

THE DISPERSAL OF IMMIGRANTS IN THE 1990S

Central Issues

The U.S. immigrant population grew rapidly during the 1990s, with growth rates especially high across a wide band of states in the Southeast, Midwest, and Rocky Mountain regions. In many of these states, the foreign-born population more than doubled between 1990 and 2000.

The dispersal of our newest arrivals to regions that historically have attracted relatively few immigrants means that the integration issues previously confined to only a handful of states—issues such as access to language classes, health care,

population.¹ While the immigrant share of the population doubled since 1970, it remains below the record level of 15 percent set in 1900.

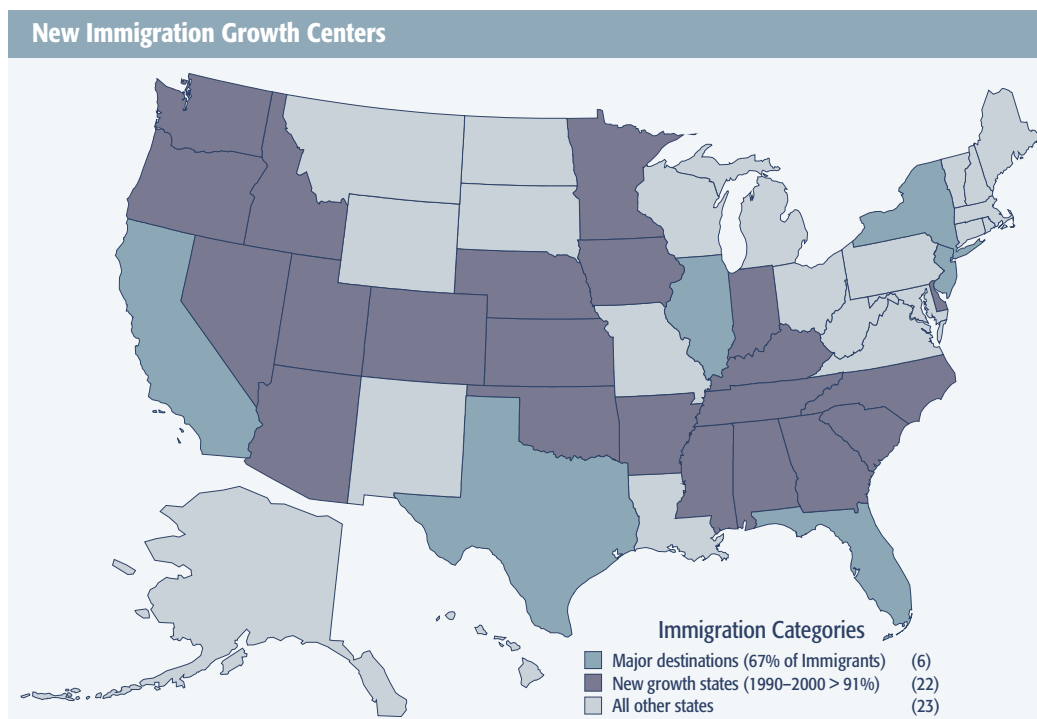
Today, one in five children in the United States and one in four low-income children is the child of an immigrant. One in four low-wage workers (under 200 percent of the federal poverty level) is foreign-born.

Concentration in Six States

In 2000, over two-thirds of the nation's total foreign-born population lived in six "major destination" states:

- California (28 percent),
- New York (12 percent),
- Texas (9 percent),
- Florida (9 percent),
- New Jersey (5 percent), and
- Illinois (5 percent).

However, the overall share of the immigrant population living in these six states declined significantly, from 75 percent in 1990 to 68 percent in 2000. In fact, California's growth rate fell sharply from 80 percent in the 1980s to 37 percent during the 1990s. Among the top six states, only Texas had a growth rate (91 percent) significantly above the national average (57 percent).



Source: Analysis of 1990 and 2000 U.S. Census data, Urban Institute, 2002.

welfare benefits, and jobs—are now central concerns for most states. Additionally, immigrants settling in states with relatively weak safety nets may not fare as well as those in more generous ones, should the economy continue to decline.

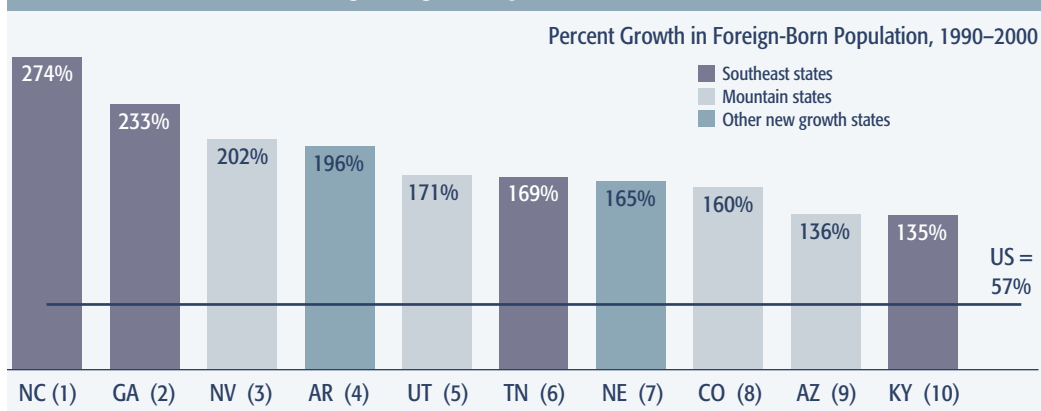
Rising Immigration

Record-high immigration marked the 1990s, with over 13 million people entering the United States—more than a million people per year. According to Census 2000, there were 31 million immigrants living in the country, representing 11 percent of the

The growth rate of California's foreign-born population slowed because the state received relatively fewer immigrants during the 1990s in part because many immigrants—particularly from Mexico—settled in new growth states. Evidence from the 1990s, when California experienced an economic slowdown, suggests that jobs and higher wages drew many immigrants to other states, especially in the Rocky Mountain and Southeast regions.

Public benefits do not appear to have driven these migration choices. In fact, California, Illinois, New York, and New Jersey

States with the Fastest Growing Immigrant Populations



Source: Analysis of 1990 and 2000 U.S. Census data, Urban Institute, 2002.

rank among the most generous states in providing benefits to noncitizens, and most of the “new growth” states have relatively weak safety nets for immigrant families.

Increasing Dispersal

With the share of immigrants in the six major receiving states declining, and with overall immigration rising, there has been a rapid dispersal of immigrants to new growth states—many of which have not received significant numbers of new immigrants for over a century. The foreign-born population grew by 145 percent during the decade in the new growth states (see map), while nationwide it grew by 57 percent. The 22 states that absorbed these largely labor-driven flows form a broad band across the middle of the country, with the highest growth levels occurring in North Carolina, Georgia, Nevada, and Arkansas (see chart). In fact, during the 1990s the immigrant population more than doubled in 19 states.²

Policy Implications

As a result of shifts in migration, the new growth states have higher shares of recent arrivals than California and the other major receiving states. Over 50 percent of all immigrants living in the new growth states arrived during the 1990s, as compared with 40 percent in the major destination states.

Recent immigrants are likely to have fewer marketable skills, lower incomes, and a weaker command of English than those who have lived here longer. Thus, recent immigrants are more likely to need benefits and services such as health insurance, interpretation, and English language courses. In many new growth states, demand for these types of services is rising.

At the same time, these new growth states have less experience settling immigrants and many have a less developed service infrastructure (e.g., bilingual teachers and immigrant organizations). Many new growth states restrict legal immigrants’ access to the social safety net. (The 1996 federal welfare reform law limited legal immigrants’ access to federally funded benefits, but

allowed states to replace lost benefits with state funds.) Most new growth states have not taken this option. Further, use of public benefits by legal immigrants has fallen more sharply in new growth than in other states. Restricted access and declining use raise concerns about how well immigrant workers and their families will fare in states with weak safety nets as states cope with budget shortfalls.

The Data

Figures for foreign-born population size and growth between 1990 and 2000 were obtained from the 1990 and 2000 U.S. Census of Population and Housing.

Further Details

- Fix, Michael, and Jeffrey S. Passel. 2002. “Assessing Welfare Reform’s Immigrant Provisions,” in *Welfare Reform: The Next Act*, Alan Weil and Kenneth Finegold, eds. (Pages 179–203). Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute Press.
- Fix, Michael, Wendy Zimmermann, and Jeffrey S. Passel. 2001. “The Integration of Immigrant Families in the United States.” Research Paper. Washington D.C.: Urban Institute.
- Passel, Jeffrey S., and Wendy Zimmermann. 2001. “Are Immigrants Leaving California?” Research Paper. Washington D.C.: Urban Institute.
- Zimmermann, Wendy, and Karen Tumlin. 1999. “Patchwork Policies: State Assistance for Immigrants Under Welfare Reform.” Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute. *Assessing the New Federalism* Occasional Paper No. 24.

Endnotes

- The total includes those who have become U.S. citizens, as well those who are still noncitizens, including both legal and undocumented immigrants.
- The total foreign-born populations of the 10 fastest growing states—according to the 2000 Census—were: Arizona (656,000), Georgia (577,000), North Carolina (430,000), Colorado (370,000), Nevada (316,600), Tennessee (159,000), Utah (159,000), Kentucky (80,000), Nebraska (75,000), and Arkansas (73,700). The six major destinations for immigrants had much higher 2000 foreign-born populations: California (8,864,000), New York (3,868,000), Texas (2,900,000), Florida (2,671,000), Illinois (1,529,000), and New Jersey (1,476,000).

Acknowledgments

Support for this project comes from the Annie E. Casey Foundation and the Ford Foundation.