



PHOTOS BY JOHN D. SIMMONS - jsimmons@charlotteobserver.com

Workers place chickens on cones before skin and meat are removed. Latinos make up about 90 percent of the work force at the West Columbia, S.C., plant. Complex manager James Mabe said many workers stay for six months and then return to Mexico. They may or may not come back, he said.

Some illegal immigrants work in fear

Latino from 9XX

Greenville, S.C., plant human resources employee.

Former Greenville supervisors said the plant prefers undocumented workers because they are less likely to question working conditions for fear of losing their jobs or being deported.

In the early 1990s, when another company owned the Greenville plant, most workers were African Americans. Now, most are Latino.

"We can only hire those who apply to work for us, and at the moment between 85 percent and 90 percent of our job applicants are Latino," said Greenville complex manager Barry Cronic in a written response.

Handling IDs

Federal immigration law requires little of companies when checking applicants' IDs. Employers don't have to verify workers' immigration status or check that their IDs are valid. Instead, companies must accept applicants' documents if they "reasonably appear to be genuine."

Davis, the former Greenville human resources employee, said she was told not to examine actual IDs when hiring, but instead to copy the IDs, then review the black-and-white images. She said some Latino applicants provided discolored Permanent Resident Cards, but such flaws did not show up in the black-and-white copies.

"We knew for a fact that some of the IDs were fake," said Davis, who worked at the plant for two years until this past summer.

If questioned by authorities, the company could show copies of the IDs, which appeared authentic, she said.

Cronic, the Greenville complex manager, said the plant examines all documents as presented and makes copies only for its records.

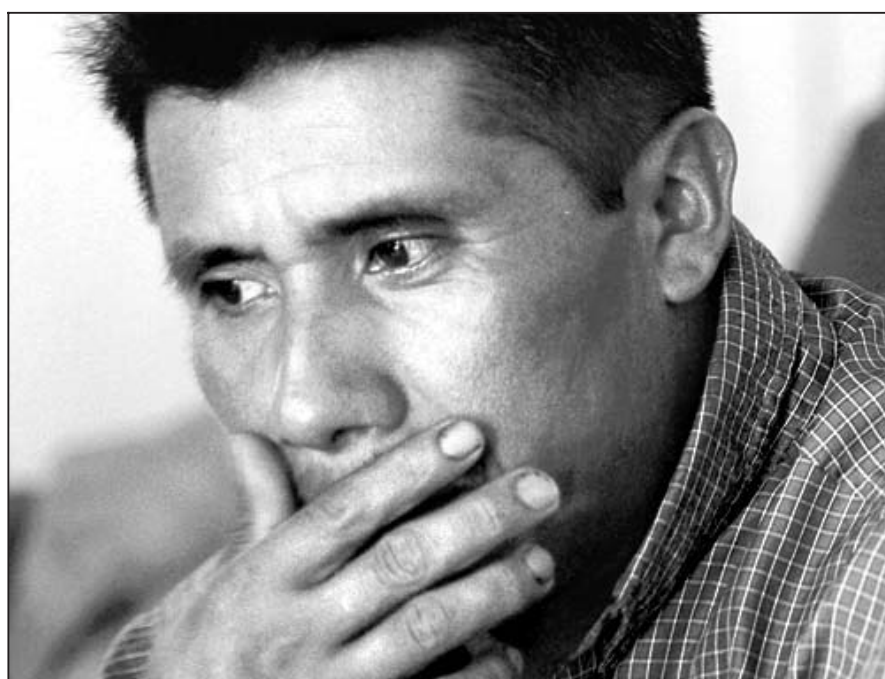
"All Human Resource personnel are trained to examine documents," he wrote. "We are not document experts."

Workers from House of Raeford's plants in Raeford, Greenville and West Columbia, S.C., spoke to the Observer about their status. Some said House of Raeford questioned worker IDs less than other employers. One worker said he got a job at the same plant twice using different names and IDs.

House of Raeford's Carolina plants do not participate in a free federal program that allows companies to verify applicants' Social Security numbers, according to the Department of Homeland Security.

"It is a common misconception that the employer must check social security numbers of applicants or employees in order to determine their immigration status," Cronic said in a written response.

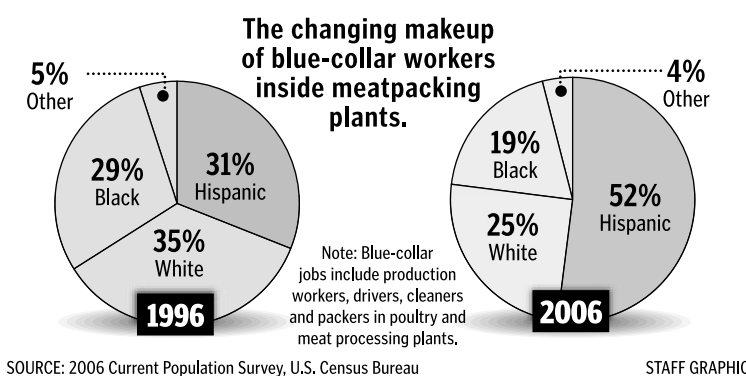
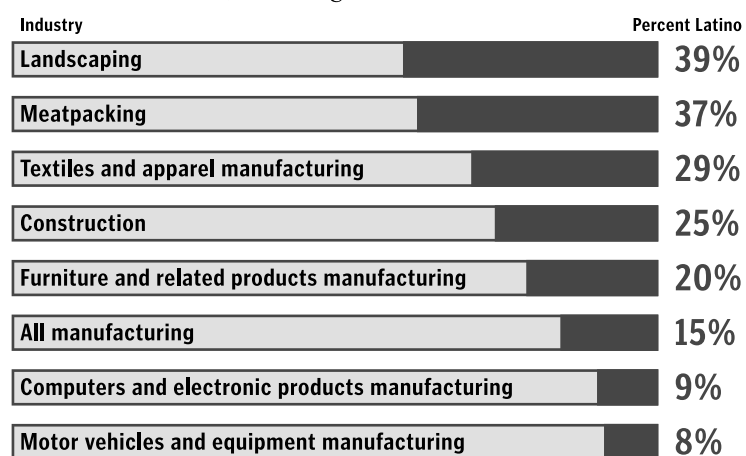
Former poultry worker Jose Lopez told the Observer he used fake docu-



Family and friends from Guatemala told Jose Lopez he could find a good-paying poultry job in the Carolinas. He says he spent \$100 for fake identification, then used it to get a job at House of Raeford's Greenville, S.C., plant.

Latinos in the work force

Meatpacking is more reliant on Latinos than all but one other industry - landscaping. The percentage of Latinos in various industries in the U.S., according to the Census:



ments to get work at the Greenville plant. He said family and friends from Guatemala told him that there were good-paying poultry jobs in the Carolinas, even for illegal immigrants who didn't speak English.

In 2004, he paid a smuggler \$3,000 to guide him on a two-week journey across the desert and into Arizona before catching a series of buses. He said \$100 bought him a fake Permanent Resident Card and Social Security number, which he says he used to get his job.

Industry of undocumented

It's unclear how many illegal immigrants work in the poultry industry. One 2006 study estimated more than a quarter of meat-processing workers nationwide are undocumented. Some experts say even more work in poultry be-

cause its jobs are less skilled.

A 900-employee Crider poultry plant in Stillmore, Ga., lost 75 percent of its mostly Latino work force during September 2006 immigration raids. No Carolina poultry plants have been raided in the past five years, according to immigration officials.

House of Raeford's West Columbia plant stopped production when about 10 percent of its work force did not show up during a May 1, 2006, national boycott calling on Congress to support efforts to legalize undocumented workers.

James Mabe, the West Columbia complex manager, said 90 percent of



Mabe

The immigration case against Tyson

The 2003 federal trial involving Tyson Foods provides a rare glimpse of how some poultry plant managers filled their chicken lines with illegal immigrants. The company was cleared of wrongdoing, but two managers pleaded guilty to charges of conspiring to hire illegal immigrants. Another manager committed suicide shortly after the charges became public.

Here are excerpts from the thousands of pages of transcripts and court documents:

■ Federal agents posing as human smugglers secretly taped some plant managers, such as Robert Sanford in Monroe, requesting illegal immigrants to work on the production lines. "Hell, I put over 700 people to work," said the voice identified as Sanford. "I'm going to need to replace 300 or 400 people - maybe 500. I'm going to need a lot."

■ Some plants skirted immigration scrutiny by giving federal officials the impression they verified workers' legal status. While the company policy called for using a federal program to verify applicants' Social Security numbers, several plants used in-house temporary employment agencies that did not scrutinize worker IDs.

■ In 1995, a Tyson plant in Shelbyville, Tenn., that had only a few Latino workers boosted production by increasing its staff to about 80 percent Latino, according to a former manager. In that year, production surged from processing 900,000 chickens a week to 1.3 million - impossible without the help of illegal labor, the former manager told a federal jury.

■ A security guard at the Tennessee plant said he was told to turn away black or white job applicants who approached the gate, but to let Latinos in.

The company, headquartered in Arkansas, said illegal immigrants were hired because of a few rogue managers.

— FRANCO ORDOÑEZ

Yuxquen" was spray-painted in black letters across one apartment complex driveway, referring to a community in Northern Guatemala.

Workers walk to the plant along wooded paths littered with torn aprons, gloves and hairnets.

Over a decade ago, pockets of the neighborhood were predominantly African American, former workers said. But as the plant hired more Latinos, those employees displaced many blacks in their jobs and later in their homes.

Experts have long debated whether illegal immigrants take jobs away from U.S. citizens, or take jobs U.S. citizens don't want.

Former union steward Joann Sullivan said the number of Latinos increased at the Greenville plant after House of Raeford bought it from Columbia Farms in 1998. She said Latinos replaced many of her African American colleagues.

"You were seeing Hispanics coming in and no blacks," said Sullivan, an African American who worked at the plant for more than 20 years. Soon, she said, Hispanics were being promoted over blacks with more experience.

Some African Americans in neighborhoods near the plant said they came to believe blacks wouldn't be hired there.

The work force change was no accident, said Belem Villegas, a former employment supervisor at the Greenville plant. She said a plant manager told her in 2001 to stop hiring African Americans.

"They want people who do not complain," said Villegas, who handled much of the hiring until she was fired in 2005 after about five years at the plant. "It's a benefit to them to be in control. To have them illegal."

Cronic declined to answer questions about Villegas' allegations. But he said, "It is the law of supply and demand, not discrimination that has led to us having today a work force that is predominantly Latino."

The company said it fired Villegas because she was "accepting money to provide employment favors to potential employees." Villegas denies the claim and says she believes she was fired, in part, because she started speaking up for workers.

When problems arise, illegal immigrants often won't pursue typical avenues of recourse, such as joining unions or hiring attorneys, because they fear exposing themselves to greater risks.

Villegas, who was born in Texas, said some company managers would hold the workers' immigration status over their heads if they complained too much. One manager kept a list of illegal immigrants who could be fired if they caused problems, Villegas said.

"They don't play fair," she said. "They knew they had the upper hand."

— RESEARCHERS SARA KLEMMER AND MARIA WYGAND CONTRIBUTED.

Spanish version

See a Spanish version of this series at www.charlotte.com/español

“If immigration came and looked at our files, they'd take half the plant.”

CAITLYN DAVIS, A FORMER GREENVILLE, S.C., PLANT HUMAN RESOURCES EMPLOYEE