

FOREIGN-BORN RESIDENTS IN U.S. AT HIGHEST LEVEL SINCE 1930 THEY MAKE UP MORE THAN 10% OF THE POPULATION, THE CENSUS BUREAU SAYS. SOME CREDIT THE ECONOMY.

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Body

Lured by plentiful jobs in a strong economy, the number of immigrants in the United States reached its highest level in decades last year, the U.S. Census Bureau estimated yesterday.

About 28.38 million people living in America, or more than 10 percent of the population, were born outside the country, according to the bureau's latest annual estimate. The last time the rate was so high was during the 1930 census, when 11.6 percent of the population had roots abroad.

"It's the economy, both a push and pull," said University of Michigan demographer William Frey, an expert on immigration. "Our economy is looking better to people from outside. . . . And the need for labor here is high at both the low-skilled and high-skilled end."

The number of foreign-born residents in the United States peaked at 14.8 percent during the industrialization period more than a century ago, in 1890, according to the bureau. Its lowest point was 4.7 percent in 1970.

The figures are estimates from the bureau's Current Population Survey, not from the 2000 census. They consist of estimates at the national and regional level, not for each state, county or city.

More detailed and reliable figures from the 2000 census will be released this year.

Demographers say immigration most likely has accounted for the biggest gains in population nationwide during the decade, reflected in the first set of 2000 census figures released last week. Those figures showed a national population of 281.4 million, up more than 13 percent from the last census.

Frey noted that last week's figures were bigger than initially projected, especially for traditional immigrant gateways like Florida and Texas.

"Perhaps the 2000 census will show even bigger gains than this," Frey said.

A decade ago, about 7.9 percent of the resident population - or 19.8 million - were people born outside the country. Foreign-born residents are both noncitizens and naturalized citizens.

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Pennsylvania's population has reached 12.28 million this year, up a slight 3.4 percent from the last census. New Jersey grew faster, hitting 8.41 million, up about 8.9 percent.

Pennsylvania's slow growth stems from a relatively small number of immigrants choosing to come to the state, particularly its major cities, according to several demographers.

Pennsylvania may be an exception in the region. The estimates released yesterday show that the Northeast and the West are the most likely home regions for foreign-born residents, the bureau said. The region with the most immigrants is the West, with 11.3 million, mostly Latino.

According to the estimates, foreign-born immigrants also had a slightly lower unemployment rate last year than the year before, 4.9 percent compared with 5.4 percent.

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