

IMMIGRANT DIVERSITY GROWS IN MINNESOTA

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Body

Minnesota attracted more immigrants from a wider range of countries during most of the 1990s than in past decades, according to a Minnesota Planning report.

Minnesota's jobs, educational opportunities and reputation as a safe haven for refugees - as well as substantial populations of recent immigrants already living in Minnesota - attracted people from other lands, according to the report released this week by the state planning agency.

About 40 percent of the immigrants were refugees, a higher percentage than in any other state, the report said.

Immigrants from the former Soviet Union, Somalia, Bosnia, Mexico, India and China topped the list of newcomers.

From 1990 to 1998, 67,777 immigrants came to Minnesota, according to the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service. Nationwide, there were 9,141,551 immigrants in that time span.

The report, "Immigrants in Minnesota: An Increasingly Diverse Population," captures many of the changes that the state's schools, workplaces and communities have witnessed in recent years.

African immigrants did not come to Minnesota in large numbers during the 1980s, but that changed during the 1990s. In 1997, Somalis were the largest group of Minnesota immigrants with 1,008 arriving that year.

The number of Russians immigrating to Minnesota increased sharply after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. In 1998, the 651 immigrants from the former Soviet republics constituted the biggest group of Minnesota immigrants, followed by Somalis with 582. Years of civil war have caused many Somalis to flee to the United States.

All but six Minnesota counties have some schoolchildren who do not speak English at home. Asian languages make up the largest language group spoken by students, with Hmong speakers accounting for two-thirds of those students, the report said.

Hospitals are also facing a widening language barrier.

"It's changed the demographics of the population we see," said Hennepin County Medical Center administrator Jeff Spartz.

Of the 400,000 patients served last year, 102,000 required interpreters. That represented a 25 percent increase in such services over 1999, Spartz said.

While Minnesota outstrips its Upper Midwestern neighbors when it comes to attracting immigrants, the state's numbers pale in comparison to such large coastal states as California, New York, Texas and Florida.

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"We're not the focal point, but we do receive a rather interesting mix of people," said state demographer Tom Gillaspy. "There are people who believe we're the center of change because it seems to be very large, when in fact most of the change is on the coasts."

While he can't predict what Minnesota's family portrait will look like 10 or 20 years from now, Gillaspy said one thing is for sure: It'll be different from today.

"Our population will be much more diverse, we believe, in large part because we're starting from a point of relatively less racial and ethnic diversity than the rest of the country," he said.

ONLINE Visit www.mnplan.state.mn.us to see the report.

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