A Portrait of Immigrants in New York

OFFICE OF THE NEW YORK STATE COMPTROLLER

Thomas P. DiNapoli, State Comptroller

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Message from the Comptroller

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President John F. Kennedy described the United States of America as “a nation of immigrants.” The contributions of these individuals have been vitally important to the economy, society and culture of New York State, and of our entire nation.

Immigrants now represent some 22 percent of New York State’s population, well above the national figure of 13 percent. In recent years, an average of more than 140,000 State residents annually have earned status as legal permanent residents. New York is also among the leading states in welcoming refugees, with more than 35,000 settling in the State over the past decade.

As it has done throughout its history, New York City attracts immigrants from a multitude of nations. From 2010 to 2015, almost 75 percent of the approximately 631,000 international migrants to New York State located in our largest city. The influence of immigration, however, extends all across our State.

In upstate cities, immigrants have helped stabilize population numbers that had declined sharply during the decades after World War II. Individuals born outside the United States and their children make up nearly a quarter of the population in Utica; for Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse, Albany and Schenectady, the figure is over 10 percent. In regions including New York City and Long Island where total population counts rose from 2010 to 2015, immigrants were the driving factor in such growth. In many other areas, population losses during the period would have been greater if not for the influx of immigrants.

Immigrants have a high rate of employment and work in a wide range of occupations. Immigrants fill more than a quarter of all positions in various fields including nursing and home health aides, registered nurses, construction laborers, accountants and auditors, and childcare workers.

Across our nation, debate over immigration has been recurring and often intense. Here in New York, immigrants stimulate economic activity in communities within every region, as well as advancing their social and cultural vitality. The continuing inflow of immigrants from around the globe should be a lasting source of pride for all New Yorkers.

Thomas P. DiNapoli
State Comptroller

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Introduction

The United States and New York State in particular have consistently experienced an influx of people coming from other countries. Some plan a temporary stay to pursue educational or business endeavors, while others choose to make the United States their new home. As of 2014, New York was home to nearly 4.4 million immigrants, second only to California. These individuals constituted approximately 22 percent of the State's total population of over 19 million, well above the national figure of 13 percent. In the past five years, over 5 million people have immigrated to the United States either on a temporary or permanent basis, with approximately 631,000 taking up residence in New York State.[1]

Immigrants in New York represent more than 150 nations. While Latin America is the predominant place of origin for New York's immigrants, each region of the State has a distinctively different composition of immigrants—from a large Latin American population in the downstate region to a contingent of Eastern Europeans in the Mohawk Valley to a large number of Canadians in the North Country.

Over 73 percent of foreign-born individuals in New York over age 25 have a high school education or higher, compared to 70 percent nationwide. Almost half of the State's immigrants have earned an associate's degree or completed additional college, including 29 percent with a bachelor's, graduate or professional degree.

Immigrants tend to be older than the overall State population, with a median age of 45 years compared to 38 for all New Yorkers. Most are long-established residents of the United States, with two-thirds having entered the country before 2000.

Immigrants have a high rate of employment in New York and are employed in a wide variety of occupations. Immigrants make up more than half of all New Yorkers serving as nursing, psychiatric and home health aides; maids and housekeeping cleaners; and taxi drivers and chauffeurs. They are also more than 30 percent of the State's accountants and auditors; construction laborers; childcare workers; cooks; waiters and waitresses; and janitors and building cleaners.

This report uses a variety of data resources to portray the immigrant population in New York and nationwide. Net international migration data from the U.S. Census Bureau and immigration statistics from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security provide a snapshot of the number of immigrants entering and establishing residence in New York on an annual basis, while the American Community Survey, published by the U.S. Census Bureau, provides demographic data to describe the immigrant population living in New York regardless of year of entry.

1 Data for this report is drawn primarily from the U.S. Census Bureau, 2010-2014 American Community Survey, 5-year estimates, and supplemented by the U.S Department of Homeland Security, Yearbook of Immigration Statistics, 2014; the U.S. Census Bureau, 2015 Population Estimates; and the U.S. Census Bureau, Public Use Microdata Sample.

Classifications of Immigrants

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security characterizes immigrants in one of four categories—naturalized citizens, lawful permanent residents, non-immigrants, and unauthorized immigrants. Naturalized citizens are those immigrants who have met the requirements for U.S. citizenship. Lawful permanent residents (LPRs), commonly known as “green card” recipients, are immigrants who: have been granted lawful permanent residence in the United States; may live or work permanently anywhere in the country; may own property; may attend public schools, colleges or universities; and may join certain branches of the armed services. An immigrant must have LPR status before becoming a naturalized citizen.

Non-immigrants are foreign nationals who have been granted temporary admission to the U.S. for a specific purpose. These include foreign exchange students, temporary workers and diplomats, as well as tourists and those in the U.S. solely for business. Non-immigrants can be granted LPR status.

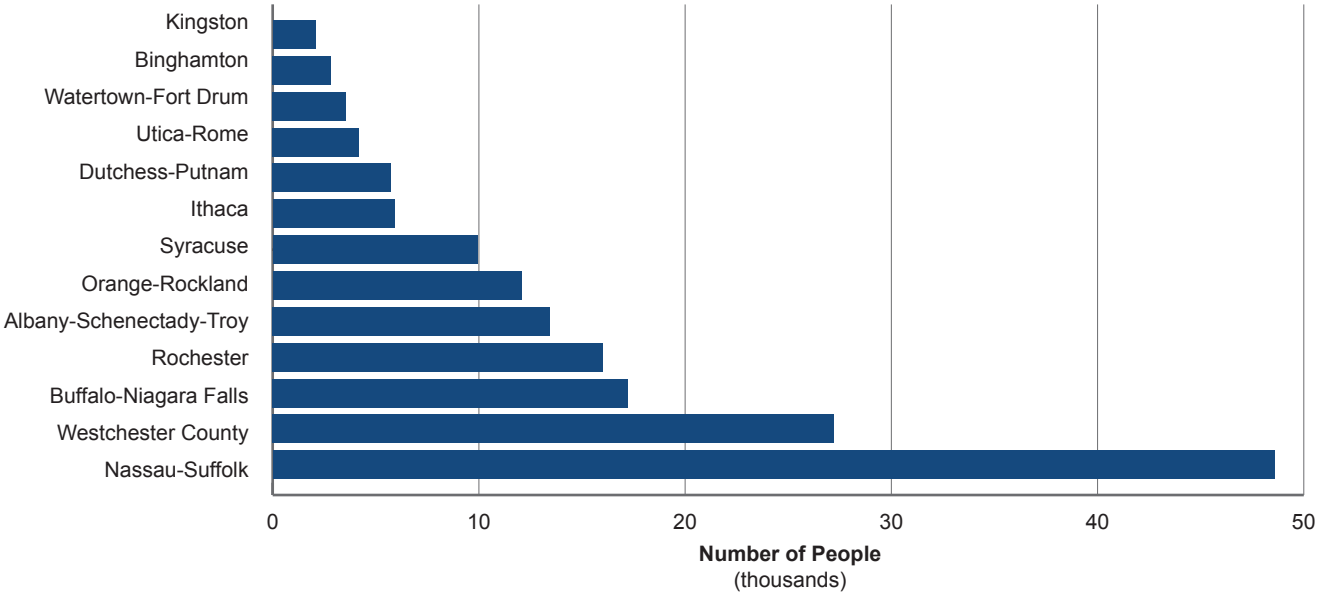
Unauthorized immigrants are foreign-born non-citizens who either came into the U.S. without being admitted through the legal admission process or were admitted as non-immigrants and stayed past the date they were required to leave.

Immigration to the United States and New York

Net international migration, as reported by the U.S. Census Bureau, reflects the change of a person's residence across the borders of the United States. While net international migration includes immigrants, both authorized and unauthorized, it also includes U.S. citizens and immigrants moving to other countries, as well as those moving to and from Puerto Rico and armed services personnel returning from or being deployed in other countries.

From 2010 to 2015, a net of 5.3 million people migrated to the United States from other countries and Puerto Rico. Of this total, nearly 12 percent or approximately 631,000 people, migrated to New York. Most of the net international migration to New York, nearly 96 percent, was to the State's metropolitan areas, with almost 75 percent, or 452,000 occurring in New York City and over 87 percent in the downstate region. Figure 1 shows the net international migration to various areas of the State outside New York City for this period.

Figure 1
Net International Migration by Area, 2010–2015



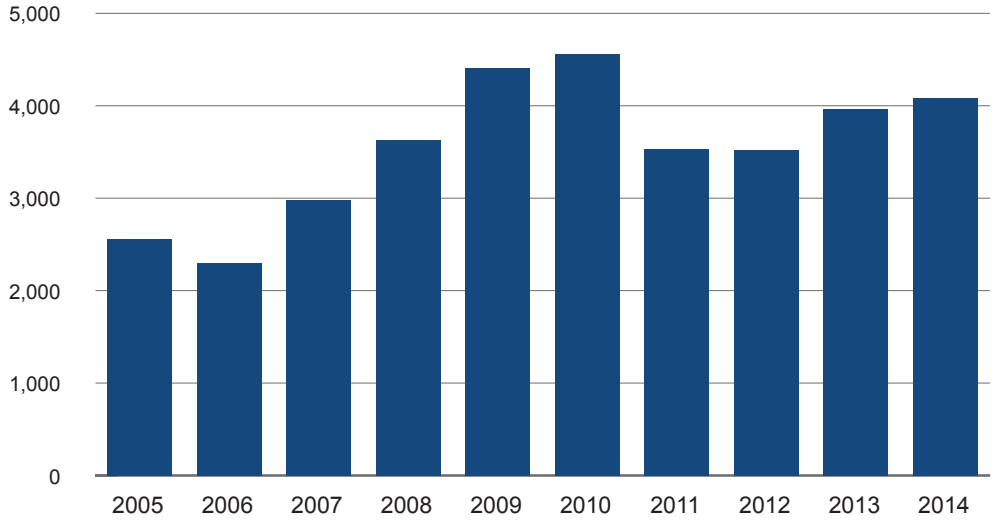
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, OSC Analysis

Total population counts in Buffalo-Niagara Falls, Syracuse, Dutchess-Putnam, Utica-Rome, Binghamton and Kingston fell from 2010 to 2015, and would have declined more sharply if not for the addition of new residents from other countries, according to Census data. In Rochester, Albany-Schenectady-Troy, Nassau-Suffolk and Ithaca (as well as in New York City, not shown), overall population would have declined during the period if not for the immigrant numbers shown in Figure 1.

The net migration data also includes refugees coming into the United States. Refugees are those people leaving their country of origin to avoid persecution.[2] A maximum number of refugees allowed into the United States each year is set by the President, in consultation with Congress. This annual admissions ceiling, which also allocates a maximum number of refugees allowed from each area of the world, was set at 70,000 from 2005 to 2007. In 2008, it was increased to 80,000 to accommodate refugees from Iraq, Iran, and Bhutan and remained at that level until 2011. The annual admissions ceiling was lowered to 76,000 in 2012 and returned to its historical level of 70,000 refugee admissions in 2013. The Near East/South Asia region, which includes Iraq and Iran, continued to be the region with the largest allocation of the refugee admissions ceiling.[3]

New York ranks third as the destination for refugees admitted to the United States, behind Texas and California. Figure 2 shows the numbers of refugees arriving annually in New York over the past decade. Refugees represent a small proportion of overall immigration to the State and the nation. For example, there were approximately 4,100 refugees admitted to New York in 2014 compared to 141,000 immigrants receiving green cards that year, as discussed below.

Figure 2
Refugees Admitted to New York, 2005–2014



Source: U.S. Department of Homeland Security

2 According to the Immigration and Nationality Act, a refugee is defined as a person who is unable or unwilling to return to his or her country of nationality because of persecution or a well-grounded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion.
3 U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Annual Flow Report: Refugees and Asylees: 2012.

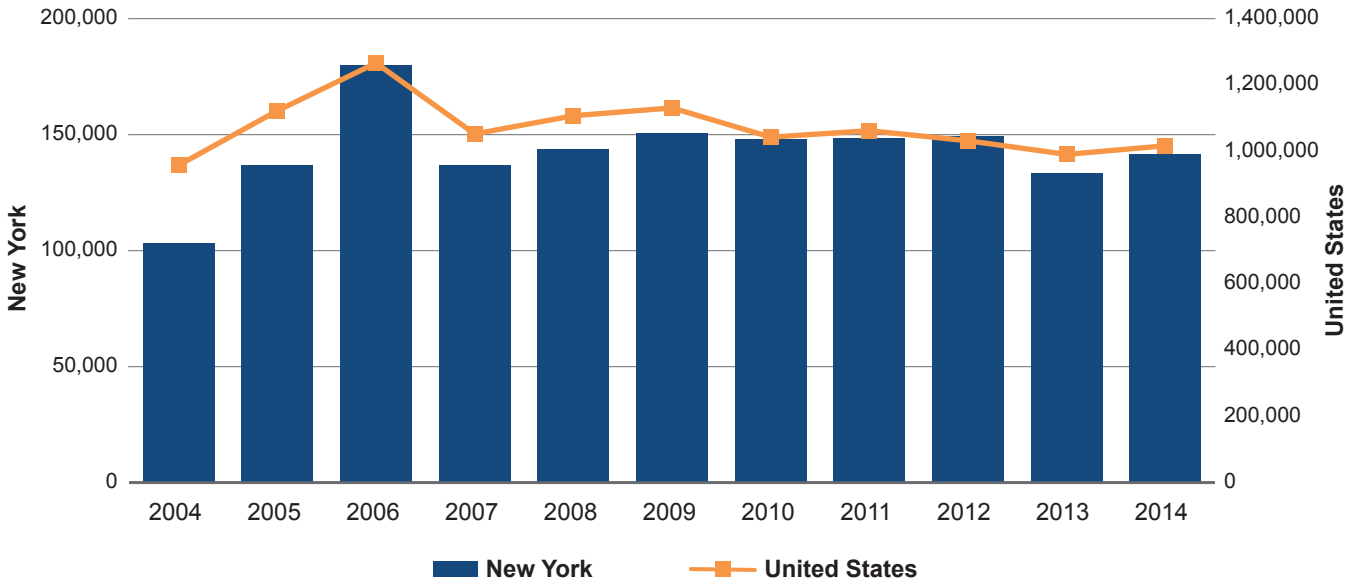
Another indicator of the volume of immigrants coming to the United States over time is the number of those obtaining LPR status.[4]

Figure 3 shows the number of U.S. immigrants obtaining LPR status over the decade ending in 2014, the most recent data available. In 2006, the nation had the largest number of immigrants becoming permanent residents since 1991, at nearly 1.3 million.[5] In subsequent years, the number of immigrants gaining legal status has leveled off, averaging slightly over 1 million new immigrants per year.

The number of immigrants gaining lawful permanent resident status in New York has shown a similar experience over the last decade. In 2006, the number of these immigrants was just over 180,000 people, also its highest since 1991. Since then, the number of immigrants establishing lawful permanent residence in New York has leveled off, averaging approximately 144,000 per year.

Figure 3

Immigrants Obtaining Legal Permanent Resident Status, 2004–2014



Source: U.S. Department of Homeland Security

4 Since lawful permanent residence status can be granted to non-immigrants already residing in the United States on a temporary basis or refugees who were previously granted admission to the U.S., the year such status was granted does not necessarily equate to the year of entry.

5 The large increase in immigrants gaining LPR status in 2006 was due to the REAL ID Act of 2005 which eliminated the cap on the adjustment of status for asylees which had previously been set at 10,000. Elimination of this cap increased the number of asylees gaining LPR status by over 86,000 in 2006.

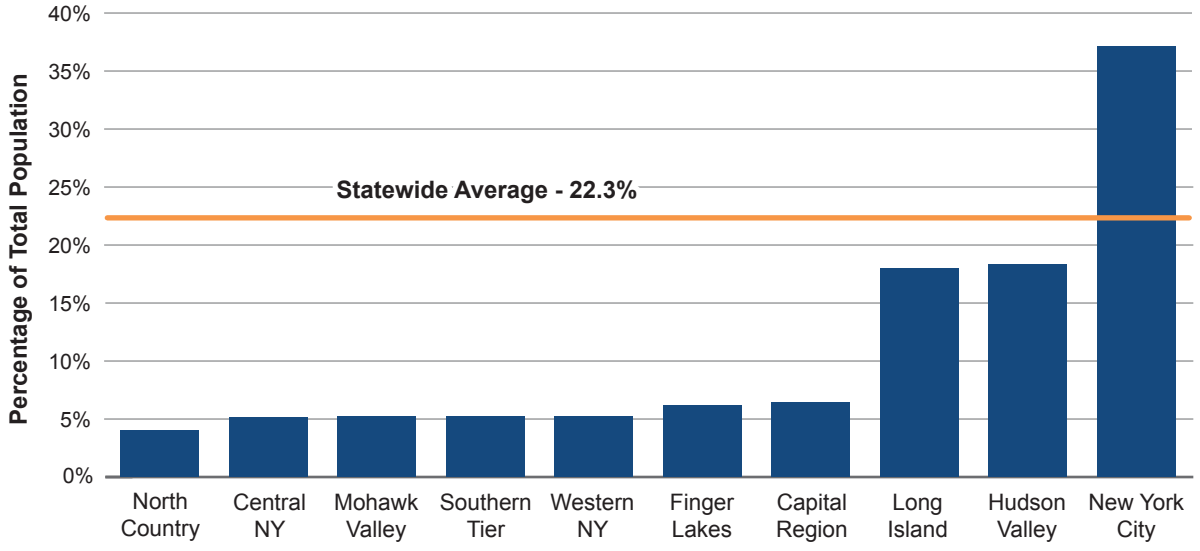
Portrait of the Immigrant Population in New York

As of 2014, there were nearly 4.4 million immigrants in New York, constituting approximately 22 percent of the State's total population. Of the State's immigrant population, over half are naturalized citizens.

In comparison, the nation's immigrant population of over 41 million accounted for 13 percent of the total U.S. population in 2014. California is the only state that has a higher immigrant count than New York, with nearly 10.3 million, over a quarter of its population. Nationwide, approximately 46 percent of immigrants are naturalized citizens.

Figure 4 shows that the immigrant population within New York State, as a proportion of the total area population, is highest in New York City, Long Island and the Hudson Valley. As shown, New York City has the largest proportion of immigrants with over one-third of its population being foreign-born, a percentage almost three times the U.S. average. Long Island and the Hudson Valley also have higher concentrations of foreign-born residents than the nation as a whole. While the downstate regions comprise approximately 69 percent of the State's total population, they are home to over 92 percent of all immigrants in the State.

Figure 4
Immigrants as a Proportion of Total Population by Region, 2014

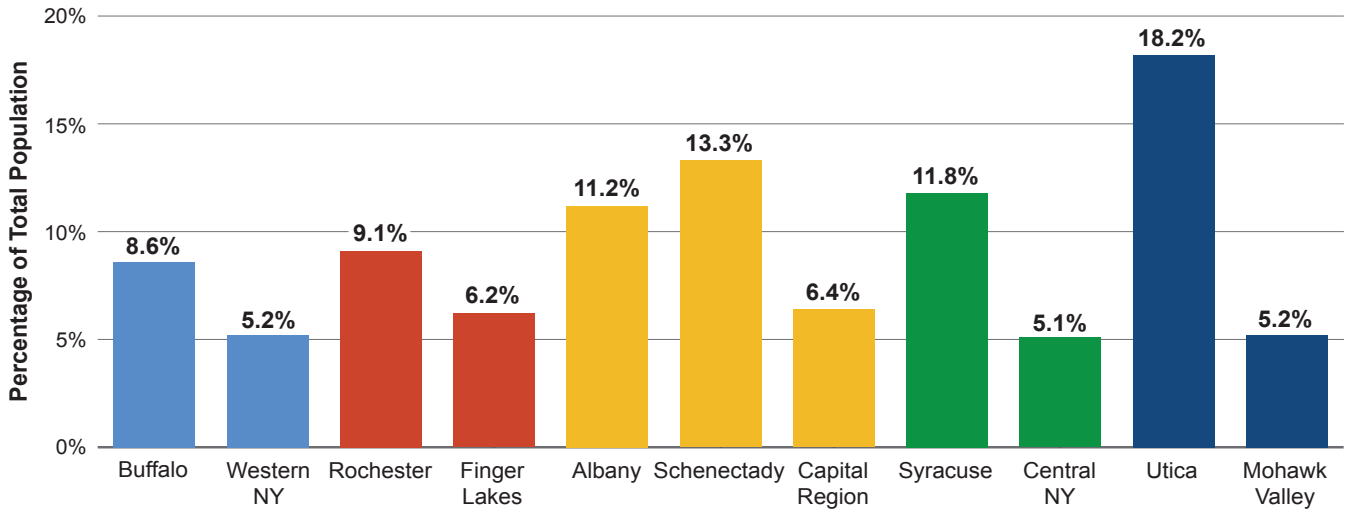


Source: U.S. Census Bureau, OSC Analysis

Similar to the State as a whole, over half of the immigrants in each region are naturalized citizens, except in the North Country and the Southern Tier. The region with the highest percentage of naturalized immigrants is the Finger Lakes region, at 57 percent.

Although concentrations of immigrants are smaller in the metropolitan areas outside downstate, such residents add significantly to area totals, especially in cities. Figure 5 shows the proportion of the immigrant population to the total population in six of the larger upstate cities and in corresponding regions.

Figure 5
Immigrants as a Proportion of Total Population In Selected Upstate Cities and Regions, 2014



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, OSC Analysis

For example, among upstate cities, Utica has the highest proportion of immigrants, slightly over 18 percent of its total population. In comparison, foreign-born residents account for just over 7 percent of the population in Oneida County (where Utica is located), and slightly over 5 percent of the total in the Mohawk Valley region (which includes Oneida County). A similar pattern is seen in the other upstate cities compared to the counties and regions where they are located.

Most upstate cities experienced sharp population declines in the second half of the 20th century. Those in Western New York and the Mohawk Valley suffered the most severe declines, including Buffalo, which lost nearly half its population, and Utica, which suffered a decline of more than 40 percent. A 2004 report by the Office of the State Comptroller observed: "In recent decades, many of the State's cities have experienced serious population losses which have contributed to economic and fiscal decline."[6] A decreased population means fewer customers for area businesses and a reduced tax base for local governments and school districts, among other adverse consequences. By offsetting such population losses, immigrants help alleviate the economic and fiscal challenges confronting many cities in New York State.

6 "Population Trends in New York State's Cities," Office of the New York State Comptroller, December 2004.

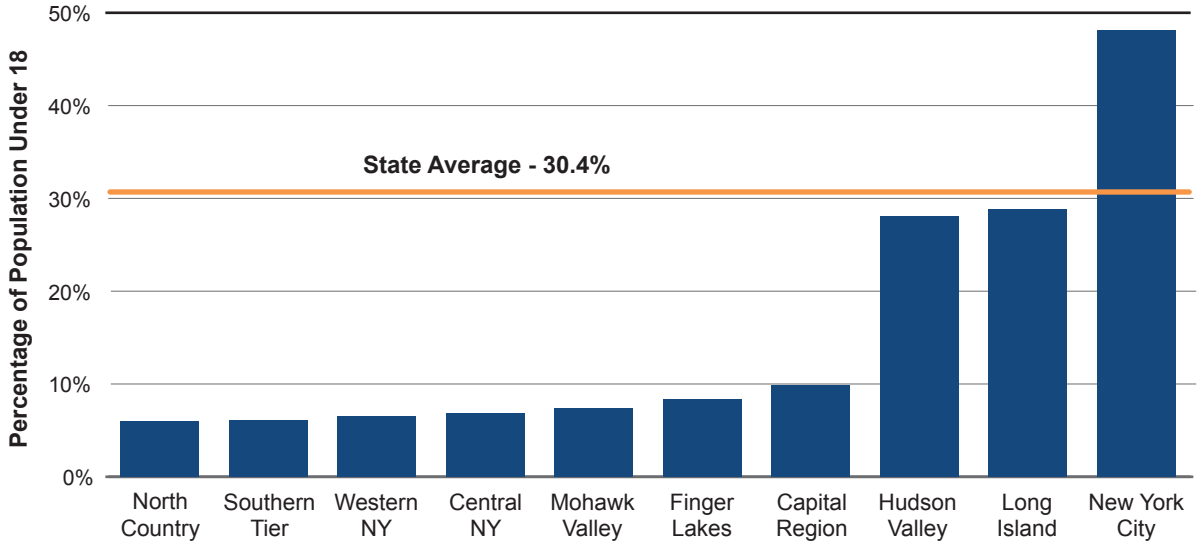
American-Born Children of Immigrants

Less than 20 percent of the foreign-born population in New York is under the age of 25. Among all New York children under age 18, slightly fewer than 5 percent are immigrants. (Nationwide, this proportion is even smaller, approximately 3 percent.)

However, the proportion of American-born children under the age of 18 with one or two immigrant parents is much higher. In New York, almost a third of American-born children have at least one parent who is foreign-born. On a national basis, it is over 21 percent.

Figure 6 shows the proportion of children under the age of 18 who are first-generation Americans in each region of the State.[7] Those regions with a large proportion of immigrants generally also have a large proportion of first-generation Americans. In New York City, the region with the largest proportion of immigrants, almost half of all children under 18 have at least one immigrant parent.

Figure 6
First-Generation American Children Under the Age of 18, 2014

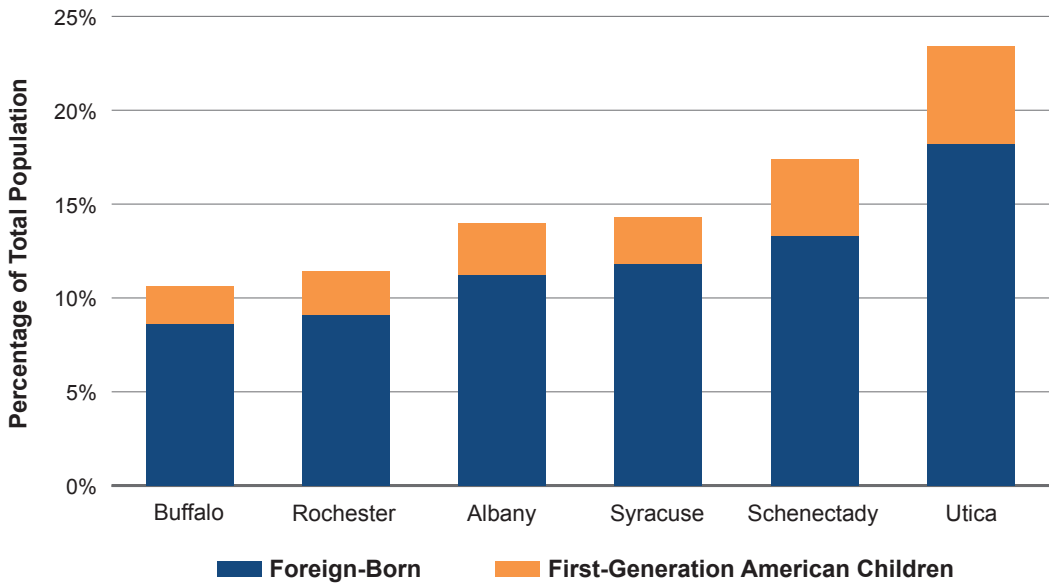


Source: U.S. Census Bureau, OSC Analysis

7 For purposes of this report, first-generation American children includes those who have parents that are foreign-born or one foreign-born parent and one native-born parent.

With a larger proportion of the immigrant populations in the upstate regions concentrated in the metropolitan areas, there are also a larger number of first-generation Americans in these areas. Figure 7 shows the proportion of immigrants and their U.S.-born children in relation to the overall population in six of New York's larger upstate cities.

Figure 7
Immigrants and First-Generation American Children as a Proportion of the Total Population, 2014



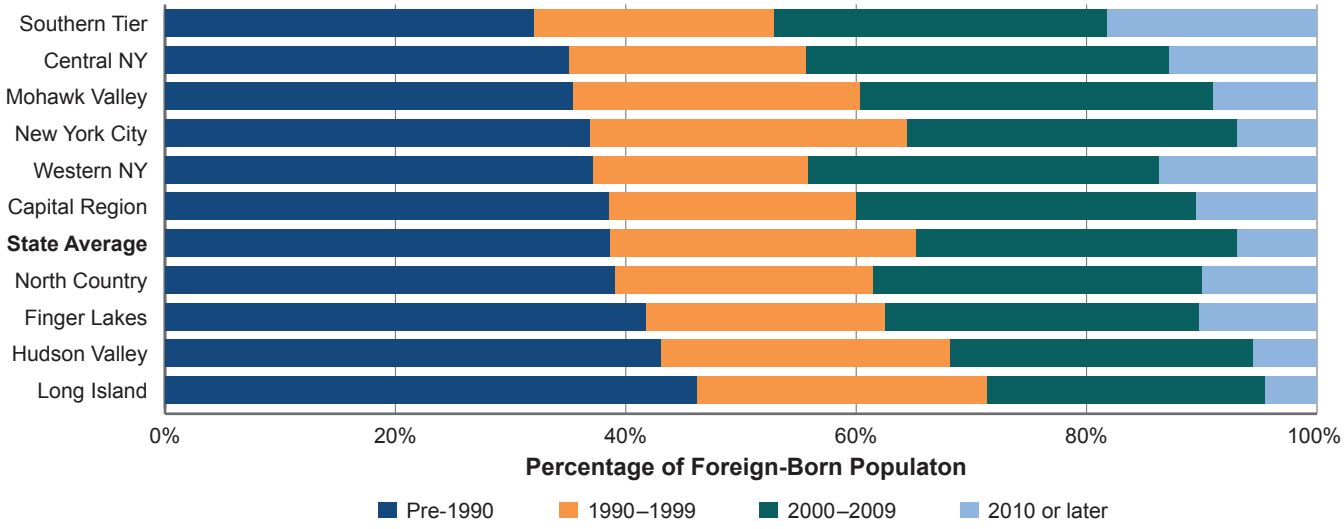
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, OSC Analysis

The cities of Utica and Schenectady have a larger proportion of immigrants than the other upstate cities and, in turn, have the largest proportions of children who are first-generation Americans. As shown, nearly one-quarter of the population in the city of Utica comprises immigrants and their children. In Schenectady, Syracuse, Albany, Rochester and Buffalo, such immigrant families represent more than 10 percent of all residents.

Age and Year of Entry of the Immigrant Population

While New York has had a continuous influx of immigrants for many years, approximately two-thirds of the immigrants who currently reside in New York entered the United States before 2000, with over a third having done so before 1990. As shown in Figure 8, the Long Island region has the largest proportion of pre-1990 immigrants, while the Southern Tier has the largest proportion of newer immigrants, with over 18 percent of its foreign-born population entering in 2010 or later.

Figure 8
Period of Entry to the U.S. of the Immigrant Population by Region, 2014

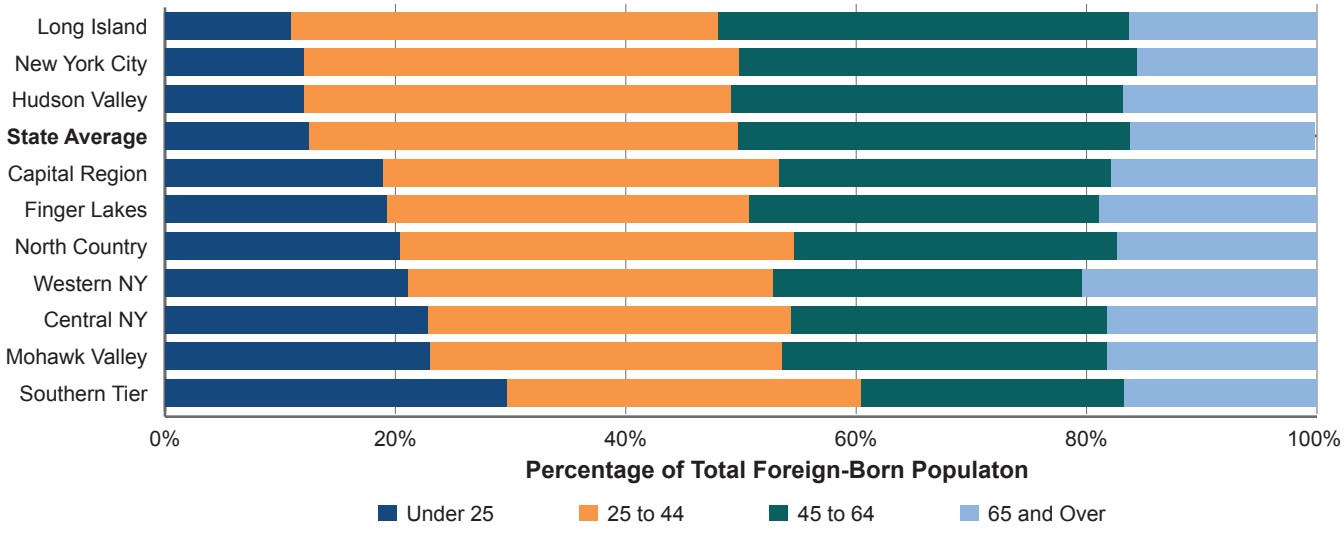


Source: U.S. Census Bureau, OSC Analysis

The median age of immigrants living in the United States as of 2014 was approximately 42.6 years, with the largest proportion of the national immigrant population, over 40 percent, between ages 25 and 44. New York has a slightly older immigrant population, with a median age of 45.1. Both nationally and in New York, median ages for the immigrant population are several years higher than for the overall population, partly reflecting that U.S.-born children of immigrants tend to reduce the overall average age but not that of the foreign-born population. In both New York and in the nation as a whole, over 70 percent of the immigrant population is within the 25 to 64 age demographic.

On a regional basis, the Southern Tier has the highest proportion of younger immigrants, with nearly 30 percent under the age of 25. As shown in Figure 9, the downstate regions have the largest proportion of immigrants in both the 25 to 44 and 45 to 64 age demographics, while Western New York has the highest proportion of older immigrants, those aged 65 years and older.

Figure 9
Immigrant Population in New York by Age and Region, 2014



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, OSC Analysis

Place of Birth

Immigrants in New York come from more than 150 nations in virtually every region of the world. The highest proportion comes from Latin America, representing slightly less than half of New York's immigrant population.

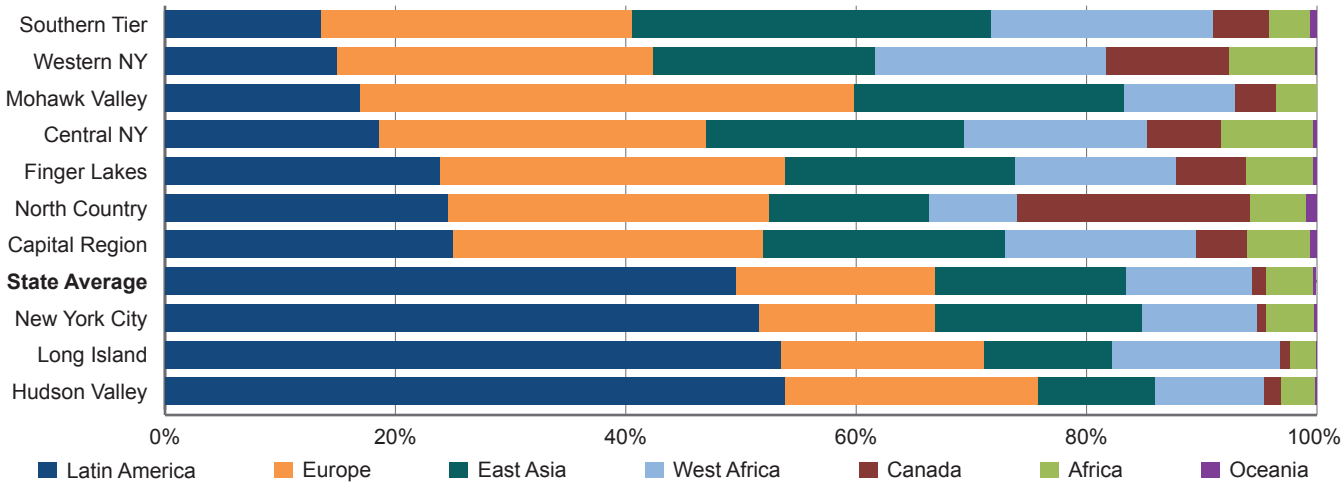
The composition of the immigrant population varies from region to region. As shown in Figure 10, the downstate regions have the largest proportion of Latin American immigrants, with the Hudson Valley having the largest share, nearly 54 percent.

However, European immigrants make up the largest share of immigrants in the Mohawk Valley, at over 40 percent. Almost two-thirds of these residents are from Eastern Europe, with individuals from Bosnia and Herzegovina dominating the group.

In the Southern Tier, the Asian immigrant population accounts for slightly more than half of the foreign-born population. Among that group, almost a third come from eastern Asia, which includes China, Japan and Korea, as well as the countries of Southeast Asia, such as Cambodia, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. This region has the lowest proportion of immigrants from Latin America of any in New York.

Due to its proximity to the Canadian border, the North Country has the highest proportion of Canadian immigrants, who constitute over 20 percent of its foreign-born population. While immigrants from Australia and other South Pacific nations (also known as the Oceania region) constitute a very small portion of the immigrant population in New York, the North Country has the highest proportion of immigrants from this area of the world as compared to the other regions of the State.

Figure 10
Place of Birth of the Immigrant Population by Region, 2014



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, OSC Analysis

Education

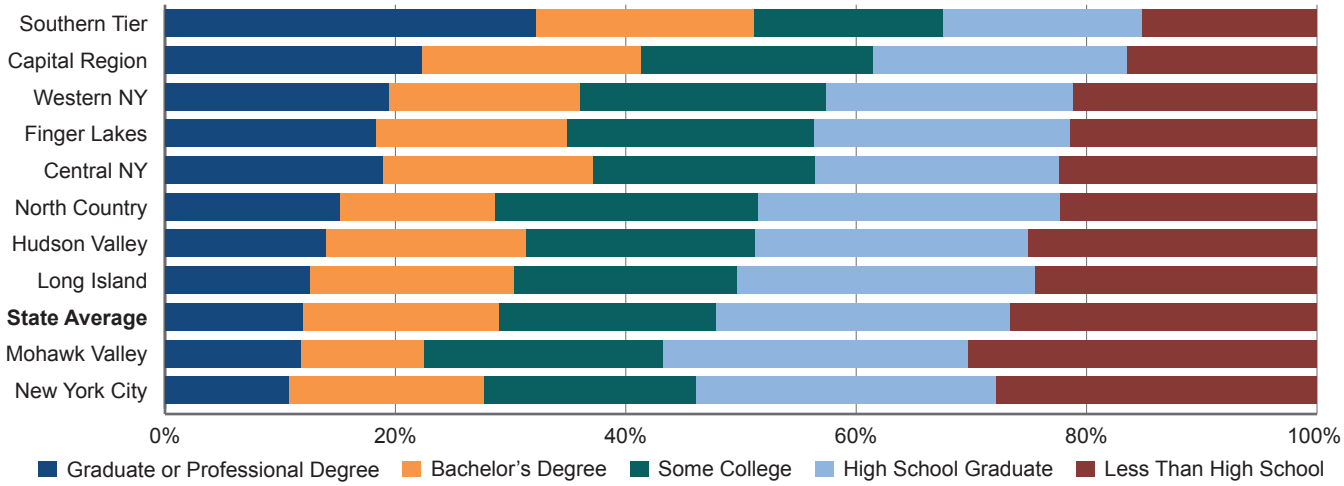
With a majority of the immigrant population being older than 25, less than 15 percent of the immigrant population in New York and nationwide is enrolled in school. However, of those who are enrolled in school, over half nationwide are enrolled in higher education. Almost 60 percent of New York's immigrants enrolled in school are attending college.

Among immigrants aged 25 and over, those in New York have a higher level of educational attainment than the similar population nationwide. Over 73 percent of the foreign-born in New York have a high school education or higher as compared to 70 percent nationally. Twenty-nine percent of New York immigrants were college graduates, including nearly 12 percent with a graduate or professional degree, while an additional 19 percent had completed some college or an associate's degree. These figures are somewhat lower than those for U.S.-born residents in New York. Nearly 48 percent of all immigrants in the State had completed at least some college, a proportion that was slightly higher than the national figure.

Figure 11 shows the regional breakout of the immigrant population aged 25 and over by educational attainment. As shown, a greater proportion of the immigrant population in the Southern Tier has achieved a high level of educational attainment, with two-thirds of this group having some college education and over half having a bachelor's degree or higher. In addition, the Southern Tier has the highest proportion of immigrants with graduate or professional degrees, constituting almost one-third of the foreign-born population in this age demographic.

The Capital Region ranks second in the educational attainment of its immigrant population with over 60 percent of immigrants over 25 having a college degree or some college education, and more than 40 percent having a bachelor's degree or higher.

Figure 11
Educational Attainment of Immigrant Population Aged 25 and Over, 2014



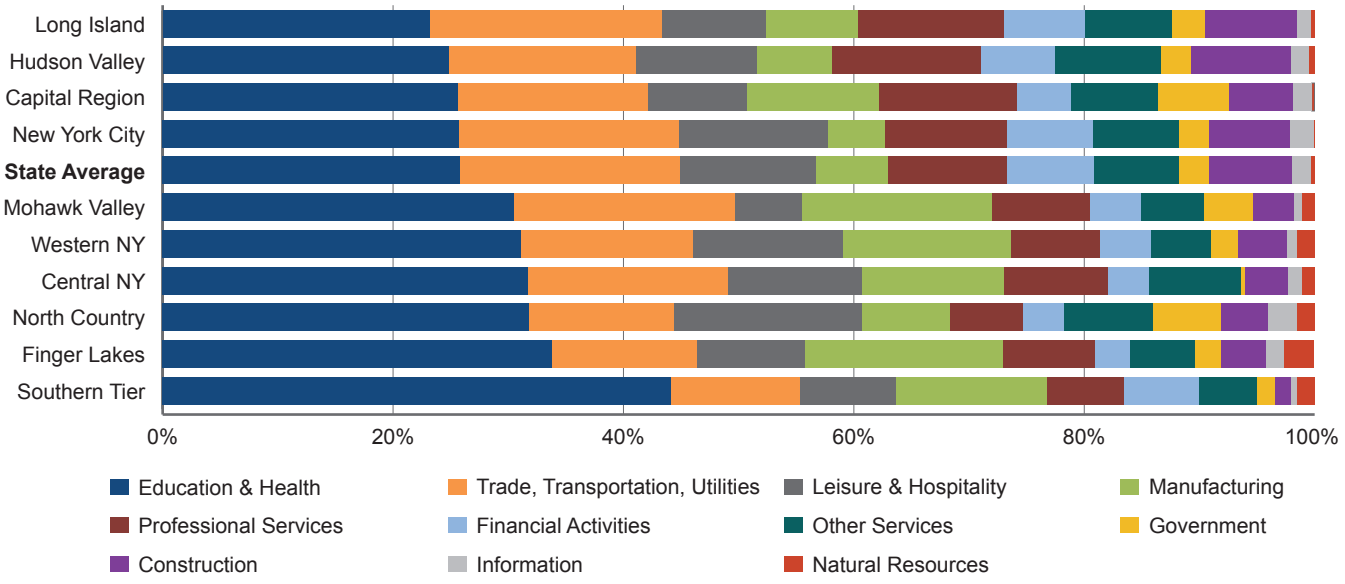
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, OSC Analysis

Employment

The labor force participation rate among the immigrant population aged 16 and over in the United States was 67 percent in 2014, higher than the participation rate of 63.9 percent for the total population.[8] Similarly, in New York, the labor force participation rate for immigrants of 65.4 percent was somewhat higher than the total participation rate for the State of 63.5 percent.

Besides the strong labor force participation rate for the immigrant population in New York, the unemployment rate among immigrants is low. In 2014, the unemployment rate for the immigrant labor force was 5.6 percent nationally as compared to a total unemployment rate of 6.2 percent. In New York, the results are similar, with an immigrant unemployment rate of 5.4 percent as compared to 6.3 percent statewide.

Figure 12
Employment by Industry of Immigrant Population Aged 18 and Over, 2014



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, OSC Analysis

8 As defined by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the labor force participation rate is the portion of the population aged 16 and over that is either employed or officially considered unemployed. The unemployed population does not include those who are voluntarily not working, such as students, retirees, and stay-at-home parents.

On a regional basis, the Hudson Valley has the highest labor force participation rate among its immigrant population, at 70 percent. In contrast, the Southern Tier has the lowest participation rate of just under 45 percent. A possible explanation for this lower participation rate is the higher incidence of immigrants enrolled in higher education in the Southern Tier, as this region also has the lowest proportion of immigrants who are unemployed.

Immigrants are employed in every major industry sector. The education and health services sector is the largest immigrant employer. As shown in Figure 12, the Southern Tier has the largest proportion of immigrants employed in this sector, at nearly 45 percent.

Long Island has the smallest share of immigrant employment in education and health services of all the regions, with less than a quarter of working immigrants employed in these industries. However, this is still the largest employer of immigrants in the region. Long Island has the largest share of immigrants working in the trade, transportation and utilities sector compared to all other regions, almost as much as in education and health services.

The North Country has the highest proportion of immigrants working in the leisure and hospitality sector of all the regions, while a larger proportion of immigrants work in manufacturing in the Finger Lakes and Mohawk Valley regions than in any other regions of the State.

In addition to working in a wide variety of industries, immigrants in New York work in a wide variety of occupations within those industries. Figure 13 shows the top fifteen occupations in which immigrants work (measured by the percentage of employed immigrants in the occupation), along with immigrants' share of the total employment in the occupation.

Figure 13
Employment of Immigrants in New York State:
Top Fifteen Occupations and Share of Employment, 2014

	Percentage of Employed Immigrants	Immigrants as Share of Total Employed	Average Annual Wage
Nursing, psychiatric, and home health aides	5.9%	57.3%	$33,200
Janitors and building cleaners	3.6%	39.7%	$31,900
Maids and housekeeping cleaners	3.5%	67.0%	$32,220
Cashiers	2.8%	28.5%	$22,240
Construction laborers	2.8%	49.9%	$48,510
Retail salespersons	2.5%	23.4%	$27,440
Taxi drivers and chauffeurs	2.3%	71.4%	$32,990
Managers	2.3%	22.5%	$116,720
Registered nurses	2.2%	29.1%	$80,090
Childcare workers	2.2%	39.7%	$26,800
Cooks	2.2%	41.7%	$28,440
Driver/sales workers and truck drivers	1.9%	28.4%	$37,680
Waiters and waitresses	1.8%	32.5%	$28,480
Secretaries and administrative assistants	1.8%	17.0%	$52,540
Accountants and auditors	1.6%	30.8%	$93,770

Note: Percentage of employed immigrants aged 18 and older. Average annual wages are for all workers in the respective occupations.
Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, NYS Department of Labor

As shown, while nearly 40 percent of working immigrants are employed in these fifteen occupations, no one occupation predominates. Most of these are low-wage occupations, with average wages in 2014 below the New York average annual wage of $65,900.[9] However, many immigrants also hold well-paying jobs as accountants and auditors, registered nurses, and managers of various types. Immigrants represent large proportions of certain occupations including taxi drivers and chauffeurs, maids, nursing, psychiatric, and home health aides, construction laborers, cooks and childcare workers.

9 Excluding the finance and insurance sector which has exceptionally high average wages, the annual average wage in New York in 2014 was $53,600.

Conclusion

Representing almost a quarter of New York's population, immigrants reside in every region of the State and represent every region of the world, contributing to the rich diversity of cultures, backgrounds, skills and experiences that helps make our State strong. While most of the immigrant population is concentrated downstate, immigrants also play an important role in stabilizing populations in upstate cities.

With over 73 percent of immigrants in New York over the age of 25 having a high school education or higher, and nearly 48 percent having completed some college, immigrants are helping to maintain and grow the skilled work force that is necessary for a strong economy. Immigrants also have a high rate of employment in New York and work in a variety of industries, contributing to New York's diverse workforce. In addition to their economic roles as workers, consumers, employers and taxpayers, immigrants add to the social and cultural vitality of communities throughout the State.

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