AN INVISIBLE POPULATION; IMMIGRANTS ARE CARVING OUT THEIR NEW LIVES IN A HEARTLAND CITY WHERE THEY BLEND IN SO QUIETLY, FEW NOTICE THEY'RE HERE

St. Louis Post-Dispatch (Missouri)

May 21, 1995, Sunday, FIVE STAR LIFT Edition

Section: WAR PAGE; Pg. 1B; PROFILE ***IMMIGRANTS*** IN ST. LOUIS

Length: 2694 words

Byline: Story by Philip Dine Photos by Jerry Naunheim Jr. Of the Post-Dispatch Staff

Body

St. Louis, long sketched in black and white, is on the verge of being profoundly - if ***quietly*** - transformed.

For decades, the area's ***population*** base and ethnic mix have been stable. Immigration and the challenges it poses may be rocking California or Texas or Florida, but they seem far removed from the ***Heartland***, many St. Louisans suggest.

Yet signs of a ***new*** presence abound:

Minutes after the Vietnamese health clinic on Keokuk Street in south St. Louis opens, the waiting room is jammed with scheduled patients, relatives and walk-ins. Novice interpreters and conferences pushed into the hallway make for a chaotic scene. But the Vietnamese here say they'***re*** ecstatic to have a place where people understand their problems.

A dozen blocks to the west, an upbeat teacher named Lorene Reid pauses at a table that her students at Fanning Middle School seem to have designated the Hispanic desk. She gives pointers on grammar to the Mexican, Cuban and Honduran fifth-graders looking up at her. Then she heads to a corner where two boys, one Iraqi and one Chinese, sit transfixed by a computer game.

Above the thumping of the sewing machines and presses and button-holers at Biltwell Clothing's factory at Lucas and 15th streets downtown, Ibrisim Dedic's co-workers speak Serbo-Croatian and Spanish and Vietnamese, Russian and Polish and Romanian and Greek, Chinese and Czech and Italian and the Amharic of Ethiopia. Sixty percent of the plant's 300 workers are from overseas. Dedic, a Bosnian, is the plant's first foreign-born union official.

Refugees and ***immigrants*** are arriving daily in St. Louis, driven by rising xenophobia in Russia or crushing poverty in Mexico or famine in parts of Africa, or simply drawn from an India or a Korea by the opportunities here.

The area's ***population*** has become one of the most ethnically diverse in the Midwest. The numbers aren't huge but the breadth is notable for a metropolitan region the size of St. Louis, experts say. More than 90 nationalities are scattered among the area's 2.5 million people. And in recent years the growth of immigration to St. Louis has well outpaced the national rate.

The number of foreign-born residents here stands at roughly 80,000 two-thirds more than the 48,000 shown in the 1990 census. The increase partly reflects earlier undercounting but also a strong influx in the past five years.

This is all happening with scant attention and virtually no public discussion. Beyond commenting on an exotic ***new*** Thai restaurant or a Chinese cultural festival, people generally seem unaware of the shifting demographics.

Why? St. Louis lacks traditional ethnic enclaves no Little Havana, no Chinatown, no barrio or a single dominant group of ***immigrants*** who might capture the public ear. Polls in other regions suggest that longtime residents tend to most ***notice*** and feel threatened by a large homogeneous group of ***immigrants*** with a particular language and culture.

Noticed or not, ***immigrants*** and refugees here are making an imprint on a decidedly monoglot area.

They are revitalizing streets in south St. Louis. Schools are struggling to cope with an expanding pool of students from divergent backgrounds. Churches are setting up special services and ***new*** ministries.

A ***few*** ***immigrants*** are spending scarce dollars to put ***out*** foreign language publications, hoping to bind their communities. Police are taking steps to prevent ***new*** residents from becoming easy prey, sometimes from fellow refugees. Health care providers are testing novel measures to reach poorly served ***populations***.

Signs point to continued growth in the numbers of foreigners to this area. Local economic forecasts call for continued job expansion here, while rising hostility toward ***immigrants*** elsewhere has sparked secondary migration to St. Louis and other Midwestern destinations.

Dr. William Chignoli, a native of Argentina who works with Hispanics here, says the relative absence of animosity gives the area a chance to head off crises that have engulfed other parts of the country.

"It's a perfect time to act because the problem is beginning in this moment," he said.

Who ***Lives*** Where

A decade ago, South Grand Boulevard was a dilapidated and nearly deserted stretch knifing through the ***city***'s southern tier. Today it pulses with the entrepreneurial spirit of Southeast Asians, Hispanics, Middle Easterners and others, who have given birth to an array of food markets, restaurants and stores of all types. Refugees live on side streets, many placed there over the past decade by the nearby International Institute of Metropolitan St. Louis, the largest resettlement agency in Missouri.

Nearer the central corridor to the north live East Africans - largely Ethiopians, Eritreans and Somalis - while deep south St. Louis has pockets of Bosnians, Romanians and other East Europeans.

Along Olive Boulevard in University ***City*** sits a second, smallish commercial district bearing a foreign flavor, mostly Chinese. Many Russian Jewish refugees live nearby.

West St. Louis County communities, including Ballwin, Creve Coeur, Manchester and Chesterfield, are home to Chinese and Pakistani ***immigrants***, to Koreans and Indians and Filipinos.

On the Illinois side, Hispanics live in Fairmont ***City***, while some East Europeans are heavily represented in parts of the Metro East area.

For the most part, St. Louis' foreign ***population*** is spread across the area more by economic rank and by ***immigrant*** or refugee status than by nationality. The prevalence of mid-sized groups helps explain the absence of visible enclaves.

The one much bigger group, Hispanics, is split into nearly two dozen nationalities scattered from the South Grand-Jefferson area to North County to West County to Southern Illinois making it perhaps the most ***invisible*** of all foreign ***populations*** here.

Cuban-born Luis Trabanco sells food from Mexico, Spain, South America and the Caribbean in his market at Lindenwood and Hereford in south St. Louis.

"People come in the store and say, 'Why are you here? There aren't any Hispanics in the ***city***.' I say, 'There are, there are tons of them.' We don't congregate together, and the ***population*** is relatively ***new*** compared to other ***cities***."

Many refugees work away from the public eye in jobs where a command of English is not required. Isolation or lack of resources keeps many inside, says Ali Al-Mansouri, an Iraqi refugee.

Al-Mansouri helps ***immigrants*** study English in their homes during the day and makes candy in a factory on the evening shift before returning to his small apartment on South Grand near Interstate 44.

"So there's no chance for a lot of people to see me outside," says Al-Mansouri, who spent two years in a Saudi refugee camp after taking part in an uprising against the Iraqi regime.

The quiescent flavor of the ***immigrant*** experience here has pluses and minuses, suggests Eric Wernecke, who resettles refugees for Catholic Charities. It has reduced ethnic stereotyping, blunted potential hostility and led to more ***blending*** in, he says. But, "There's less awareness of the needs of ethnic groups, of their concerns. It just doesn't get the attention of St. Louisans."

A Fledgling Response

Yet the effect of the influx is being felt.

At the start of this school year, nine St. Louis public schools offered special classes for students speaking foreign languages. Within two months, the flow of ***immigrants*** and refugees pushed the number to 11 two high, three middle and six elementary schools.

By September, 14 English as Second Language centers are expected to be operating.

"The number of students we'***re*** overwhelmed," says Priscilla Schulz. She was the lone social worker for the ***city***'s foreign students from 1988 until the schools hired an assistant last fall to help her counsel youngsters and their families.

The numbers are telescoped at Fanning Middle School, where more than one of six students - 82 of 468 - speaks a primary language other than English. The figure had been as high as 111 a month after school started. That prompted the opening of a ***new*** English as Second Language center, which took some of the additional students.

The schools also have been confronted with non-educational matters. Tension between minority American and foreign students has simmered. But for the first time, violence broke ***out*** a couple of months ago among a ***few*** refugee youths. The incident, at Roosevelt High School, led to the transfer of the Vietnamese involved and prompted a handful of Bosnians to drop ***out***.

Police Chief Clarence Harmon says he is concerned about the implications of newcomers fighting each other, which "could speak to some growing antagonism we need to deal with."

Immigrants generally are unused to the level of private violence that now surrounds them. Harmon has met with some worried about street crime or incipient ethnic gangs, trying to build trust with ***immigrants*** conditioned to viewing police with suspicion.

In parts of south St. Louis, refugees are reticent to report organized hooliganism for fear of reprisal, especially with the terror back home still fresh in mind. So, they simply move from street to street to avoid problems.

Meanwhile, some merchants, fearing gangs will gain a hold in their enterprises, want police to get more aggressive. In the last 20 months, the force has hired two Asian-American officers, and the department's training focus this year is on ***immigrants*** and ethnicity.

Anyone strolling along the 3300 block of South Grand a ***few*** Sundays ago might have seen some 500 Vietnamese spilling onto the sidewalk outside St. Pius V Church. Since February, the church has celebrated a monthly Mass for Vietnamese refugees.

Churches have been among the local institutions most affected by the ***new*** arrivals. Two years ago three churches served Hispanics in the ***city*** and county; now 10 do. In the past year Haitians have set up their own French-speaking church as well as youth discussion groups in Creole at Harmony Baptist on Grace Avenue. Fifteen Korean churches form the backbone of that ***immigrant*** community.

In West County, a ***new*** Islamic mosque and a relatively ***new*** Hindu temple loom like bookmarks on Weidman Road. An elementary school teaching Arabic and the Koran is planned adjacent to the mosque, where people pray five times a day.

The rectory of a converted church on South Taylor Avenue in midtown is filled with racks of donated clothes and shoes, meticulously cleaned and arranged by gender, size and season, waiting for Hispanics to take what they need before heading to work at dawn.

Chignoli, the Argentinian doctor who in the 1980s worked with Cuban and Nicaraguan refugees in Miami, runs what he calls a "silent ministry" here for Hispanics, chiefly Mexicans some here illegally.

Until now, he says, he has not discussed his work publicly, believing some he counsels prefer quiet.

Maria Luisa, for one. On a recent Saturday afternoon, despite a warming sun, the drapes remained tightly drawn in her family's two-bedroom apartment near Arsenal Street. Religious ornaments filled the tiny but well-scrubbed rooms of the dwelling, reached by a narrow stairway.

From the mountains of Central Mexico, the 11 family members made their way here in groups over the past three years. Maria Luisa, 15, speaks of humiliation over the way some people treat her in St. Louis, but her undocumented status leaves little recourse.

Though it's a weekend, both her parents are working, because if they don't do what they'***re*** told there may be no job to return to Monday, and there clearly is no room to protest.

The growing number of people in this situation form a small minority but theirs is perhaps the best-kept secret about immigration in St. Louis.

They'***re*** not the only ones who complain about discrimination at the workplace and elsewhere. Such problems are sparking isolated calls for, and tentative steps toward, a political voice for ***immigrants*** here.

A Transparent Wave

The closest the public discourse gets to immigration seems to be around isolated incidents such as the murder of a Polish ***immigrant***'s daughter, the drunken-driving fatality caused by a Mexican worker or the death of a Russian motorist hit by a rock dropped from an overpass. Most recently, the Islamic Center got several threatening calls after early reports of a possible Middle Eastern link to the bombing in Oklahoma.

Not only the public seems unaware. St. Louis' 20 full-time immigration lawyers, a large number for an area of this size, form an active panel within the local bar association. Yet, says Chester Moyer, who runs the Immigration and Naturalization Service office here, "I bet if you talked with 99 percent of the lawyers here, they wouldn't know there's an immigration committee of lawyers."

Clayton lawyer Gene McNary says President George Bush appointed him commissioner of the Immigration and Naturalization Service in 1989 partly because St. Louis was perceived as having virtually no immigration, so McNary would bring a clean slate.

An Attractive Area

A healthy economy here should draw more ***immigrants***, whose arrival often is linked to specific job offers, and refugees, parceled ***out*** across the country based partly on which ***cities*** offer promising prospects.

Beyond that, given the political and social pressures that have fed Proposition 187 in California and copycat measures elsewhere denying benefits to ***immigrants***, the anonymity that marks immigration in St. Louis has an appeal to those seeking peace and quiet.

"People come first to ***New*** York or Florida, California or Texas or Colorado, and never think of the Midwest," says Chignoli, who runs the Hispanic Community Social Action. "But when other people are pushing, they come here."

For similar reasons, ***immigrants*** who make St. Louis their first stop now tend to stay here. A decade ago, many left as soon as they arrived, heading to states thought to be more hospitable or offering more generous benefits.

The Human Side

Adapting to a ***new*** environment and healing the wounds that may linger from the old can be wrenching.

Near Jefferson Avenue, an East African family huddles in a bare public housing unit as night falls. Ominous noises and yells reverberate outside. The mother wraps a protective hand around her children, unwilling to let them into the wild society raging ***out*** there a society she says poses not only physical dangers but threatens the values she has taught her children.

On the walls of the Bosnian Club inside an old South Vandeventer Avenue warehouse hang several haunting paintings of unsmiling children with round, vacant eyes. The artist is a young physician here just four months but already sinking into despair. She walks around mouthing the words: "I must help Bosnian children. Every family is tragedy. I am doctor."

If the very presence of ***immigrants*** in St. Louis borders on ***invisible***, the struggles they face form the second and even more hidden aspect of this ***population***. Those struggles can lead to explosive personal and family strains.

"A lot of them think their problems are solved when they come here but in many ways their problems are just beginning," says Ron Klutho, a teacher who works closely with refugee youngsters and their families.

The way individual ***immigrants*** adjust will determine their long-term impact on their ***new*** home. But in places where immigration has become a red-hot topic, debate has centered on numbers, eligibility for services and other matters of immediate practical and political import.

St. Louis, which has manageable numbers, little hostility and no hysteria, offers a hospitable setting for probing the human dimension.

And, the very silence that has surrounded the general issue of immigration here makes a public focus on it all the more timely, suggests Bob Ubriaco, Webster University specialist on immigration to the Midwest.

"Issues aren't at the visceral level yet, and once they reach that level people and governments act through emotion," Ubriaco says.

Now, he contends, government and institutional policies can still be formulated in a calm, non-polarized atmosphere.

Graphic

PHOTO, GRAPHIC, MAP; (1) Photo by Jerry Naunheim Jr./Post-Dispatch - Russian refugees Alla Belogorogsky, her son, Paval, and her father, Aleg Tchaouskine, arrive at Lambert Field last month to join relatives in Ballwin. (2) Photo by Jerry Naunheim Jr./Post-Dispatch - Women pray at the Islamic Center of Greater St. Louis, 3843 West Pine Boulevard. Many who worship at the center are ***immigrants***. (3) Photo by Jerry Naunheim Jr./Post-Dispatch - Antonio Capiz, 22, plays with his 6-month-old nephew, Juan Manuel Sanchez, in south St. Louis. Ten family members from Mexico live in the apartment. They have two beds and the crib, so some must sleep on the floor. (4) Photo by Jerry Naunheim Jr./Post-Dispatch - ***Immigrants*** arrive for Sunday Mass celebrated in Vietnamese at St. Pius V Church, 3310 South Grand Boulevard. (5) Map by Tom Borgman/Post-Dispatch of the South Grand Boulevard area. Why South Grand? Anna Crosslin, director of the International Institute of Metropolitan St. Louis, often hears the question. "People say, 'Gee, I don't understand South Grand. It's just sort of risen up.'" How it did tells part of the tale of foreigners in St. Louis. In 1981 the institute, seeking bigger quarters to handle a growing flow of refugees, left its midtown office and bought a building on the South Side's Park Avenue. It began placing refugees on South Grand, the area's main thoroughfare just two blocks to the east. Grand offered affordable housing and numerous bus routes, so refugees could easily attend language classes. Because the institute is the area's biggest resettlement agency and isn't tied to any specific ethnic groups, a large and diverse ***population*** of refugees grew around South Grand. Stores and restaurants followed, as did health centers and churches. Map details the South Grand area and highlights the following: International Institute, Faru (Int'l Folk Art), Mekong Restaurant, Cafe Mangia, King & I Restaurant, Cafe de Manila, Grand Chinese Cuisine, Pho Grand, Mid-Eastern Market, Cho Grand Trading, Trang Fashions, Rasha's Beauty Supplies, Pho Saigon Restaurant, Thai Ngoc Jewelry, Van Phong Bac Si Thanh (Doctor), Jay Int'l Food, Siete Mares Mexican/Nicaraguan Restaurant, Than Nhan Restaurant, Thu Do Hair Design, Kim Thanh Gift Shop, Tan My Bakery/Restaurant, Kim Chi Jewelry, Vietnam/Hong Kong Video Rentals, Chim's Imports (Martial Arts), St. Pius V Church, Tower Grove Park. (6) Graphic/Line Chart by Tom Borgman/Post-Dispatch - Number of ***Immigrants***/Refugees: Selected groups in the St. Louis area Mexicans 14,000 Chinese 7,500 Germans 5,000 Koreans 5,000 Vietnamese 4,705 Indians 4,000 Former USSR 3,200 Filipinos 3,000 Canadians 3,000 British 3,000 Pakistanis 2,500 Italians 2, 200 Palestinians 2,000 Polish 2,000 Japanese 1,400 Romanians 1,000 Greeks 880 Austrians 850 Bosnians 825 Iranians 800 Laotians 700 Cubans 700 Hungarians 700 Spanish 600 Irish 600 Thais 530 French 520 Czechs 510 Nigerians 500 Ethiopians 430 Eritreans 400 Lebanese 400 Iraqis 360 Haitians 350 Israelis 350 Argentinians 340 Malaysians 320 Serbs 300 Croatians 300 Colombians 300 Panamanians 250 Guatemalans 250 Jamaicans 240 Peruvians 235 Chileans 225 Somalis 200 Turks 200 Venezualans 200 Bolivians 160 Bulgarians 150 Brazilians 140 S. Africans 140 Cambodians 130 Ecuadorans 100 Jordanians 100 These are Post-Dispatch estimates based on census figures and discussions with demographers, ***immigrant***/refugee associations, resettlement agencies and government officials. The figures include only people from abroad, not descendants born here. Some nationality numbers, particularly from Europe, reflect an immigration in the immediate post-World War II years, rather than a continuing flow. Puerto Ricans, estimated at 1,500 here, are not included because they are U.S. citizens, but they face some of the linguistic and cultural adjustments of the other groups. The distriction among Lebanese, Palestinians and Jordanians can be arbitrary. Story by Philip Dine Photos by Jerry Naunheim Jr. Of the Post-Dispatch

Classification

Language: English

Subject: STUDENTS & STUDENT ***LIFE*** (64%); MIDDLE & JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOLS (64%); PRIMARY SCHOOLS (64%); MANUFACTURING FACILITIES (60%); IMMIGRATION (50%)

Industry: MIDDLE & JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOLS (64%); PRIMARY SCHOOLS (64%); MANUFACTURING FACILITIES (60%); CLINICS & OUTPATIENT SERVICES (50%)

Geographic: FLORIDA, USA (73%); TEXAS, USA (73%); CALIFORNIA, USA (53%)

Load-Date: May 27, 1995

End of Document