

The Boston Globe **Bay State's immigrant influx grows**

Latest data run counter to US trend

By Maria Sacchetti, Globe Staff | October 5, 2009

Massachusetts' immigrant population rose last year in the middle of the recession, bucking a national trend that showed a decline in foreign-born residents for the first time in decades.

The Bay State's modest 2.5 percent increase in immigrants puzzled researchers and advocates as the numbers dipped in other states, including California, Florida, and neighboring Rhode Island, according to the Census Bureau's 2008 American Community Survey.

Theories accounting for the increase abound. It could be that the state's economy fared better than those of other states, that the census survey simply missed departures from Massachusetts, or that tabulation of a decline could still be coming.

Some researchers suggested that immigrants in Massachusetts - who make up 14 percent of the state population - are inclined to stay put because they are more highly educated than immigrants elsewhere and less likely to be here illegally. That gives them an edge in an economic downturn.

Nowhere is the immigrant tally more surprising than in Framingham, where the estimated number of immigrants rose from 15,037 to 17,727 last year, making it about a quarter of the town's population of 69,000. Some advocates for immigrants had warned that many were decamping for Brazil, the native country of the largest immigrant group in town, because of the economy and because those who were here illegally had abandoned hope for legal residency.

"People have been saying to me for years, 'Don't you see fewer people?' And I've been saying no," said Christine Tibor, director of Framingham's adult English-as-a-second-language program. "Our numbers are actually up."

The latest figures are based on the American Community Survey, an annual survey of 3 million households nationwide that offers an estimate of the population between the decennial census, which is a head count of the entire United States. In Massachusetts, the survey estimated that the number of immigrants rose to 937,200 last year from 913,957 the year before.

Nationally, the number of immigrants slipped less than 1 percent, leveling off after soaring in previous years. Some experts attributed the national decline to immigrants who are returning to their homelands because of the recession, but others said that the influx of foreigners coming into the United States had plunged.

Researchers looking specifically at Massachusetts said that immigrants are more likely to be here legally and be highly educated compared to immigrants in other states, giving them an advantage in the current economy. About one in five Massachusetts immigrants is here illegally, below the national average of roughly one in three.

More than 80 percent of young adult immigrants in Massachusetts have graduated from high school, compared with 70 percent nationally.

"Massachusetts immigrants could be expected to fare somewhat better in the recession," said Steven Camarota, research director for the Washington, D.C.,-based Center for Immigration

Studies.

Massachusetts also might offer a more welcoming environment for immigrants than other states.

Though the Bay State does not allow illegal immigrants to drive or pay in-state tuition in public colleges and universities, Governor Deval Patrick set a welcoming tone by ordering a yearlong study on ways to better integrate immigrants here.

By comparison, neighboring Rhode Island ordered government agencies to crack down on illegal immigrants. Rhode Island's immigration population dropped nearly 5 percent last year.

It is most likely that immigrants - like anyone else - stayed in Massachusetts because they could find work, said Andrew Sum, director of the Center for Labor Market Studies at Northeastern University.

"Immigrants respond to where the jobs are," said Sum. "There was no place for them to go."

If it weren't for immigrants, Massachusetts would have lost population in the past decade, Sum said.

The survey results did draw skepticism from some advocates, who said the immigrant communities are notoriously hard to count, partly because a significant minority are here illegally.

"That's not the experience that we have," said Fausto da Rocha, a local Brazilian immigrant leader, of the numbers showing an increase in immigrants in Massachusetts. He said he believes thousands have returned to their native countries, particularly Brazil, where the economy seemed stronger, a change that he said is visible in churches and neighborhoods and in shops that have closed.

"The community has diminished a lot," he said. "If there's not a reform in the spring, more will go home."

To be sure, the number of people in Massachusetts who said they were born in Brazil has declined in the years preceding the new 2008 tally - from an estimated 75,000 in 2006 to nearly 64,000 in 2007, according to the American Community Survey.

But the numbers climbed back up last year to nearly 70,000 Brazilians in the state.

Alvaro Lima, research director at the Boston Redevelopment Authority, said immigrants returned to Brazil but not in the huge numbers that some believe, partly because Brazil's economy is not as strong in their hometowns. And some Brazilians moved to other states, such as Louisiana to help rebuild New Orleans.

In Framingham, signs that the immigrant community is staying can be seen in the number of adults in English classes, which remains high: 650 are enrolled and 550 are on the waiting list, Tibor said.

It is also possible that new immigrants have replaced those who left.

In Tibor's English classes, refugees from Iraq now join immigrants from Brazil, Russia, and China.

"I hear people saying that people are leaving, but I don't see anything," said Bruno Bicalho, a 26-

year-old music teacher from Ipatinga, Brazil. "I don't know even one."

But Priscila Silva, a 33-year-old nanny from Belo Horizonte, also in Brazil, said she knows five people who have left.

"It's been very difficult for immigrants to stay here," she said. "There aren't any jobs."

Immigrants also may have spread out to the suburbs, said Pablo Maia, owner of a real estate company that has operated for 10 years in Framingham and Marlborough.

"I'm here every day, and I can see the guys are still here," Maia said. "Some of them, they just moved around, from Framingham to Marlborough to Ashland. If you drive in Massachusetts today you'll see a Brazilian place everywhere you go."

If Massachusetts' 9.1 percent unemployment rate continues to rise, researchers say it is possible that immigration will decline.

"It may be when we get next year's data we get a different picture of what's happening," said Rakesh Kochhar, associate director for research at the Washington-based Pew Hispanic Center. "Some things may be changing just as we are talking." ■