



Work and Family Life: Perspectives from an Imperial Valley Community

Director's Welcome

To begin, let me wish you all a Happy 2008!!!

We are starting the ninth year of the publication of the *CCBRES Bulletin* with a special study conducted by a visiting scholar to CCBRES in 2005. Dr. Barbara Wells is a sociologist from Maryville College, which is located just outside of Knoxville, Tennessee. Maryville is a small, private liberal arts college that was founded in 1812. It is one of the 50 oldest colleges in the United States. Some may wonder why a professor from Tennessee came to the Imperial Valley to study our region. As many of you know, the Valley is an extremely interesting place to study and understand the everyday life of people living in the United States. It is an area where both rural and urban issues can be captured. It also has the binational influences from Mexico that impact daily life in the region. For these reasons, it is clear to me why Dr. Wells would come to our region to conduct her study. Dr. Wells' study in her own words begins on page 2.

There are always questions regarding why people settle and live where they do. Particularly, when a region does not have amenities that some consider essential for a good quality of life. As we have seen in past editions of the *Bulletin*, quality of life is a very subjective concept that is left to the individual. Dr. Wells' research provides additional insight into this discussion. It also provides policy makers with a clearer picture of the challenges and benefits of living in the Imperial Valley. Without a clear understanding of the needs within a community, public policy is never truly effective. Research such as Dr. Wells provides important insight for local, state, and federal government officials as they develop policies to respond to specific needs. It is also very important for local leaders in the private and public sector for planning and policy initiatives for future development.

Over the next year, the *Bulletin* will continue to focus on specific topics, as was done in 2007. Possible topics that we will be exploring include agriculture, health, environment, education, and finance/banking. As we normally do, these issues will be analyzed from a binational point of view with data or indicators from both the Imperial Valley and Mexicali. If you have any topics that you are interested in seeing explored in future, please do not hesitate to contact CCBRES.

We hope that the *CCBRES Bulletin* provides the information and knowledge to help the residents of this binational region make better decisions for their future. We can only do this with input and interaction with the community. Therefore, any comments or suggestions are appreciated.

**San Diego State University
Imperial Valley Campus**

Work and Family Life: Perspectives from an Imperial Valley Community

by Barbara Wells, Ph.D.

Over the summer and fall of 2005, I spent more than three months doing research in the Imperial Valley. I am a sociologist whose principal area of research and writing is about families. I came to the Valley to do research on Mexican American families, a segment of the population of the United States that has been studied relatively little. Much of the research that does exist on Mexican American families focuses on the immigrant generation. My emphasis is on U.S.-born Mexican Americans. I came to the Imperial Valley, in part, because a large segment of the Hispanic population in Imperial County was born in the United States.

The research explored Mexican American women's perspectives on working and raising children. I interviewed 40 mothers who had at least one child, elementary school-aged, or younger. I wondered whether these women were in the labor force, and if they were, how they felt about working. I asked about their child care arrangements and their work histories. I asked them about employment-related opportunities and obstacles. I asked their perspectives on raising a family in the local community, with questions such as: What is good about the community as a place to raise children? What is difficult about it as a place to raise children?

One of my objectives was to examine how women lived out their family lives in a particular place. I assume that community life varies from place to place, so I decided to focus the research in one Imperial Valley community. I chose Brawley as the research setting. The women I interviewed lived in and around Brawley. Therefore, Brawley was the specific community that research participants discussed, although in some cases, they spoke more generally about the Valley.

The 40 research participants ranged in age from 20–44 years old; a majority were in their thirties. The women were mothers of between one and seven children. Eighty-two percent had at least a high school diploma. Sixty-two percent of interviewees are second-generation Mexican Americans, while thirty-eight percent are third-generation. Nearly all were in the labor force, that is, they were employed or looking for work.

This research brief presents the interviewees' viewpoints on what is positive and negative about living in an Imperial Valley community. Table 1 provides a summary of women's responses. Positive comments clustered in four main areas. What interviewees appreciate most about living in Brawley are its 1) small town atmosphere, 2) sense of community, 3) good environment for raising children, and 4) their own connections to family and friends. Responses were spread quite evenly across these categories.

Interviewees were also asked what was difficult about living in the community. The four most frequently cited areas of concern are 1) employment, 2) drugs and crime, 3) lack of local goods and services, and 4) the weather. Among negative comments, the first two categories were mentioned far more frequently than categories three and four.

Table 1: Summary Table

What is good about living in this community?	What is difficult about living in this community?
1. Its small town atmosphere	1. Employment issues
2. A strong sense of community	2. Drugs and crime
3. A good environment for children	3. Inadequate local goods and services
4. Personal connections to people and place	4. The hot weather

Next, we examine each positive and negative response category. Tables 1.1-1.8 provide direct quotations from interviewees to illustrate the perspectives of community residents in their own words. Table 1.1 provides quotations from women who believe that one of the best things about Brawley is its small town atmosphere. The most frequent responses were "Everyone knows everyone" and "It is calm." Many women had negative views about urban places, saying that living in Brawley is much to be preferred to cities such as Fresno, Los Angeles, and San Diego.

**Table 1.1: What is good about living in this community?
Its small town atmosphere**

"Everybody knows everybody. Like my kindergarten teacher still remembers me. I wouldn't see her for years and she would say, 'Sylvia?' I'm like, 'What? You remember me?'"

"It's good because there's not so many people that you get lost. You can get close as a community with the teachers, with the school."

"It's calm. It is not fast-paced like bigger cities."

"It's a small town. I like that environment. Transportation is not a big issue. I can't see myself spending hours on the road getting kids to school."

Table 1.2 provides the perspectives of two interviewees who believe that one of the most favorable characteristics of Brawley is a strong sense of community. Many interviewees commented on the sense of connectedness in the community. Some women specifically appreciate that members of the community look out for their children; others note that people are friendly and helpful

**Table 1.2: What is good about living in this community?
There is a strong sense of community**

"I love Brawley. I love the community. I love the unity of the community. I love the aspect that when there is something going on, the community reacts to it and they participate with any kind of event that is going on. If anything happens, whether it be sports, Little League, Cattle Call, Christmas in the Park, anything. The community reacts to it."

"Even though everyone is not related to me, we're very together. And I think I like the small-knit togetherness we have. Everybody watches over everybody else. Kind of like in the circle of trust, you know. Everybody watches everybody's back."

Table 1.3 captures women's viewpoint that Brawley provides a good environment for raising children. In general, they believe small towns are safer, less complicated places where it is easier to monitor your children than in urban centers. Several interviewees described Brawley as a "family-oriented" town. Local schools were more frequently evaluated positively than negatively by mothers.

**Table 1.3: What is good about living in this community?
It is a good environment for raising children**

"It is easier to keep track of your children and know where they are."

"It's safe. I mean, you can send your kids to the park to play and you don't have to worry about them getting mugged or something on the way."

"Here everyone knows everyone. They know whose kids they are. If you see kids are getting into trouble, you can go to the parents. In LA, it's like—you don't know who it is. Here, you can find out who are the bullies. You can know who are the good kids, who are the wrong kids, you know."

Table 1.4 provides positive comments from women who grew up in the Valley and/or have strong relationships with family and friends in the community. These women cite their connections to people and place. Some women have strong community attachment—they have good memories of growing up in the Valley, and hope for the same experiences for their children. For others, the overriding benefit of living in the community is being close to their extended families (or less frequently stated, long-term friends).

**Table 1.4: What is good about living in this community?
I am connected to the place and the people here**

"I wanted my kids to grow up here too like I did. I wanted my son to be a Wildcat because he plays sports."

"Both my husband's family and my family live here. Generation to generation, we've all been here."

"My family is here and I have their support."

"I have friends here. I have known them a long time and they are very good people."

Next, we consider women's responses to the question of what was difficult about living in the community. Table 1.5 captures women's perspectives on employment-related concerns. Just over half of interviewees expressed some concern related to the quantity or quality of jobs. Available jobs are not what they called "decent jobs," or "career-type jobs." While they have decided to remain in the Valley, at least for now, they see that many need to leave for better opportunities. They cite strong competition for the jobs that were available, mostly from local residents, but a few mention individuals from Mexico.

**Table 1.5: What is difficult about living in this community?
Employment is an issue**

"It is very hard to get a job. Job opportunities are not that high here. Unless you know somebody that can get you in."

"Finding a good job. Gosh, my daughter [age 19] might need to move. There's a lot of competition for whatever work there is."

"A lot of times there are people, for their careers, they have to leave. There is not that much room for advancement in the Valley."

"The problem is jobs. A lot of them are taken by immigrants that come into our town, and especially to El Centro and Calexico, that take our jobs as U.S. citizens."

Table 1.6 provides quotations from women who expressed concern about drugs and crime in the community. Just over half of women cited drugs as a negative aspect of community life. Fewer cited crime, but many saw the two as associated, that is, increased drug use in the community results in more crime. Women expressed great concern when crime intruded into their neighborhoods or when their children were exposed to individuals engaging in drug-related activity. In general, however, women think there is less crime in their community than in large urban centers.

**Table 1.6: What is difficult about living in this community?
Drugs and crime are a concern**

“There is a big drug problem in the Imperial Valley as a whole. I think that is a challenge for all parents to make sure their kids don’t become wrapped up [in it].”

“I think we have a high drug trafficking problem. Crime is also bad, and it is all related to the drugs. The drug problem has gotten worse over the years.”

“Well, just two weeks ago by where I live—I didn’t think it was like a really bad neighborhood—there was a shooting in front of my home. And that was really scary for me. Especially for my two small children. So I don’t let my kids go out no more.”

Table 1.7 provides the perspectives of women who find current levels of goods and services in the community to be inadequate. Women most frequently mentioned two areas of concern: first, the need to drive considerable distances to shop for clothing and home goods; and second, insufficient activities for children and youth. Some pointed out that when children’s activities are available, families often cannot afford the fees required for participation. While many women found that progress had been made on these concerns, they wished more could be done.

**Table 1.7: What is difficult about living in this community?
The lack of local goods and services**

“There’s not very many places you can shop. So you do have to go to El Centro. The commuting is quite exhausting, but with the new highway coming in (111) and the new development programs coming into Brawley, it is getting a lot better.”

“We have a mall [in El Centro] now. Other than that, there isn’t enough entertainment for youth. There is more in Brawley now than before, but there still isn’t really anything for adolescents to do.”

“There are not enough extra-curricular activities for kids. That’s hard because you want your kids to be involved in good things and keep busy and not have time to goof around and get into trouble.”

Table 1.8 provides quotations from women who find the weather to be a difficult aspect of living in the Imperial Valley. Interviewees expressed both their personal complaints about the summer heat, and also noted that the hot climate shapes their children’s lives by restricting their activities.

**Table 1.8: What is difficult about living in this community?
The hot weather**

"It's hot—130 degrees—I'm not exaggerating, right? Every year I say, 'What am I doing here?'"

"My son is very active and in the summertime he can't go outside. You just can't do it. I think that's why some kids tend to be obese too. They don't do nothing, a lot of things, but watch TV."

"The heat, just the heat. It's really intense. Everybody's grumpy. If you don't have a pool, what do you do? It's too hot for the kids to go out and play. It makes it really hard to go out and actually do something, do an activity, because it's really bad."

In conclusion, the women interviewed for this research realize there are pros and cons to living in any community. Overall, women were more positive than negative about life in the Imperial Valley. A few women did say that they could not think of anything good about living in Brawley. But nearly a third said that they could not identify anything negative about raising children in the community.

An important aspect of many women's satisfaction with the community is the fact their (and/or their husbands') extended families live in the Valley. In some instances, they rely on the support of their parents; in other instances, their parents are elderly or disabled and rely on them for assistance. Some interviewees said they would probably move to another locale if it were not for their families here.

In many cases interviewees recognize that what they value most about the community comes with a price. The small-town atmosphere they appreciate is associated with a limited job market, less shopping, and fewer entertainment possibilities than in an urban center. For example, one woman says, "We have less crime and robbery, but there are better jobs in bigger cities." Another woman says she hopes there will not be much more commercial development, because it would change the Valley too much. She prefers maintaining the sense of community, "Even if we don't move up too much." One of the things many women are outspoken about is their dislike for urban living. Thus, they are willing to accept what they think to be the limitations of living in a small town because the positives far outweigh the negatives.

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Inside this Edition

Director's Welcome

A Special Study:

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College, Maryville, Tennessee

Table 1; Summary Table

Table 1.1: What is good about living in this
community? Its small town atmosphere

Table 1.2: What is good about living in this
community? There is a strong sense of community

Table 1.3: What is good about living in this
community? It is a good environment for raising
children

Table 1.4: What is good about living in this
community? I am connected to the place and the
people here

Table 1.5: What is difficult about living in this
community? Employment is an issue

Table 1.6: What is difficult about living in this
community? Drugs and crime are a concern

Table 1.7: What is difficult about living in this
community? The lack of local goods and services

Table 1.5: What is difficult about living in this
community? The hot weather