Immigrants: More Boon Than Burden; Woven Into Economic Fabric Is Strength of Foreign Threads

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Body

Second of three articles

They are physicians and uninsured patients. They are bilingual teachers and teenagers struggling to learn English. They are business owners paying thousands a week in payroll taxes and grandmothers living on Social Security.

Immigrants are having an enormous effect on ***economic*** and civic life in the Washington region, where their numbers have swelled by ***more*** than 350,000 since the early 1980s. In schools and work places, at community health clinics and social service offices, their increasing presence in the District and Washington suburbs affects nearly every aspect of private industry and government -- although not necessarily in ways their native-born neighbors might realize.

Whether this surge in immigration adds up to a ***boon*** or a ***burden*** for local jurisdictions and the area's ***economy*** is difficult to assess, however. No systematic survey has documented what the Washington region's ***immigrants*** provide in taxes and ***economic*** growth vs. what they cost in services. Still, the best available evidence suggests that area ***immigrants*** -- who now account for one in six residents -- make greater contributions and impose fewer costs than those in many other urban centers that have large ***foreign***-born populations.

The most comprehensive immigration study yet, released last year by the National Research Council, found that immigration provides an overall modest net gain for the United States -- roughly $ 7 billion to $ 10 billion a year in an $ 8 trillion ***economy***. Some local governments feel the financial strain in states with a large number of ***immigrants***, notably California, the report said, because those households are ***more*** likely to have school-age children, depend on social services and pay lower taxes than native residents.

But the Washington region, besides having fewer ***immigrants***, has an above-average proportion who arrived with skills, education or jobs already waiting for them, according to U.S. Census Bureau and Immigration and Naturalization Service data. This is probably a key reason why -- even as Congress and D.C.-based think tanks wage a national debate on the pros and cons of immigration -- the anti-immigration backlash in California and Texas has failed to take hold here.

In the Wheaton-Silver Spring-Aspen Hill Zip code of 20906, the region's most ethnically diverse, ***more*** than one in five of the 58,000 residents is ***foreign***-born. In South Arlington's Zip code 22204, which has the highest concentration of ***immigrants*** in the area, 28 percent of the 43,000 residents is ***foreign***-born.

Still, greater Washington does not appear to be a place where low-paid, native-born employees have been pushed out by a new, ***foreign***-born work force, says William Frey, a University of Michigan demographer who has studied metropolitan areas with high immigration.

In addition, illegal ***immigrants***, who are ***more*** likely to be uneducated and poor, make up only 11 percent of the ***foreign***-born population in Maryland and 15 percent in Virginia -- as compared with 25 percent in California, according to government estimates. The percentage in the District is unknown but could be substantially higher.

As ***immigrants*** have become part of the region's ***economic fabric***, their purchasing power has grown steadily. In communities such as Seven Corners in Falls Church, Adams-Morgan in the District and Wheaton in Montgomery County, hundreds of ***immigrant***-owned or inspired shops and services -- from international couriers and fast-food chicken to auto body shops and ethnic restaurants -- have opened in the last decade.

"If you really want to look at the ***immigrant*** impact, look at all the small business starts in a place like Wheaton -- the ethnic markets, the travel agencies, the laundries," said Ana Sol Gutierrez, a member of the Montgomery County school board who was born in El Salvador and whose father was once its finance minister.

In Arlington, Angel Juarez Valle, who arrived penniless from Central America in 1980 and today co-owns Restaurante Abi, a popular Salvadoran restaurant, boasts: "I was the first one to introduce pupusas to Virginia. Now people can't get enough of them."

But ***immigrants*** are buying much ***more*** than $ 5 lunch specials. The region's Hispanic community is the fifth largest Latino enclave in the nation -- and one of the four wealthiest, according to private marketing surveys. ***More*** and ***more***, mainstream insurance companies, car dealerships and other firms are discovering and courting this lucrative market.

A Nissan dealer in Tysons Corner takes out regular ads in local Spanish-language newspapers, featuring two Latino salesmen. A Giant store in Arlington just added an entire aisle of popular Latino foods, from black beans to guava paste. A chiropractor says 90 percent of the 850 patients at his four suburban Maryland clinics are Latinos, who often turn to chiropractors because they are cheaper than physicians.

The Hispanic Yellow Pages, a private guide published in Alexandria, carries ads for U.S.- and ***foreign***-born dentists and doctors as well as national real estate firms, airlines and banks.

"I'd say 98 percent of my clients are Hispanic," said Joel Atlas Skirble, a U.S.-born lawyer who started out in Adams-Morgan in 1974 and now does most of his business in the Virginia and Maryland suburbs. He is widely known for his "I speak your language" pitch on Spanish-language television. In truth, he doesn't, but it hardly matters: His firm has 19 Spanish-speaking employees.

Classroom Challenges

The region's public schools have experienced the most dramatic and visible impact of immigration. Ten years ago, there were about 25,000 students in the District and surrounding suburbs whose first language was not English, and many schools had no ***immigrant*** students. Today, there are ***more*** than 75,000 such youngsters, and hundreds of classrooms where ***more*** than 40 percent of the students are ***immigrants*** or the children of ***immigrants***.

Many of these students have made notable contributions to schools, becoming class leaders and winning college scholarships. At Annandale High School, the top-performing seniors last year included children of ***immigrants*** from India, South Korea, the Philippines and Costa Rica, all of whom say they and the school benefited from the diversity.

"The American side keeps us bonded together; the other side contributes flair and spark," said Jaspreet Singh, 19, an Indian ***immigrant*** who is now a freshman at the University of Michigan.

But the continuing influx, especially rural refugees from underdeveloped or war-torn countries, has placed costly demands on school systems to hire ***more*** bilingual aides and English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers.

In Arlington, the budget for ESL programs has risen from $ 3.8 million in 1988 to an expected $ 9.1 million next year. In Fairfax County, the cost of ESL services jumped from $ 7 million in 1989 to $ 24 million this year. In Montgomery County, it has increased from $ 5.3 million in 1988 to $ 15.2 million.

At Weller Road Elementary School in Wheaton, located in an area that has the region's most diverse ***immigrant*** population, teachers use hand gestures to communicate with students when language fails. They also schedule 7 a.m. appointments with ***immigrant*** parents, many of whom work two or three jobs. The school has received government grants that help keep classes smaller, buy bilingual software and fund an after-school homework club.

At Patrick Henry Elementary School in Arlington, bilingual staff members visit the homes of ***foreign***-born students who fall behind. After school, a program called "Arroz con Leche," or Rice with Milk, lets youngsters and their mothers practice reading in both English and Spanish.

"I love this school," said Belkis Gallo, 34, a Salvadoran mother and nighttime office cleaner who was reading, very slowly, to her 7-year-old son about bats and penguins. "Both me and my son are learning a lot here."

But there have been complaints that too much attention is being given to ***immigrant*** students at the expense of their American-born classmates.

The special effort to help ***immigrants*** "has not come without a great price tag," said Conchita Mitchell, executive director of the Columbia Pike Revitalization Organization. "There is some worry that the balance is tipping."

Francisco Mallet, who directs the ESL program in Fairfax County, concedes that "working with 10 different languages at once can make teachers [initially] scratch their heads in frustration." But he and school officials defend the investment.

"***Immigrants*** bring us a great richness," said Donald Clausen, principal at Annandale High, where ***more*** than half the 2,100 students are ***immigrants*** or the children of ***immigrants***. "We have a reputation as a diverse school, and some [parents] want to avoid it. I say that's their loss."

By way of example, Ghassam Tarazi, the Lebanese American principal at Ellen Glasgow Middle School in Annandale, recounts walking through the cafeteria and hearing a Muslim student being asked why he wasn't eating lunch.

"He was explaining what Ramadan was," said Tarazi, referring to the Muslim observance that requires fasting. "There was education going on right there." Tarazi's school has 1,000 students from 42 countries, "and as an ***immigrant***, I have a vested interest in meeting the needs of the child."

Montgomery County school board member Gutierrez said it's "a myth" that ***immigrants*** are a drain on the system. About 90 percent of the budget is funded locally based on real estate and income taxes, she said, and all people pay their fair share "whether they come from Oklahoma or El Salvador."

Whatever the expenditure, and despite intensive efforts, alarming numbers of young ***immigrants*** "are right at the edge," said Sam Miranda, an English teacher at Bell Multicultural High School in the District. The parents often work at night and don't speak English well, so "the kids start falling behind, and then they are ***more*** susceptible to dropping out and joining gangs."

For Those in Need

Across the region, social services, health agencies and police departments are also feeling the effect of rising immigration. Few localities track the use of such services by nationality, and many agencies make a point of not asking an ***immigrant***'s status unless, as with Medicaid applications, federal law requires it. Still, scattered statistics and ample anecdotal evidence suggest that ***foreign***-born newcomers and their children draw heavily on these public programs.

Some area health workers have seen an increase in tuberculosis cases among Hispanic and Southeast Asian ***immigrants***. In Arlington, 60 percent of the pregnant girls attending alternative high school classes are Latino. In Montgomery County, officials estimates that 30 percent to 40 percent of maternity clinic patients are ***foreign***-born.

"The population growth in our county in the last 10 years has been largely in an ***immigrant*** population, so obviously a lot of these folks are coming to us for services," said Charles L. Short, director of Montgomery's Family Services.

In the mid-1980s, the Immigration Reform and Control Act enabled thousands of illegal ***immigrants*** to legalize their status. But in 1996, concerned that ***immigrants*** were drawing too heavily on federal programs, Congress cut benefits -- chiefly food stamps and Supplemental Security Income -- for many noncitizens.

Food stamps were later restored for some ***immigrants***, specifically any elderly, disabled or children who were in the country before the law took effect. But the restrictions led to a rush of people, locally and nationally, applying for citizenship. And local service agencies report that hardship cases have increased because benefits are ***more*** difficult to get.

"We're seeing people in ***more*** dire conditions of poverty -- ***more*** overcrowding, ***more*** difficulty putting food on the table," said Leslye Orloff, of Ayuda, a private agency in the District that helps mostly Central Americans.

Ayuda is one of a network of nonprofit agencies and churches trying to fill the gap in ***immigrant*** services because many local public agencies, especially those in the District, haven't been able to handle the demand. These organizations provide everything from nighttime English classes to well-baby checkups.

But despite a common public perception that ***immigrants*** receive excessive public benefits, few ***foreign***-born in the region receive government cash assistance -- and most who do are new refugees or senior citizens. Illegal ***immigrants*** are not allowed to receive welfare or food stamps.

Of nearly 238,000 people in Maryland, Virginia and the District who receive Supplemental Social Income, a monthly grant for the poor who are elderly or disabled, only about 13,000 are noncitizens. Virginia's Medicaid program spent an estimated $ 40 million on health care for noncitizens in 1997, but most of that money went to help U.S.-born children or for one-time emergencies.

The National Research Council's immigration report challenged assertions by anti-***immigrant*** groups that ***immigrants*** raise crime rates, saying this is only a problem in some border areas. Still, the arrival of low-income ***immigrants*** in Mount Pleasant in the District, Culmore in Fairfax County and Langley Park in Prince George's County has spawned numerous Latino and Asian youth gangs whose members, police say, sell drugs, steal, beat one another up in turf fights, and force sex on young female members.

"Most often, the kids I deal with on probation were born outside the U.S.," said Gerald Jackson, Fairfax County's chief juvenile probation officer. "We tend to see war refugees" from Central America or Southeast Asia. "The country makes no difference; we see trauma from war zones."

It's clear that immigration has caused demographic changes, but "xenophobia is discouraging," Jackson said. "One man stood up at a meeting and said, 'Why don't we shoot all these illegals?' You almost have to change attitudes one person at a time."

Besides, he added, the problems are not as bad as they were five years ago. "Ethnic leaders are emerging -- they don't want to be victimized either," he said. Young ***immigrants*** trying to get out of street life have enrolled in a new tattoo-removal program. And, according to Fairfax County Sheriff Carl R. Peed, the number of ***foreign***-born in county detention has decreased from 14 percent to 10 percent of the overall prisoner population.

In the District, the Latin American Youth Center has set up a drop-in program to keep teenagers off the streets and out of trouble. And in Arlington, police have formed a Spanish-speaking task force that removes gang graffiti, questions teenagers loitering in parks and handles calls from worried Latino parents.

Usually, however, the behavior that irks some American-born neighbors of ***immigrants*** is not criminal, but cultural: poor ***immigrants*** sharing housing and parking a bunch of old cars on the street; Latino women turning their kitchens into informal restaurants or selling homemade food in the neighborhood.

"In some cultures, you always have your mother-in-law . . . and other extended family members living with you," said Kim Ouan Cook, a Vietnamese social worker in Falls Church. "Here, people complain that their property values are being destroyed."

Fairfax County Supervisor Penelope A. Gross (D-Mason) is dismayed when she hears hostile comments about ***immigrants***. "Some of them can only see it as foreigners coming in and taking over," she said. "I tell them, these are your neighbors and mine, and they all want clean water, safe schools, and decent wages -- the same things you do."

Jorge Mora, an ***immigrant*** from Chile and a Montgomery County homeowner since 1967, agrees. He and his wife, he said, "live life like anybody else -- cut the grass, keep it short, go to the beach."

Numbers, Not Clout

For all their increased population and ***economic*** influence, the region's ***immigrants*** are still just a blip on the local political landscape. In most communities, only a handful regularly participate in civic activities, and area ethnic leaders don't see that changing any time soon.

"To participate in public life, you have to have a certain amount of leisure time," said Charles Cervantes, a Mexican American lawyer and former Arlington School Board member. "You have to master English, learn complicated issues and not be afraid to speak out. For most ***immigrants*** in the first generation, those barriers are just too high."

In the Maryland suburbs, Del. Kumar Barve (D), an ***immigrant*** from India, heads Montgomery County's delegation to the state legislature. Prince George's County Del. David M. Valderrama (D) is from the Philippines. But elsewhere in the region, no ***immigrant*** has won elective office higher than the school board.

Latinos, by far the largest ***immigrant*** group in Washington and its suburbs, "are still in Pampers" politically, said Saul Solorzano, who directs the Central American Resource Center in the District. The city's Hispanics "are seen as a bunch of undocumenteds. [We] haven't been included in policy or resources."

Keith Haller, president of Potomac Survey Research, which tracks political trends in the region, said ***immigrant*** and native-born Asian Americans have been ***more*** aggressive in registering to vote, raising money and organizing. The area's Hispanics are "just on the cusp of breaking through."

As ***more*** ***foreign***-born become eligible to vote, research suggests Republicans will likely attract affluent ***immigrants*** and Democrats will draw support from poorer ***immigrants*** hoping to preserve social services.

Immigrant activists successfully beat back efforts several years ago in the Virginia General Assembly to require that illegal ***immigrants*** in public schools be identified so that they could be deported or forced to repay the government.

"If the hostility level grows, or [***immigrants***] want a particular change in a law," they will organize themselves, said Toni-Michelle Travis, a government professor at George Mason University. "Then the impact will come."

Arlington community activist Ralph Perrino cites his Italian mother, who took her time learning English and never attended PTA meetings, in predicting that it will take another generation for newer ***immigrants*** to raise their profile. "It's the same whether you're Italian, Greek or Vietnamese," the former PTA president said. "The first and second generations feel uneasy approaching institutions in a different culture. . . . It takes time for people to work their way into it."

Foreign-born in Virginia, Maryland

Virginia has 372,000 ***immigrants***. Maryland has 412,000. ***More*** than two-thirds live in the Washington suburbs.*

VIRGINIA MARYLAND

Race/ethnicity

Black 8% 27%

White 58% 54%

Asian/Pacific islander 34% 19%

Hispanic (any race) 24% 24%

Education (people 25 and older)

Not a high school graduate 15% 19%

High school graduate/some college 39% 35%

Bachelor's degree 32% 22%

Graduate/professional degree 15% 23%

Income (1995)

Under 16 or without income 18% 20%

$ 1 to $ 19,999 50% 42%

$ 20,000 to $ 49,999 24% 27%

$ 50,000 or ***more*** 9% 10%

Owner/renter Rent 41% 55%

Own 59% 45%

Poverty Status Above poverty line 84% 90%

Below poverty line 16% 10%

*1996 statistics unless otherwise noted.

ABOUT THIS SERIES

Immigration is having a profound impact on Washington and its suburbs. The number of ***foreign***-born in the region -- up from one in 22 residents in 1970 to one in six now -- has dramatically altered dozens of neighborhoods, changed the ***economic*** ***fabric*** of the metropolitan area and imposed new service demands on governments.

SUNDAY: A computer-assisted analysis of immigration and population data provides a detailed look at the lives of ***immigrants*** in the region, including where they have come from and where they have settled.

TODAY: ***Immigrants*** here appear to have had a ***more*** positive overall impact -- with less of a backlash -- than in many other urban areas with large ***foreign***-born populations.

TUESDAY: ***Immigrant*** women in metropolitan Washington face unique challenges as they adapt to a new country and try to preserve the cultural customs and traditions of their homelands.

Graphic

Chart, The Washington Post; Photo, BILL O'LEARY, Services: Ronny Parada cuts Nelson Flores' hair at Parada's shop in Arlington. Schools: Ryan Khlok, left, and Reginald Hunter play at Patrick Henry Elementary in Arlington. In Arlington, the Andrade family operates a pupusa wagon along Columbia Pike. Maria Andrade and her granddaughter Jacqueline, 6, lean on their van as a customer departs with his lunch. Nora Vallejos relies on 10-year-old son Edwin for help in filling out a form at a free clinic set up at an Arlington school. A Glenmont Realtor, above, has signs listing his name as Joe Leon and Jose Leon. And Angel Juarez Valle has been successful selling Salvadoran food at Restaurante Abi in Arlington. Children of different hues line up at the end of recess at Patrick Henry Elementary School in South Arlington. The county expects to spend $9.1 million this school year on programs in English as a second language. On Columbia Pike in Arlington, shops carry signs in Vietnamese, right, and Spanish, rear. ***Immigrant*** population growth is reflected in many businesses.

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Subject: IMMIGRATION (93%); US FEDERAL GOVERNMENT (89%); MULTILINGUALISM (78%); CITIZENSHIP (78%); COMMUNITY HEALTH PROGRAMS (78%); EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTION EMPLOYEES (78%); BILINGUAL EDUCATION (78%); TAXES & TAXATION (78%); RACE & ETHNICITY (77%); SOCIAL SECURITY (77%); REGIONAL & LOCAL GOVERNMENTS (77%); LABOR FORCE (77%); ***ECONOMIC*** CONDITIONS (77%); CENSUS (73%); RESEARCH INSTITUTES (73%); ***ECONOMIC*** DEVELOPMENT (73%); ILLEGAL ***IMMIGRANTS*** (72%); TAX RELIEF (72%); DEMOGRAPHIC GROUPS (72%); CORPORATE TAX (72%); ***ECONOMIC*** GROWTH (72%); POPULATION & DEMOGRAPHICS (71%); CITIES (66%); POLITICAL DEBATES (61%)

Company: NATIONAL RESEARCH COUNCIL (55%); NATIONAL RESEARCH COUNCIL (55%)

Organization: NATIONAL RESEARCH COUNCIL (55%); NATIONAL RESEARCH COUNCIL (55%); NATIONAL RESEARCH COUNCIL (55%); NATIONAL RESEARCH COUNCIL (55%)

Industry: UNDERINSURED & UNINSURED PATIENTS (73%); CLINICS & OUTPATIENT SERVICES (56%)

Geographic: CALIFORNIA, USA (92%); MICHIGAN, USA (79%); TEXAS, USA (79%); DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA, USA (79%); UNITED STATES (95%)

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