



Cities are at the core of global immigration debate

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By **MARIE PRICE** and **LISA BENTON-SHORT**

IMMIGRATION today touches the lives and economies of more people and places than ever before. Yet the places that are disproportionately impacted by immigrant flows are not countries, per se, but cities.

In the United States, only 12.4 percent of the population is foreign-born, whereas in many metropolitan areas the foreign born make up 20 percent or more of the total population. The same pattern holds true for nearly every state with a positive net migration rate; most immigrants today are bound for metropolitan areas, especially a select range of "global immigrant gateways."

The 20 cities of the world with immigrant populations of 1 million or more are home to 36 million foreign-born residents, approximately 20 percent of the world's foreign-born stock. This means that one in five of the world's immigrants is settling in these metropolises.

Some of these cities have a long history as immigrant gateways such as Sydney, New York, London, Chicago, Buenos Aires and Toronto. But others, such as Dubai, Houston and Washington, D.C., have topped the 1 million mark only recently.

In terms of sheer numbers, the New York City metropolitan area is the largest immigrant destination in the world, with more than 5 million foreign-born residents in 2005.

The large number of immigrants in the Persian Gulf cities is due to temporary worker programs that result in thousands of laborers migrating to this region, especially from North Africa and South Asia. Few of these workers are permitted to settle permanently in these cities, and they are largely excluded from political and social integration.

Yet many easily renew their visas and have labored for more than 20 years in the region -- thus raising the question of when a "temporary worker" is no longer temporary.

In the last decade, Dubai has emerged as one of the fastest-growing Arab cities. More than 80 percent of the city's population is foreign-born. No other major city in the world is so dependent upon foreign labor.

Around the world, but especially in Western Europe, Australia, the Persian Gulf and North America, immigrants play a fundamental role in the labor force and the social life of cities. These flows of people are a powerful, but often overlooked, expression of economic and cultural globalization.

Asia also affected

In Western Europe and the Persian Gulf, unprecedented numbers of foreign-born have arrived within the last two decades. In North America and Australia, the numbers of immigrants are reminiscent of flows in the early 20th century, although the ethnic and racial diversity are far greater.

Even in cities that are seldom thought of as immigrant destinations, such as Tokyo, Seoul and Taipei, the numbers of foreign-born workers have increased dramatically in the last 15 years, and demographic trends (such as low birth rates and older populations) suggest that this trend will continue. These immigrants tend to be in their prime working years (20-45), include both men and women, are educated, and are typically legal immigrants. The undocumented, for obvious reasons, are often not found in the data.

While many cities attract the majority of their immigrants from a narrow range of countries -- Mexico in Los Angeles or Houston, Cuba in Miami -- others are strikingly "hyperdiverse": New York, London, Toronto, Amsterdam, Sydney, Copenhagen, Hamburg, San Francisco, Seattle, Munich and Washington, D.C. Such cities are a product of the globalization of labor that has both economic and cultural implications.

There are several conclusions to draw from this snapshot of immigration to cities. Globalization is resulting in an intensification of the movement of people across borders, and much of this flow is directed to metropolitan areas for which large numbers of diverse immigrants are relatively new. It is in these newer destinations where tensions often arise between native-born and newcomer.

In the end, however, immigrant integration or exclusion has always happened at the local scale. Thus, while Congress debates national immigration reform, it is the nation's metropolitan areas that are the front line in terms of developing policies that promote immigrant integration, exclusion, accommodation or deflection.

Marie Price is a councilor of the American Geographical Society. She can be reached at mprice@gwu.edu. She and Lisa Benton-Short are members of the department of geography at George Washington University. Benton-Short can be reached at lbenton@gwu.edu.

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