

THE FACES OF IMMIGRATION IN MERCER COUNTY

By Anastasia R. Mann

POLICY ANALYST

PREFACE

Immigration has become the great social and civil rights issue of our time. The sheer numbers of recent immigrants, many of them illegal, would be enough to create new tensions in American society. But since 9/11, Americans have also come to feel more anxious about strangers in our midst, and with a stalled economy and stagnant or falling incomes, many people are now more insecure about their economic prospects. These are not auspicious circumstances for bringing out our most generous impulses or our traditions of political compromise and practical legislation. At the national level, the political divisions over immigration became so sharp and shrill in the past year that Congress gave up trying to reform national policy. Partly as a result, some of the issues surrounding immigration are defaulting to the states and localities, regardless of whether they are adequately equipped to deal with the problems.

Like many other parts of the nation, Mercer County has experienced a surge of immigration in recent years that poses fundamental challenges in the schools, health care, social services, housing, criminal justice and other fields. The Sandra Starr Foundation shared the sense of many in the region that these challenges have been increasing, but the exact dimensions were unclear. As a result, we asked New Jersey Policy Perspective to produce a definitive report that could clarify the scale and character of immigration in the county and illuminate the issues

faced by local and state governments, private institutions and the immigrant communities themselves.

This report confirms the exceptional growth in the local immigrant population. For example, between 2000 and 2006, while the number of immigrants in New Jersey as a whole increased by 14 percent, the number of immigrants in Mercer County grew by 48 percent — far more than the five percent increase in the county's overall population. The best estimates available suggest that just over one-quarter of the county's 71,000 immigrants are in the United States illegally, but many of them are parents of children who were born in this country. As a result, the welfare of the children, who are U.S. citizens, depends on adults who have no legal rights, live in constant fear and may be exploited and abused with impunity by employers and others. At the same time, they provide services and labor that have been vital to the county's prosperity.

We hope this report provides a factual basis for local and state leaders and members of the public to think through the challenges related to immigration. Some of those challenges can only be dealt with through action by Congress. But even with the best possible national legislation, there is much that can and must be done at the local level. Mercer County ought to be a model for such efforts.

— Paul Starr
President, Sandra Starr Foundation

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

To prepare this report, New Jersey Policy Perspective analyzed data from the U.S. Census Bureau, state agencies, labor unions and many other sources. In some instances, statistics on race, ethnicity and English proficiency are employed as rough stand-ins for immigration data. Though not always conclusive, they can provide valuable clues.

What emerges is a vivid, nuanced, sometimes disturbing and sometimes inspiring portrait of a county in the throes of change. Mercer doesn't have the most immigrants among New Jersey counties. That distinction goes to Hudson and Essex. But the county draws immigrants from all corners of the world, some with graduate degrees and some who left school after third grade. Mercer County, best-known as home to the state capital and to Princeton University, offers them a variety of housing, job and educational opportunities, including inner-city Trenton neighborhoods and sprawling middle- and upper-class suburbs, high-tech research labs and countless restaurants, retail stores and other service businesses.

Two facts dominate the survey. The number of immigrants in Mercer County is large, and growing. And — in a major difference from previous waves of immigration — the number of illegal immigrants is also large, and also growing. Some highlights:

- Almost 20 percent of Mercer County's 376,000 residents were born outside the United States — some 71,000 people.
- The number of immigrants in Mercer County grew by 48 percent from 2000 to 2006, compared to overall county population growth of five percent.
- The percentage of immigrants in Mercer County is very significant by national standards, higher than statewide averages everywhere but California and New York State.
- Latinos make up the largest share of Mercer County's immigrants, at 36 percent. Asians represent another 32 percent. The percentage of European immigrants has been decreasing. So, to a lesser extent, has the percentage of African immigrants.
- Students in Mercer County schools speak an astonishing 87 different languages, including Spanish, Mandarin, Haitian Creole, Gujarati and Telugu (languages spoken in India) and Polish.
- As many as 29 percent of Mercer's 71,000 immigrants are estimated to live in the U.S. illegally. At least 20,000 undocumented immigrants — perhaps more than 40 percent — are believed to be Latinos.
- The presence of undocumented immigrants appears to have grown dramatically. In one congressional district that includes part of Mercer County, the number grew by 47 percent from 2000 to 2005. In another Mercer County district, the increase appears to be 131 percent.
- In contrast to policies and rhetoric reported in other New Jersey communities and elsewhere in the nation, some municipal officials in Mercer — Hightstown, Trenton and Princeton, for example — have been especially welcoming to immigrants, both legal and undocumented. Federal and state guidance, which could lead to uniform policies, is lacking.
- Among Mercer's immigrant population some 5,500 people live below the federal poverty line, about the same percentage as for the county as a whole.
- Among Latino immigrants, 20 percent have less than a ninth grade education and only 25 percent have a high school diploma. One in three Asian immigrants has a bachelor's degree. Of these, 40 percent have advanced graduate degrees.
- Although English language skills are critical, a scattershot approach pervades public school systems and adult education. Many school districts use waivers to avoid offering courses in students' native language. A patchwork of adult courses is offered by local libraries, nonprofits and Mercer County College. Many courses are expensive, require proof of legal status or are otherwise inaccessible.
- Immigrants in Mercer County are affected by New Jersey's imposing tighter restrictions in some areas than some other states. Only legal immigrants are eligible for coverage by the state health insurance program, for example. New Jersey

requires undocumented state residents to pay high out-of-state tuition rates to attend public colleges. And New Jersey requires a Social Security number to receive a driver's license — effectively barring undocumented immigrants from driving legally.

- Immigrants are half as likely to have health insurance as the native-born. But this varies greatly according to area of origin. Four of five Asian immigrants are insured.
- Because of their well-known fear of authorities, undocumented immigrants are often victims of criminal activity that ranges from “notarios” posing as immigration lawyers to street thugs.

WHO ARE MERCER'S IMMIGRANTS?

Size of Immigrant Population

Mercer County today is immigrant-rich. According to the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey, immigrants account for 19 percent — or 71,000 — of residents in Mercer's 13 municipalities. According to the 2006 ACS, 32 percent of the foreign-born in Mercer County have come to the United States since 2000, and 65 percent since 1990.

These recent arrivals to Mercer represent only the latest players in a centuries-long drama. “Few states,” contends one historian, “have been so continuously shaped and reshaped by immigration.”

Of New Jersey's 21 counties, Mercer ranks 12th in population. Yet it is eighth in terms of the percentage of the population that is foreign born.

Place of Origin

Throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, most immigrants to Mercer County, and to New Jersey and the nation as a whole, came from Europe. This movement peaked in 1910, when im-

IMMIGRANTS IN NEW JERSEY COUNTIES

	Total Population	Foreign Born	Rank of Percent Foreign Born
Bergen	904,037	28%	5
Middlesex	786,971	28	3
Essex	786,147	24	6
Monmouth	635,285	13	11
Hudson	601,146	41	1
Ocean	562,335	8	17
Union	531,088	30	2
Camden	517,001	10	12
Passaic	497,093	28	4
Morris	493,160	19	9
Burlington	450,627	9	14
Mercer	367,605	19	8
Somerset	324,186	21	7
Gloucester	282,031	5	19
Atlantic	271,620	15	10
Cumberland	154,823	10	13
Sussex	153,384	6	18
Hunterdon	130,783	9	15
Warren	110,919	9	16
Cape May	97,724	3	21
Salem	66,595	4	20
New Jersey	8,724,560	20%	

SOURCE: U.S. Census American Community Survey, 2006

migrants accounted for more than 25 percent of New Jersey's population. Today, just over one in five (22 percent) of the county's immigrant population originated in Europe, slightly above the New Jersey rate of 19 percent. By contrast, in Ocean County, where the immigrant population is low, Europeans still dominate, making up 38 percent of all immigrants.

But as European immigrants age and the pace of immigration from elsewhere accelerates, a shift is under way. Fewer immigrants come to Mercer County from Europe and, to a lesser extent, from Africa than even three years ago. Conversely, the share of Latin Americans and Asians is growing.

It should be noted that Census data on the national origin of Hispanics and possibly other immigrants are notoriously flawed, in part because some people are reluctant to be counted. Year-to-year comparisons are of dubious value because data collection is better in some years than in others.³

ORIGIN OF MERCER'S FOREIGN BORN

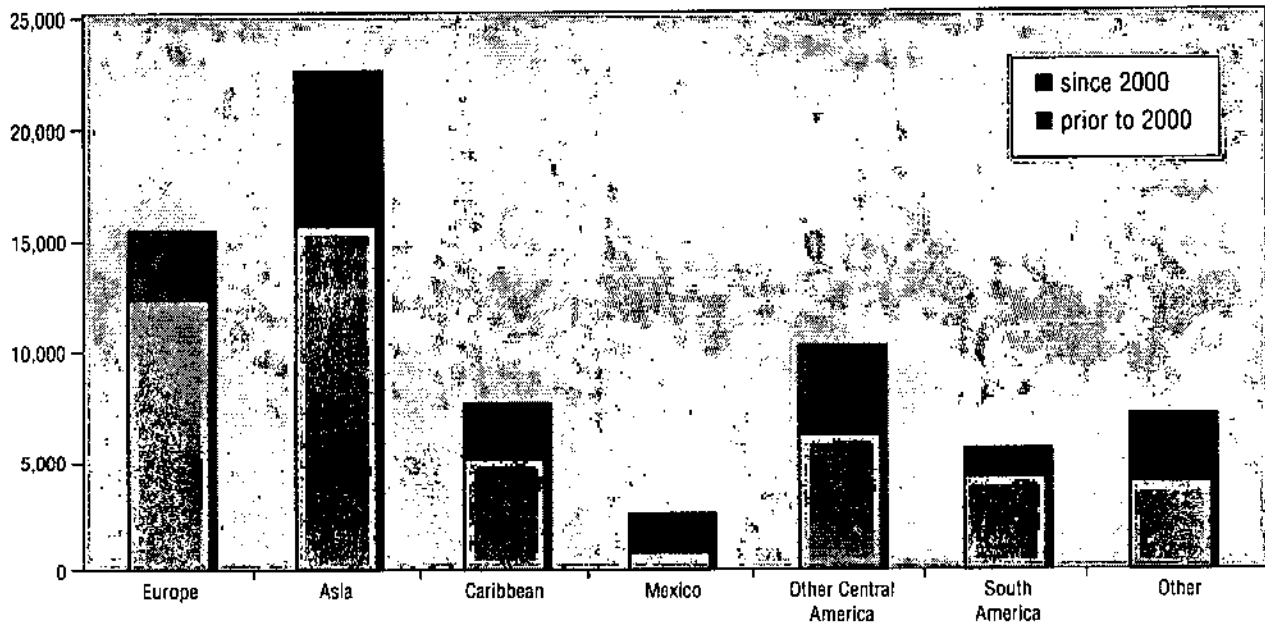
	2003	2006
Latin America	29%	36%
Europe	26%	22%
Asia	30%	32%
Africa	14%	8%

SOURCE: Compiled from U.S. Census American Community Survey, 2003 and 2006

Demographers point to New Jersey as a model of immigrant diversity.⁴ Mercer fits this description. The largest share of immigrants — 36 percent — comes from Latin America. One of every three — 32 percent — of immigrants in Mercer comes from Asia, a slightly larger share than the statewide average of 30 percent, though far below neighboring counties such as Middlesex, where 49 percent of immigrants are Asian-born.

As the chart below shows, a sizeable number of immigrants living in Mercer County come from other regions, principally Europe and Central and South America.

Mercer's Most Recent Immigrants by Region of Origin and Period of Entry



SOURCE: U.S. Census American Community Survey, 2006.

Diversity of Languages

About 55,000 persons, or 21 percent of Mercer County residents, speak a language other than English at home. About half of these speak Spanish, according to the U.S. Census 2006 American Community Survey. The next most prominent language spoken in homes is Italian, with nearly 4,500. More than 4,000 speak Chinese at home and nearly 3,500 Polish. Others spoken with notable frequency are: French (including the Creole version spoken in Haiti), German, Korean, languages of India and Russian as well as other Slavic languages.

Changes in Latino Population

Since the first significant population of Puerto Ricans arrived in Mercer County after World War II, this group has been steadily edged out by Central and South Americans, a shift that continues today. This is evident in the years between 2003 and 2006, for example, when Puerto Rican natives in Mercer went from 47 percent to 34 percent of the county's Latino population.

Diverse groups of Latino immigrants live in every Mercer municipality, with more than half in Trenton.

LATINOS IN MERCER COUNTY

	Latino Population	% of Mercer Latinos	Predominant Origin
Trenton	18,391	54%	Puerto Rico
Hamilton	4,471	13	Puerto Rico
East Windsor	3,559	10	Ecuador
Ewing	1,586	5	Puerto Rico
Lawrence	1,344	4	Puerto Rico
Hightstown	1,046	3	Ecuador
Princeton Bor.	1,009	3	Mexico
West Windsor	892	3	Mexico
Princeton Twp.	847	2	Mexico
Hopewell Twp.	395	1	Puerto Rico
Robbinsville	279	1	Puerto Rico
Hopewell Bor.	47	<1	Guatemala
Pennington	32	<1	Colombia

SOURCE: Lillian Escobar-Haskins, "Latinos in Mercer County: A Reflection of the Changing Latino Population in the Northeast," United Way of Greater Mercer County, 2004