

New Immigrants Transform Life in New York City

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In 1993, 33 percent of New York City's residents were immigrants; another 20 percent were their children. The newest New Yorkers come from all over the world. More than half of the immigrants are from the Caribbean and Asia. Almost a quarter are from Europe, especially from countries in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. Approximately 20 percent come from the Dominican Republic. New arrivals also include people from Senegal, Nigeria, Egypt, Guatemala, Bangladesh, the Middle East, Korea, and Ireland. Two-thirds of all new immigrants settle in either Brooklyn or Queens.

In Brooklyn, Crown Heights and East Flatbush remain the "co-capitals" of Caribbean people living in the United States; there is a thriving Chinatown and a Mexican community in Sunset Park; Brighton Beach is known as "Little Odessa" because of immigrants from Russia; the streets near the intersection of Coney Island and Foster Avenues are lined with stores selling Indian and Pakistani food; and African shops are sprouting up on Fulton Street in Fort Greene. New immigrant communities add to the cultural diversity of New York City and contribute to its economic growth.

Newest Wave of Immigrants

The 1980's brought New York City its greatest wave of immigration since the 1920's. Without these new people, the population of the city would probably have gotten smaller by almost ten percent.

In the 1990's, the number of new immigrants to the city became even higher. Over 563,000 legal immigrants moved to New York from other countries between 1990 and 1994. Tens of thousands more people arrived without official documentation. City officials estimate that almost 20 percent of the city's 2.5 million immigrant residents do not have legal resident status. Currently, more than 4 of every 10 children born in New York City are born to immigrant mothers.

Similarities and Differences

In most ways, the newest arrivals are similar to earlier waves of immigrants to the United States. They experience both a push and a pull -- something that drove them to leave their original homeland and something that brought them to this country. Haitian, Central American, and Chinese immigrants often seek political freedom. Jamaicans, Dominicans, and Koreans search for economic opportunities. Like earlier Italian and Slavic immigrants, many Caribbean and Latino people travel back and forth between the United States and their original homelands. On the other hand, immigrants from China, Eastern Europe, and the former Soviet Union rarely return.

Competition and Conflict

At many times in United States history, there was conflict between new immigrants and people from earlier arriving groups. Often they competed for the same jobs and housing or set up small businesses in the same neighborhoods. Today, with a decline in industrial jobs in New York and the United States, economic competition between immigrants and "old-timers" can be intense. In New York City, economic rivalry between established groups and recent immigrants has led to tension between African Americans and Asians and between Puerto Rican and Dominican communities.

While earlier immigrants, especially the Irish, Italians, and Jews, faced economic and religious discrimination in the past, the newest wave of immigrants faces an additional problem. The United States has a long and bitter history of racial discrimination and the newest immigrants are largely non-European and non-white. Economic competition and religious and racial discrimination have contribute to calls to restrict the number of people who can legally enter the United States.

Record Number of New Citizens

In response to anti-immigrant feelings, record numbers of immigrants living in New York City and other parts of the country have decided to become citizens. Nearly 1.2 million people were naturalized between October 1, 1995 and September 30, 1996. This shattered the previous record of 445,853 set the year before. In the fall of 1996, the large number of applications for citizenship caused long delays in processing.

The push for citizenship was spurred by discriminatory rules included in the 1996 federal welfare bill. Although non-citizens make up only 5 percent of welfare recipients, they receive 40 percent of the cuts. Congress and a number of states are also debating laws that will limit the number of new immigrants, make it easier to find and expel undocumented immigrants, and penalize legal immigrants who are not citizens.

One unexpected result of anti-immigrant hostility is a spurt in political activism among legal immigrants and new citizens. In October, 1996, tens of thousands of Latino immigrants marched in Washington DC protesting against anti-immigrant and anti-Hispanic policies. Congresswoman Nydia Velázquez, who represents parts of Manhattan, Brooklyn, and Queens, was one of the leaders of this march.

In addition, new immigrants were a crucial voting block in a number of election districts. In California, they helped to defeat former Republican Congressman Robert Dornan, a leading opponent of immigrant rights. As increasing numbers of new immigrants become citizens, politicians will be unable to ignore their needs. This should improve the climate for school funding, increase the number of voters who oppose cuts in social services, and increase the political influence of urban areas.

Questions

- 1- About how many immigrants live in New York City?
- 2- What percent of the city's population are immigrants and their children?
- 3- How has the newest wave of immigrants changed Brooklyn communities?
- 4- How are new immigrants similar to earlier groups of immigrants?
- 5- How does the situation facing new immigrants differ from that of earlier groups?
- 6- How have new immigrants responded to anti-immigrant feelings?
- 7- In your opinion, should the United States limit the number of new immigrants allowed to enter the country?
Explain your answer.