

Foreign-Born Faring Worse in D.C. Than in Suburbs

The Washington Post

June 19, 2003 Thursday, Final Edition

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Section: D.C. EXTRA; Pg. T03

Length: 692 words

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Body

Immigrants in the District are more likely to be poor and slightly less likely to be proficient in English, compared with other foreign-born residents in the region, according to a new report by the Brookings Institution.

The study found that 10.6 percent of the foreign-born population in the Washington metropolitan area meets the official definition of living in poverty, and nearly 79 percent speak English well, the report said.

But the city's figures are worse: Here, nearly 18 percent of immigrants are considered poor, and 76 percent are proficient in English, according to the report, which was released last week and draws on 2000 Census data.

Audrey Singer, a demographer who wrote the report, said it showed how immigration had brought both benefits and difficulties to Washington.

"Without more immigrants moving in, the District probably would have lost more people," she said, referring to the exodus of residents in recent decades.

However, she added, "this is a new and fairly demanding immigrant population, in the sense that many are coming from war-torn countries and have a lot of unmet needs."

Washington, like the rest of the region, experienced a surge in immigration in the 1990s. Newcomers were drawn by international institutions, the booming economy and a rapidly growing foreign community that welcomed them.

The District's immigrant population rose by 25 percent in the 1990s, to 73,561, the report noted. Overall, the city's population dropped 6 percent in the decade, according to the census figures.

The poverty rate for Washington immigrants is lower than the rate for the city's native-born citizens, which is about 20 percent, according to the data. But immigrants here are more likely to be poor than foreign-born residents in most suburban areas.

One possible reason: Just more than half of Washington's immigrants arrived in the 1990s and could still be settling in and learning English.

Overall, a greater share of Washington's population is from Latin America and the Caribbean: 50.4 percent, compared with 39 percent for the region.

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"We are getting a lot of Central Americans, from El Salvador in particular, a place ravaged by natural and political disasters," Singer said. "People are coming here with little or next to nothing."

Nearly 22 percent of the District's **foreign-born** population comes from El Salvador, nearly double the share they make up of regional immigrants.

Immigrant advocates at a panel discussion at Brookings emphasized that an unknown number of people were missed in the census count. Thus, figures on immigrant poverty and English proficiency could be somewhat **worse**.

One advocate, Eugenio Arene, executive director of the Council of Latino Agencies, noted that the **foreign-born** population had not won political power commensurate with its numbers. He urged officials to provide some way for immigrants who are noncitizens to vote.

"Until we have access to the structure of power in this region, we will not make these numbers count," he said.

Many Central American immigrants have stayed in the United States on temporary permits that do not provide an automatic path to citizenship.

Because the Brookings report was based on 2000 Census data, it does not reflect changes caused by the recession or the immigration crackdown that came after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

The study showed that the biggest concentration of immigrants was in the census tract encompassing Mount Pleasant, Columbia Heights, Pleasant Plains and Park View. There, nearly one in three residents was **foreign-born**. Nearly half of them (48.6 percent) were from El Salvador, followed by Vietnam (5.7 percent), Ethiopia (5.3 percent), and the Dominican Republic and Honduras (4.7 percent each).

But the city, like the region, has a remarkable diversity of immigrants. In the fourth-biggest immigrant area, the Dupont Circle tract, more than one in five residents is **foreign-born**, according to the report.

Within the Dupont area, the biggest countries of origin are: El Salvador (11.2 percent), the United Kingdom (5.8 percent), France (4.4 percent), Japan (3.4 percent) and Korea (3.3 percent).

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Publication-Type: Newspaper

Subject: IMMIGRATION (93%); RESEARCH REPORTS (90%); POPULATION & DEMOGRAPHICS (90%); CENSUS (89%); CITIES (89%); POOR POPULATION (89%); POVERTY & HOMELESSNESS (89%); POPULATION SIZE (89%); POPULATION DECLINE (79%); DEMOGRAPHIC GROUPS (78%); POPULATION GROWTH (77%); POVERTY RATES (77%); CITY LIFE (76%); **SUBURBS** (73%); RESEARCH INSTITUTES (72%); POLITICS (60%)

Organization: BROOKINGS INSTITUTION (58%)

Geographic: EL SALVADOR (92%); CARIBBEAN ISLANDS (79%); LATIN AMERICA (79%); CENTRAL AMERICA (74%)

Load-Date: June 19, 2003

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