

D.C. Region's Immigrants Faring Better Than Others

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Body

The Washington area has the highest percentage of foreign-born residents who speak English well and the lowest immigrant poverty rate among the 10 U.S. metropolitan areas with the largest international populations, according to a study being released today.

The study, by the Brookings Institution, provides the most detailed sketch yet of this region's foreign-born population, using 2000 Census data to delve into English proficiency, country of origin, poverty levels and the neighborhoods where immigrants live.

The portrait that emerges is one of a large, rapidly growing foreign-born community that is starkly different from those in cities such as New York or Los Angeles. Here, the report finds, there are no sprawling immigrant ghettos; instead, most of the foreign-born live in moderate- or high-income neighborhoods. Nearly 80 percent speak English well. And 10.6 percent are officially poor, about half the immigrant poverty rate of metro areas such as New York and Houston.

Still, the report emphasizes, the flood of newcomers is producing costs as well as benefits. The sheer size of the immigrant population -- 832,000 -- means there is a large number of people who don't speak English well. The number of students enrolled in English-as-a-second-language classes doubled from 1993 to 2001, reaching 54,000, the report says.

And immigrants here are still more likely than U.S.-born residents to be needy: Only 6.8 percent of the native-born are classified as poor.

"Compared to other major immigrant metropolitan areas, Washington appears to be doing well, looking at these indicators. But there are local areas where some immigrants are struggling, and service providers are also struggling," said Audrey Singer, the demographer who did the report.

The Washington region now ranks seventh among U.S. metro areas in the size of its immigrant population, with one in six residents born in a foreign country -- compared with one in 22 residents three decades ago.

The local immigrant population is distinct for a number of reasons. With its international institutions, embassies, high-tech industry and universities, the region draws educated workers from around the world. Thirty-six percent of

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immigrants are from Asia and the Middle East, compared with 26 percent nationally; 39 percent are from Latin America and the Caribbean, below the national average of 52 percent.

Drew Dedrick, demographer for Montgomery County, noted that Washington attracts a different mix of immigrants than a border state.

"Our immigrants mostly arrive here by airplane," Dedrick said. "A lot of people come here because they can make a lot more money. They would be affluent where they were."

Although El Salvador is the top country of origin among the area's immigrants, it accounts for just 12.6 percent of the foreign-born, the report says. Ranking second and third are Korea and India.

Many Washington area immigrants are white-collar professionals: physicians, computer programmers, scientists working at the National Institutes of Health.

"The last time I looked, for Montgomery County, our immigrants had a higher percentage of PhDs than our native population," Dedrick said.

One of those PhDs is Grace Virtue. She left a journalism job in her native Jamaica in 1996 to study mass communications at Howard University. Virtue, 38, now is the university's executive communications manager and lives in Silver Spring. She stayed on because of the opportunities available, particularly for her two daughters, 10 and 12.

"The education my child gets in public school is an education I would have paid a lot of money for in Jamaica," she said.

The high rate of English proficiency among immigrants is explained in part by those with advanced education. In addition, many immigrants come from countries where English is widely spoken, such as India and the Philippines.

A further reason is the extraordinary diversity of Washington's immigrants, who come from more than 150 countries. Consider the case of Khem Bahadur Gurung, 37, a native of Nepal who lives in Tysons Corner. He arrived 20 years ago, to do housework for a diplomat, and now owns a small landscaping business.

"I feel I should know English if I live in this country," said Gurung, who slogged through three years of night school to learn the language.

He certainly needs it to function in his job and suburban neighborhood. His neighbors are from Laos and Vietnam, as well as the United States. One of his employees is Mexican. And about half of his customers are immigrants, including a large number of Indians living in McLean.

Though a minority of immigrants are poor and lack English proficiency, they still represent a challenge to governments, schools and health centers. And some jurisdictions face bigger hurdles than others.

More than one-quarter of the foreign-born in the more densely populated immigrant areas of Arlington, Alexandria and the District say they cannot speak English well or at all. Poverty rates vary across the region; in the District, 18 percent of immigrants are poor, the report says.

Although the census sought to count both legal and illegal immigrants, immigrant advocates say it missed some of those here without authorization. So figures for poverty rates and English proficiency could be worse than those tabulated.

Immigration accounted for nearly half of the Washington area's population increase of 700,000 in the 1990s, with the vast majority of newcomers settling in the suburbs.

The report did not include U.S.-born children of immigrants, who are U.S. citizens. They represent an additional 150,000 people, estimated Steven Camarota, director of research for the Center for Immigration Studies.

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"New immigration and births to immigrant women added about 500,000 people to the Washington metropolitan area in the last 10 years," said Camarota, whose group urges immigration cuts. "That has enormous implications, if we continue to do that . . . for lots of things people seem to care about -- like loss of open spaces, like crowding."

The study was underwritten by the Washington Area Partnership for Immigrants. One of the foundations that funds the group is the Meyer Foundation, established by a former Washington Post publisher.

Singer, the report's author, emphasized that it used data from the 2000 Census and thus missed whatever changes came from the recession and stepped-up immigration enforcement after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

Staff writer DVera Cohn and database editor Dan Keating contributed to this report.

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