



Immigration

Issue Brief



The Community Input Project

Silicon Valley Community Foundation is committed to the best ideas and most effective solutions—at the local and the regional levels. With those goals in mind, the community foundation has initiated the Community Input Project, a series of strategic conversations around needs and issues that matter most. The issues were selected based on a review of local data, the many excellent assessments available about the health, social and environmental concerns in the region, and issues community members and leaders have raised.

The community foundation anticipates this process will spur a greater interest in regional partnerships as well as strategic solutions for meaningful, lasting and transformative change. The community foundation's board of directors will take the results of the community input process into consideration when making decisions about future directions and strategies.

This brief represents a summary of important trends and issues related to immigration. Similar briefs are available in the areas of arts and culture, environment, community economic development, housing, civic engagement, health, child and youth development and education.

DEFINITION: IMMIGRANT INTEGRATION

Grantmakers Concerned with Immigrants and Refugees defines immigrant integration as a dynamic, two-way process in which newcomers and the receiving society work together to build secure, vibrant and cohesive communities. There are six pathways in the framework:

- Communitywide planning
- Well-being and economic mobility
- Equal language and education
- Health treatment and opportunity
- Social and cultural interaction
- Civic participation and citizenship

Introduction

Immigration is an enduring hallmark of the United States, helping to drive economic growth and define national identity since the country's founding. Although the United States has benefited greatly from immigration, the nation has historically been ambivalent about newcomers and their role in society. This ambivalence has created formidable challenges for immigrants throughout the course of U.S. history, whether they hailed from Europe, Africa, Asia, Latin America or the Middle East. Nevertheless, the majority of immigrants across the generations—overcoming poverty, discrimination and other barriers—have successfully pursued the American Dream, bettered their lives and those of their children and enriched society in the process. To continue thriving as a nation, the United States must be intentional about weaving newcomers into the fabric of society and creating opportunities for them to work with native-born residents on shared goals and interests (1).

Major Trends

Global migration is a growing phenomena.

As a result of global economic and political factors, the foreign-born population in the United States tripled in the past four decades and currently totals 37 million or nearly 12 percent of the overall population. One in seven U.S. workers is an immigrant and one in five school-age children (most of whom are citizens) have an immigrant parent (1, 8).

Immigrants are a significant, increasing proportion of the workforce. As native birth rates continue to decline and as the Baby Boom generation begins to retire, immigrants and their children—as workers, taxpayers, consumers and entrepreneurs—become even more critical to U.S. economic vitality and global competitiveness. Currently, immigrants play an important role in many sectors of the U.S. economy, but they are most concentrated in jobs at the high end and low end of the labor market (1, 8).

Immigrant issues are highly politicized.

Current immigration policies, which have been patched together over the past two decades, are increasingly inadequate for advancing the best

interests of the nation. In 2006, Congress began to debate comprehensive immigration policy reform, which has led to increased attention of the issue by many immigrants and non-immigrants alike. Today, immigrant policy options are vigorously debated among presidential candidates and political parties (1).

Policies erode immigrant integration efforts.

Three acts of Congress in 1996—welfare reform, immigration reform and anti-terrorism legislation—limited immigrants' eligibility for federally funded health and social service programs. Further, policies enacted since September 11, 2001 (from the USA Patriot Act to the Real ID Act) have weakened civil rights protections for both citizens and non-citizens, particularly those who are of Arab, Muslim, Middle Eastern or South Asian descent (1).

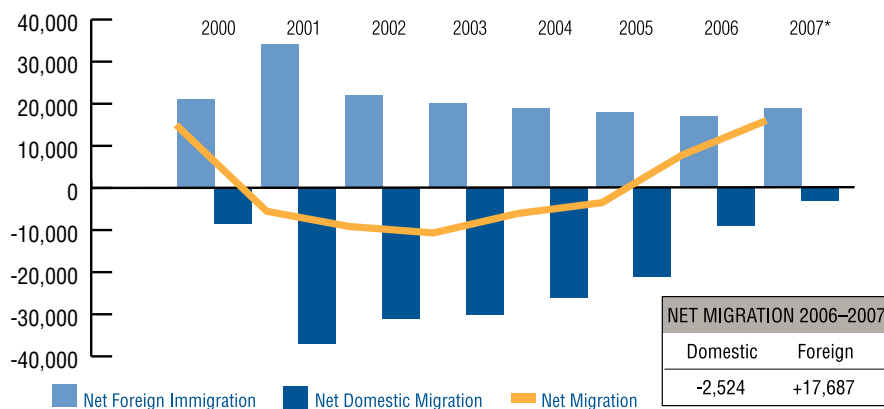
Regional Indicators

- Silicon Valley has cultural ties around the world. With 36 percent of its population born in another country, the San José area tops every other U.S. metro area, besides Miami, in its percentage of foreign-born residents (2)
- Net foreign in-migration has long been a substantial source of new population and in 2007 increased by 11 percent (2).
See Figure 1
- The region's residents are more than twice as likely as U.S. residents to speak a language other than English (2). *See Figure 2a*
- Among those who speak a language other than English at home, the largest proportion speak an Asian or Pacific Islander language (49 percent), just ahead of the share of Spanish speakers (40 percent) (2).
See Figure 2b
- Immigrants with no English skills earned an average hourly wage of just \$7.41 compared to \$31.44 for those with excellent English skills (3).

- In 2000, the region was home to 177,233 undocumented newcomers, approximately 17 percent of whom were less than 17 years of age (4).
- In comparison to U.S.-born residents, immigrants have far greater needs in the areas of health care, housing, employment, child care and transportation (3).

See Figure 3

Figure 1: Foreign and Domestic Migration, Santa Clara and San Mateo Counties

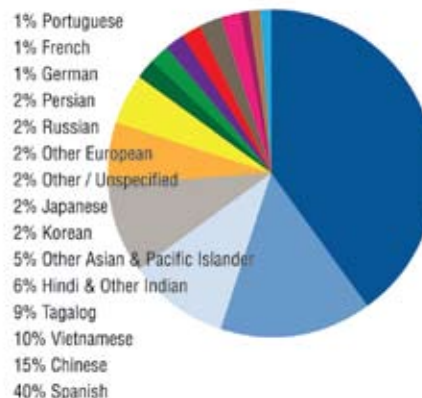


Source: Joint Venture: Silicon Valley Network * Provisional population estimates for 2007

Figure 2a: Percentage of Population Speaking Language other than English at Home, San Mateo and Santa Clara Counties



Figure 2b: Languages other than English Spoken at Home, San Mateo and Santa Clara Counties



Source: Joint Venture: Silicon Valley Network

Figure 3: Percentage of Santa Clara County Immigrants versus U.S.-Born Residents Reporting Needs in Major Life Areas, 2000



Source: Santa Clara County Office of Human Relations, Citizenship and Immigration Services Program

Issues for Discussion

Immigrants in the Silicon Valley are diverse in terms of national origin, legal status, economic status, culture, education and language. It would be an oversimplification to generalize about issues facing immigrants as a whole. The primary issues for African and Eastern European refugees and asylees clearly differ from those for undocumented immigrants from México and Latin America. Undocumented immigrants—who do not benefit from the protections and rights offered by formal status and are therefore more vulnerable to discrimination, exclusion and isolation—warrant special attention.

Labor

Silicon Valley's highly skilled immigrant workers. The region's high tech economy relies increasingly on immigrant talent. In 2000, 49 percent of the region's workers in science and engineering jobs were born abroad, and by 2005, it expanded to 55 percent. Immigrants founded approximately 25 percent of Silicon Valley's high-tech firms (2).

Research indicates that many skilled immigrants cannot use their previous training, education or work experience to secure employment in their field in the United States. These workers may be unfamiliar with American job search techniques and need assistance in updating skills or gaining U.S. licensure or credentials in their occupations. In addition, employers and regulatory bodies often lack expertise in comparing education and skill certifications obtained outside the United States, leaving many skilled immigrants working in jobs that require lower skills than they possess (5).

Silicon Valley's low-skilled immigrant workers. While one in eight U.S. residents is an immigrant, one in five low-wage workers is an immigrant. In Silicon Valley, many immigrant workers not in the high-tech industry contribute substantially to the economy through low-wage production work. It is estimated that immigrant women from developing countries represent 68-90 percent of the operative labor force in this region. Immigrant women earn substantially less

than immigrant men. Undocumented workers, due to their lack of work authorization, have limited options for moving out of low-wage jobs (3).

Language

Shortage of English-Language Acquisition Programs. Immigrants need English language skills to function effectively in three core roles: as leaders and caretakers of their families, as members of their communities and as workers. English proficiency is linked to higher wages and economic opportunities. English as a Second Language (ESL) programs with three to six hours of instruction per week can help immigrants acquire basic language skills for their family and community roles.

Other ESL programs address family, health and financial literacy as well as the civic requirements necessary for passing the U.S. naturalization exam. Vocational ESL programs are geared to the English skills required for employment, including for particular jobs or occupations. Despite the large growth in the U.S. immigrant population and the benefits of promoting English proficiency, federal and state funding for ESL programs has not kept pace. Funding shortfalls can mean long waiting periods for enrollment, overcrowded classrooms and lack of updated materials and equipment (5).

Human Rights

Law enforcement and deportation. One of the most important and unsettling new trends in immigration policy is the federal deputization of state and local officials to combat illegal immigration. This has meant that local mayors, county executives, city councils, police chiefs, sheriffs, state troopers, state attorney general, hospital administrators, housing inspectors, emergency room workers and ESL program providers, to name just a few, have been pressed into the role of immigration law enforcement. In reaction to federal law requiring local governments to cooperate with the Department of Homeland Security's Immigration and Customs Enforcement, cities such as San José have adopted "sanctuary policies." Such resolutions

confirm immigrant rights and prohibit arrest solely on the basis of illegal residency (3, 7).

Discrimination. As public debate increasingly frames immigration as a legal and economic threat, informal discrimination is reinforced both inside and outside of the workplace. In Silicon Valley, immigrants were more likely to be the victims of police discrimination and to report experiencing discrimination in the workplace from their boss (35 percent), their co-worker (25 percent), or from a job interviewer (20 percent) (3).

Following the events of Sept. 11, Arab, Middle Eastern, Muslim and South Asian communities have been the targets of hate crimes and media stereotyping. Furthermore, their families have been torn apart by government-sanctioned actions, such as racial profiling, mass detentions and deportations (6).

Civic Participation and Citizenship

Opportunities for participation. Civic participation for an immigrant or refugee often begins with neighborhood efforts to reduce crime, improve schools, increase access to health care or develop affordable housing. Artistic and cultural exchange may also be a starting point. Participation can eventually expand to policy advocacy and electoral work—testifying before their representatives and helping to register and motivate voters—but is not limited to these highly visible forms of political involvement. For naturalized immigrants, voting and running for elected office can become further expressions of civic integration (1).

Across the Silicon Valley region, immigrants contribute substantially to the political process. In Santa Clara county 75 percent of immigrants who are registered to vote report that they vote all of the time. Additionally, numerous officials whose country of origin is not the United States, have run for and been elected to public office in many cities in Santa Clara and San Mateo counties. Notably, immigrants also participate in appointed positions including boards, council, and commissions (7).

Barriers to naturalization. U.S. citizenship, which is attained through the naturalization process, allows immigrants to participate fully in civic life, and is a powerful and symbolic gesture of commitment to the United States. In addition to voting rights, citizenship brings many practical advantages: the ability to travel freely on a U.S. passport; U.S. government protection and assistance when abroad; substantially increased ability to sponsor relatives living abroad; protection against deportation; and access to the federal safety net of income support and other benefits (5).

The importance of citizenship has risen in the past decade because new laws passed in 1996 reduced legal immigrants' access to safety net services and their protection from deportation. While citizenship rates are rising, many eligible immigrants have not applied. Those who do not apply tend to be low-income (41 percent), to be less proficient with English (60 percent), and to have low levels of education (25 percent). Designing a new citizenship test for would-be citizens and setting fees that they can afford are two possibilities for increasing citizenship rates for this population (5).

DEFINITION: NATURALIZATION

The U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service, or USCIS, defines naturalization as the process by which U.S. citizenship is conferred upon a foreign citizen or national after he or she fulfills the requirements established by Congress in the Immigration and Nationality Act. The general requirements for administrative naturalization include:

- A period of continuous residence and physical presence in the United States
- Residence in a particular USCIS District prior to filing
- An ability to read, write, and speak English
- A knowledge and understanding of U.S. history and government
- Good moral character
- Attachment to the principles of the U.S. Constitution
- Favorable disposition toward the United States

Special Immigrant Populations

Undocumented immigrants. Living as an undocumented immigrant creates a number of difficulties for foreign-born residents. Undocumented immigrants are ineligible for driver's licenses and car insurance. They are ineligible for student loans, grants or scholarships or public safety net services. They cannot access health care services for their children, nor can they obtain proper identification to cash checks, buy a house or rent adequate housing. Without a permanent resident card or full citizenship status in the United States, many immigrants are forced to work in underground markets with few workplace safeguards and no guarantee of minimum wage compensation.

DEFINITION: PERMANENT RESIDENT CARD

The permanent resident card or "green card" is a life-long visa allowing a foreigner to live and work in the United States. The card itself is a government-issued plastic I.D. card that serves as proof of permanent resident status in the United States. The card is not actually green, in size and format it generally resembles a driver's license.

Children and youth. The demographic impact of immigration is especially visible in the children and youth population. Children of immigrants make up nearly one out of five K-12 students in the United States. Among young children with foreign-born parents in the Silicon Valley, about 32 percent have a parent born in Mexico, while 52 percent have a parent born in Asia. Nearly a quarter of the region's children speak a language other than English and are more likely to live in low-income and less-educated households. Studies show that without intervention, children of immigrants are significantly less likely than other low-income children to be exposed to reading and writing activities during the first five years of life (1, 10).

Sources

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About Silicon Valley Community Foundation

Silicon Valley Community Foundation is a leading voice and catalyst for innovative solutions to the region's most challenging problems. Our mission, vision and values reflect our commitment to serving the vibrant communities in San Mateo and Santa Clara counties. We bring together diverse groups of people—nonprofits, donors, government leaders, business people, faith-based organizations—all of whom care deeply about improving the quality of life in our region. Our goal is impact and we employ a variety of strategies to achieve it, including grantmaking, community initiatives, donor engagement, convening and research.

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