

Immigrants make up 40 percent of New York City's population

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A survey of New York City households taken by the US Census Bureau in 1999 has revealed that 40 percent of the city's 7.4 million people are now foreign-born.

This figure, reported in the press this week, quantifies and confirms what is apparent on the city's streets, subways and in other public places. Roughly 100,000 immigrants have been arriving and making New York City their home each year for the past decade. One million have come since 1990. This has meant an almost incredible jump in the percentage of foreign-born New Yorkers, from 28 to 40 percent, in less than ten years.

The immigrant presence in the city has now matched the level of 40 percent recorded in 1910, at the height of the 1880-1920 wave of immigration which brought millions of workers to the US.

During those decades the newcomers arrived mainly from southern and eastern Europe, joining previous waves from Germany, Ireland and England. Today the immigrants come from literally every corner of the globe. The number of New Yorkers born in the Dominican Republic, for instance, has jumped from 230,000 in 1990 to 387,000 in 1999. During this same period city residents born in the former Soviet Union nearly tripled, from 81,000 to 229,000; South Asians from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh increased their numbers from 67,000 to 146,000; and the Mexican population nearly quadrupled, from 35,000 to 133,000.

These are only a few of the more dramatic statistics. Chinese immigrants have also arrived in huge numbers, along with Koreans and an increasing number of Africans, both from the Arab North and from sub-Saharan Africa. There is barely a country in the world that doesn't have a significant presence in the largest city in the United States. There are three "Chinatowns" today, with Flushing in Queens and Sunset Park in

Brooklyn joining the original Chinese neighborhood in lower Manhattan.

Nearly every country in Latin America is represented in the Jackson Heights, Elmhurst and Corona sections of Queens. Nor are these immigrant groups confined to only one neighborhood. There are many sections of the city which have become a mix of languages, cultures and nationalities. The borough of Queens includes 167 nationalities and 116 languages, the greatest variety in the country and undoubtedly in the world.

The estimate of 40 percent immigrants is not yet official, but it is if anything a conservative figure. It is based on a recently released survey conducted by the Census Bureau every three years for the purpose of determining whether housing vacancies are below the 5 percent level required for continuing rent regulation. (Needless to say, the vacancy rate is far below 5 percent!) Andrew Beveridge, a Queens College sociologist, analyzed the data and made certain adjustments for factors such as the number of children born in the US to parents who are recently-arrived immigrants. The household survey, large enough to make the margin of error less than one percentage point, actually found that 44 percent of heads of households were foreign-born.

The absolute number of foreign-born New York residents has climbed from about 2 million in 1990 to nearly 3 million today. Furthermore, this does not include 290,000 who were born in Puerto Rico. They are US citizens, but in many respects they share the experiences of the immigrants. In addition, there may be as many as several hundred thousand children below the age of 10 born in the US but growing up in immigrant households. All of these elements together mean that in essence New York either already has an immigrant majority, or will within another year or two.

As recently as 1970 the proportion of foreign born in New York was less than 18 percent. In the space of one generation the population of the city has been transformed.

Immigration has of course been a widespread phenomenon in the past 50 years. Canada and Australia, with major metropolises such as Toronto and Sydney, have been greatly changed by this process. Most major cities in the US have also seen their share of immigration, but New York has seen the largest and fastest transformation of this kind.

A combination of factors and circumstances are involved, above all the changes in the world economy, the accelerating globalization of production and of economic life. The growing gulf between living conditions in the advanced capitalist sector and the countries of the “Third World” has made the economically advanced nations a pole of attraction. The conditions of ruthless exploitation and miserable housing facing many immigrants in New York has still seemed far preferable to the semi-starvation and generalized hopelessness in their countries of origin. Billions of people have been driven deeper into poverty by the debt crisis and the austerity policies dictated by the International Monetary Fund.

A glance at the countries of origin of most of the new immigrants—Mexico, the Dominican Republic, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, the former Soviet Union—shows the relationship between the immigration trends and this economic reality. In all these areas, there is not simply economic suffering, but also little hope for any change for the better. Behind this is the collapse of the old movements and leaderships claiming to speak for the working class and the oppressed masses.

At the same time, American capitalism has announced its willingness to accept larger numbers of immigrants. Federal legislation was changed more than three decades ago, and soon resulted in increasing numbers of immigrants and a major change in the mix of immigrants, with more coming from the world's poorest regions.

Capitalist globalization has meant the creation of new low-wage sectors of the economy inside the US, along with the search for cheap labor in other parts of the world. Immigrants have been pitted against native-born workers to drive down wages and conditions. The newcomers have been used to take the many poorly

paid jobs in the service sector, including personal services provided to the growing numbers of millionaires and the upper levels of the middle class. While the new immigrants have made New York a more proletarian city than ever, it is also a city which is as socially polarized as it was in the Gilded Age of a century ago, if not more so.



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