# Metro Atlanta keeps its worldwide appeal; Foreign-born populace still rising, an exception amid Great Recession.

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## Body

Metro Atlanta continues to draw new foreign-born residents despite the economic downturn, which sets it apart from many other regions around the country.

Atlanta's immigrant population grew by 42,000 people, or 6 percent, from 2007 to 2009. That steady increase was felt in myriad ways: providing low-cost labor while also burdening some public services, further diversifying the culture while deeply unsettling some longtime residents.

As of 2009, nearly three-quarters of a million foreign-born people made the 28-county metro area their home, according to census figures, accounting for 13 percent of the population. The census distinguishes between foreign-born people who are now U.S. citizens --- in metro Atlanta, about one-third --- and those who are not. But it does not determine which noncitizens are here legally; estimates on that question come from other sources relying on other data.

The Pew Hispanic Center estimates that 28 percent of the nation's foreign-born population is illegal, though researchers say the percentage in Georgia could be twice that, because the state has so many recently arrived immigrants. Those who are in the country legally may be refugees, students with visas or employees with work permits.

Immigration is a potent force, and illegal immigration is a point of contention in metro Atlanta. The surge of foreign-born residents has affected more facets of metro life --- schools, public safety, the workplace, churches --- than virtually any other phenomenon, save growth itself.

Unlike metro Atlanta, many American metropolitan areas saw immigration level off or decline during the global recession, according to a report released Thursday by the Brookings Institution, a Washington think tank.

"Atlanta's economy did a little bit better," said Audrey Singer, a senior fellow at Brookings and author of the study, "The Impact of the Great Recession on Immigration Trends."

That assessment may sound odd, considering the level of economic pain that has hit the ***metro*** area, especially among those sectors that employ immigrants --- legal and illegal --- such as construction and landscaping. But Singer and other researchers point to other sectors that were not hit as hard and that employ immigrants, such as hotels, convention centers and large educational institutions.

Beyond that, immigrants remain a group willing to do unpleasant jobs, such as working in the chicken factories in Cherokee County, and many of those jobs continue to exist, said Harvey Newman, a public policy professor at Georgia State University.

***Metro Atlanta*** emerged as a major immigrant destination in the 1990s, long after the major metropolitan centers of New York, Chicago and Baltimore. It is a leader in the trend toward immigrants settling in the suburbs rather than the urban core, with large enclaves residing in Gwinnett, DeKalb and Cobb counties.

The influx of immigrants did slow during the ***recession***: The years 2005 to 2007 saw a 10 percent increase, considerably higher than the increase experienced during the ***recession*** years. It remains to be seen whether the pace of growth will pick up again or reach earlier levels. Some researchers have their doubts, pointing to the moribund real estate market and the push by Georgia lawmakers to tighten scrutiny on illegal immigrants.

The ***recession*** has taken a severe toll on many immigrants, according to both census figures and the Brookings study. Poverty is up among the ***foreign-born***, especially in Gwinnett County, one of ***metro***'s earliest enclaves for immigrants. Gwinnett saw about a doubling in poverty among immigrants between 2007 and 2009, from 20,000 people to 45,000.

"Gwinnett is a major settlement area for Latino immigrants, and no doubt many of them were employed in the construction industry," said Mary Odem, an associate history professor at Emory University.

Laurent Ditmann, principal of the International Community School, saw the ***recession***'s impact first-hand in the lives of the students, nearly half of whom are immigrants from war-torn countries such as Myanmar, the Sudan and Afghanistan.

"Especially for the last two years since the economic crisis hit, it's been very hard for them," he said of the parents in the roughly 200 families represented at the school. "A lot of them are very highly educated, and they've had to take jobs below their education level."

Ditmann, himself a naturalized French immigre, said the children's parents have been resilient, however.

"What you're starting to see is people relying on entrepreneurship rather than salaried jobs," he said. "They're starting businesses because they realize they're not going to be able to find work."

Nevertheless, many immigrants continue to regard ***metro Atlanta*** as a place where they can fulfill their dreams.

Born and raised in Kenya, George Odongo moved here about three years ago from Virginia. He wants to become a chaplain who helps children in hospitals, and he was drawn by the area's choice of schooling and ministries. Currently saving money from his job at a Dunwoody hotel, he plans to start night classes at a Lithonia seminary next year.

"It's a hub of education," said Odongo, 53. "My main purpose is to get a good education and do something with it."

***Metro Atlanta*** also reflects national trends in the increase of naturalized citizens among immigrants. The census data also clarify the country of origin for immigrants. In 2009, 26 percent of ***foreign-born*** people in ***metro Atlanta*** were born in Mexico, making it the leading country of origin. Other countries included India, 6 percent; Jamaica, 4.6 percent; Korea, 4.3 percent; Vietnam, 3.6 percent and China, 3.6 percent.

The immigration issue is expected to be front and center during the state's upcoming legislative session, with Republicans pressing hard for an Arizona-style law that could allow local law enforcement to enforce federal

immigration laws and force employers to electronically verify the immigration status of employees. Those measures are opposed by many within the state's $65 billion a year agriculture industry, which relies on immigrants for labor.

Pam Pinkard, a Smyrna resident and member of the ***Atlanta*** chapter of the Minutemen Project, a group that wants more stringent enforcement of U.S. immigration laws, said illegal immigrants are stealing jobs that should go to legal residents.

"We are a country of opportunity," Pinkard said. But because of the influx of illegal immigrants, "many may not have that opportunity."

***Metro*** ***Atlanta*** has not bestowed the opportunities sought by every immigrant.

Ulices Hernandez, born in Mexico City, came here with his wife from Dallas about two years ago. He was a forklift operator there, but his wife wanted to move here because she had family here. He didn't reveal his immigration status.

They moved smack into the ***recession***. Finding a job was hard.

He and his wife are now separated. He's working as a stock worker at the Doraville farmer's market, not far from where he lives.

But with little here to hold him, Hernandez said, "I want to move back home."

Not to Mexico, to Dallas.

What the census does --- and doesn't --- ask

Through the yearly American Community Survey, the Census Bureau gathers detailed demographic, economic, social and housing information from a sample of residents throughout the country. The section on citizenship asks:

Whether the person was born inside or outside the United States;

Which country a ***foreign-born*** person was born in;

Whether the person is a U.S. citizen, either by virtue of birth or through naturalization.

The census does not ask noncitizens whether they are in the U.S. legally. Therefore, the census is not a source of information on how many people are illegally in this country.

Percentage of residents who are ***foreign-born***

In most ***metro*** ***Atlanta*** counties, the number of ***foreign-born*** residents has increased modestly as a percentage of the total population over the past decade.

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