



UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEXT



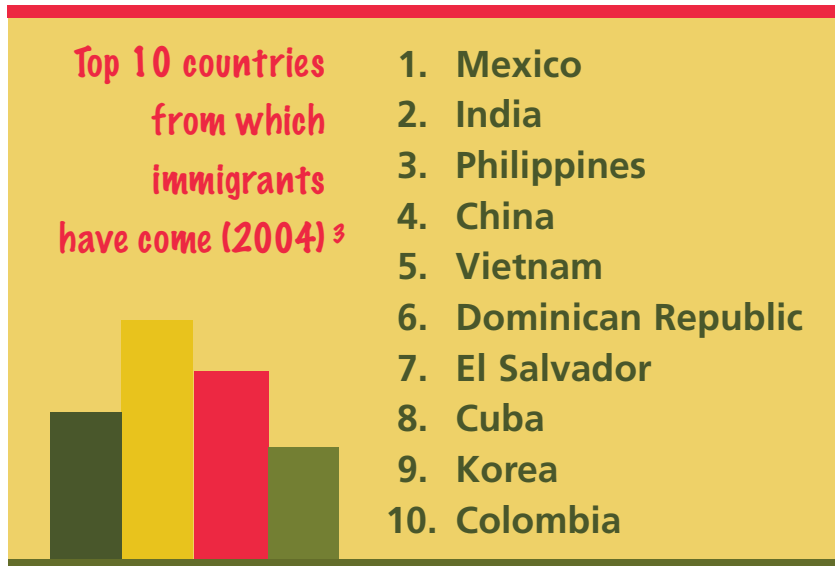
The Diversity of Immigrant Youth

Immigrants make their way to the U.S. from every corner of the globe. Latinos, the largest group, come from approximately 25 countries as varied as Mexico, Colombia, Cuba, El Salvador, and Peru. Other immigrant groups come from a similarly wide range of Asian, African, European, Middle Eastern, and Pacific Island nations. Even when they come from the same region, immigrants will differ with respect to education, social class, and urban versus rural backgrounds.

While many immigrants continue to settle in historically “high-immigrant” states like California, New York, Texas and Florida, large numbers are also moving to other parts of the country.⁴

Currently, there are 35.7 million immigrants living in the U.S., an increase of 16% in just the last five years and an 80% increase since 1990.⁵ According to the last Census, one in five children in this country today is an immigrant or the child of an immigrant, and the number is rising.⁶

Families migrate to the U.S. for many different reasons and through a variety of avenues. Some leave their families and everything they know behind in search of a better life, education, or financial opportunities. Others come to escape war, poverty, famine or persecution. Immigrants reside in the U.S. in one of the following capacities:



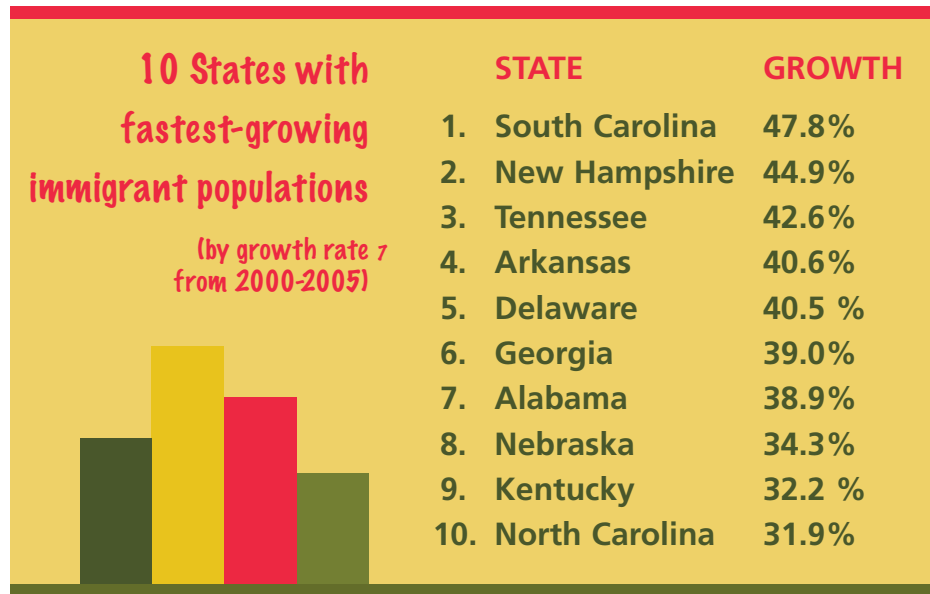
3 Gelatt, J. and Meyers, D. 2005. Fact sheet #12: Legal migration to US up from last year. Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute.

4 Ibid.

5 U.S. Census Bureau. 2006. American community survey.

6 Grantmakers Concerned with Immigrants and Refugees. Immigration fact sheet: Demographics. Sebastopol, CA. Available at: www.GCIR.org

- Naturalized U.S. citizens
- Lawful permanent residents (LPR)—individuals granted an immigrant visa through sponsorship by a family member who is a U.S. citizen or LPR, by a U.S. employer, or via the annual Diversity Visa Lottery, which admits a small number of individuals



from countries with low rates of immigration over the past five years. ⁸

- Individuals with temporary visas—students and temporary workers who have legal status to enter the U.S. for a limited time and specific purpose
- Undocumented immigrants—those individuals who enter the U.S. without required documents or authorization, or those who were admitted on a temporary basis and have overstayed their visas

Immigrant Youth Needs

The transition from childhood to adolescence presents challenges for all youth, as they seek to define who they are by weaving multiple and often disparate strands of themselves into a coherent sense of self. For youth of color, ethnic and racial identity is an inherently important part of this development process. Adolescent development gets even more complicated for newcomer youth who must simultaneously integrate their migration and national origin experience into their ethnic identity. It is a testament to their strength and resilience that they find many different and creative ways to do so. Nonetheless, there is a need for programs and environments that actively affirm newcomer youths' original ethnic identities, while also supporting their ongoing self-exploration and transformation. ⁹

⁷ Paral, R. 2006. Immigration policy brief. American Immigration Law Foundation.

⁸ National Immigration Forum. 2005. Diversity visas. Washington, D.C.

⁹ Delgado, M., Jones, K., and Rohani, M. 2005. Social work practice with refugee and immigrant youth in the United States. Pearson Education, Inc.

Youth organizations must strive to understand the specific needs of each young immigrant. Some youth may be refugees from war-torn regions who need to heal after leaving an environment of violence; while others may be undocumented immigrants who are fearful that their families may be deported. Although individual cases may vary, there are needs that are shared by most immigrant youth.

- **A New Country and a New Language**

All young people who are recent arrivals to the United States have a series of adjustments to make. They must learn a new language, adapt to different societal norms, and determine how to navigate a whole new set of social systems and institutions.

With U.S. immigrants speaking 176 different languages, there is a large and diverse population who face the challenges of learning English.¹⁰ For children and youth, these challenges frequently affect their academic lives, creating difficult and discouraging learning environments and experiences. At the same time, especially for young children, the pressure to learn English can drive newcomers away from their home language. This weakens their connections to their family and culture and limits their ability to develop valuable bilingual and biliteracy skills.

- **Cultural Identity, Family & Community**

Immigrant youth struggle to find their place in American society, often straddling the fence between their home culture and the new culture in which they are living. These young people need encouragement to value and affirm their heritage and language while clarifying their identity as Americans.

Family and community connections, which can provide a crucial element of support, are extremely varied for immigrants. Although some leave their close relatives behind, the majority of immigrants (7 out of 10) move to the U.S. to join close family members.¹¹ An important role of youth organizations is to support youth in maintaining strong ties to family and extended community both here in the U.S. and back home. Youth workers must be able to earn the trust of participants' families and communities, and to connect programs and services directly to parents and families whenever possible.

10 Fix, M. and Zimmermann, W. 2000. The integration of immigrant families. Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute.

11 National Immigration Forum, 2000.

Political Context

Fear and mistrust of immigrants runs high in communities throughout the U.S. for a variety of reasons. There are three key issues to consider:

1. Changing Demographics

Many long-time residents have never explored beyond their own cultural experience before, or dealt with people who are different from themselves. –Agency Director

In regions such as the South, the Northwest, and the Midwest, the recent influx of immigrant populations is transforming the culture and character of many cities and neighborhoods. Community members may be uncomfortable with these changing demographics because they fear that immigrants are “taking all the jobs.” Another source of discomfort involves a resistance to cultural or linguistic differences.¹²

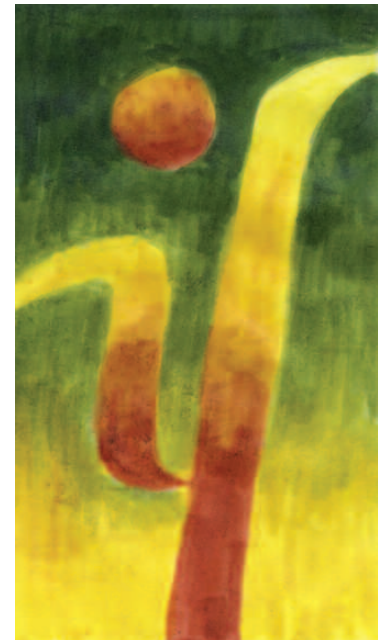
2. National Political and Policy Debate on Undocumented Immigration

The national debate on immigration continues to be very divisive. It has fueled widespread anti-immigrant attitudes directed largely at Latinos, regardless of their documentation status or country of origin.

3. War on Terrorism

They feel like we look at them all as terrorists and killers and all this kind of thing, and that really puts them on edge. And for all I know, some of the people here do feel that way about it. –Program Director, working with Somali Muslim staff and youth

In the post 9/11 context, the “war on terrorism,” the war in Iraq, and other conflicts around the world have engendered widespread anti-Muslim fear and prejudice. These negative attitudes have escalated to a broader backlash against any persons who look non-Christian and non-white, but particularly if they are Middle Eastern.



12 Jensen, L. 2006. New Settlements in rural America: Problems, prospects and policies. Reports on Rural America, 13. Durham, NH: University of New Hampshire, Carsey Institute.