart, he said. But the last year has left him at times feeling like an outsider.

Now he wonders, "what home means?"

COVID-19 has killed more than 500,000 people in the U.S. In Hall County, which includes Grand Island, 109 people have died from the virus. The loss of life is an incalculable toll for the victims and their friends and family.

A secondary effect of virus has been a rise in incidents of discrimination, most troubling are attacks on Asian Americans wrongly targeted for bringing the virus to the U.S.

Tensions have also increased in communities like this one — rural areas with sizeable Hispanic populations tied to early outbreaks. The League of Latin American Citizens last spring received reports of Hispanic meatpacking workers being turned away at restaurants and other places of service. In Grand Island, a city clerk refused service to a Somali couple seeking a marriage license out of fear of catching the coronavirus. After the threat of legal action, the couple got the license.

Persistent disparities

The pandemic also served to highlight persistent disparities here among the city's diverse population. The initial outbreak in the spring hit Hispanic and other immigrants who labored in jobs that didn't allow for remote work particularly hard. Now, Hispanics account for 22% of the total cases where race or ethnicity was recorded although they make up just 11% of Nebraska's overall population.

Audrey Lutz says the pandemic 'intensifies' racial disparities. Credit: The Independent.

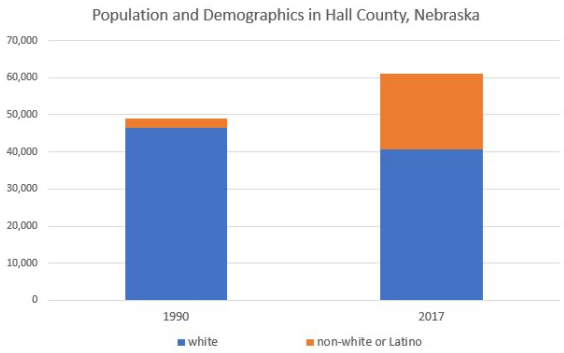
"The pandemic intensifies what already exists," said Audrey Lutz, the executive director of the Multicultural Coalition, a group that helps immigrants to transition to life in the U.S. "If you have racial inequality before the pandemic, the pandemic is just going to strengthen that. If you have racial tension before a pandemic, that's going to strengthen that."

Grand Island is unusually diverse for a state where nearly 78% of residents are white. Here, 30% of residents are Hispanic and 15% are foreign born. A majority of the students in the Grand Island Public School system are students of color.

Demographers predict that by 2050 the state will look more like Grand Island, with a Hispanic population nearing 25%, meaning some of its lessons will translate to other communities.

Backbone of the city

Much of Grand Island's diversity is owed to JBS, which when fully staffed employs more than 3,500 workers. Many of the workers are immigrants and resettled refugees — from



Immigration has fueled growth in Hall County and made the community much more diverse.

Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, Sudan, Somalia, and other countries — who have come looking for a steady wage and a chance at a better life.

A half century ago, meatpacking plants largely employed local, mainly white residents. But as the industry consolidated, companies increasingly turned to foreign countries to fill slots.

Many of the workers were young men with limited education and who didn't speak the language, increasing the strain on city budgets for social services. Wages at the plants stagnated, and studies have shown that meatpacking plants tend to raise poverty rates in their communities.

On the other hand, the new residents keep towns like this one growing as other rural areas stagnate or lose people. Hall County's population has increased by 25 percent over the past three decades.

Much of the growth has been fueled by immigration. In 1990, just one in 20 Hall County residents were classified as nonwhite or Latino. By 2017, the ratio had risen to one in three.

Train tracks separate a redeveloped downtown area called Railside from a stretch of immigrant-owned businesses on Fourth Street.

JBS is "the backbone of the city," said Cesar Rafael, who owns Tienda Centro America, a grocery and clothing store on Fourth Street, a strip of largely immigrant-owned businesses.

Many of Rafael's customers are meatpacking workers, and his own origin story here includes a JBS chapter. His parents worked there for years before they started their own businesses. (He also worked there for a couple of weeks, hated it and quit.)

Two downtowns

Rafael remembers asking a white boss at a car dealership if he ever went to Fourth Street.

"He said, 'God, no. I never go there. … It's ghetto,'" Rafael said.

Rafael took offense in part because his mother had a business there at the time.

To some here, Fourth Street itself is the physical representation of the divisions in the town.

Though it's a vibrant stretch — with ethnic grocery stores, restaurants, clothing shops, and a "taco emergency" food truck — it looks less polished than Third Street, with hand-painted signs and little landscaping. Third Street marks the northern border of a redeveloped area called Railside that offers breweries, antique stores and a quaint coffee shop called Chocolate Bar. Train tracks separate the two streets.

"Grand Island has two downtowns," said Adam Jacobs, an organizer with the Heartland Workers Center, a labor rights group.

Essential v. non-essential

Residents say pre-existing schisms widened further when more than 230 JBS workers tested positive for the virus last spring.

Barcenas, who has made bringing people together in his community the subject of his work as a diversity trainer, said he saw distinctions develop between people who could work from home and those who couldn't.

"Something that's become a reality was this idea of essential personnel and non-essential — and it became a topic for prejudice, and maybe racism," he said. "People say, 'Well, they should have just stayed home, not go to work.' But then you had [meatpacking workers] that were saying, 'I have to go to work, even if I might have symptoms. I cannot afford not to feed my family.'"

Immigrants have kept Grand Island growing, as other rural towns stagnate or lose population.

Health officials said it wasn't clear who brought the virus to the community, but the

publicity generated by the illnesses at JBS and the fact several hundred people in mid-March attended a quinceanera in Doniphan, a small town about 15 miles south of Grand Island, meant Hispanics shouldered much of the early blame.

"It went racist really fast," says the Rev. Kelly Kargas, the lead pastor of the Trinity United Methodist, which is located not far from Rafael's store.

Hispanics and other immigrants, who often live in multi-generational homes, were blamed for spreading the virus, as if their way of life were at fault, he said.

Laying blame

The sentiment was echoed on the floor of the Legislature. Sen. Steve Erdman of Scottsbluff, which lies at the far western edge of the state, objected to a bill to force meatpacking plants to provide more safeguards for workers.

He said companies weren't to blame for spreading the virus, but rather "workers who live in crowded conditions" and jammed in cars together. His office didn't return a call for comment.

Sen. Ray Aguilar, who represents Grand Island, called the characterization "unfair."

"The meatpacking plants are the ones that designed the close proximity to the workers working beside each other," Aguilar said. "It's also their responsibility to provide the PPE to keep people safe, and that wasn't being done."

In Grand Island, Nebraska TV reporter Steve White's Facebook timeline captured some of the finger pointing -- not just at plant workers but a broader "they" that seemed to cover any person of color.

"I'm pretty sure they are here at Walmart cause they don't understand that they NEED TO STAY HOME!!!"

"How many of them were at the party in Doniphan 2 weeks ago?"

"How many of the 400 can we assume are illegals and won't get tested?"

Other posts defended the workers and the broader immigrant community. A few noted a rodeo was held during the early weeks of the pandemic.

Aguilar said workers did go to stores without masks, angering some other residents. But he says the community didn't do a good job initially of translating health information in enough languages to account for Grand Island's diversity.

"A lot of that came from not understanding the threat of not wearing a mask," he said.

'Scapegoated'

Unlike the physical attacks against Asian Americans in the U.S., residents here say the animosity was more midwestern passive aggressive.

Miguel Estevez, a therapist who focuses on drug and alcohol addiction, said he felt like white shoppers gave him a bit more space than the recommended six feet at stores.

More troubling were the stories he'd hear from COVID survivors in group therapy sessions. He said they felt traumatized by their experience and "scapegoated" by the community, which added to their anxiety and sense of isolation.

"It was a little bit of hypocrisy," Estevez said. "'Yeah, you guys are essential workers, but you're bringing COVID to us. Stay away.'"

Sociologist Lourdes Gouveia said Grand Island has made strides in integrating its diverse population. Credit: KU Sociology Department.

Working at assimilation

City leaders foresaw some issues as the meatpacking industry expanded and its population grew more diverse. Grand Island formed the Multicultural Coalition to help immigrants adjust to life in the states.

The hospital set up a service center in the mall to provide check-ups to immigrants who tended to congregate there, in order to improve health outcomes, said former state senator Mike Gloor, who was then an executive at CHI St. Francis hospital at the time.

"We realized that if we were going to reach out to this specific population it needed to be someplace other than a big, imposing institution," he said.

The city's school system has hired a number of translators to help students, who speak more than 50 languages and dialects. It works to introduce parents with longer ties in Grand Island with new immigrants to help them adjust.

But Estevez said there were still too few members of minority groups in positions of authority. While 50% of the students in the Grand Island Public School system are of Hispanic, only 4.5% of its teachers are.

School superintendent, Tawana Grover, is the first African American to hold that position in Nebraska.

The congregation at St. Mary's Cathedral is split evenly between whites and Hispanics, but of the church members who died from covid last April, all were Latino, according to the Rev. Jim Golka. Credit: St. Mary's Cathedral.

Lourdes Gouveia, a sociologist and professor emeritus at the University of Nebraska Omaha, said Grand Island had made big strides in terms of racial equality since the 1990s, when she spent time there as part of her study of communities with meatpacking plants.

Back then, there was a "strong element of racism," she said. Workers felt harassed by state patrol officers. There was not much effort at translating official notices for new immigrants.

Now, Grand Island exemplifies what sociologists call "place setting," which occurs when large segments of community leaders are working together regardless of ethnicity to confront challenges, said Gouveia, who is a visiting professor at the University of Kansas.

Gouveia said Grand Island has followed a segmented path to assimilation, where some portion of the second generation of immigrants ascend to higher pay jobs but a significant number do not.

Poverty rates remain significantly higher for minority groups in Grand Island, as they do across the U.S. More than 17% of Hispanic households live below the poverty line vs. 9.4% for whites. Hispanic and Black Grand Islanders are also less likely to graduate from high school or receive a bachelor's degree than whites.

Aguilar said that integration "remains a work in progress."

COVID also highlighted health disparities among its diverse populations, particularly in the early months. Critics say JBS was slow to respond to the crisis, jeopardizing the health of its largely immigrant workforce.

The Rev. Jim Golka's congregation at St. Mary's Cathedral is split roughly evenly between whites and Hispanics.

But the 12 church members who died from COVID last April were all Hispanic, and several had ties to the meatpacking plant.

By fall, when a new outbreak hit the town, the rates of infection were spread more evenly, he said.

"On one hand, we know our immigrant population does a lot of jobs that a lot of Anglo-Americans don't want to do," Golka said.

Appreciating that "would be a good step for us to take, and a good step in trying to have a better sense of racial justice and appreciation, instead of judgment."