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Welcoming New Americans: Community Action Agencies Open Their Doors to Immigrants

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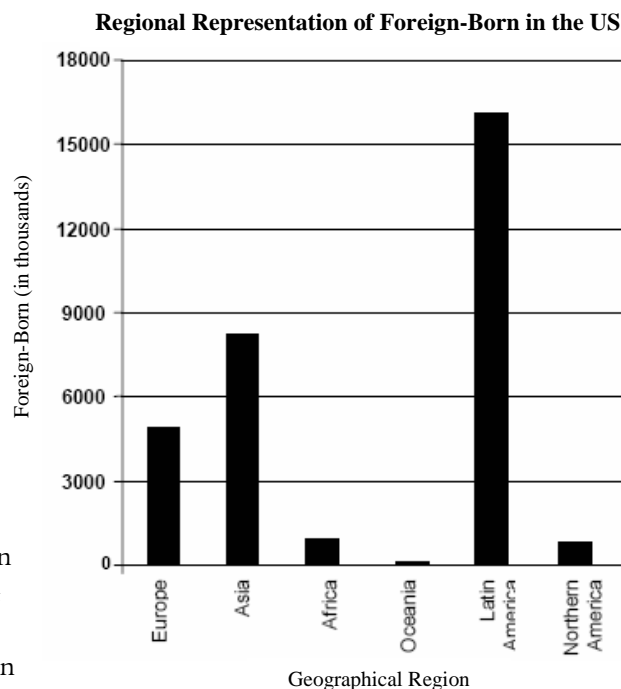
Overview

The issue of immigration is one that often sparks political debate and passionate emotion. It is an overlying issue that raises complex questions about the future of United States citizens and the nation's obligations to the oppressed and downtrodden from other countries. Those who do enter the United States face many challenges from finding employment and maintaining immigrant status to preparing for citizenship and maintaining family well-being. This brief attempts to provide a thorough and objective look at these and other issues facing immigrants in this country and efforts to assist them in participating in American economy and society.

As stated by U.S. immigration law, an immigrant is one who is admitted into the United States as a permanent resident. By removing favoritism towards Europeans in the 1965 Immigration Reform Act, individuals are now admitted into the United States based upon skills or professions rather than nationality. The resulting changes in immigration policy have led to increases of immigrants from Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean. Today's immigrants are generally non-white, non-western, non-English speaking transnationals who identify with more than one nationality.

Introduction

In 2003, the number of immigrants admitted into the U.S. for permanent residence was 705,827, a 34% decrease in comparison to the 1,063,732 immigrants admitted in 2002.¹ According to a report from the U.S. Census in March 2003, the foreign-born population of the U.S. totaled 33.5 million people, accounting for 11.7% of the total population. Among these 33.5 million people, 53.3% are of Latin American decent, 25% from Asia, 13.7% from Europe, and 8% from other regions. Foreign-born individuals from Central America, including Mexico, are represented two-thirds more than those from Latin America, and overall comprise one-third of the total foreign-born. Geographically, the foreign-born population resides across the country, with 11.3% in the mid-west; 22.2% in the northeast; 29.2% in the south; and 37.3% in the west.²



Source: US Census, 2004

In 2003, 80.1% of the foreign-born were working adults between the ages of 18 and 64. Among the combined population of the foreign-born in 2003, 13.6% entered the United States since 2000, 36.6% in the 1990s, 24% in the 1980s, and 13.7% in the 1970s. The remaining 12.2% arrived before the 1970s, of which 80.9% gained citizenship by 2003. Almost 70% who arrived in the 1970s gained citizenship, and 43.5% who arrived in the 1980s gained citizenship. Of those who arrived in the 1990s and later, only 14.7% were able to gain citizenship.³

Immigrant Characteristics

Statistics on Foreign-Born Households

25% of households consist of 5 or more people

67.2% of those ages 25 and older have graduated from high school compared to 87.5% of the native population

23.3% are more likely to be service workers than natives

24.6% of households had incomes less than \$20,000 in 2003

16.6% of households were living below the poverty level, compared to 11.5% among the native population in 2002

7.5% of those in the civilian workforce were unemployed compared to only 6.2% of the natives in 2003

80.1% are between the ages of 18 and 64 as of 2003

Source:

<http://www.census.gov/prod/2004pubs/p20-551.pdf>

Results of Immigration

With the increasing amounts of immigrants and a time-consuming process for citizenship, immigrants are faced with the lengthy processes of waiting five years to upgrade their status in the United States to naturalized or legal immigrants. Together, legal and illegal immigrants make up an estimated 11.5 percent of the total population.⁴ Already at this 70 year high, projections by the U.S. Census indicate that the immigrant population could amount to 14.8% by the close of the decade. The most significant increase as an effect of immigration is the addition of 750,000 births by immigrant women, accounting for two-thirds of the population growth.⁵ The increasing diversity in the composition of the population brings forth new issues, particularly regarding social services and employment. While there is no direct impact of immigration on the national economy, effects may be felt at the local levels. With so many immigrant households falling at or below poverty levels (see box to the left), social service conduits, such as Community Action Agencies (CAAs), are identifying immigrants' needs and offering services to accommodate them.

Characteristics of the immigrants are quite similar to other Community Action participants. Despite the similarities, immigrants arriving in the past decade receive public assistance at lower rates than the native population.⁶ The similarities include lower levels of education and limited employment opportunities due to low-paying employment which often places their households at or below the poverty threshold. Though immigration reflects a 21% increase in adults without a high school degree, it does attribute to a 5% increase in the overall US work supply.⁷

Low-paying employment results in many social inequities for those immigrant-headed households, similar to those experienced by the native population. Overall, one-third of immigrants do not have health insurance. That rate is 2.5 times higher than the rate of natives lacking health insurance. Of those immigrants arriving after 1989 and their children, 7.8 million (95% of population increase) were uninsured. Further, the proportion of immigrant-headed households using at least one major welfare program is 24.5% compared to 16.3% for native households.⁸

In addition to the number of households in poverty, the poverty rate for immigrants' United States-born children is two-thirds higher than the children of natives. Immigration increases have also contributed to national increases in public school enrollment over the past 20 years. In 2002, close to 10 million school-age children were from immigrant families residing in the U.S.

Responses to Immigration

The growing needs of the immigrant population in the U.S. have been identified by all levels of government and community based organizations that administer social services, including Community Action Agencies (CAAs).

In 1996, the federal government acknowledged these needs in identifying immigrant provisions in the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA). The legislation prescribed new eligibility requirements for foreign-born individuals to receive public assistance. Further, the legislation denied eligibility to certain types of non-citizens and those who arrived after its passage. The major tenants of the legislation include: removal of non-citizens arriving before August 22, 1996 from SSI and food stamps within a year's time; prohibition of receipt of most types of public assistance until citizenship is reached for those entering after August 22, 1996, and consideration of sponsors' eligible income and assets as part of immigrants' applications for public assistance, which may last up to 10 years.

Later, on April 1, 2003, legal immigrants became eligible again for Food Stamps as a result of the Food Stamp Reauthorization Act passed in 2002. The act identified that those "qualified" legal immigrants who have been in the U.S. for five years or more no longer face a citizenship requirement. The new legislation also repealed the standards set forth by the 1996 PRWORA legislation.

At the state level, actions were taken to expedite services to those immigrant populations in need of social services. For example, the State of California, through the Department of Community Services and Development (CSD), under the Health and Human Services Agency, administers state and federal funded programs for low-income residents. One of the programs administered is the Naturalization Services Programs (NSP), funded by \$1.425 million in State General Funds. CSD also solicits applications from private, nonprofit organizations and local governments to assist legal permanent residents in obtaining citizenship by providing free naturalization services.

Responses from Community Action Agencies

Other specialized programs are taking place in states across the country. As in California, states allocate funds to CAAs to respond to the growing needs of low-income populations, including some immigrant populations. In some instances the CAA themselves identify the needs and respond in a traditional grass-roots manner. Below are some exemplary programs operated by CAAs in working with immigrant populations in the U.S.

Colorado

Boulder County Community Action Programs (CAP) responds to the needs of low-income residents and disenfranchised communities to create opportunity for self-determination through service delivery. In responding to the community's needs, CAP has identified a variety of collaborative projects aimed at advocating for newly arrived immigrants living and working in Boulder County. These projects include citizenship classes, publication of a resource directory, and creation of the St. Vrain Valley Latino Coalition.

Boulder County CAP, working with a number of area human service agencies, created an informal handbook for immigrants entitled *"Finding Your Way in the USA, a bilingual roadmap for immigrants and immigrant advocates in Boulder County."* The handbook provides information about resources, services and legal rights for immigrants. The handbooks are sold by Boulder County CAP at a minimal charge. To date, the Boulder County CAP has distributed over 3,000 handbooks. Along with the handbook, Boulder County CAP assists citizenship classes at two locations within the county to prepare adults taking the citizenship test.

CAP also actively works with the St. Vrain Valley Latino Coalition, an organization aimed at improving the health and well-being of low-income and underserved Latinos, with an emphasis on migrants and immigrants. Through their goal-oriented advocacy, interagency coordination and collaboration, the Coalition has actively improved health and well-being by addressing housing, legal issues, education, safety, human rights, physical and mental health, nutrition, and all basic needs.

Iowa

Since 2002, Community Opportunities, Inc. in Iowa has operated the Immigrant Advocacy Program to assist the growing population of immigrants. The program staff members assist in working to help immigrants sort through the legal system's requirements regarding paperwork and forms and assist immigrants with answers to questions about their immigration status and how the immigration system works. The office in Dallas County is a safe place for all immigrants to obtain assistance and information.

The Center offers affordable services to immigrants to assist in the processes of immigration and naturalization and to help individuals understand their legal rights. Program staff can refer clients to private attorneys if deportation or criminal issues are involved. Translation services are provided by staff or through the Iowa Division of Human Rights for languages or dialects not spoken amongst staff. Clients are also offered access to notary services at the agency for assistance in completing immigration forms for a nominal charge. Community Opportunities, Inc. also holds citizenship preparation classes to review citizenship test questions and to provide English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction.

Program staff members at Community Opportunities, Inc. partake in basic and advanced training to gain the necessary knowledge and understanding of immigration laws and requirements. The staff is familiarized with a manual, *Immigration and Nationality Laws*, by Aleinikoff, Martin and Motomura published by the West Group and used frequently as a reference. Similarly, resources are accessed through the Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services, including *A Guide to Naturalization* and all other immigration related forms.

The services offered by Community Opportunities, Inc. are crucial to the community especially since the closest immigration office is in Omaha, Nebraska. To date, the program has served over 200 clients. The program is staffed by 1.75 agency positions and funded through United Way of Central Iowa, donations and fees for services. Community Opportunities, Inc. has received formal recognition as an Immigrant Assistance Organization and the staff received partial accreditation for completion of immigration advocacy training. In addition, the program has gained national attention and has been visited by diplomats from Poland, Russia and Japan.

Massachusetts

The Franklin Community Action Corporation, located in Greenfield, MA, is the CAA serving 26 rural towns in Franklin County. Over the last 10 years, Franklin County has become more racially and ethnically diverse with increases in African American, Asian and Hispanic populations. There has also been a sizable influx of immigrants from the former Soviet Union.

To better serve their recent immigrant clients, FCAC formed a Diversity Committee to identify training needs and management issues related to diversity. Each year, half of the one-day in-service training day focuses on diversity issues.

FCAC recently received a CSBG Special Projects award to address emerging diversity issues. Components of this project include numerous diversity related issues including a workshop series for recent immigrants on topics of

their choosing. Additionally, FCAC received a Community Food and Nutrition Program (CFNP) award to fund improving the accessibility of the food pantry to minority/immigrant populations. Specific improvements include translating newsletters and fliers into the appropriate languages. FCAC also works to ensure its food pantry has culturally appropriate foods available.

Earlier this year, FCAC hosted their fifth regional conference on rural poverty and social change. This year's conference was entitled "Cultivating Hope, Harvesting Action: Changing Faces of Rural Poverty." The conference addressed issues on new Americans in the community and sessions included topics such as "From an African Village to America," "Welcome to Paradise?", and "Reaching Out to Newcomers."

The staff at FCAC are making agency wide effort to address the needs of immigrants by working in partnership with several other local agencies such as the Center for New Americans and the Massachusetts Immigrant and Refugee Advocacy Coalition. FCAC is also a part of the Language Access Network, a collaborative of Franklin County citizens and agencies interested in improving and expanding resources for people with Limited English Proficiency (LEP).

California

The Community Action Board of Santa Cruz County, Inc. houses the Santa Cruz County Immigration Project (SCCIP). Services offered by SCCIP include immigration legal services for naturalization, appeals and waivers, as well as other information, referrals, community advocacy, and education.

To date, the program has assisted over 6,000 low-income persons with immigration legal services. Of those individuals, 681 people received assistance with the citizenship process while 164 individuals submitted completed applications. Further, 3,423 legal residents received non-citizenship immigration assistance such as resident status renewals and over 650 residents attended 28 SCCIP workshops on a variety of immigration issues. SCCIP also coordinates bimonthly field office hours by U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services agents at the SCCIP office in Watsonville and on average serve over 120 people per session.

The Project is funded by CSBG, County of Santa Cruz, Cities of Santa Cruz and Watsonville and other private grants and donations.

Delaware

First State Community Action Agency (CAA) in Delaware administers two programs targeted to support new immigrants in the community.

First State CAA operates the La Casita Learning Center which provides an after-school tutorial program for about 70 Hispanic elementary school children of immigrants during the school year, and over 50 Hispanic children during the summer in Georgetown, Delaware. The summer program includes educational field trips, tutoring, and school supplies. Funding for the tutors and supplies for the program are provided through a grant from MBNA, grants from a private individual and Cape Henlopen School District. The oversight and operating costs for the building that houses the program are supported by CSBG funds.

First State CAA also operates La Casita Outreach Center in Georgetown, DE, which provides life skills assistance to Hispanic immigrants. The program is staffed by two individuals, and the operating costs for their separate building are financially supported by CSBG. The Outreach Center has served over 3,335 clients, and has successfully met the needs of 3,055 of them.

Another community based organization in Georgetown, La Esperanza, has received CSBG discretionary funds since 2000 to provide family development outreach services, including translation and access to health care, to mainly Hispanic immigrants, the majority of whom (68%) work in Delaware's poultry plants. Last year, they served 715 new and 176 existing immigrants. The majority of those clients served are from Guatemala (56%); Mexico (18%); El Salvador; Honduras, and Nicaragua (16%).

New Hampshire

Southern New Hampshire Services, Inc., (SNHS) the CAA serving Hillsborough, New Hampshire, runs a Multi-Cultural Services Program offering numerous services to Hispanic and immigrant communities. Between 1990 and 2000, the Hispanic population in Manchester grew by 133%, to 5,000 individuals. The Manchester School District serve a diverse community representing 75 countries with about 55 different languages and dialects. In response to the changing population, SNHS established these programs to better serve the cultural and linguistic needs of the community.

Among the services offered are the Latin American Center and the ALPHA Youth Services activities. The Latin American Center offers English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes open to all community members. The Center also provides services for new immigrants such as information and referral services, outreach, advocacy, notary services, interpreter and translator services. To serve the younger populations, the ALPHA Youth Services provides an after school program and summer program for low-income, at-risk youth and the program includes many immigrants from a number of countries. Together, the two programs also strive to offer training courses on computers, parenting, resiliency and mentoring, and positive role modeling.

Conclusion

CAAs make for an ideal location for immigrants to obtain information and assistance on social programs as they are information centers for the poor and working poor. CAAs identify barriers to self-sufficiency and mobilize and coordinate funds and their other community resources to reduce the causes of poverty. As immigration continues to grow and impact all communities, CAAs draw upon many categories of limited-purpose programs to combat the conditions of poverty that many new Americans face. CAAs continue to create new programs or organizations, either to fill a gap in community resources for immigrants or to coordinate existing facilities and services. CAAs bring together not only material resources but also many groups in the community and the public sector. The response of CAAs to the changing population is natural. With the influx and growth of immigrant populations in the United States comes changes in our communities, yet CAAs remain constant in providing much needed assistance and advocacy.

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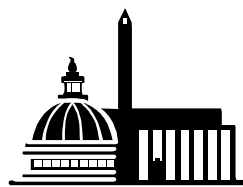
⁴ US Census, 2003.

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⁶ Michael E. Fix, Jeffery S. Passel. "Immigration and Immigrants: Setting the Record Straight." May 1994. Online. <<http://www.urban.org/url.cfm?ID=305184>>.

⁷ George J. Borjas, 2002.

⁸ George J. Borjas, 2002.



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