

Immigration report lifts some eyebrows

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The most detailed U.S. Census study ever of America's immigrants reveals a remarkable diversity in age, income and education — and yields some surprises.

For example:

- Recent immigrants from the Soviet Union were among the poorest and least employed, far more so than Latin American or Asian newcomers.

- African immigrants had the highest levels of education, with nearly 90 percent having high school diplomas or better.

- Immigrants who had been here the longest, arriving before 1980, had significantly higher per-capita incomes than native-born Americans.

"This is the first time these broad characteristics of the foreign-born have been available," said Susan Lapham, a Census Bureau demographer and author of the study. "You can really see how the longer people are here, people's incomes go up."

Lapham's work, which was based on the 1990 census, shatters the notion that America is absorb-

ing a bigger share of immigrants than ever before.

The numbers may be vast — 8.7 million since 1980 — but Lapham says the proportion of foreign-born residents today is not even close to that of the early part of the century.

"At the turn of the century, in 1910, (the U.S. population) was 15 percent foreign-born," Lapham said. "In 1990, it was 8 percent foreign-born."

The study uses responses from the 1990 census to estimate income levels, education, ability to speak English and other characteristics of the entire foreign-born population and of those who arrived during the 1980s.

It did not attempt to distinguish between the characteristics of legal and illegal immigrants, who come from a variety of countries.

The findings are of particular relevance to California, which is home to 23 percent of the nation's immigrants, the largest proportion of any state.

Most immigrants to the United States and to California are Mexicans, but the state is also home to

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and others. RP 9/24/93 p.4

In 1990, Mexicans represented 21.7 percent of the U.S. foreign-born population and 38.3 percent of California's. Filipinos were second in the nation with 4.6 percent and second in California with 7.5 percent.

Political conflict and economic instability during the 1980s created a surge in Salvadoran, Guatemalan and Nicaraguan immigration, according to Jorge del Pinal, the Census Bureau demographer in charge of ethnic studies.

But Mexicans were the largest Latino immigrant group. Those who entered the country between 1987 and 1990 had a mixed bag of characteristics.

They have relatively low levels of English proficiency and education compared with Filipinos or Europeans, but with an annual median household income of \$16,712, they earned far more than recent Soviet immigrants.

The Soviets were at the bottom of the income list at \$8,248.

"I'm surprised by that," said Linda Gordon, a policy analyst with the Immigration and Naturalization Service who has worked on Soviet refugee resettlement.

However, Gordon said, the explanation probably lies in the fact that virtually all Soviet immigrants who entered between 1987 and 1990 were official refugees — Armenians and Soviet Jews who came with few resources, relied on settlement agencies for help and were not barred from receiving

public assistance such as welfare and medical insurance.

Del Pinal said that, as refugees who entered under special status, Soviet immigrants might have had longer to adjust to the United States. They may have spent more time sharpening their English skills and holding out for better-paying jobs than Latin American immigrants.

"Possibly, somebody who speaks Spanish and not English can do more jobs than somebody who speaks Russian and not English," del Pinal said. "And people who are educated tend to want to take positions that are higher-paid."

Many Latin American immigrants came here with the intention to find work immediately, he added.

Del Pinal said these immigrants took low-wage jobs — benefiting many industries — but appeared to be limited in individual advancement by a lack of higher education.

If the United States government wants consciously to better prepare its work force for more sophisticated jobs, it should consider investing in more adult literacy classes for immigrants, del Pinal said.

"It depends on what you want to do about things," he said. "You can say, 'This is terrible, we're being invaded.' But I think on balance these people probably contribute a lot more than people realize."

Gordon said the comparatively high-education levels of Japanese-born immigrants could be attributed to an influx of business professionals from Japan during the 1980s.

Lapham said Africans' high education levels could have resulted from influxes of Egyptian and South African students and professionals. The census report does not break down African immigration by country of birth, however.