

Crossroads of the World: New Americans in Middlesex County, New Jersey

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY – AUGUST 2011

Thanks to its immigrants, New Jersey's population — and Middlesex County's within it — is large, growing and extraordinarily diverse.

Nested within the US, where 1 in 7 newcomers make their homes, and within NJ, where 1 in 5 residents emigrated from other nations, 1 in 3 Middlesex County residents is an immigrant.

At this scale, immigration offers great opportunities and poses critical challenges. How we meet these challenges has dramatic implications for our shared future.

Apex of Multicultural New Jersey

Middlesex County is a vibrant, cosmopolitan destination, ranking 3rd (behind Hudson and Bergen) among NJ counties for the size of its immigrant population, and 25th among all counties nationally. Statewide, Asians account for 8% of total residents, whereas Latinos make up 15% of the total.¹

Such is the diversity of NJ's newcomers that no single nation accounts for more than 10% of the total immigrant population. India reigns at 10% of all immigrants, followed by Mexico with 7%, and the Dominican Republic with 6%.

Majority Suburban

Across the US newcomers are more likely to settle in suburbs than in cities. The bedroom communities and small cities of NJ are a perfect example.

Immigrant Citizens

Most newcomers are legally present in the US. About half are full citizens under the law. Statewide, 1 in 4 immigrants have green cards, making them eligible to naturalize under federal law. Cost, fear and confusion deter large numbers of eligible applicants from taking this important step.

Growth in Undocumented Populations

Federal immigration policy has fallen badly out of synch with employers' need for labor. That's why from 2000 to 2005 the number of undocumented immigrants living in the US grew by 23%. Today NJ ranks 5th for the number (not share) of undocumented immigrants.² Estimates suggest that approximately 1 in 4 newcomers living in Middlesex County lacks legal status.

Traditional Families

Newcomers are more likely than natives to live in married, two-parent households: 67% of adult immigrants are married, compared with 45% of native born. State data bear out these findings.

Engines of Entrepreneurship

Historically, the US has always attracted newcomers with great ideas. Perhaps nowhere is this truer than in Middlesex County. Today 15 out of every 100 Middlesex County businesses were started by an immigrant. Foreign-born entrepreneurs stimulate markets while they generate goods, revenue and jobs. Their businesses have revived neighborhood economies, and kick-started some of the most robust economies statewide.³

Education and Integration

Nationwide, school districts range widely in the share of Limited English Proficient (LEP) students they enroll. In Middlesex County, Perth Amboy has the largest share of LEP students with 20%. The burden is on schools to bridge the educational and cultural gaps these 1st and 2nd generation newcomers face. The challenges are great. Latinos account for more than 50% of all dropouts in Middlesex County schools, despite making up only about 25% of the student body.⁴

A Backbone of the Economy

Newcomers make up 26% of the state's civilian labor force and 37% of those who work in Middlesex County. Concentrated in specialized fields such as biotechnology, telecommunications, medicine and higher education, newcomers also dominate in low-skill industries such as landscaping, food service, and janitorial work. Countywide almost half (45%) of workers in management and professional fields are foreign-born. New Jersey companies recruit more high-skilled workers from overseas than all but two other states.⁵

Taxpayers

All New Jersey residents pay taxes: property tax, sometimes as a portion of rent; sales tax on everyday purchases, as well as other federal, state and local taxes. These contributions will be critical to programs such as Social Security over the coming decades. Economists estimate that NJ alone receives \$450 million in tax revenues from undocumented immigrants.⁶

"Bad Apple" Employers Threaten All Workers

Spotty enforcement of existing labor laws allow exploitative employers to skirt minimum wage and overtime requirements. This hurts native and immigrant workers alike.

Conclusion

Thanks in no small part to its New Americans, Middlesex County is an economic and multicultural leader within New Jersey and nationally. Challenges lie ahead however.

Failure of the federal government to create an immigration policy consistent with the American creed has provoked a crisis at the state and local levels.

Historically the US has been a magnet for hardworking freedom seekers: the hub of an innovative economy, a bastion of representative democracy, and a haven for those who value justice and freedom. To regain this status will require rigorous enforcement of wage and hour laws; a renewed commitment to civil liberties; public support for community-based organizations; investment in the education of poor and minority youth, and a path to legal status for those who play by the rules.

As in generations past, today's newcomers are poised to contribute to a prosperous, thriving future for New Jersey.

MIDDLESEX COUNTY IS HEAVILY FOREIGN BORN RELATIVE TO NEW JERSEY AND THE NATION

(NEWCOMERS PER 100 INDIVIDUALS)

UNITED STATES: 12 in 100



NEW JERSEY: 20 in 100



MIDDLESEX COUNTY: 28 in 100



ENDNOTES

¹ U.S. Census Bureau, 2005-2009 American Community Survey. Unless otherwise noted, all data are from the U.S. Census.

² Jeffrey S. Passel, Randolph Capps, Michael E. Fix, "Undocumented Immigrants: Facts and Figures." Urban Institute. 2005. Also Pew Research Center (2011).

³ U.S. Department of Commerce, Minority Business Development Agency. <http://www.mbda.gov>

⁴ NJ Department of Education, enrollment and dropout totals by county. See <http://www.state.nj.us/education/data/>

⁵ Statistics by State, H1-B visa resource.

⁶ American Immigration Council, Immigration Policy Center, "Assessing the Economic Impact of Immigration at the State and Local Level," August 18, 2009. Available at <http://www.immigrationpolicy.org/just-facts/assessing-economic-impact-immigration-state-and-local-level>.