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Immigration and Ethnic Diversity in Nevada*

Introduction

In a few decades, non-Hispanic whites will constitute a bare majority in the United States. If current demographic trends continue,

- By 2050, the Hispanic population will more than double, the Asian population will double, and the African-American population will grow at a faster pace than non-Hispanic whites.

These developments promise to bring profound changes in the country's ethnic and racial landscape. Many of these demographic trends are on display in the Silver State.

- Nevada has a higher percentage of foreign born than the United States as a whole, and its Asian and Latino populations are higher than the comparable national figures. Nevada is likely to join several other states where non-Hispanic whites are in the minority or will be soon.

The present report seeks to provide an overview of immigration and ethnicity in Nevada. After a brief historical overview, the discussion follows the 2000 U.S. Census data and taps other sources that shed light on situation in Nevada. A caveat is in order: Since more research has been done on immigration and ethnicity in Clark County than in the rest of the state, the main focus of the report will be on the current trends in the Las Vegas Valley.

Historical Overview

Immigration has been central to U.S. history. Except for the Native Americans, the entire U.S. population is the product of immigration, voluntary or forced. Africans arrived as slaves until the trade was legally stopped in 1808. Prior to the Civil War, the great majority of immigrants hailed from western and northern Europe. Immigration increased after the war and the sources of immigrants shifted to southern and eastern Europe. Small numbers of Mexicans and Asians, primarily Chinese, complemented the Europeans.

The **Chinese Exclusion Act of**

1882, <http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/chinex.htm>, and quotas imposed in the 1920's slowed immigration, and the Great Depression and World War II kept it in check.

The pace of immigration has quickened in each decade since the 1950s.

- In the 1990's, the greatest decade of immigration in American history, over 13 million foreign born came to the United States.
- In 2000, over 31,000,000 people, or 11.1% of the U.S. population, were born abroad.
- These 31 million people were counted by the U.S. census. Several millions entered the country illegally and evaded the census takers.

In contrast to the traditional immigration patterns, which involved primarily Europeans, modest numbers of Mexicans, and Asians drawn from only a few countries, recent immigrants have come from around the world. The new immigration is driven by poverty, ethnic strife, war, repression that sometimes rises to the level of state terror, and genocide such as seen in Guatemala in the 1980's and Rwanda and Bosnia in the 1990's. The pull factors emanating from the developed world are a demand for cheap labor, economic opportunity, consumerism, and democratic political systems that minimize repression. Today, instant mass communication brings home to even the remotest communities the yawning gap between life on the periphery and life at the center of the world economy, propelling millions of people onto the route toward a better life.

Two important publications reflect the diversification of immigration currents in recent decades. The *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups*, published in 1980, listed 106 groups, from Abkhazians to Zoroastrians. But people from several countries, such as Ethiopia, Nigeria, and Sudan, were subsumed under the category "Africans" and immigrants from most Latin American countries were listed as "Central and South Americans." The 1997 *American Immigrant Cultures* listed 161 groups, including Circassians, Igbo, Vlachs, and Punjabi Mexicans. Any such work published today would

undoubtedly identify dozens of additional ethnic and immigrant communities.

These two publications underscore the inadequacy of U.S. Census categories for portraying the reality of racial and ethnic groups. They tell us that we are already extremely demographically diverse and that coming changes will be profound. The Hispanic population today, for example, consists of people from every Latin American country, most of which, in turn, are ethnically diverse. The same is true of Asian immigrants and of a new but growing presence in the United States and Nevada, African immigrants. In coming decades, if not now, the number of ethnic and immigrant groups will greatly surpass the 161 identified in *American Immigrant Cultures*.

Immigration and Diversity in Nevada

Nevada has been racially and ethnically diverse from its beginnings. When it achieved statehood in 1864, the United States had begun to diversify its immigration sources, and that trend was reflected in Nevada's population. The 1870 Census found that 44.2% of the new state's population was foreign-born, the highest figure of any state and over three times the national percentage of immigrants. The figure dropped to 41.2% ten years later. In the heyday of the Comstock Lode, Virginia City's population was a potpourri of nationalities. Of the 2,770 men employed there in mining in 1880, only 770 (27.8%) were native-born.

- Chileans were found in Nevada as early as 1870. Chinese constituted 8.6% of Nevada's population in 1880. Greeks made up 5.8% of the state's population in 1910 and 10% of White Pine County's residents.

Today, Nevada mirrors national trends in immigration and ethnic diversification, and in some categories, leads the country.

- Nevada had the fastest growing Asian population in the 1990s: 207.4%.
- Nevada had the country's second fastest growing Hispanic population in the 1990s: 217%.

- Nevada's percentage of foreign born is 15.8%, compared to the national figure of 11.1%.
- Of the foreign born, 61.4% were from Latin America, 22.9% from Asia, 10.2% from Europe, 3.4% from Canada, 1.6% from Africa, and 0.7% from Oceania.
- 10% of Nevadans are not U.S. citizens.

2000 Census figures for Nevada's and the country's populations, in broad racial categories, are as follows:

- The white populations were essentially equal – 75.2% for Nevada and 75.1% for U.S.
- Nevada had just over half the African American population – 6.8% compared with 12.3%.
- Nevada had greater than average American Indian and Alaska Native population – 1.3% versus 0.9%.
- Nevada was 4.5% Asian, compared with the U.S. figure of 3.6%.
- Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islanders constituted 0.4% of Nevada's residents, compared with only 0.1% of the U.S. population.
- Hispanics or Latinos made up 12.5% of the national population, while they accounted for 19.7% of Nevadans.

The Nevada state demographer estimates that

- In 2003, Nevada population was 63.7% white, 6.9% percent black, 1.4% American Indian or Alaska Native, 6.0% Asian or Pacific Islander, and 21.0% Hispanic.

Nevada's two population centers, Clark and Washoe Counties, are federally designated **Metropolitan Statistical Areas**, or **MSAs**. Not surprisingly, they are the areas that have attracted the greatest number of immigrants and are the most ethnically diverse. While Carson City is also designated as an MSA, its demographic characteristics more closely resemble those of Nevada's other counties. In the fifteen counties outside Washoe and Clark, ethnic makeup and immigration status vary as follows:

- Storey (county seat Virginia City) has the highest percentage of white population (93.0%) and Mineral (Hawthorne) the lowest (73.9%).
- Pershing (Lovelock) has the highest percentage of African Americans (5.3%), while the least populated county, Esmeralda (Goldfield), has the lowest (0.1%), a single person.
- Mineral has the highest percentage of American Indian and Alaska Native population (15.4%), Storey the lowest (1.4%).
- Churchill (Fallon) has the highest percentage of Asians (2.7%), while Esmeralda has none (.0%).
- Nye (Tonopah) has the highest percentage of Native Hawaiians and other Pacific Islanders (0.3%) while Lincoln (Pioche) has none (.0%).
- Elko (Elko) has the highest percentage of Hispanics (19.7%) and Storey the lowest (5.1%).
- Humboldt (Winnemucca) has the highest percentage of foreign born (10.4%), Storey the lowest (2.2%).

The most salient demographic feature of the fifteen counties is the Latino population. Given the large influx of undocumented Mexican and Central Americans to the United States, it is likely that the Hispanic population in these areas is considerably larger than the 2000 Census revealed. Service industries, ranching, and mining have attracted Hispanics in growing numbers. One increasingly hears Spanish spoken and sees Spanish language signs in small town and Rural Nevada. School districts in these areas are increasingly challenged by growing enrollments of non-English speaking students.

Census figures for 1990 and 2000 indicate that the Reno MSA, which is defined as Washoe County, is rapidly diversifying.

- In 1990, 9.2% were foreign born; in 2000, the figure had risen to 14.1%. In both years, nearly half the foreign born had immigrated within the previous decade. Reno ranked 49 th among the country's 367 MSAs in its percentage of foreign-born residents.
- Of its 272,985 residents in 2000, Washoe County was 80.4% white, 16.6% Hispanic, 2.1% African-American, 1.8%

American Indian and Alaska Native, 4.3% Asian, and 0.5% Hawaiian Native and Other Pacific Islander.

Washoe County's diversity is reflected in a vibrant ethnic scene: organizations, festivals, restaurants, markets, media, and other businesses serving many of the area's peoples and cultures.

Ethnic Diversity in Las Vegas and Southern Nevada

The Las Vegas Valley is not only Nevada's and the country's fastest growing area; it is also the state's most ethnically diverse and the destination of most immigrants bound for Nevada. The present diversity of the peoples residing in Las Vegas and Southern Nevada is based on internal growth, migration, and immigration. Las Vegas has been more ethnically diverse from its inception than is commonly assumed, and the gradual growth of early populations of Southern Paiutes, African Americans, Chinese, Mexicans, and various European-Americans has contributed to today's mix. Migration from within the United States is responsible for much of Las Vegas's diversification. Offering jobs, entrepreneurial opportunities, reasonable costs of living, and retirement with sun and entertainment, Las Vegas has attracted "old" ethnics – Irish, Germans, Italians, and other Europeans – from eastern and northern cities and Midwestern and southern towns and farming communities; Mexican Americans from the Southwest; Hawaiians from the islands; and African Americans and Native Americans from around the country.

Las Vegas is a magnet for immigrants, whether the city is their original destination or they arrive via another port of entry – commonly Los Angeles. The uninterrupted boom of the past twenty years has created tens of thousands of service and construction jobs that can be filled by persons without skills or knowledge of English. While beginning salaries rarely exceed the minimum wage in most jobs open to immigrants, and sometimes fail to reach that level, persistence and the acquisition of skills can lead to substantial improvement in salary, although infrequently to benefits. The most prized jobs are in the hotel casinos, particularly those that have contracts with the **Culinary Workers Union**, local 226, <http://www.culinaryunion226.org/>.

While immigration does not account for all of Las Vegas's recent ethnic diversification, it is a major factor in the valley's new look. People in native dress (full or partial), automobiles with decals identifying their owners' countries of origin, signage in Spanish and numerous Asian languages, a proliferation of ethnic restaurants and markets, soccer leagues with over three hundred teams, growth a distinct Latino barrio in northeast and expansion of a pan-Asian "Chinatown" in the near west – these and other signs reveal a Las Vegas Valley greatly transformed over the past few years. Statistics support the impression of rapid ethnic change.

- In 1980, Las Vegas's population was approximately 82.5% white, 9.8% black, 7.4% Hispanic, with a few thousand Asians and American Indians rounding out the local demography.
- The ethnic diversification that became noticeable in the 1980s exploded in the 1990s. Nevada experienced the greatest percentage growth among the states in its Asian population during the 1990s, and the second highest in Hispanics, with the greatest numerical gains occurring in Clark County.
- Las Vegas grew by 83.5% between 1990 and 2000, when it counted 1,563,282 residents, led by increases of 299% among black Africans, 262% among Hispanics, and 261% among Asians.
- In 2000, Las Vegas was approximately 63.1% white, 20.6% Hispanic, 8.4% non-Hispanic black, 6.2% Asian, 0.7% American Indian, 0.2% North African, and 0.2% black African.

Clark County School District, <http://www.ccsd.net/>, statistics on ethnicity reveal a deeper change in the school age population than in the community at large.

- Between the 1992-94 and the 2000-2001 school years, the number of students enrolled in the English Language Learner program increased 245%, to 35,296, while total district enrollment grew 59%.
- In the 1999-2000 school year, of the 1200 new students entering the district monthly, 700 did not speak English. The same year, Clark County drew students from 110 foreign

countries. The following year, minorities became the majority of students enrolled, reaching 50.1%.

Immigration, Naturalization, and Linguistic Diversity

Important information can be gleaned from the **Clark County Census** data, <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/53/53011.html>. Of this county's census-counted population in 2000,

- 18.0% was foreign born, compared to 11.1% of the U.S. population.
- Of Las Vegas' foreign born, 61.1% were from Latin America, 23.6% from Asia, 9.9% from Europe, 1.7% from Africa, 3.1% from "Northern America," and 0.4% from Oceania.
- Reflecting the impact of immigration, 25.5% of Las Vegas's population of over five years of age spoke a language other than English at home.
- In 1990, the Las Vegas MSA ranked 44th among the 331 U.S. metropolitan regions for its number of "new" immigrants – those who arrived in the last decade. In 2000, Las Vegas ranked twenty 26 th sixth.

Naturalization, or the conferring of U. S. citizenship on immigrants, provides further insights—although only a small proportion of immigrants take this step.

- There were 3,578 immigrants naturalized in Nevada in the 1970s and 24,736 in the 1990s, a large majority of them in Las Vegas .
- While the number of naturalizations in the United States tripled during this period, Nevada experienced a sevenfold increase.
- Between 1985 and 1987, persons naturalized in Las Vegas came from 79 countries; in 1999 and 2000, from 131 countries.

This change in provenance parallels the national trend away from Western Europeans and toward Latin Americans, Asians, Africans, and Eastern Europeans. After representing a major share of naturalized citizens in the 1960s and 1970s,

- Western Europeans represented only 8.9% of those naturalized in Las Vegas in the mid-1980s and only 2.9% in 1999-2000.
- The leading Western European supplier of new citizens, the United Kingdom, ranked 14th in 1999-2000, and only three other European countries – Germany, Italy, and France – ranked in the top 40.
- The greatest number of Las Vegas’s new citizens in 1999-2000 came, in descending order, from Mexico, the Philippines, El Salvador, China, and Cuba.

Further evidence of diversification fueled by immigration is found in the records of the Clark County Court Interpreter’s Office, established in 1975.

- A total of 1655 court cases (138 per month) required interpreters during 1981-82, and 25 languages were used.
- In 1994, 12,317 cases (1,026 per month) required interpreters; by 2000, the number had grown to 26,773 (2,231 per month), a 1,617% increase over the 1981-82 workload, and the office drew from a pool of 320 certified interpreters.
- In the seven years between 1994 and 2000, interpreters were used for 79 languages, including four spoken in Ethiopia, four from the Philippines, Hawaiian, Goshute, and Afghani.

By comparison, Los Angeles County, one of the country’s largest and most ethnically diverse counties, employed 580 court interpreters of 104 languages.

Specialized Services

The rising presence of immigrants in the Las Vegas population is reflected in the growth of specialized services.

- Las Vegas had only 1 full-time specialist in immigration law in the early 1980s. In 2003, Las Vegas had 35 members of the American Immigration Lawyers Association, half of whom were dedicated primarily or exclusively to immigration law.

- In 1987 Las Vegas was served 1 week per month by a single immigration judge based in Phoenix. In 1996, Las Vegas got its own immigration court with 1 full-time position, increased the following year to 3 judges.
- After serving since its inception as a branch of the Phoenix office, the Las Vegas office of the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) was upgraded in 2001 to a district office, one of 34 in the country.

Las Vegas has immigrants from every Latin American country, but Mexico and Central America have contributed the greatest numbers due to proximity and to severe economic problems in Mexico and civil wars and repression in El Salvador and Guatemala in the 1980s. Filipinos constitute the largest Asian population in Las Vegas, followed by Chinese and Koreans.

Refugee Resettlement

Refugee resettlement has played a major role in the diversification of Southern Nevada

population since the 1970s. Under the auspices of several local social service agencies, foremost among them Catholic Charities of Southern Nevada, thousands of people with official refugee status have made Las Vegas their home. The flow of refugees reflects the spread of war and repression around the globe. It also reflects U.S. Cold War policy of offering haven to anyone leaving a communist regime, which is still in effect. Refugee resettlement and the secondary migrations that it fuels are responsible for the establishment and/or growth of several sizeable groups found in Las Vegas , including Cubans and Vietnamese in the 1970s, Ethiopians in the 1980s, and Bosnians in the 1990s.

- Between 1995 and 2000, Catholic Charities resettled 5,168 refugees from 32 countries in Southern Nevada.
- Over half were Cubans. Bosnia (1,192), Iran (209), Vietnam (164), Sudan (127), Serbia (95), and Somalia (75) were the largest suppliers of refugees. Angola, the Czech Republic, Rwanda, Togo, Uzbekistan and Zaire (2 persons each), and

Armenia, Kazakhstan, and Tunisia (1 person each) provided the least.

Though accounting for less than 1% of Las Vegas' population growth during that period, the impact of refugee resettlement on the Valley's diversification is much greater than that figure might suggest. Refugees from Kosovo, Uzbekistan, and Burundi were probably the first Las Vegasans from those countries; and given the general pattern of immigrants settling in locales where they have family, acquaintances, countrymen, or co-ethnics, these small numbers launched migration streams, however small, of family members, refugees initially resettled elsewhere in the United States, and undocumented compatriots. Given the multiethnic composition of many refugee-sending countries, particularly in Africa and Asia, the impact of refugee resettlement on Las Vegas' diversification is considerably greater than is reflected in the figure of thirty-two countries. Trends that were in place in 2000 have continued.

- Hispanics in 2005 approached a quarter (25%) of Las Vegas's population, their numbers swelled by immigrants.
- Between the 2000-2001 and 2004-2005 school years, whites dropped from 49.9% to 41.5% of Clark County School District's students, while the Hispanic percentage climbed from 28.8% to 35.2%, and the Asian from 6.6% to 8.2%.
- The number of court cases requiring interpreters grew by 33% between 2000 and 2002, and continues to climb.
- Africa House, a new specialized refugee resettlement agency, reflects the continuing diversification of immigration to Las Vegas.

Urgent Problems and Prospects for the Future

Immigration has created a number of needs that are not being adequately met in Las Vegas. Education facilities for adults are inadequate. Health care insurance, except for members of the Culinary Union and some other casino workers, is difficult to obtain. Housing for many immigrant workers is substandard. Many immigrants are marginalized from advancement by virtue of being undocumented. Poverty is a growing problem for immigrants:

- While the Hispanic population grew by 217% in the 1990's, poverty among Hispanic children increased by 251% – almost all of whom presumably were immigrants.

With an estimated ten to twelve million undocumented immigrants in the United States, illegal immigration is quickly becoming a major political issue. During 2005, the governors of Arizona and New Mexico declared border emergencies and demanded increased federal help to secure their borders. In a controversial and highly publicized move, an organization of volunteers, called the Minutemen Project, joined the U.S. Border Patrol to dramatize the situation as well as to aid in apprehending undocumented border crossers. Congress and President Bush struggle to adopt effective measures to control the borders and address the presence of illegals already residing in the country. Possible components of a new policy include: increased funding and augmented personnel to reduce the flow of illegal immigrants; cracking down on employees who hire undocumented workers; and establishing a guest worker program in some form. As of the end of 2005, there was no consensus on policy. As the national debate heats up, immigration policy is likely to become an important issue in Nevada.

Conclusion

The 2000 Census was a wake-up call for Nevadans. It confirmed what Nevada is rapidly being transformed by immigration and by migration of ethnic populations from within the United States. The new realities call for major research efforts not only in the population centers but throughout rural Nevada.

One such effort, sponsored by the Boyd School of Law at UNLV, got underway in 2003. Its purpose is to assess the immigrant presence in Las Vegas and determine the policies and services that may be needed. The outcome of that study will be most welcome in a city that depends on immigrant labor and, barring dramatic change, will continue to do so for the foreseeable future.

Data Sources and Suggested Readings

Wilbur S. Shepperson, *Restless Strangers: Nevada's Immigrants and their Interpreters*. Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1970.

Jerry L. Simich and Thomas C. Wright, eds., *The Peoples of Las Vegas: One City, Many Faces*. Reno and Las Vegas: University of Nevada Press, 2005.

Roger Daniels, *Coming to America: A History of Immigration and Ethnicity in American Life*. New York: HarperCollins, 1990.

Alejandro Portes and Rubén G. Rumbaut, *Immigrant America: A Portrait*. 2nd ed. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996.

David W. Haines and Carol A. Mortland, eds., *Manifest Destinies: Americanizing Immigrants and Internationalizing Americans*. Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2001.

David W. Haines, *Refugees in America in the 1990s: A Reference Handbook*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1996.

Daniel D. Arreola, *Hispanic Spaces, Latino Places: Community and Cultural Diversity in Contemporary America*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004.

U.S. Census Bureau. 1980, 1990, and 2000 censuses of population.

Lewis Mumford Center for Comparative Urban and Regional Research, State University of New York at Albany. Numerous publications and web site at <http://www.albany.edu/mumford/>.

Community Resources

The Boyd School of Law has an immigration clinic that offers free services on matters such as residence status, visas, deportation, and citizenship. The **Immigration Clinic** has an outreach program, the **Nevada Immigrant Resources Project**, which educates immigrants about their rights and trains social workers, police, and other service providers about immigration law and resources for immigrants.

The Citizenship Project is sponsored by the Culinary Union, and it aids immigrants desiring to become U.S. citizens. While it serves citizens as well as non-citizen immigrants, **Nevada Partners**, a culinary training institute funded by the Culinary Union and resorts with which the union has contracts, is an important vehicle for immigrants to upgrade their skills and secure jobs in resort hotels.

Services for immigrants

Washoe County:

Nevada Hispanic Services, 3905 Neil Road, Reno, NV 89502. Tel. 775-826-1818, <http://www.hsreno.org>.

Washoe Legal Services, 650 Tahoe Street, Reno, NV 89509. Tel. 775-329-2727, <http://www.washoelegalservices.org>.

Nevada Hispanic Services, 637 South Stewart Street, B, Carson City, NV 89701. Tel. 775-885-1055, <http://www.hsreno.org>.

Clark County:

Thomas and Mack Legal Clinic, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, William S. Boyd School of Law, P.O. Box 71075, Las Vegas, NV 89170-1075. Tel. 702-895-2080, <http://www.law.unlv.edu/clinic.html>.

Citizenship Project, 431 South 6th Street, Las Vegas, NV 89101. Tel. 70-868-6002, <http://www.cpnevada.com>.

Catholic Charities of Southern Nevada, Migration and Refugee Services, 1511 Las Vegas Boulevard North, North Las Vegas, NV 89101. Tel. 702-383-8387.

Rafael Rivera Community Center, 2900 Stewart Avenue, Las Vegas, NV 89101. Tel. 702-229-4600, www.lasvegasnevada.gov.

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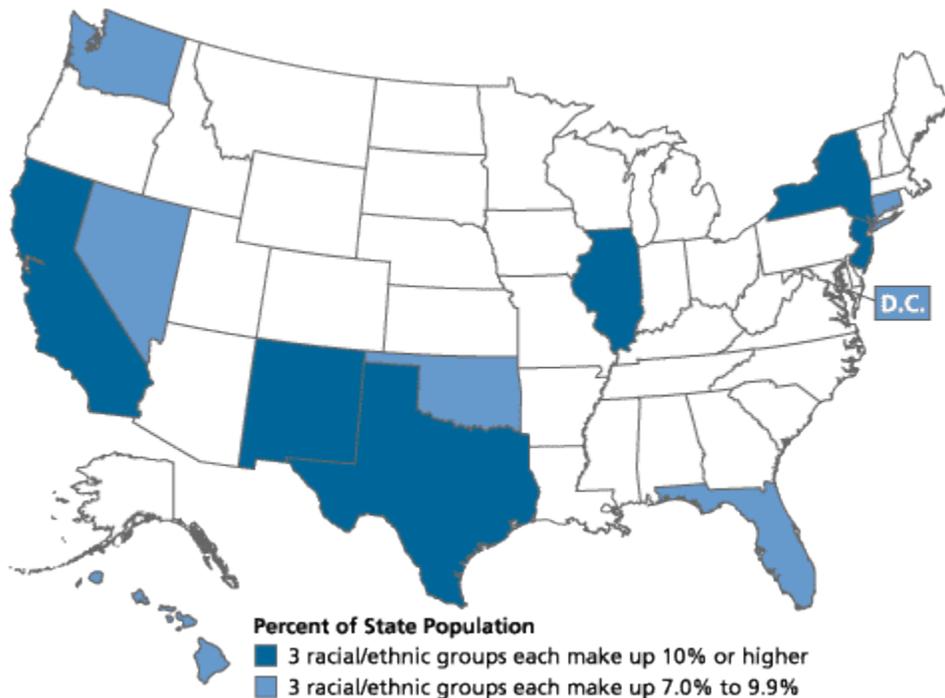
Parkway, Box 455033, Las Vegas, NV 89154-5020. Tel.: 702-895-3316. Email: tom.wright@unlv.edu.

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Supplementary Materials

Figure 1.

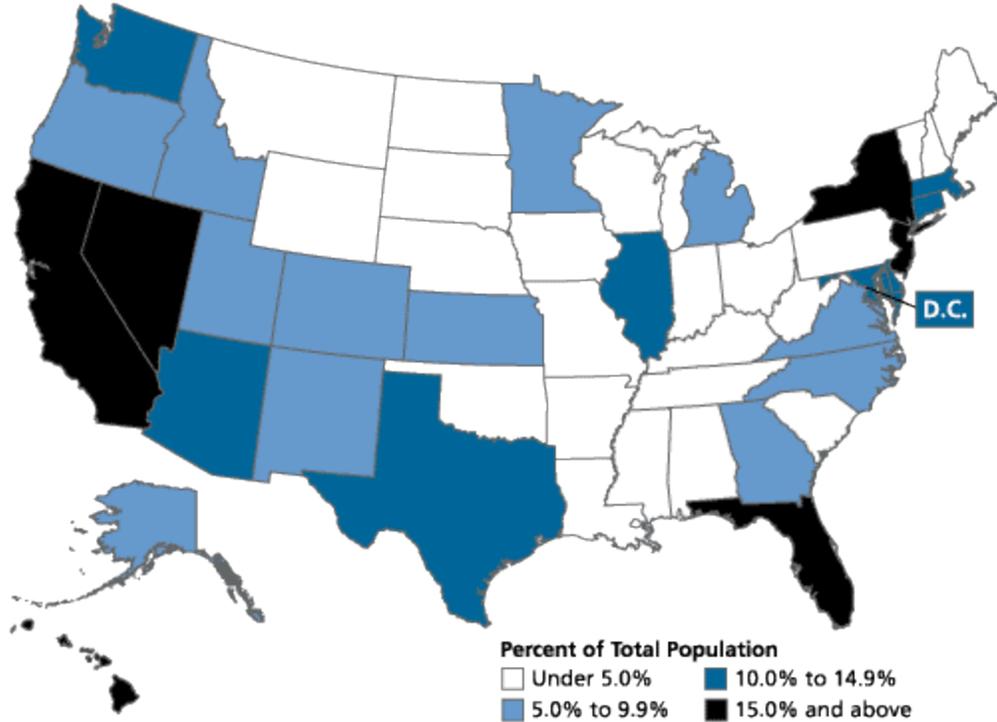
New Diversity States, 2000



Source: U.S. Census 2000.

Figure 2.

Percent Foreign-Born, United States, 2000



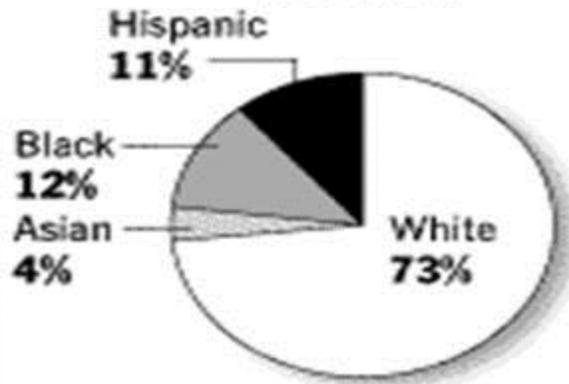
Source: U.S. Census 2000.

Figure 3.

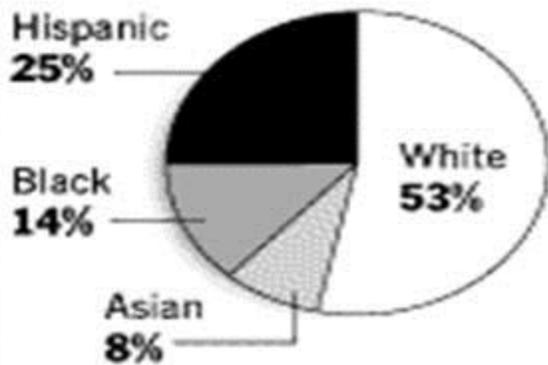
U.S. Population Projection

U.S. population (projection)

1997



2050



*"Asian" category includes Pacific Islanders. Other races, including American Indians, make up less than 1 percent.

SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau

THE WASHINGTON POST

*This report stems from the Justice & Democracy forum on the Leading Social Indicators in Nevada that took place on November 5, 2004, at the William S. Boyd School of Law. The report, the first of its kind for the Silver State, has been a collaborative effort of the University of Nevada faculty, Clark County professionals, and state of Nevada officials. The Social Health of Nevada report was made possible

in part by a Planning Initiative Award that the Center for Democratic Culture received from the UNLV President's office for its project "Civic Culture Initiative for the City of Las Vegas." Individual chapters are brought on line as they become available. For further inquiries, please contact authors responsible for individual reports or email CDC Director, Dr. Dmitri Shalin shalin@unlv.nevada.edu.