

A PROFILE OF THE FOREIGN-BORN IN LOWELL, MASSACHUSETTS

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I. Introduction

The Building the New American Community demonstration project is an experiment in refugee and immigrant integration in which the cities of Lowell, Massachusetts; Nashville, Tennessee; and Portland, Oregon formed coalitions to identify integration challenges in their communities and address them collaboratively.¹ These cities were assisted by a national team of policy analysts, advocates, and researchers from the National Conference of State Legislatures, the National Immigration Forum, the Southeast Asia Resource Action Center, The Urban Institute, and the Migration Policy Institute.

To assist the coalitions in understanding the size, composition, and characteristics of their newcomer communities, The Urban Institute has prepared a demographic profile of the foreign-born population for each site. These profiles include data on immigrant population growth, diversity, settlement patterns, English language ability, poverty, and naturalization trends. Data on immigrants and refugees can be used as a tool by the coalitions to attract future funding opportunities, target services such as English as a Second Language classes or job training, and strengthen media outreach and advocacy efforts.

This profile of the city of Lowell, Massachusetts, is accompanied by The Urban Institute's publication, *The New Neighbors: A User's Guide to Data on Immigrants in U.S. Communities*, which can further assist coalition members in finding and using data on the foreign-born in their communities.

II. Data Sources

The data in this profile are from the 2000 Census. Census data make it possible to map settlement patterns in great detail and to analyze their implications for communities at the national, state, and even local levels. Detail on numbers of immigrants,² their countries of origin, the languages they speak, and their English proficiency is available down to the level of the Census tract—a geographic area no larger than many city neighborhoods.

Another data source used in this profile is the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) *Statistical Yearbook*, which reports on annual legal

¹ Funding for the Building the New American Community coalitions is provided by U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Refugee Resettlement.

² In Census data, the foreign-born population corresponds to what is usually defined as the “immigrant” population. The foreign-born population includes only those people born outside the United States (and its territories) who were not U.S. citizens at birth, whether they are currently U.S. citizens or not. Often, local estimates of the immigrant community include children born in the United States and spouses of the foreign born plus other second- or third-generation adults. (The second generation encompasses individuals born in the United States with one or two foreign-born parents; the third and higher generations include those born in the United States with both parents born in the United States.) These differences in defining who is an immigrant can make local estimates appear larger than the Census numbers. Census 2000 did miss some people (and counted a number of people more than once). In general, the net undercount in Census 2000 is thought to be rather small but can vary from place to place. The Census Bureau has published some estimates of Census 2000 undercounts and overcounts, mostly for race groups. See <http://landview.census.gov/dmd/www/pdf/pp-54r.pdf> for further information on Census 2000 net estimates.

immigrant admissions to the United States.³ The INS public-use data are administrative data drawn from records of legal immigrant admissions. Because undocumented immigrants—those without authorization to stay in the United States legally—are not included in these data, the INS data represent only a portion of the annual flow into the country. Through comparing the INS and Census data on foreign-born country of birth, it is possible to identify indirectly the presence of undocumented immigrants in an area.

III. Profile of the Foreign-Born in Lowell, Massachusetts

A. Recent Growth in a Traditional Immigrant Receiving City

Historically, Lowell has been a destination city for immigrants and refugees. Lowell first attracted European immigrants during the Industrial Revolution in the 1800s and became a destination city again in the 1980s when large numbers of Southeast Asian refugees were resettled there. According to the 2000 Census, 22 percent (23,267) of Lowell’s population is foreign-born, which is twice the national average of 11 percent. The foreign-born share of Lowell’s population is also higher than in Massachusetts (12 percent).

Steady immigration through the 1980s and 1990s combined with a large influx of new immigrants after 1995 have meant that Lowell’s foreign-born population is a mix of older, more established immigrants and recent arrivals. Roughly equal shares of the foreign-born population arrived in the 1980s (43 percent) and 1990s (41 percent), but migration to Lowell increased after 1995 when a little more than a quarter (28 percent) of Lowell’s foreign-born entered (see figure 1).

Figure 1. Period of Entry for the Foreign-Born in Lowell

<u>Period of Entry</u>	<u>Share of all foreign born</u>
Total	100.0%
1995 to 2000	28.3%
1990 to 1994	12.7%
1985 to 1989	20.0%
1980 to 1984	22.8%
1975 to 1979	4.5%
1970 to 1974	4.3%
1965 to 1969	3.4%
Before 1965	4.1%

Source: U.S. Census 2000

³ On March 1, 2003, all functions of the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service INS were transferred from the Department of Justice to the Department of Homeland Security. The INS was split into separate agencies for enforcement and for processing of immigration and naturalization applications. The Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services is the new agency responsible for processing of immigration and naturalization applications.

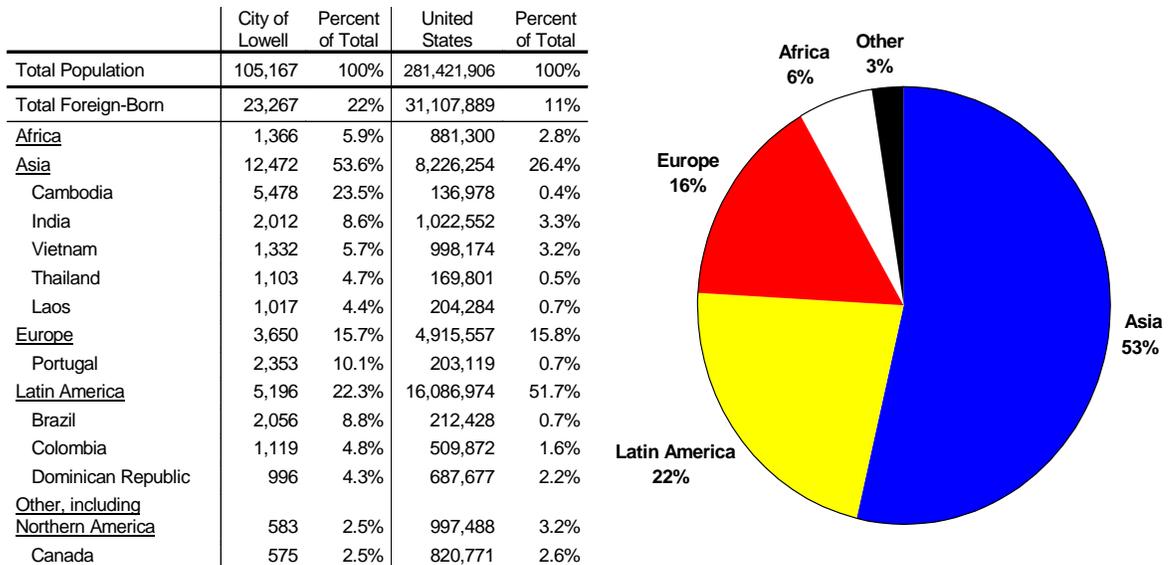
B. Slower Immigrant Population Growth in Lowell than in the United States

Although the share of the foreign-born population in Lowell (22 percent) is twice the national average, the immigrant population grew at a slower rate (37 percent) in Lowell during the 1990s compared with the national growth rate (57 percent). Immigrant population growth rates were more than 100 percent in some areas—most notably states in the Southeast, Midwest, and Rocky Mountain regions.

C. Asians Are the Majority in Lowell, but All Regions Are Represented

More than half of Lowell’s foreign-born population is from Asia (54 percent), but there are significant shares from other regions of the world: Latin America (22 percent), Europe (16 percent), and Africa (6 percent) (see figure 2). Cambodians make up nearly a quarter (24 percent) of the foreign-born population. The other principal Asian-sending countries are India, Vietnam, Thailand, and Laos. Latin American immigrants mostly come from Brazil, Columbia, and the Dominican Republic, while most European immigrants in Lowell are from Portugal. African immigrants make up 6 percent of the immigrant population in Lowell—twice the national average (3 percent). Africans in Lowell are a diverse population that is not dominated by one particular country, although nearly half (47 percent) of the Africans in Lowell come from Western Africa, which includes the countries of Ghana, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone.

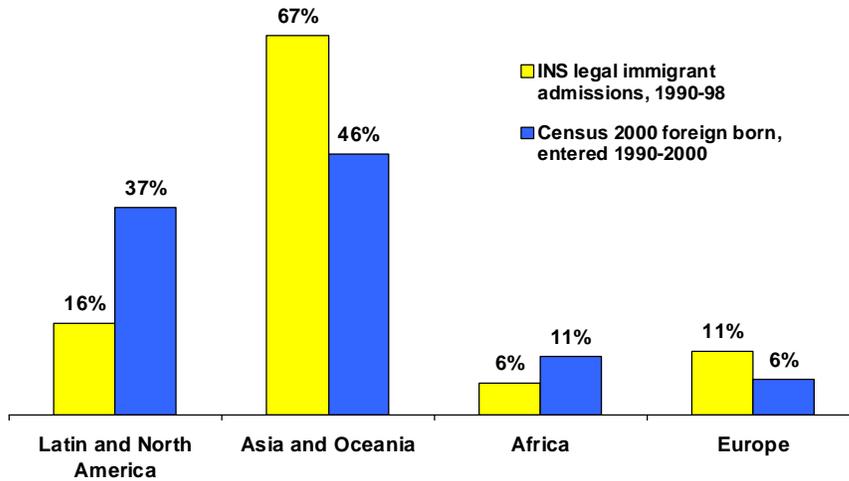
Figure 2. Regions of Birth for the Foreign-Born in Lowell, MA



D. Undocumented Latin American Immigration to Lowell in the 1990s

The INS admissions data paint a different picture of immigrants' countries of birth. The data on regions and countries of birth for Lowell's foreign-born population displayed in figure 2 include all immigrants, regardless of legal status and when they came to the United States. But INS admissions data only include records for *legal immigrants* admitted in a given year. Figure 3 shows the comparison of immigrants admitted from 1990 to 1998 using the INS data and immigrants who arrived between 1990 and 2000 using Census 2000.

Figure 3. Birthplaces for Lowell's Foreign-Born Population Arriving During the 1990s: INS vs. Census 2000 Data



According to Census data, 37 percent of immigrants who arrived during the 1990s were born in Latin or North America, a considerably higher share than the 16 percent derived from the INS admissions data. Census data show that 11 percent of the 1990s entrants were born in Africa, also higher than the 6 percent from the INS data. But INS data show 11 percent of 1990s entrants were born in Europe, compared with only 6 percent shown in the Census data. Shares born in Asia are also considerably higher in the INS (67 percent) than the Census (46 percent) data.

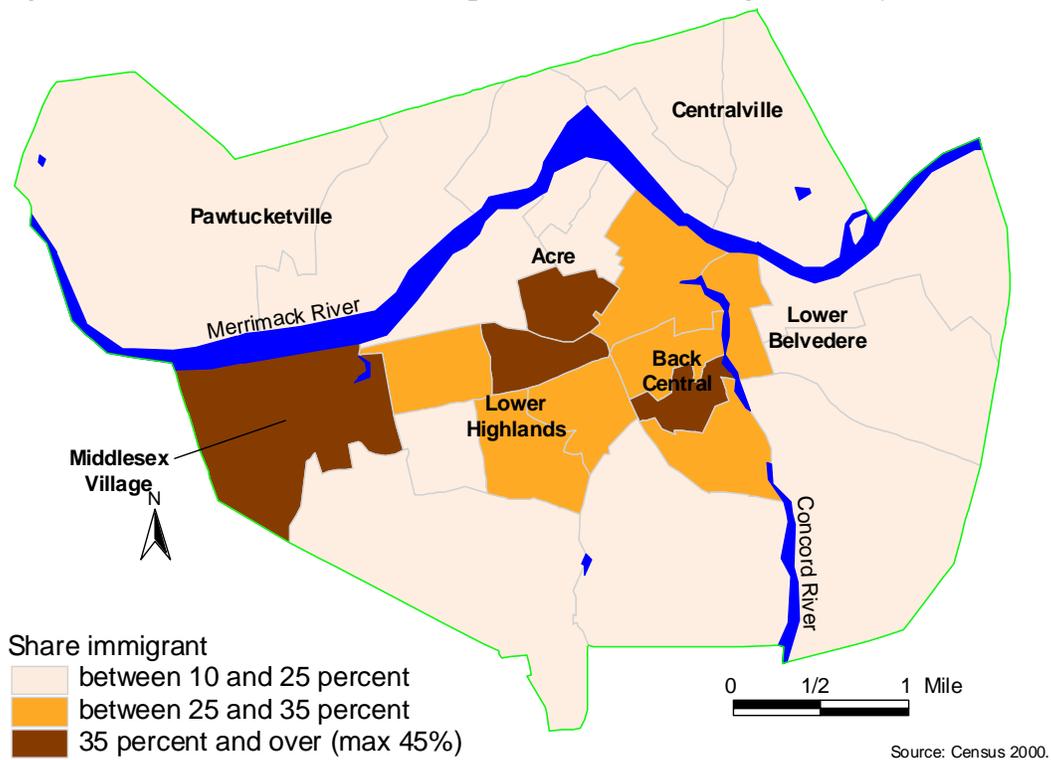
These differing datasets help us understand the legal status of the various immigrant groups in Lowell. The higher percentage of 1990s immigrants born in Latin America shown in the Census data implies that a significant proportion of these immigrants are undocumented. The differences in the data for African countries of birth may also suggest the presence of undocumented immigrants, but because many of the Africans in Lowell come from refugee-sending countries, the variation between these datasets could be the result of the lag time in the adjustment of status from refugee to

legal permanent resident.⁴ The predominance of those born in Asia and Europe in the INS versus the Census data indicates that these are mostly legal immigrants. While there are other possible explanations for the differing results obtained from the datasets,⁵ our basic conclusion is that illegal immigration accounts for the differing numbers.

E. Immigrants Are Dispersed throughout Lowell

Figure 4 shows that the foreign-born population in Lowell is dispersed throughout the city. All of Lowell’s Census tracts have a population that is at least 10 percent foreign born; some Census tracts have immigrant concentrations of up to 45 percent.⁶ Tracts with foreign-born concentrations greater than 25 percent are found south of the Merrimack River in the neighborhoods of the Acre, Back Central, Lower Highlands, and Middlesex Village.

Figure 4. Share of Lowell's Total Population that Is Foreign-Born, by Census Tract



⁴ Refugees do not appear in the INS data until after they have been adjusted to legal permanent residency; they are eligible to adjust after one year in the United States, but may not be processed for some time after that.

⁵ Other possible reasons for differences between the two sources include different time spans covered by the data (1990–98 for INS versus 1990–2000 for the Census); incorrect assignment of “intended” place of residence in the INS data; undercounting of some groups in the Census; and possible out-migration of immigrants to other states or outside the country before they appear in the Census data.

⁶ Census tracts are defined by the Census Bureau to approximate neighborhoods. The average Census tract in Lowell has approximately 4,000 people. Nationally, Census tracts usually have between 2,500 and 8,000 people.

F. Country-of-Origin Groups Settle Together in Several Neighborhoods

Although foreign-born persons are dispersed throughout Lowell, there are high concentrations of Asians and Portuguese speakers south of the Merrimack River. In Census tracts in the Acre and the Lower Highlands neighborhoods, Asians compose up to 34 percent of the population. Most of the Asian immigrants in these two neighborhoods are from Cambodia. Another significant concentration of Asians is found in the Middlesex Village area; most of these immigrants are from India. Portuguese speakers (Portuguese and Brazilian immigrants) are clustered together in the Lower Belvidere and East Back Central neighborhoods, consisting of 10 to 21 percent of each Census tract's population. There are also concentrations of Latin Americans downtown and in the Lower Belvidere and East Back Central neighborhoods. Africans are dispersed in smaller numbers downtown, along the southern border of the Merrimack River, and in the Centralville, Pawtucketville, and Middlesex Village neighborhoods.

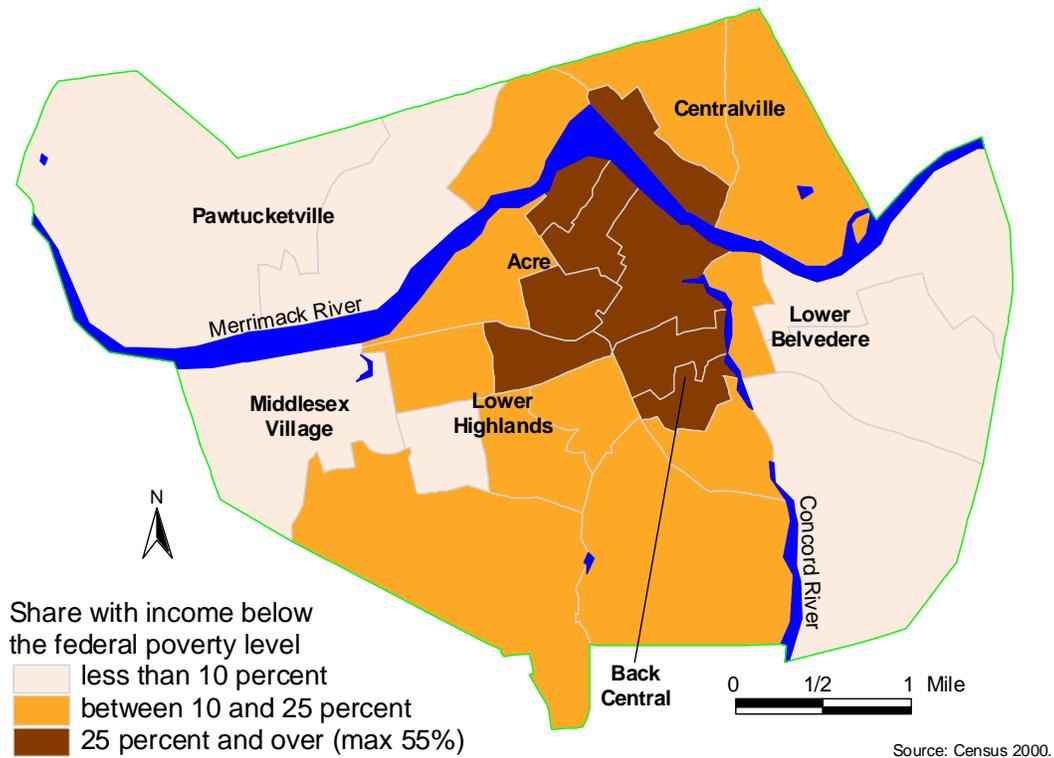
G. Naturalized Citizens Have the Lowest Poverty Rates in Lowell

In Lowell, 17 percent of the total population lives below the federal poverty level (FPL) (\$17,050 for a family of four in 2000), higher than the national rate (12 percent). The proportion of the foreign-born population in Lowell living in poverty is 18 percent, slightly higher than that for natives (16 percent). Naturalized citizens have a lower poverty rate (10 percent) than natives (16 percent) and noncitizens (22 percent).

H. Similar Settlement Patterns for Foreign-Born and Natives Living Below Poverty

Census data allow mapping of individuals living in families with incomes below the FPL for both foreign-born and native persons. In Lowell, the heaviest concentrations of poverty (from 25 to 55 percent) for the total population are found downtown and in the neighborhoods of the Acre, the Lower Highlands, Back Central, and the southwestern tip of Centralville that borders on the Merrimack River. These are the same neighborhoods where immigrants have settled, particularly Asians and immigrants from Brazil and Portugal. Figure 5 on the following page illustrates the settlement patterns of the foreign-born living below poverty.

Figure 5. Share of Lowell's Foreign-Born Population with Incomes Below the Federal Poverty Level, by Census Tract



I. Higher-than-Average Rates of Limited English Proficiency, Even among Natives

In Lowell, 19 percent of the total population is limited English proficient (LEP), more than twice the national average (8 percent). We define LEPs using Census questions as persons who speak a language other than English and who do not speak English “very well.” More than half (55 percent) of the foreign-born population five years and older are LEP, slightly higher than the national average (51 percent). Also striking is the fact that 8 percent of the native population five years and older is LEP, which is four times the national average (2 percent). When we distinguish between youth (ages 5 to 17) and adults (18 and over), we find that 16 percent of youth and 19 percent of adults are LEP. These rates are more than double the national average of LEPs for youth (7 percent) and adults (9 percent).

J. Diversity of Languages Spoken in Lowell

One distinguishing characteristic of Lowell is the diversity of languages spoken. The most common foreign languages spoken by youth in Lowell are Spanish (18 percent), Khmer (17 percent), Portuguese (5 percent), and Laotian (2 percent). About one-third of youth who speak Spanish, Asian Pacific Islander languages, and other Indo-European languages are LEP. Among adults, the most common foreign languages are Spanish (11 percent), Khmer (8 percent), Portuguese (6 percent), French (4 percent), and Gujarathi and other Indic languages (2 percent). Half of adults who speak Spanish (50

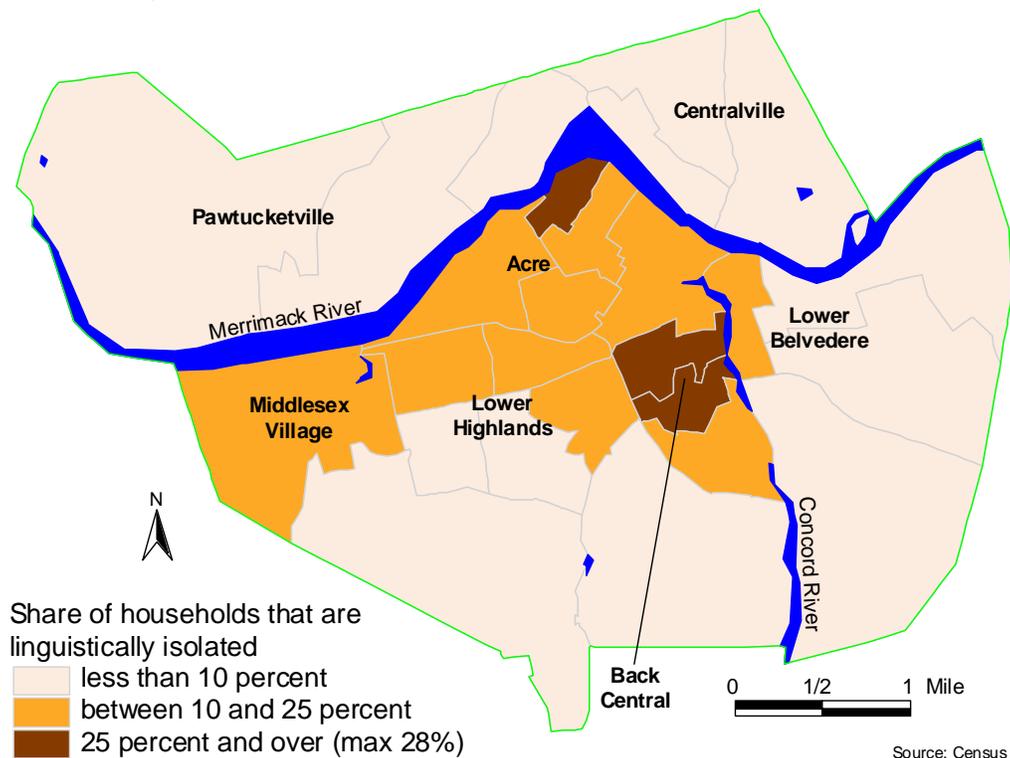
percent) and more than half who speak Asian Pacific Islander languages (64 percent) are LEP, compared with 40 percent of adults who speak other Indo-European languages.

The high rates of LEP in Lowell coupled with the diversity and comparatively even distribution of non-English languages pose challenges to public institutions, while also serving as a source of richness to the region. Proficiency in English is one of the key measures of immigrant integration used by Urban Institute and other researchers, because LEP immigrants tend to hold less desirable jobs, earn lower incomes, and generally fare worse on most indicators of well-being. The Urban Institute has also found that food insecurity and other hardship measures are more closely associated with LEP than with either legal status or length of residency in the United States (Capps, Ku, and Fix 2002).

K. High Density of Linguistically Isolated Households

The Census identifies “linguistically isolated households” as those in which no person age 14 or older either speaks English as a first language or speaks English “very well.” In Lowell, 3,980 households (11 percent) are linguistically isolated. This is more than double the national rate (4 percent). The highest concentration of linguistically isolated households (25 percent and over) is found in the neighborhoods of Back Central and the Acre, areas in which Asian and Portuguese speaking immigrants have settled. These are also neighborhoods where there are high concentrations of the foreign-born living in poverty. Figure 6 shows the distribution of linguistically isolated households in Lowell.

Figure 6. Share of Lowell Households that Are Linguistically Isolated, by Census Tract



L. Lower-than-Average Naturalization Rates

Thirty percent of Lowell's immigrants are naturalized citizens, compared with 40 percent nationwide.⁷ Asians make up a little more than half of Lowell's foreign-born population (54 percent) and account for the largest share of both naturalized citizens (47 percent) and noncitizens (56 percent). Europeans are the second largest group of naturalized citizens (29 percent) in Lowell, followed by Latin Americans (16 percent) and Africans (3 percent).

Only 27 percent of Asian immigrants in Lowell are naturalized citizens compared with 51 percent nationally. The lower rates of Asian naturalizations are surprising, especially because more than half of the Asians in Lowell (65 percent) arrived before 1990 and would have been eligible for naturalization at the time of the 2000 Census.⁸ Part of the explanation for the low naturalization rates may be the higher rate of LEPs in Lowell. LEP is a barrier to naturalization and Urban Institute research has found that 60 percent (3.5 million adults) of immigrants nationwide who have not yet naturalized but are eligible to do so are LEP (Fix, Passel, and Sucher 2003).

Naturalization rates among Latin Americans (22 percent) and Africans (15 percent) in Lowell are also lower than national averages, but the majority of immigrants from these groups settled in Lowell after 1990. Latin Americans' low naturalization levels can also be explained by undocumented migration to the region. Europeans in Lowell (55 percent) have naturalized at rates that are equivalent to national levels (56 percent). Eighty-four percent of Europeans in Lowell arrived before 1990, which means that they would have been eligible when the Census was taken in 2000.

IV. Conclusions

This profile suggests that Lowell's immigrant population has a number of defining characteristics that coalition members and policymakers focusing on integration should consider:

- A substantial share (25 percent) arrived relatively recently, since 1995. Recent entrants are more likely to be LEP, have lower levels of education, and earn less than other immigrant groups. Recently arrived immigrants may also have less experience dealing with institutional and coalition structures. Nonetheless, 75 percent of Lowell's immigrant population is more established, with over half having arrived before 1990.

⁷ Census 2000 shows that 40 percent of the foreign-born are naturalized citizens. Various Urban Institute studies have found that naturalized citizenship tends to be overreported in census and survey data (e.g., Passel and Clark 1998). Urban Institute estimates corrected for this overreporting show that 32 percent of the foreign-born are naturalized citizens in 2000 (Fix, Passel, and Sucher 2003).

⁸ Immigrants eligible to naturalize include legal immigrants who have been in the United States for at least five years or in the country for at least three years and married to a U.S. citizen.

- Spatially, the immigrant population is spread throughout Lowell, although there are heavy concentrations of poverty and language isolation within several neighborhoods.
- Lowell's population is notable for its rich linguistic diversity and for the comparatively even distribution of those languages across the immigrant population. No single language predominates within Lowell as Spanish does across so much of the United States, although there are sizeable numbers of Spanish, Khmer, and Portuguese speakers. This linguistic diversity obviously creates challenges for access to public services and benefits, making it difficult to provide interpretations and translations of so many languages.
- At the same time, LEP rates in Lowell exceed national averages, even among natives. The language access challenge presented by these high rates is compounded by the city's language diversity and creates challenges for public institutions, such as the Lowell public school system.
- Comparisons between Census and INS data suggest that Lowell is home to a growing undocumented population primarily from South America.
- Lowell's naturalized citizens appear to have the highest incomes of the immigrant groups we examined. Although it appears that naturalized citizens in Lowell are better off, naturalization rates in Lowell lag those of the foreign born nationwide, with especially low rates among the city's Asians, many of whom entered the country before 1990. These findings reinforce the importance of sustaining a strong civic engagement agenda emphasized by the Building the New American Community Project.

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