



2006-2007 Travis County Immigrant Assessment Executive Summary

**A supplement to the
2006-2007 Immigrant Assessment**

Conducted by:

**Travis County Health and Human Services & Veterans Service,
Research & Planning Division**

In collaboration with community partners:

**Catholic Charities of Central Texas
The City of Austin Commission on Immigrant Affairs
The Community Action Network
The Immigrant Assessment Steering Committee**

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Between 1990 and 2005, Travis County experienced a 230% increase in its foreign-born population (from approximately 45,000 to 148,000 people). In 2005, foreign-born residents made up 17% of the county's population. Change of this magnitude underscores the need for a better understanding of the community conditions that affect the diverse immigrant populations in Travis County.

In late 2005, community partners, observing the significance of these trends, made a commitment to examine, identify, and report the current conditions and needs of immigrants in Travis County. The Research & Planning Division of Travis County Health and Human Services & Veterans Service stewarded this project, with support from an assessment Steering Committee and community volunteers.

Note on Language

Immigrant is defined, in this report, as anyone who is not a U.S. citizen or a U.S. national by birth. This term is used synonymously with foreign born, and includes naturalized citizens, lawful permanent residents, individuals with temporary visas, and undocumented immigrants.

Mixed-status families include at least one parent who is a non-citizen and at least one child who is a citizen.

The main product of this effort is the *2006-2007 Travis County Immigrant Assessment* — a report intended to provide a balanced, accurate, and useful picture of foreign-born residents in Travis County. Recognizing that foreign-born residents are integral to our community, the Assessment also identifies overarching community goals expressed by local authorities and examines the experience of foreign-born residents within the context of these goals. To provide context for this discussion, the Assessment highlights notable differences and similarities between foreign-born and native-born residents as well as those between foreign-born populations with differing legal statuses and other characteristics.

This assessment drew from both primary and secondary research. The primary research included: (1) a forum of local service providers, and (2) 18 focus groups with immigrant residents of Travis County. The secondary research was based primarily upon an analysis of existing research, public policy, and data derived from existing data sources, including the American Community Survey, Current Population Survey, Texas Education Agency, Texas Health Department of Vital Records, and the Decennial Census.

This document serves as a supplement to the *2006-2007 Travis County Immigrant Assessment* and is intended to summarize some of the highlights from each section of the report. Please refer to the full report for a more detailed discussion of these issues, their associated citations, and related analytical methodologies. The full report also offers contact information for the authors and a list of contributors to this project.

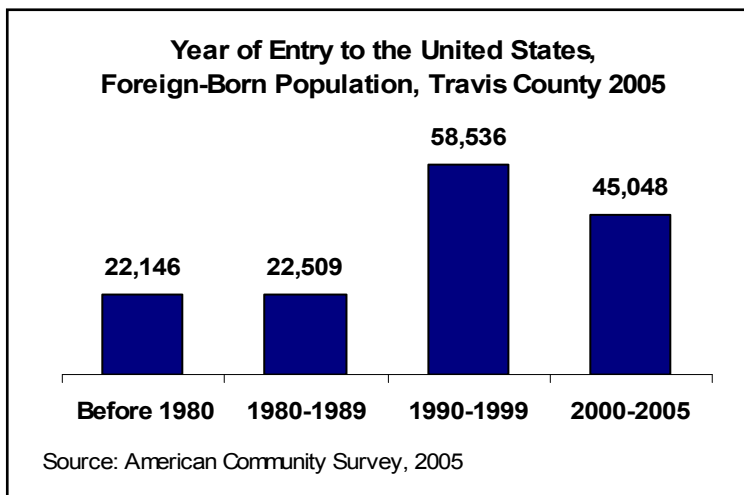
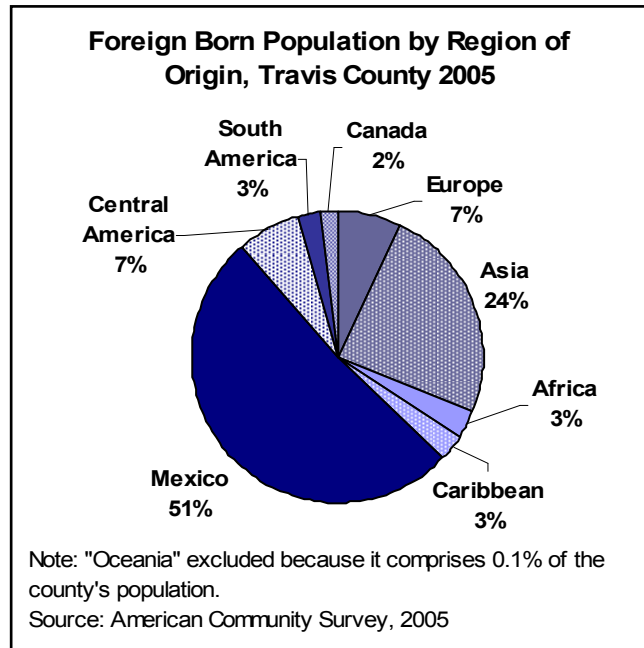
An electronic copy of the *2006-2007 Travis County Immigrant Assessment* is available to view and download at: http://www.co.travis.tx.us/health_human_services/research_planning/

Profile of the Foreign Born in Travis County

Travis County has experienced significant recent demographic change related to immigration trends. Between 1990 and 2005, the foreign-born population of Travis County increased by approximately 230%. This growth occurred at a faster rate than that of the general population. In 2005, 17% of the county’s residents (approximately 148,000 people) were foreign-born.

Immigrants’ individual experiences in the U.S. and Travis County are shaped by the interplay of many factors, including their country of origin, citizenship or legal status, how long they have resided in the U.S., their socioeconomic characteristics, and their comfort and fluency with the English language.

In 2005, about half (51%, or approximately 76,000) of immigrants living in Travis County were born in Mexico, and about one-quarter (24%, or approximately 36,000) were born in Asia (see chart at right). Regarding citizenship status, 26% (approximately 38,500) of Travis County’s foreign born are naturalized United States citizens. This share is lower than that of Texas (31%) and the total U.S. (41%).



The large majority of the county’s immigrants (approximately 104,000) arrived in the U.S. in or after 1990 (see chart at left).

In Travis County, immigrants are represented on all ends of the socioeconomic spectrum, but are more heavily represented among the lower income groups and among lower levels of educational attainment.

Almost one-third (32%) of Travis County residents speak a language other than English at home. Of these roughly 254,000 residents, 79% speak Spanish and 12% speak Asian and Pacific

Islander languages. The majority (59%) of residents who speak a language other than English at home also speak English very well.

Immigrants come to the U.S. for many reasons, including forces in the home country that may necessitate leaving, and/or opportunities in the U.S. Once in the U.S., immigrants may face a variety of challenges adjusting to a new culture and institutions.

Immigration Policy, Process and Legal Rights

On a national level, the most viable immigration policy and system would reflect and address the needs of local communities and individual community members. On a local level, the well-being of the entire community is linked to the treatment of individual community residents. The national goal for immigration policy and process and the community goal for protecting the rights of immigrants are reflected in the following statements:

[To] secure America's promise as a nation of immigrants by providing accurate and useful information to our customers, granting immigration and citizenship benefits, promoting an awareness and understanding of citizenship and ensuring the integrity of our immigration system.

--U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services

[To] be a "Safety Zone" where all persons are treated equally, with respect and dignity, regardless of immigration status.

--Austin City Council, 1997

Trends in United States immigration policy appear to be cyclical. At various points in history, immigrants (or certain groups of immigrants) have been welcomed or rejected depending on the state of the economy, public opinion, political climate, and national security issues.

The current immigration system is highly complex and can be difficult to understand and navigate. In local focus groups, immigrants noted a number of challenges with the federal system including difficulty with the paperwork process, cost, lack of legal status, and lack of timeliness in response. A demand for immigrant visas that far exceeds the supply, as well as administrative backlogs, also pose significant challenges for those wishing to attain legal residency.

Jurisdiction over immigration related policies is both complex and ambiguous. The federal government determines the overarching immigration policy and oversees the immigration system. State and local governments do not have formalized roles in the immigration system, however they often bear the costs and responsibility for meeting the needs of immigrant residents, including education, healthcare, and public safety.

Foreign-born individuals living in the U.S. can have a wide array of legal statuses. (The table on the following page describes these categories of immigrants and the distinctions between them.) While all immigrants living in the United States have some fundamental rights as laid out in the U.S. Constitution, the majority of rights are tied to legal status. The Constitution makes a

significant distinction between “citizens” and “persons.” Thus many immigrants living and working in the United States have formal protections of basic rights afforded to “persons” but not to “citizens.”

For all these reasons, immigrants, businesses, local governments and community-based organizations share the need for timely, accurate information and specialized legal assistance to understand and navigate the complex, changing immigration system understand and navigate the complex, changing immigration system.

Immigrant Subgroups and Related Visas, Legal Status and Citizenship Status				
Group	Description	Visa Availability	Legal Status	U.S. Citizens
Naturalized U.S. Citizens	Have completed the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Obtained lawful permanent resident status ▪ Lived in the U.S. for five years ▪ Shown good moral character ▪ Demonstrated ability to read, write, and speak English ▪ Indicated knowledge of U.S. history and government ▪ Completed citizenship application and paid related fees ▪ Taken the oath of allegiance for naturalized citizens 	Naturalized citizens do not require visas to live and work in the U.S.	✓	✓
Lawful Permanent Residents (LPR)	Belong to one of the following groups and have been granted immigrant visas: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Have been sponsored by a family member who is a U.S. citizen or LPR ▪ Have needed job skills & have been sponsored by a U.S. employer ▪ Come from a country that has low levels of immigration to the U.S. and have been granted admission through a diversity lottery ▪ Are refugees or aylees who are unable or unwilling to return to their home countries 	A total of 675,000 immigrant visas are available annually. Limits apply according to countries of origin and preference categories (family sponsored preference, employment based preference, and diversity lottery).	✓	
Individuals with temporary visas ¹	Have been granted nonimmigrant visas and thus have legal status to enter the United States for a limited period and specific purpose. This group includes students and temporary workers.	Nearly 100 different types of nonimmigrant visas exist, with no overall annual cap on the number of individuals admitted. However, Congress does set numerical limits for some categories.	✓	
Undocumented immigrants	Belong to one of the following groups: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Foreign-born individuals who enter, live, and work in the U.S. without the documents or authorization required by U.S. law. ▪ Foreign-born individuals who were admitted on a temporary basis but have overstayed their visas. 	Do not have a visa, and under current immigration law, may not have an opportunity to obtain a visa.		

Public Safety

Building a safe community is only possible if all individuals present in the community have the right to protection from crime and victimization. The community goals for public safety in Travis County are reflected in the following statements:

[To] be a community where all persons will be safe from crime and victimization.

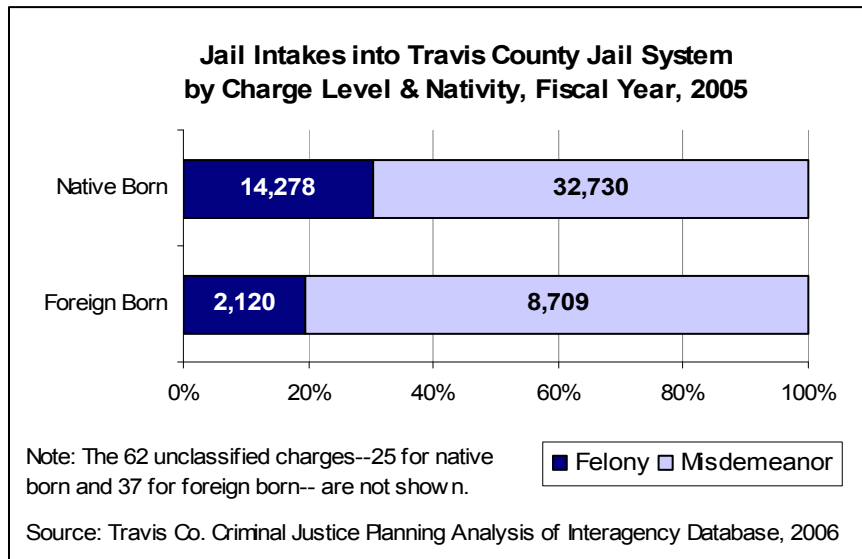
--Community Action Network, 2000

To protect and serve Austin's diverse community so that residents and visitors feel, and are, safe.

--Austin Police Department

Immigrants and Crime: Data suggest that immigrants may be overrepresented as victims of crime, most significantly homicide, robbery and human trafficking. Crimes against recently arrived immigrants are more likely to go unreported. Immigrant women appear to be at higher risk of experiencing family violence and may encounter greater difficulty escaping abuse than other women due to immigration laws, language barriers, social isolation and/or a lack of financial resources. Family violence impacts not only the adult victims, but also children living in families where violence between intimate partners is present.

While immigrants are often associated with disproportionately high rates of crime, crime data indicate this is not the case. National statistics indicate that first generation immigrants are *less likely* to be incarcerated than their native-born counterparts. Intake data for Travis County show that foreign-born residents are generally *as likely* as native-born residents to be charged with a crime. However, as related to the *type* of offense, foreign-born offenders are more likely to be charged with lesser offenses than are native-born offenders (see chart at right).



Immigrants and Local Law Enforcement: Historically, the role of local police in enforcing immigration policy has been limited. More recently, the federal government has supported an expanded role for local police. Austin and Travis County law enforcement agencies have maintained policies not to stop or detain individuals based on their assumed immigrant status and do not play a role in enforcing civil immigration laws.

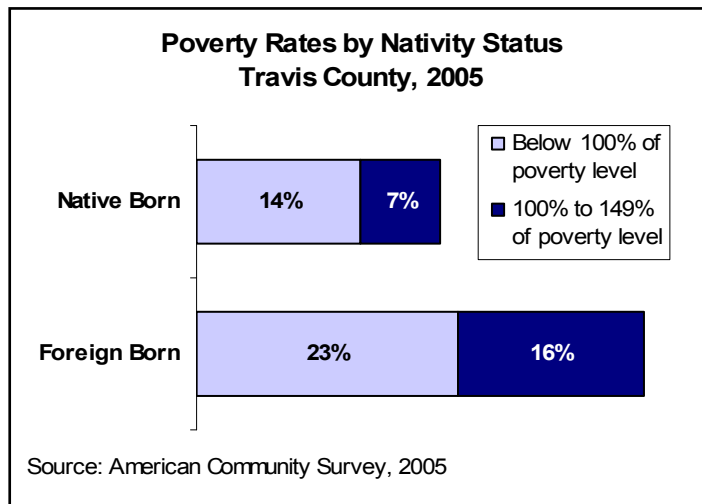
The Economic Safety Net

It is in the interest of the entire Travis County community for residents to be self-sufficient, thus fully contributing to the prosperity of the community. While the goals for other sections of this assessment focus on improving community conditions, this section addresses a community interest in maintaining a basic level of financial security for all families and individuals. The community’s goal in this area is reflected in the following statement:

To eliminate the effects of poverty and promote self-sufficiency.

--Basic Needs Coalition, 2007

Nationally, immigrants are more likely than the native born to live in poverty, regardless of household composition. In Travis County, almost one-quarter (23%) of immigrants live below the federal poverty level, compared to 14% of the native-born population (see chart below).



A “safety net” of federal benefits exists to help needy individuals and families meet their basic needs through cash assistance and services. For many immigrants, regardless of legal status, this economic safety net is weakened due to more restrictive eligibility requirements, particularly for programs that are federal means-tested public benefits (Supplemental Security Income, Food Stamps, Temporary Aid to Needy Families, Medicaid, and the Children’s Health Insurance Program).

Immigrants’ eligibility for public benefits can be quite complex. Beyond the requirements of each program, additional eligibility requirements for immigrants include criteria around type of immigrant status, when an immigrant entered the U.S., whether one belongs to a number of groups for whom there are exceptions/exemptions, and in some cases, the income and resources of an immigrant’s “sponsor” in the U.S. For some benefit programs that are operated at the state level, states may have additional and/or different eligibility criteria.

For families with mixed immigration status (having at least one parent who is a non-citizen and at least one child who is a citizen), federal benefit receipt has another layer of complexity. Among eligible low-income children, the citizen-children of non-citizen parents receive public benefits at lower rates than those of native-born parents. Their benefit receipt may be mitigated by confusion or fears that can act as deterrents for non-citizen parents.

Housing

Housing is a basic need of all residents. The safety and affordability of housing affects residents' quality of life, participation in the community, and health and financial well-being. The community's goal for housing in Travis County is reflected in the following statements:

To ensure the availability of safe, affordable housing.

--Community Action Network Housing Assessment, 1999

[To ensure that] everyone has a right to safe, decent, fair and affordable housing.

--Austin Tenants' Council

In general, compared to their native-born counterparts, immigrant households in Travis County are more likely to be married-couple households (64%), live in large households (23% have five or more persons), live in multi-family (apartment) housing (48%), and rent rather than own their housing (53%). They also experience overcrowding at higher rates than the native born.

Immigrants have lower homeownership rates than the native born. Nationwide, the homeownership gap between the native born and the foreign born is 17% (72% of native-born householders in the U.S. own their own home, compared with only 55% of foreign-born householders). Travis County is on par with these national trends, with a homeownership gap of 16% between the native-born and foreign-born populations; however, the county's homeownership rates are lower overall (63% of native-born households and 47% of foreign-born households own their own homes).

Housing characteristics vary across the county's immigrant population by several factors. Examining the effects of citizenship status shows that, compared to immigrants who become naturalized citizens, non-citizens have higher rates of overcrowding and housing cost burden. Non-citizens also have low homeownership rates. Variations are also observable by world region of origin. Latin American immigrants constitute the majority of the county's overcrowded immigrant households and the majority of immigrant households with a housing cost burden. Asian immigrants have higher rates of homeownership than immigrant groups of other origins. Lastly, length of stay in the U.S. can affect housing characteristics. The longer immigrants live in the United States, the more similar their housing characteristics become to those of the native-born population. In Travis County, immigrants who have lived longest in the U.S. have higher homeownership rates than those who are more recently arrived. They are also less likely to experience substandard housing conditions, overcrowding, or housing affordability problems.

Barriers to affordable housing and homeownership for immigrants include: lack of relationships with financial institutions, lack of formal identification, language and cultural differences, lower incomes, concentration in higher-priced housing markets, and vulnerability to predatory lending and other abusive practices.

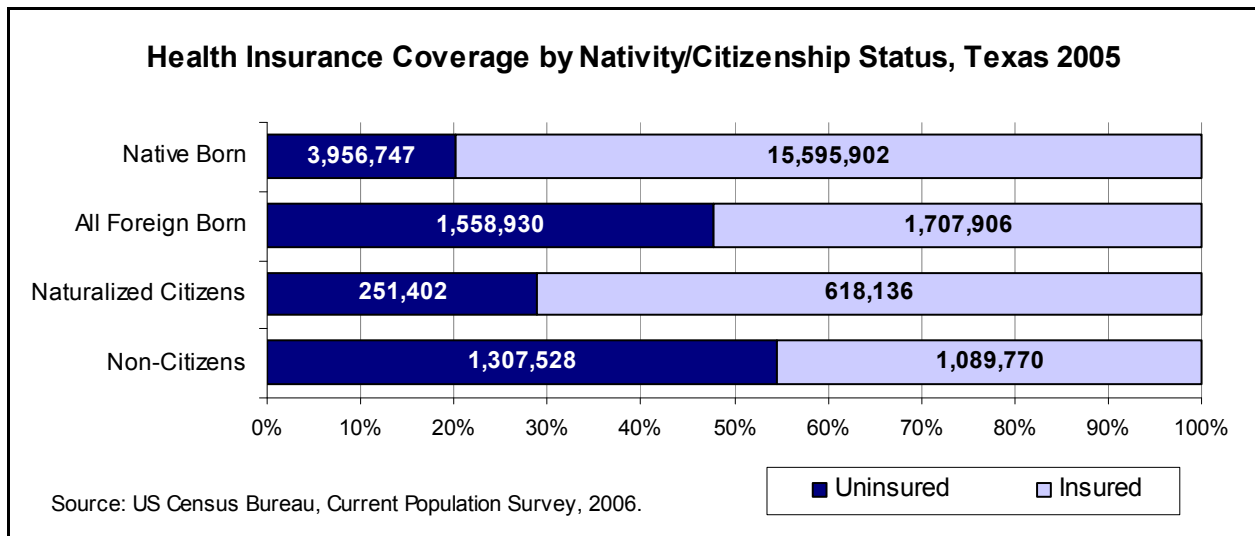
Health

Healthy residents can be full participants in their communities, schools, and places of work, thus contributing to the prosperity of Travis County as a whole. The community’s goal for health in Travis County is reflected in the following statement:

[To] promote the health and wellness of the residents of our community, especially the uninsured and underinsured, by working together to ensure access to a full range of coordinated healthcare services.
 --Travis County Healthcare District Board of Managers, 2007²

Immigrants are subject to the same constraints and challenges endemic to the U.S. healthcare system as the population at large. However, they appear to be at greater risk for falling into the system’s gaps.

Immigrants are more likely than the native born to lack health insurance (see chart below). In Texas, the share of the foreign born lacking health insurance (48%) is more than twice that of the native born (20%). In particular, non-citizens lack health insurance at almost three times the rate of the native born (55% are uninsured). These disparities in coverage are largely due to employment trends and to policies governing immigrants’ access to public health insurance.



Due to their lower rates of health insurance coverage, immigrants tend to be more reliant on healthcare safety net providers. They are also disproportionately low users of healthcare services, and as such, account for a relatively small share of total healthcare spending.

Despite their socio-economic risk factors and limited access to care, first-generation immigrants to the U.S. tend to be healthier than the native born population. However, their health tends to decline with acculturation and across later generations.

In general, language barriers, cultural differences, and providers’ levels of cultural competency can affect immigrants’ access to care, quality of care received, and ability to navigate the healthcare system.

Education

Having an educated populace strengthens the social and economic fabric of the community, and lays the foundation for community prosperity. The community goals for education in Travis County are reflected in the following statements:

Ensure that the district meets the needs of all student groups, with an emphasis on high-priority student populations, including African-American adolescents and recent immigrant English Language Learners.
 --Austin Independent School District, 2005

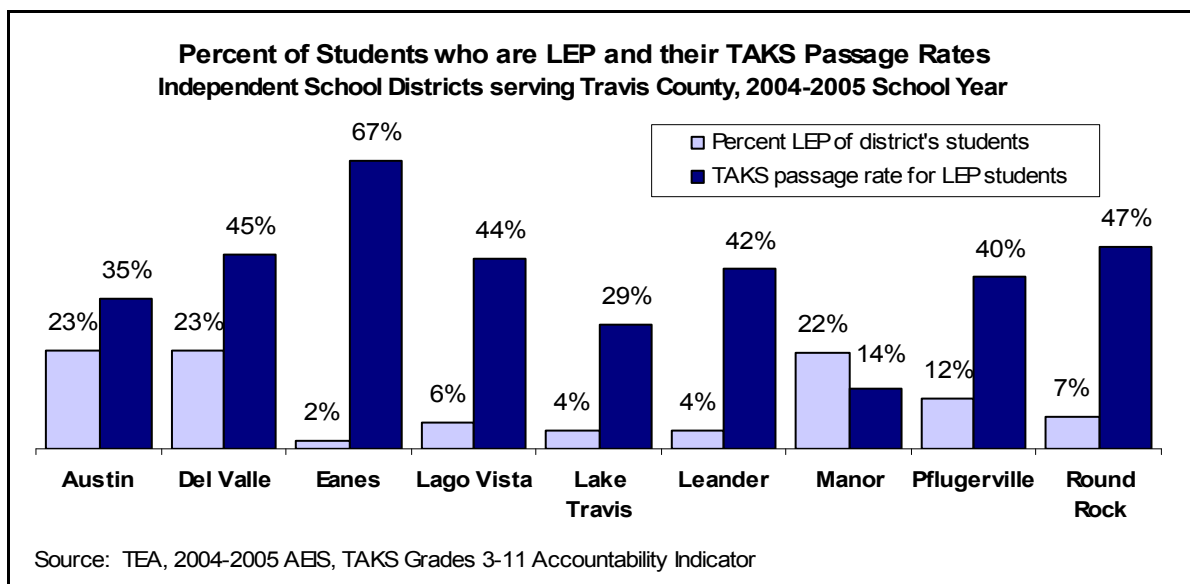
Support and expand high quality literacy services so that businesses can hire, people can work, and families can thrive.
 --Literacy Coalition of Central Texas, 2007

A growing number of students come from immigrant families. One out of every five children in the United States is the child of an immigrant.

Parental involvement in a child’s education often plays a key role in a child’s success from early childhood through college. English language proficiency and educational attainment among parents, as well as family socio-economic status generally correlate to parental involvement.

Nine school districts serve Travis County. Of these, Manor, Del Valle, and Austin Independent School Districts (ISD) have the largest percentages of LEP students. In total, 16% of students in districts serving Travis County are classified as limited English proficient (LEP). The majority of this LEP population comes from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

Travis County schools reflect the diversity in language and culture that exists throughout the community. In one of the largest LEP schools in Travis County, LEP students speak more than 63 different languages. 93% of those students speak Spanish at home.



Graduation rates for LEP students are consistently lower than those of other student populations. LEP students also achieve consistently lower passage rates on TAKS tests than other students. This growing population of students faces special circumstances and may require specific interventions in order to achieve academic parity.

Beyond the secondary level, immigrants may participate in higher education and attain degrees, regardless of their citizenship status; however, this does not ensure legal employability. Current proposed legislation (The Dream Act) attempts to address this.

English proficiency helps increase job opportunities, civic participation, and access to services. The demand for classes in English as a Second Language continues to surge as the immigrant population grows, in some instances outpacing the supply.

Workforce

The future economic prosperity of the Travis County community will rely on addressing the workforce needs of both businesses and community residents. The community goals for workforce development are reflected in the following statement:

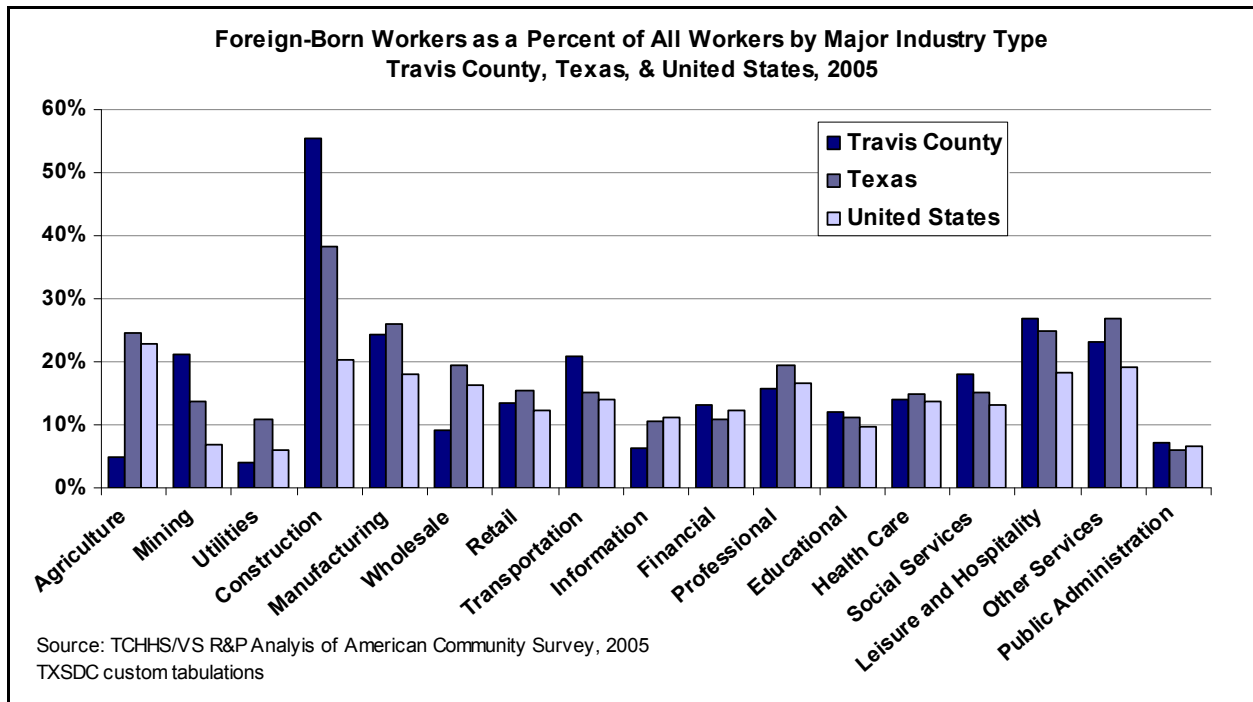
To provide enough skilled workers to support growing businesses and industry. To provide all individuals with the opportunity to achieve self-sufficiency.

--Community Action Network Workforce Development Assessment, 1999

Immigrants play a significant and growing role in the U.S., Texas, and local labor forces. Based on current and projected labor force dynamics, including retirement of the baby boomers, globalization, changing skill demands, and technological advancement, they are expected to continue to do so.

Due in part to these changing dynamics, the foreign born workforce in Texas has experienced considerable growth. Between 1995 and 2005, while the total Texas workforce grew by 18%, the state's foreign-born workforce grew by 62%. Currently, about one in five Texas workers is estimated to be foreign-born.

Nationally as well as locally, immigrant workers are represented throughout all sectors and occupations. However, they tend to be most concentrated either in jobs that require little formal education or training (such as construction and the service industry) or jobs that require advanced skills and training (such as engineering and medical professions). When compared with national averages, many industries in Texas rely more heavily on foreign-born workers (see chart on the following page).



Foreign-born workers are legally entitled to most of the same labor protections as other workers. However, particularly for undocumented workers, they are often vulnerable to exploitation of their rights, including being denied wages.

The issue of immigration’s effects on native-born workers’ wages and job opportunities has generated much debate. Regarding wages, there is little agreement among researchers regarding immigration’s impact on wage effects. As related to job opportunities, immigrant labor generally complements the native-born workforce rather than competes with it, although some competition does exist in that immigration has likely displaced some low-skilled native-born workers from jobs in some industries.

Immigrants make significant contributions to the U.S. economy. Immigrants help create new jobs and sustain jobs, both through their entrepreneurship and by increasing the demand for goods and services. Immigrants also contribute to businesses’ profits and stability, help keep jobs in the U.S., and help U.S. companies stay competitive in the global market.

Conclusions and Next Steps

As the assessment process ends, the community can build on existing planning efforts, and/or identify a new entity, to (1) lead and engage the community in addressing these issues, (2) determine the scope and focus of the work, and (3) maintain community connections and broaden the network of participants. Discussions could begin by convening different sets of stakeholders to explore the different angles of the issue.

To help navigate the complexity of the immigration issue and perspectives on it, the following conclusions sketch the overarching themes that emerged from the assessment, suggestions for future action, and questions to spark a community conversation.

1. Immigrants are part of and impact the Travis County community. Their success and well-being is tied to the long-term prosperity of the entire community.

As debate around immigration continues and Travis County emerges as an “immigrant gateway,” our community’s task remains to ensure the health, safety and well-being of all residents. To do so requires that public responses to community concerns incorporate a holistic and collective approach that includes immigrants and immigration-related issues. Without this inclusive perspective, the community’s long-term prosperity is compromised.

Next Steps: Acknowledge that immigrants are and will continue to be an integral part of the community. Examine social equity issues from this perspective.

Questions for Further Discussion:

- On a local level, how do our policies and practices act to include or exclude immigrant groups?
- What role do the public, private, and nonprofit sectors play in helping or hindering the integration of immigrants in the community?
- To what extent does the community’s response to immigrants limit or enhance the contributions they can make and define their membership in the community?
- To what extent does the community’s response to other issues (such as basic needs and healthcare) accommodate the immigrant population?
- How can the community capitalize upon immigrants’ economic and cultural contributions?

2. Travis County’s immigrants exhibit diversity in culture, socio-economic characteristics, and experiences in the U.S.

Immigrants vary in their countries of origin, languages spoken, reasons for immigrating, and the cultural norms and values they bring. Some immigrants are newly arrived, and others have lived in the community for decades. Immigrants are represented on both sides of the socio-economic spectrum, in terms of both educational attainment and income, and possess skills needed by the local economy. The unique interplay of these factors for each individual shapes their experiences, opportunities, and sense of integration into the community.

Next Steps: Facilitate community conversation and information exchange to better understand the constantly changing dynamics of immigration in Travis County. Monitor trends and continue exploration of immigrant issues.

Questions for Further Discussion:

- Do specific populations and topics warrant more in-depth examination? Where is further research needed?
- How closely do public perceptions of immigrants in Travis County align with the demographics and characteristics of the population?
- If a gap exists between perception and reality, how can it be addressed?

3. *Some immigrant sub-populations have higher needs and encounter greater challenges. These challenges are linked to both socio-economic and immigration-related characteristics.*

Being an immigrant frequently entails a prescribed set of challenges. Some are common to all or most immigrants, such as adjusting to a new culture and the loss of family, friends, community, and support systems from the home country. Many immigrants also face language barriers. For some individuals and families, opportunities and quality of life are further limited by their legal status, which governs access to resources and basic protections.

Socio-economic status has the potential to alleviate or augment the impacts of these challenges. Much like it does for the general population, socioeconomic factors (such as education, occupation and income) affect immigrants' ability to meet basic needs and to pursue opportunities leading to upward mobility.

The barriers immigrants experience may be immigrant-related, socio-economic, or some combination of both. To effectively serve individuals and families with high needs requires understanding their unique vulnerabilities, strengths, challenges and opportunities. To make service delivery systems inclusive of this population requires consideration of the links between individuals, systems and policy.

Next Steps: Convene stakeholders to identify ways to improve service delivery to immigrants. Review approaches to immigrant issues, taken in Travis County and in other communities, in order to identify best practices and inform local strategies.

Questions for Further Discussion:

- How can the community adapt existing institutions, systems, and planning efforts to be more inclusive of immigrant populations?
- How can the community develop or expand capacity to serve immigrant populations and address immigrant issues that fall outside the traditional service delivery system?
- What initiatives are taking place within immigrant communities and how can local resources support them?
- What can we learn from other communities in order to make our service delivery more effective and inclusive?
- What steps can be taken toward cultural competence in government and non-profit systems?

4. *Immigration systems, and the laws and policies related to them, are complex, changing and frequently unclear.*

The convergence of varied interests in the political, economic, and social welfare arenas results in ambiguous policies and inconsistent practices. Multiple challenges result. Immigrants may not be aware of their rights, the resources available to them, or sources for reliable information. Local governments and community-based organizations must stay informed of immigration-related laws and policies in order to appropriately serve clients and residents. Lastly, employers struggle to balance their business needs with their legal responsibilities.

While the prospects for comprehensive immigration reform remain unclear, potential outcomes include a broader guest worker program and/or a path to lawful permanent residency and citizenship for undocumented immigrants currently living in the United States. Such changes would likely have broad impacts for the community, including an increased demand for social services and for immigration-related legal services.

Next Steps: Inform multiple stakeholders. Provide current information and conduct outreach and training for immigrants, service providers, businesses, and local governments. Identify processes and structures to sustain an ongoing exchange of information.

Questions for Further Discussion:

- What information do different stakeholders need?
- How can this information be appropriately delivered to different sectors?
- What information systems and outreach/training efforts already exist? How can the community replicate and build upon them, either locally or regionally?
- Given the complexity and variability of immigration-related policy, what kind of information system can gather, centralize, update and disseminate the information needed by the community?
- If comprehensive immigration reform occurs, what potential impacts could be expected on the local level? What planning or action would be needed?

5. *Federal, state and local authorities disagree on who is responsible for the immigration issue.*

While the federal government has jurisdiction to set and enforce broad laws and policies, it can fall to states and local governments to define their roles in immigration enforcement. Local communities, often with limited resources, are ultimately responsible for meeting the needs of immigrant residents, including their education, healthcare and safety.

Next Steps: Impact policy. Establish communication networks between different levels of government so that immigration policy reflects and addresses the real needs and costs of local communities.

Questions for Further Discussion:

- What are the community's interests and values around immigration and meeting the needs of immigrant residents?
- What policies can be developed or modified locally?
- What does the community want to convey to state and federal policy makers?
- How can the local community best communicate its messages? Who is best situated to do it?