

Another Kind of Poverty: Immigrants

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Immigration in the small state of Delaware reflects one of the most important social developments of our time. It, like many states, has experienced the largest wave of immigration in history. This wave is a social phenomenon, which not only affects economies but also families and their children. It is a rising phenomenon because once immigrants are settled, they send for their loved ones or form new families. The smallest towns such as Marydel to the largest such as Wilmington have experienced this phenomenon.

Presently in Delaware, immigrants account for 19% of the state's overall population increase and nine percent of the total population. It is estimated that there are over 75,000 immigrants and 10,000 undocumented immigrants. The numbers, however, could be much higher since most undocumented immigrants are isolated and uncounted. But whether documented or not—who are these people? And why do they come to quiet little towns like Georgetown or Laurel, changing the face of those towns forever? What do they face as they as they create new lives, so far from their homes?

Immigrants are the result of a “push” or “pull” force. Some immigrants, such as many of the Guatemalan Indians in Georgetown, escape political, ethnic or religious persecution. Others leave, seeking jobs and economic stability. Even others, from countries entrenched in socioeconomic stratification, are drawn by a desire for social mobility. And still a few others are pulled by a sense of adventure. Whatever the reason is for a move, immigration today usually results in gains for the people who move. There are gains to be made but typically at a high cost. Often what the immigrant gains in economics, he and his family lose in the psychosocial arena, as a consequence of cultural violence. This cultural violence is locked into the shifts in immigration trends.

The recent immigrants represent a remarkable shift in these immigration trends. Previously, most immigrants hailed from European countries. Now the majority are from Latin America, the Caribbean, and Asia. Typically, these are not people of the same race as our Irish or German forefathers

and mothers. No, instead as with the Mayan Indians in Georgetown or the Haitians in Laurel, the majority of immigrants bring us a blend of an Indian, African, and Latino culture and race. Within this spectrum, the population is so diverse that public school, in large cities such as New York as well as our own Delawarean public schools, document that the children enrolled speak over 100 different languages. Consequently, this shift brings a wealth of culture, ideas, and hard work to our American Melting Pot.

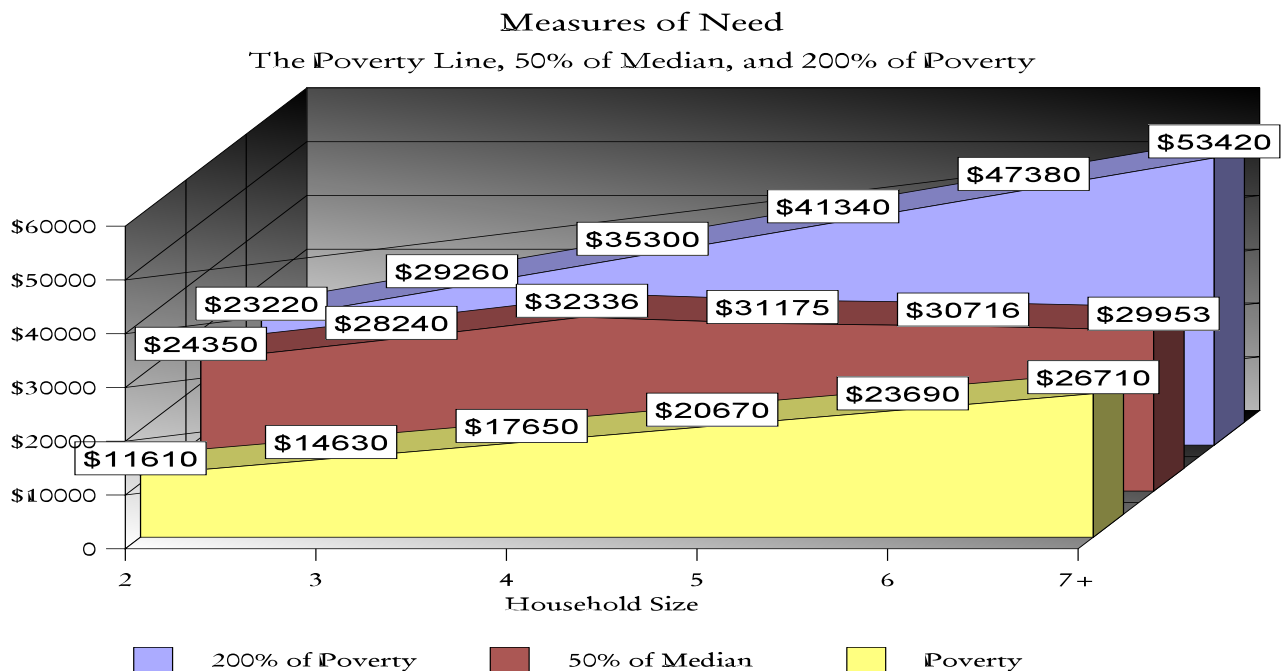
But such diversity of people of color is also often at the crux of some of the poverty faced by immigrants. Sadly, it is precisely because of race and ethnicity that the immigrant is no longer so easily absorbed by the Melting Pot. Instead, because of these same factors, the majority of immigrants, well educated or not, face marginalization, poverty, and isolation.

The majority of immigrants are, in fact, well educated. Many immigrants represent the technological fields and engineering. Roughly a third of all Nobel Prize winners in the United States are immigrants. More than half of all entering physics graduate students were foreign born. Though an educated background definitely lends certain ease into the transition to this society, it hardly insures "success". Many professionals, such as a Mexican woman in Wilmington, once a banker, who now ironically cleans the

bathrooms of a bank, are marginalized, segregated into neighborhoods far from their professional roots.

On the other hand, immigrants are also overrepresented among people without diplomas, without skills necessary to succeed in a post-industrial society. Many of the Mayans in Georgetown and many of the Haitians hail from far-removed villages where neither technology nor traditional Western education was readily available. Though, they might carry incredible skills such as building homes, playing complex music, tending diverse agricultural crops, the demands of this society can be daunting. The negative societal stereotyping of people of color, narrowing their opportunity further often reinforces these difficulties.

Today's immigrants of color are seen by many as possessing traits that make them unmeltable and incompatible with modern American culture. Like other minority groups (such as African Americans and Puerto Ricans) some new immigrants have been labeled as "inferior", "lazy", "prone to crime", then therefore less deserving of sharing the American Dream. Many of these, despite their backgrounds, but due to societal perception, end up in low skilled jobs at the other end of the economic spectrum,



working in poorly paid and uninsured service. Unlike the unskilled jobs of our forefathers, when factories were on the rise and there was floor shop mobility, these jobs are dead end jobs that have little upward mobility. The economy today promises little economic rise to those without skills or credentials; and seems to oftentimes deem race as part of the credential.

While all groups of immigrants face structural obstacles such as the need to find housing and jobs, not all groups face the same attitudes from the dominant culture. Some groups elicit a more negative response than others do. Asians, for example, according to US public opinion polls, are seen more favorably than Latinos. In cases where ethnic and racial inequalities are highly structured, such as with Algerians in France or Mexicans in California, then “psychological disparagement” or “symbolic violence” dominates the immigrants’ experience. Members of the groups are not only locked out of opportunity (by being segregated to inferior schools or less desirable jobs) but also become victims of cultural degradation. They might be considered “inferior” “lazy”, prone to crime” and therefore less deserving of the dominant society’s American Dream.

Facing such attitudes, many children quickly absorb them and begin to look at them selves as such. They spend most of their psychic energy facing cultural violence, defending their sense of self and family. Though immigrants driven by their own sense of hope for a better tomorrow are willing to work hard in these jobs, the jobs also fail to provide for the basic needs of a family. Not only does this state or our country lose invaluable resources in the skills lost to poultry plants, but also the immigrants become more and more segregated within our society.

Many immigrants, due to this stereotyping find themselves in conflict ridden, segregated, poor neighborhood, jobs and schools where xenophobia and exclusion can be attitudinal and structural. They settle in segregated neighborhoods where violence is an everyday norm. As one West African teenager in Wilmington shared: “I worry everytime I go to the bus stop to go to school. Will there be any shooting? There is a lot of violence here in the United States. They kill people on the streets.”

New immigrants face the great task of finding a place to live, employment, and enrolling their children in schools. Additionally, there are many unanticipated realities the immigrant faces: the loss of loved ones, language, culture, the fear of an unpredictable life, and disappointed

aspirations. They also need to learn a new language and about the new social interactions. As one Mexican summed it up: “I got here and I didn’t know anything. It was like I was a kid again. I had to learn everything again. I had to learn to talk, how to eat, how to dress and even how to smile at the right time.”

There is little to guide the immigrant in this experience. In fact, many parents lose status as they plunge into a world where they are regarded merely as “spics”, and where their education or culture is devalued by the dominant society. Their self-esteem corrodes and they are often left with little power with which to manage and lead their children in this New World.

Some of their children respond to the cultural violence they see inflicted upon their parents by placing their energy into become a success despite all circumstances. Others, absorb this negative mirroring, and look for a more immediate protection and acceptance by forming or participating in gangs. The gangs offer acceptance, protection and often structure the anger that immigrant kids feel towards the society that violently rejected their parents. Many, fortunately, outgrow the gang mystique after working through their teenage issues, but not without the scars of less education and oftentimes entanglements with the law.

Despite all of these obstacles, the immigrant’s most fundamental hope is to create a better life. Hard work and optimism are considered part and parcel to this project. Most immigrants see hard work as part of their commitment to this new life. They will do the impossibly difficult jobs that no other workers will do. They will stand long hours in the poultry plants, pick crops from our fields, and fill boxes of make up in our factories. Strong family ties, the work ethic, and the optimism, are the strengths they bring with them that oftentimes helps them overcome these enormous obstacles. Hope for a better tomorrow is their inspiration. It is the advantage that many immigrants hold as they face hard work, stressful changes, and profound losses.

We align ourselves with that hope every time we confront and transform perceptions and negative stereotyping. A mere shift in perception which looks beyond race and to the skills and talents immigrants bring, can not only impact school systems, policies, and work places, but can also lend ease and comfort to the immigrant’s arduous, but hopeful journey.