



San Mateo County

immigrant focus





Our goal was to better understand immigrants' needs, aspirations and challenges as told in their own words.

introduction

California is home to the largest number of immigrants in the country and in San Mateo County the immigrant population is growing at a rate greater than in any other county in the state. Because of this demographic reality, Silicon Valley Community Foundation partnered with the Silicon Valley Center for Global Studies at San José State University to complete the first-of-its-kind study of immigrants residing in San Mateo County. Our goal was to better understand their needs, aspirations and challenges as told in their own words as well as from the perspective of staff at nonprofit and government agencies that work with them.

What we learned affirmed some of what we already knew. Immigrants in the county are a diverse group representing countries around the world. They face incredible hardships and at the same time care deeply about their communities, their families, their health and education.

But there were some surprises too. While many consider San Mateo County overall as a welcoming community, they also feel that a level of discrimination exists in schools and in the larger community. They expressed concerns about the fear and stigma experienced by their children and long-term impact on their mental health.

This issue brief presents key findings from this study and discusses the implications of these findings as we prepare for the inevitability of immigration reform.

overview of the research

This study was conducted over an 18-month period from early 2011 to mid 2012. It included 26 focus groups and interviews with 126 immigrants conducted in communities throughout the county, from the coast to the bay and north to south. Participants for the focus groups were recruited by nonprofit organizations that serve immigrants, and meetings were held in spaces provided by these organizations. A written survey was distributed to 108 immigrants, who were identified through the focus groups, for a more in-depth exploration of their experiences and perceptions. The survey had a 55 percent response rate. In addition, extensive interviews were held with 80 lead staff at 22 nonprofit agencies, government entities and community colleges, and another written survey was administered to 50 agency staff, with a 72 percent response rate.

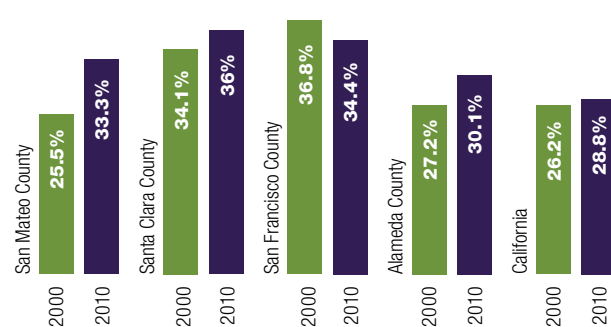
This study consists of data from a small subset of San Mateo County immigrants, providing descriptive information about their perspectives, needs and challenges. It is not intended to be comprehensive nor representative of every immigrant in this region. For the purposes of this study, an “immigrant” was defined as an individual who is foreign born or whose parent(s) were foreign born.

key findings

Immigrant population has grown at a faster rate in San Mateo County than elsewhere in California

San Mateo County is one of the most “immigrant rich” areas in California. As of 2010, it ranked fourth among counties in California and eighth across the nation in the concentration of foreign-born residents. In fact, between 2000 and 2010 San Mateo County’s immigrant population increased more than any other county in California, from 25.5 to 33.3 percent.

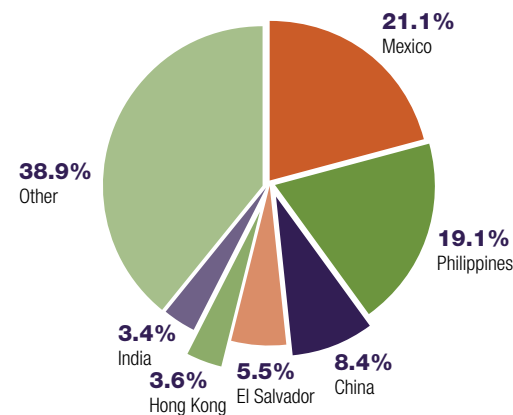
CHANGE IN IMMIGRANT POPULATION IN BAY AREA COUNTIES AND CALIFORNIA



Source: 2010 U.S. Census

Most immigrants in San Mateo County came from Mexico, followed by the Philippines, China (excluding Hong Kong and Taiwan) and El Salvador. Of all foreign-born residents in the county, 53 percent were citizens, 24.5 percent were non-citizens with a green card or visa and 22.5 percent—or 7.8 percent of the total county population—were estimated to be undocumented.

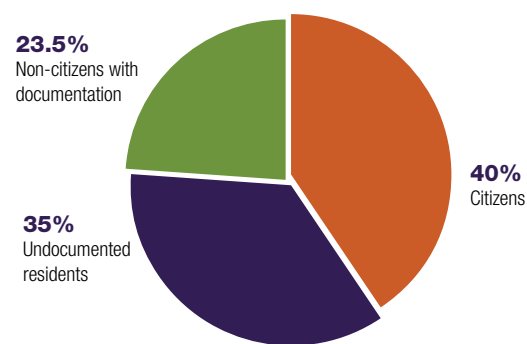
MOST COMMON COUNTRIES OF ORIGIN OF IMMIGRANTS IN SAN MATEO COUNTY



Note: Figure for immigrants from China excludes those from Hong Kong and Taiwan
Source: U.S. Census Bureau: American Community Survey, 2007-2011 estimates

The largest share of immigrants in this study were Hispanic/Latino (67.9 percent) followed by Pacific Islander (23.6 percent), Other (4.2 percent), White (3.0 percent) and Asian (1.2 percent). Among survey respondents who reported immigration status, there were fairly equal shares of citizens (40 percent) and undocumented (35 percent). The remaining 23.5 percent were non-citizens with a green card or visa. The median length of time that survey respondents had lived in San Mateo County was 14 years: Those surveyed were not newcomers to America.

IMMIGRATION STATUS OF SURVEY RESPONDENTS



Source: Silicon Valley Community Foundation

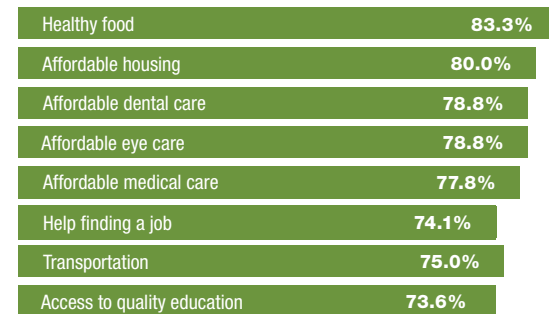
Immigrants face wide range of challenges in meeting their needs

Similar to other studies on immigrants, data from this study indicate that immigrants face many challenges: low wages, economic insecurity, inadequate housing, limited access to health care, discrimination and some unwelcoming political and social environments. These challenges are more pronounced among undocumented immigrants.

Healthy food, affordable housing, affordable eye and dental care, affordable medical care and help finding a job were cited as a “considerable need” or “somewhat of a need” among immigrants responding to the survey.

PERCENTAGE OF SURVEY RESPONDENTS INDICATING LEVEL OF NEED FOR SPECIFIC SERVICES

Respondents who said they had considerable or some need:



Source: SVCF San Mateo County Immigrant Survey

Survey respondents reported that information on how to meet their needs is difficult to find, particularly related to affordable medical care (including eye and dental care), affordable housing, legal services and employment training. For many, the Internet, family and friends were the primary sources of information and not community-based organizations or government. This is consistent with what immigrant service providers reported about the difficulties they face in reaching immigrant families with relevant information.

When asked about barriers to receiving services in general, survey respondents named lack of information most often, followed by scheduling problems, immigration status and a lack of time. The immigrant service providers, however, cited immigrants’ limited English-language skills, immigration status and negative political climate as the three major barriers. The agencies also noted lack of knowledge of available resources and access to available resources as barriers.

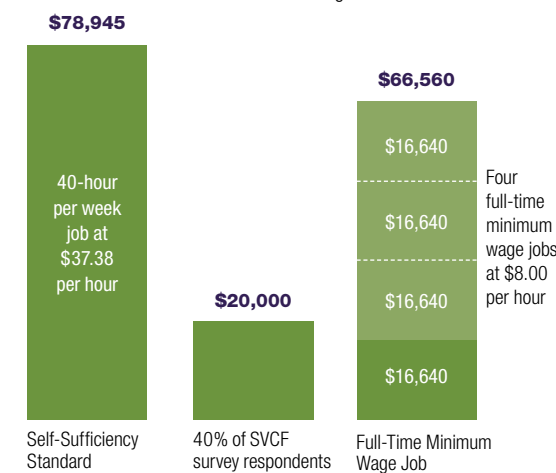
Economic hardship makes it difficult for immigrants to meet basic needs

The economic hardships immigrants face were evident in nearly every interview and focus group. Close to 40 percent of survey respondents who reported their household income, for example, earned less than \$20,000 per year. Recent data from the Insight Center for Community Economic Development indicates that to meet the most basic expenses for a family of three in San Mateo County, one would need to earn \$78,945—which is more income than can be earned from four full-time minimum-wage jobs.

HOW MUCH IS ENOUGH IN SAN MATEO COUNTY?

San Mateo County 2011

One Adult with One Preschooler and One School-age Child



Sources: SVCF and Insight Center for Community Economic Development, *How Much Is Enough in San Mateo County*, www.insightcced.org

For the undocumented immigrants in this study, finding a stable job continues to be a daunting endeavor. By far, language barriers were noted as the most significant hurdle to seeking jobs and gainful employment among survey respondents and focus group participants.

Education is a top priority, but immigrant students face particular challenges

While many of the immigrants in this study came to the United States to increase the economic and educational opportunities for their children, meeting those goals is challenging. Immigrants reported feeling that local schools have very low expectations for their children, often expecting them to fail. This perception was particularly strong among Mexican and Pacific Islander parents.

While parents in this study strongly acknowledge the importance of their involvement in their children’s education, many believe that their lack of familiarity with the American educational system, their own lower education level and/or their poor English-language skills impede their ability to advocate effectively for their children’s needs.

“For me, it is the support at school. There are too many kids per classroom and the teachers do not have the time necessary to assist those that need more attention.”

—FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

These parents expressed concern about the impacts of the economic downturn on their children’s schools. For instance, they noted that overcrowding and mixed-grade classrooms decrease the amount of attention teachers can provide to all students, but particularly to those who may need extra help. Teachers do not know each student well and may not understand any extenuating circumstances, some parents reported. Some said students are not being pushed to realize their academic potential.

Immigrants surveyed place a premium value on higher education, too, and some think that local schools do not provide adequate college orientation for immigrant children. College-age participants mentioned that the struggle to meet basic needs may force them to put their education on hold or work long hours while in school, both of which can force students to take longer than four to five years to graduate. Some students mentioned that their families do not understand why it takes so long and fail to provide the emotional support the student needs. Both documented and undocumented immigrants expressed the need for college-graduate role models and mentors, beginning in middle school or earlier.

Health concerns include those caused by stress and fear

While San Mateo County ranks among the healthiest counties in California, this study suggests there are a number of chronic and acute health concerns facing immigrants. At the top of the list are obesity, diabetes, breast cancer and mental health.

A majority of focus group participants and survey respondents indicated they did not have health insurance and had to rely on basic services provided by community clinics or emergency rooms. This can mean long wait times (up to several months) before being seen by a medical provider, limited services or avoiding seeking services altogether. Healthcare providers echoed these concerns, noting a lack of linguistically appropriate services and long waiting lists as particularly problematic; preventive care was singled out as inadequate.

Although many more of California's immigrants and their families stand to benefit from the implementation of the Affordable Care Act in 2014, which will provide them with access to quality health care coverage, undocumented immigrants are explicitly excluded from this coverage, and may have fewer options for affordable health care.

In addition to a lack of consistent, adequate health care, data suggests that depression and feelings of isolation are common among immigrant children and youth, particularly those that are undocumented.

Legal services are expensive and take a long time to obtain

Immigrants are faced with an increasingly complex web of laws that govern their lives in the United States. Overwhelmingly, survey respondents and focus-group participants, especially undocumented immigrants, indicated little understanding of their individual legal rights. This is particularly relevant given the impact that Immigration and Customs Enforcement has on immigrant communities. Nearly all of the focus group participants were aware of situations in which children of undocumented parents had been held in custody or people had been deported, leaving their families behind.

Survey respondents expressed little knowledge of where to get information about legal services. Focus group participants stated they knew where to obtain these services, but said the services were expensive and any free services often required a lengthy waiting period.

Immigrants feel a sense of belonging, but discrimination is common

Most of the survey respondents, 80.9 percent, said they had a higher quality of life in the United States than in their home countries, but only 47 percent indicated that they were happier in the United States than they had been in their home countries. Nonetheless, respondents expressed a general feeling of belonging and contributing to their communities. Some focus-group members mentioned volunteering in local churches, distributing food to the needy, working in K-12 classrooms and tutoring as activities that made them feel connected to their communities.

Ethnic discrimination was mentioned in more than half of the focus groups, and roughly half of the survey respondents said they had felt discriminated against in San Mateo County. Law enforcement, an employer or teacher were mentioned most frequently as the sources of discrimination. Generally, respondents indicated high levels of trust and respect between the police and residents. Concern about gangs and drugs, however, was commonplace in focus-group discussions throughout the county.

conclusion

We are at an important time in our history. As we present this issue brief, an overhaul of the nation's immigration system is being discussed and debated on Capitol Hill. Given this political context, we hope the information presented in this issue brief will serve a few purposes. The first is to increase awareness of the changing demographics of San Mateo County and thereby draw attention to the fact that the county has a stake in getting immigration reform right. The second is to highlight several areas—access to insurance and medical care, English-language learning, job training and legal services for immigrants—that demand our attention now, so the county is ready to respond to immigration reform and maximize the potential contributions of immigrants in our community. This will require working together across sectors, interests and geographies.

Immigrants are part of San Mateo County, their children are the future of our region, and working with them to make the county a better place is in the best interest of us all.

“Immigration status adds tremendous pressure across different layers of our lives. I feel as though I travel across different communities, having to act differently depending upon where I am. This is isolating and depressing. I feel invisible.”

—FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT



“I try to tough out some illnesses I might have just because there is not health care insurance...And sometimes they do not want you to make [installment] payments. I tried to go to the dentist once and I asked them if they give me the opportunity to pay in payment and they told me they would give me the opportunity but to pay it all before I had the work done. So...I did not get the work done.”

—FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT



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About Silicon Valley Community Foundation

Silicon Valley Community Foundation makes all forms of philanthropy more powerful. We serve as a catalyst and leader for innovative solutions to our region's most challenging problems. The community foundation has more than \$3 billion in assets under management and more than 1,600 philanthropic funds. As Silicon Valley's center of philanthropy, we provide individuals, families and corporations with simple and effective ways to give locally and around the world. Find out more at siliconvalleycf.org.

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