

# A CLOSER LOOK

## PORTRAITS OF IMMIGRANTS IN LOS ANGELES COUNTY

May 2008

The Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles

### Diversity and Immigrant Populations in Los Angeles County

Los Angeles County is one of the most diverse in the nation in terms of both immigrant populations and the general population. Los Angeles is a world-class metropolitan area and, as such, attracts immigrants from many areas around the globe. The City of Los Angeles, for example, is home to people from more than 140 countries, who speak at least 224 different languages.<sup>1</sup>

The total population of Los Angeles County, as of 2006, was approximately 10 million. Los Angeles County has the largest population of Asians in the entire United States—with a total of 1.3 million people. The county also has the largest population of Hispanic or Latino people—4.7 million.<sup>2</sup> By 2050, these populations are expected to grow 200% and 187%, respectively.<sup>3</sup>

The percentage of Los Angeles County residents aged five and older who were foreign-born, as of 2006, was 35.4%.<sup>4</sup> In addition, 63% of children in Los Angeles County are members of immigrant families. However, 87% of these children are themselves United States citizens.<sup>5</sup> The percentage of Los Angeles County residents who speak a language other than English at home was 56.3% in 2006.<sup>6</sup>

Los Angeles County is home to a wide variety of immigrant communities, including unique enclaves. For example, according to the 2000 census, 18% of the population of Beverly Hills is of Iranian (or Persian) descent.<sup>7</sup> The largest concentration of Armenian-Americans in the United States is located in Glendale, where the ethnic group makes up 26.2% of the population.<sup>8</sup> In addition, the Southern Californian region (San Diego, Orange, Los Angeles, Ventura, Riverside, and San Bernardino counties) hosts the largest communities of Mexican, Salvadoran, Guatemalan, Filipino, Vietnamese, Taiwanese, Korean, Iranian, and Cambodian people living outside of their countries of origin.<sup>9</sup> Finally, although Black communities in Los Angeles County have the lowest proportion of immigrant members out of all ethnic groups, diversity within the Black community has been growing, as more Black and African immigrants move to the area.<sup>10</sup>



The information in this report about immigrants in Los Angeles County was drawn from research released in the past six years. The document presents recent facts about characteristics of immigrant populations in the area, as well as their contributions to the county.



# Immigrant Families and Children

Children of immigrants grow up in a linguistically diverse environment—83% of these children in the county speak a language other than English at home. However, the majority—77% of these children are able to speak both languages well. Seventy percent of parents in immigrant families in the county speak English, whereas 30% are “linguistically isolated” and do not speak English. The diversity of languages children speak in Los Angeles immigrant households is reflective of the diversity of Los Angeles as a whole—67% speak Spanish, 3% Chinese, 2% Korean, 2% Armenian, and 2% Tagalog. The percentage of English Learners in Los Angeles County schools is 31%.<sup>11</sup>

Immigrant adults in Los Angeles County are significantly more likely to be currently married than are native-born adults. For example, 64% of foreign-born citizens and 60% of legal permanent residents in the county are married, as opposed to 44% of native-born adults. Undocumented immigrant adults are only slightly less likely to be married than native-born adults—37% are married.<sup>12</sup>

Immigrant families face specific challenges. 32% of adults in immigrant families have fewer than 12 years of schooling, while only 9% of adults in non-immigrant families do. In addition, 44% of immigrant households are low-income—versus 27% of native-born families.<sup>13</sup> In 2004, the average family income for native-born families in Los Angeles County was \$50,300, whereas the incomes for legal and undocumented immigrant families were \$39,700 and \$26,300, respectively. Interestingly, however, legal immigrants may have slightly lower child poverty rates than native-born citizens in Los Angeles County (21% versus 23%) although child poverty rates for undocumented

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families are much higher (38%).<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, immigrant households in Los Angeles County are much more likely to be overcrowded than native-born families (23% versus 4%).<sup>15</sup> Finally, 33% of immigrant families in Los Angeles County in 2000 were food insecure—whereas only 12% of the native-born population was food insecure.<sup>16</sup> In 2000, the homeownership rate for immigrants in the Los Angeles-Long Beach area was 37.5%, versus 56.5% for native citizens.<sup>17</sup>

Immigrant family members are striving to improve the futures of their children and themselves. For example, the percentage of households with a working parent in Los Angeles County is 88%—the same for *both* immigrant and non-immigrant families.<sup>18</sup> As of 2000, among low-income immigrants in Los Angeles County, labor force participation was significantly higher than among low-income native-born populations.<sup>19</sup> In addition, in the 2002-2003 school year, 247,000 adult students were enrolled in English as a Second Language programs in Los Angeles County—making up about half of the state’s population of students.<sup>20</sup>

Furthermore, many immigrants in Los Angeles County do not conform to stereotypes regarding low educational status. In the county, 25% of legal immigrants and 8% of undocumented immigrants hold at least bachelors degrees. Indeed, immigrants (including naturalized citizens) comprise up to 40% of *all* Los Angeles County residents who have obtained college and advanced degrees.<sup>21</sup>

Immigrant families in Los Angeles County find both challenges and opportunities in the process of creating better lives for their children. The children of immigrants, who make up the majority of all children in the county, hold tremendous promise for Los Angeles. It is important to invest in them, as such an investment would immensely benefit the community and the metropolis in the future, as they will be Los Angeles’s leaders of tomorrow.



# Economic Contributions of Immigrant Communities in Los Angeles

Immigrant worker populations in Los Angeles County are concentrated in a variety of sectors, which vary according to their immigration status. Immigrants as a whole are highly represented (in contrast to the general population) in manufacturing and personal services trades.<sup>22</sup> Undocumented immigrants are highly represented in leisure and hospitality, construction, food and agriculture, service, and textile sectors. In terms of percentages of the labor force as a whole, immigrants (including undocumented immigrants) in Los Angeles County make up 59% of service sector workers, 80% of production or manufacturing workers, 67% of construction workers, 62% of transportation workers, 46% of sales workers, 56% of agricultural workers, and 61% of installation workers.

Even in fields where immigrants are less likely to work, their numbers are significant—they account for 30% of professional workers, 38% of office support workers, and 34% of management and business workers in Los Angeles County. Industries with particularly low percentages of immigrant workers include information technology, finance, education and health services, and public administration.<sup>23</sup>

As of 2005, first-generation immigrants had started at least 22 of Los Angeles's 100 fastest growing companies. Immigrant entrepreneurs in Los Angeles have founded nationally successful firms such as El Pollo Loco, Panda Express, and LuLu's Desserts. According to one estimate, immigrants are starting as much as 80% of all new businesses in Los Angeles.<sup>24</sup>

## Immigrants and the Safety Net

Immigrants in Los Angeles County made up a disproportionately small portion of the population using general public assistance programs in 2004. Citizens in the county make up 93.9% of CalWorks caseloads, 88.1% of General Relief caseloads, 61% of Medical Assistance caseloads, and 90.3% of Food Stamps caseloads. Unsurprisingly, legal immigrants make up 99.8% of refugee caseloads and 99.6% of CAPI (Cash Assistance Program for Immigrants) caseloads. Undocumented immigrants notably utilize almost no public assistance programs in the county. The single major program where undocumented immigrants register as a percentage of caseloads is for Medical Assistance—where they make up 4.1% of caseloads.<sup>25</sup>

82% of food insecure immigrant families in Los Angeles County (families with foreign-born members, including naturalized citizens and families with citizen children) did not receive food stamp benefits in 2000.<sup>26</sup>

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Only 90% of children of immigrant fathers in Los Angeles County have health insurance, whereas 98% of children of non-immigrant fathers are insured.<sup>27</sup> A significant proportion of children of undocumented parents are uninsured. While California's State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) provides coverage to legal immigrant children, it does not extend the same benefits to undocumented children.<sup>28</sup> However, as of 2004, the proportion of insured undocumented children in Los Angeles County had risen significantly since 2000—to 74% from 60%—as a result of the implementation of the Healthy Kids program in California.<sup>29</sup> Adult immigrants are also less likely to be insured. Whereas 17% of native-born adults in Los Angeles County were uninsured as of 2000-01, 23% of naturalized citizens, 38% of permanent residents, and 68% of undocumented immigrant adults were uninsured.<sup>30</sup>

## Citizenship and Voting

Nationwide, citizenship applications almost doubled between 2006 and 2007, from 731,000 to 1.4 million.<sup>31</sup> In 2006, 9.4% of citizens naturalized in the United States (65,813 out of 702,589) lived in the Los Angeles metropolitan area (Los Angeles-Long Beach-Santa Ana).<sup>32</sup> Currently, 54% of foreign-born Asians in Los Angeles County and 27% of foreign-born Latinos are naturalized citizens.<sup>33</sup> As previously stated, however, the vast majority of children of immigrants in Los Angeles County are citizens, and will bring to bear their demographic weight to the democratic process, as will newly naturalized citizens.





**Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles (CHIRLA) was formed in 1986 to advance the human and civil rights of immigrants and refugees in Los Angeles; promote harmonious multi-ethnic and multi-racial human relations; and through coalition-building, advocacy, community education and organizing, empower immigrants and their allies to build a more just society.**

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#### **Endnotes**

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