

# The Impact of the Great Recession on Metropolitan Immigration Trends

AUDREY SINGER AND JILL H. WILSON

## FINDINGS

An analysis of national and metropolitan immigration trends surrounding the recession of 2007–2009 shows:

- **Immigration slowed during the Great Recession following fast paced growth.** While the U.S. foreign-born population grew considerably during the 2000s, the pace of growth slackened at the onset of the recession at the end of 2007. Slower growth was seen after 2007, as the share of the national population that is foreign born has remained constant at 12.5 percent.
- **The recession's impact on metropolitan immigrant settlement has been uneven.** Two growth trajectories stand out among a handful of metropolitan areas: those that have “weathered” the recession and continued to receive immigrants such as Austin, Dallas-Ft. Worth, and Seattle, and those that experienced a reversal from high growth to negative growth including Phoenix, Riverside-San Bernardino, and Tampa. Overall, 35 of the top 100 metros saw significant change in their foreign-born populations during the recession.
- **Few impacts of the recession can be discerned in the characteristics of immigrants, pre- and post-recession.** There has been a drop in the number of immigrants from Mexico, a slight increase in those with less than a high school education, an increase in those who are naturalized U.S. citizens and, not surprisingly, a rise in poverty among immigrants.

Following thirty years of unprecedented growth, immigration to the United States plateaued during the Great Recession. As the country moves into recovery mode, immigrant settlement patterns are likely to reflect economic growth across metropolitan areas. In the meantime, many regions facing budget shortfalls, unemployment, and an increased need for social services are struggling to maintain programs that benefit immigrants.

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## INTRODUCTION

During 2009, the U.S. economy was in the throes of the Great Recession, and immigration had become a highly polarized topic of debate, reflected by a rise in anti-immigrant sentiment. Immigration was high prior to the Great Recession which officially commenced in December 2007.<sup>1</sup> While immigration seemed to come to a standstill in 2008, an increase between 2008 and 2009 may be reflective of the first signs of the comeback of the national economy. At the very least, the demand for immigrant workers seems to have reappeared, though immigrant earnings are diminished in the post-recessionary period.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the national trend, metropolitan markets have experienced the recession in different ways, causing shifts in immigrant settlement patterns, at least for the time being.

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How has the immigrant population changed since the recession started, nationally and across metropolitan areas? How do current flows, immigrant stock and characteristics compare to the pre-recession moment? This brief analyzes immigration during the 2000s, highlighting pre- and post-recession trends for the 100 largest metropolitan areas where 85 percent of the U.S. foreign-born population lives.

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## METHODOLOGY

This brief uses newly released data from the U.S. Census Bureau's 2009 American Community Survey (ACS). For comparison purposes, we also use prior years of ACS and decennial census data. While we present data for the nation as a whole, much of our focus is on the 100 largest metropolitan areas (as ranked by their population).

We use "foreign born" and "immigrant" interchangeably to refer to anyone born outside the United States who was not a U.S. citizen at birth. This population includes naturalized citizens, legal permanent residents, temporary migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, and, to the extent to which they are counted, unauthorized immigrants.

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## FINDINGS

### A. Immigration slowed during the Great Recession following fast-paced growth.

Since the 1970s, the United States has seen steady growth in immigration (Figure 1). The immigrant population grew by 4.5 million in the 1970s and 5.7 million in the 1980s, and accelerated during the 1990s, resulting in an increase of more than 11 million immigrants in that decade alone. During the 2000s, the foreign-born population has grown by nearly 7.5 million, a smaller volume than the preceding decade. This reduction is due in large part to the slowing of immigration since the recession started.

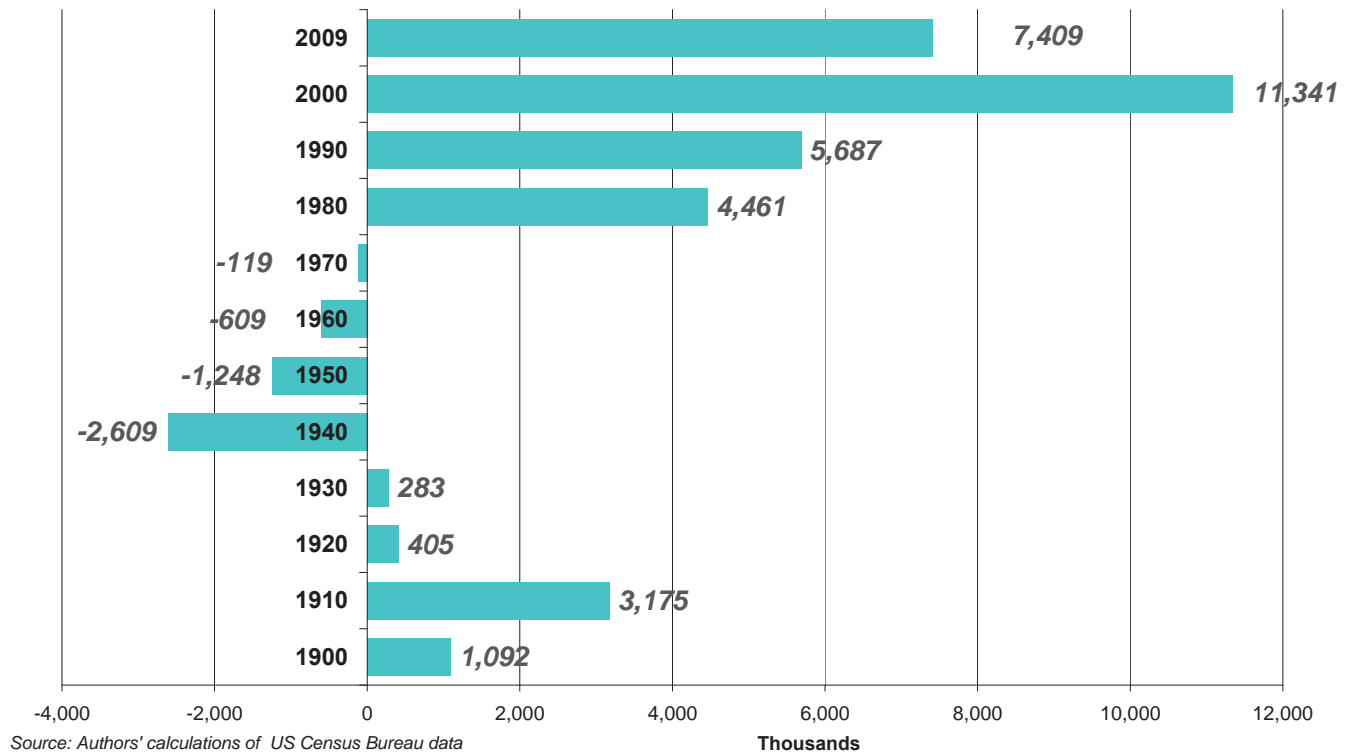
The U.S. immigrant population grew by approximately 1.1 million per year on average during the 1990s, continuing at that blazing pace in the 2000s right up until the recession started. Estimates of annual increases in immigration were still quite high between 2005 and 2006, dropping significantly between 2006 and 2007 (Figure 2). As the recession continued, immigration flows came to a standstill; the immigrant population did not grow significantly between 2007 and 2008, the first year of the recession.<sup>3</sup> As economic recovery gets underway, the nation as a whole will see renewed immigration, albeit likely at a much slower rate than the previous period, as evidenced by the substantial but more moderate increase between 2008 and 2009.

### B. The recession's impact on metropolitan immigrant settlement has been uneven.

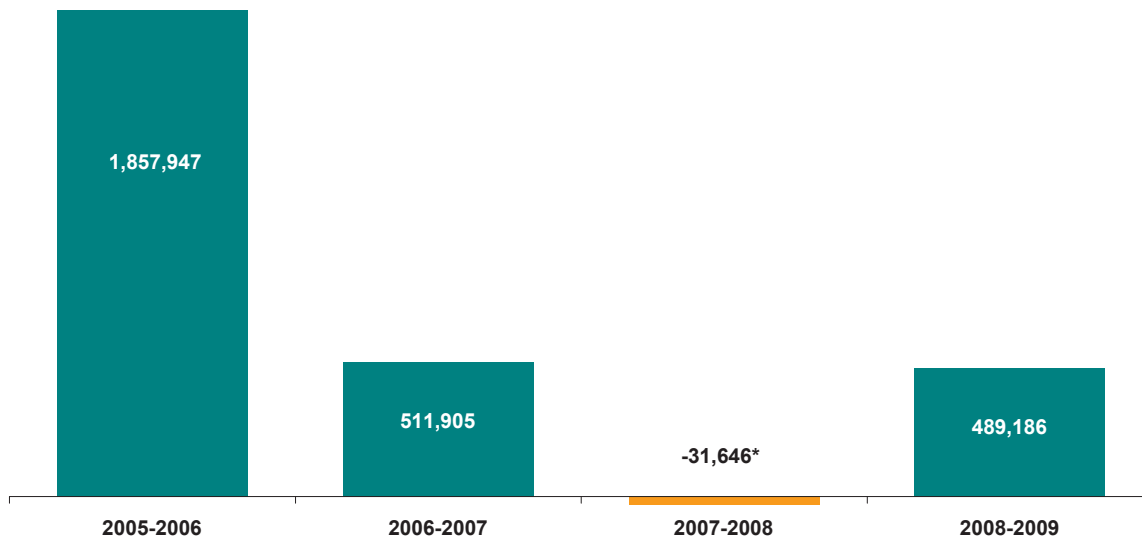
While national levels of immigration have rebounded moderately since the Great Recession started, among individual metropolitan areas, the changes have been varied. Thirty-five of the 100 largest metro areas experienced some change to the size of their immigrant population between 2007 and 2009, and among them, six saw significant decreases (Map 1). Among the six metro areas that lost immigrants between 2007 and 2009, all were major immigrant settlement areas. New York and Los Angeles, the two largest immigrant gateways, both saw declines on the order of 55,000. However, these losses amounted to only slightly more than a 1 percent drop in both metro areas. Riverside-San Bernardino, adjacent to the Los Angeles region, also lost an estimated 29,000 immigrants, or 3.2 percent of the foreign-born population. By far the largest loss in a single metro area was the estimated 64,000 in Phoenix, amounting to a decline of nearly 9 percent of the total foreign-born population.<sup>4</sup> San Jose and Tampa also had declines of 18,000 (2.7 percent) and 16,000 (4.8 percent) respectively.

In terms of immigrant gains, a range of metropolitan areas had increases since the recession began in 2007. The largest numeric gains were in Houston (74,000), Miami (54,000), Dallas (50,000), Philadelphia (45,000), and Atlanta (42,000), all metros that house large

**Figure 1. Change in the Foreign-Born Population by Decade (in thousands)  
1900-2009 (year shown is end of decade)**



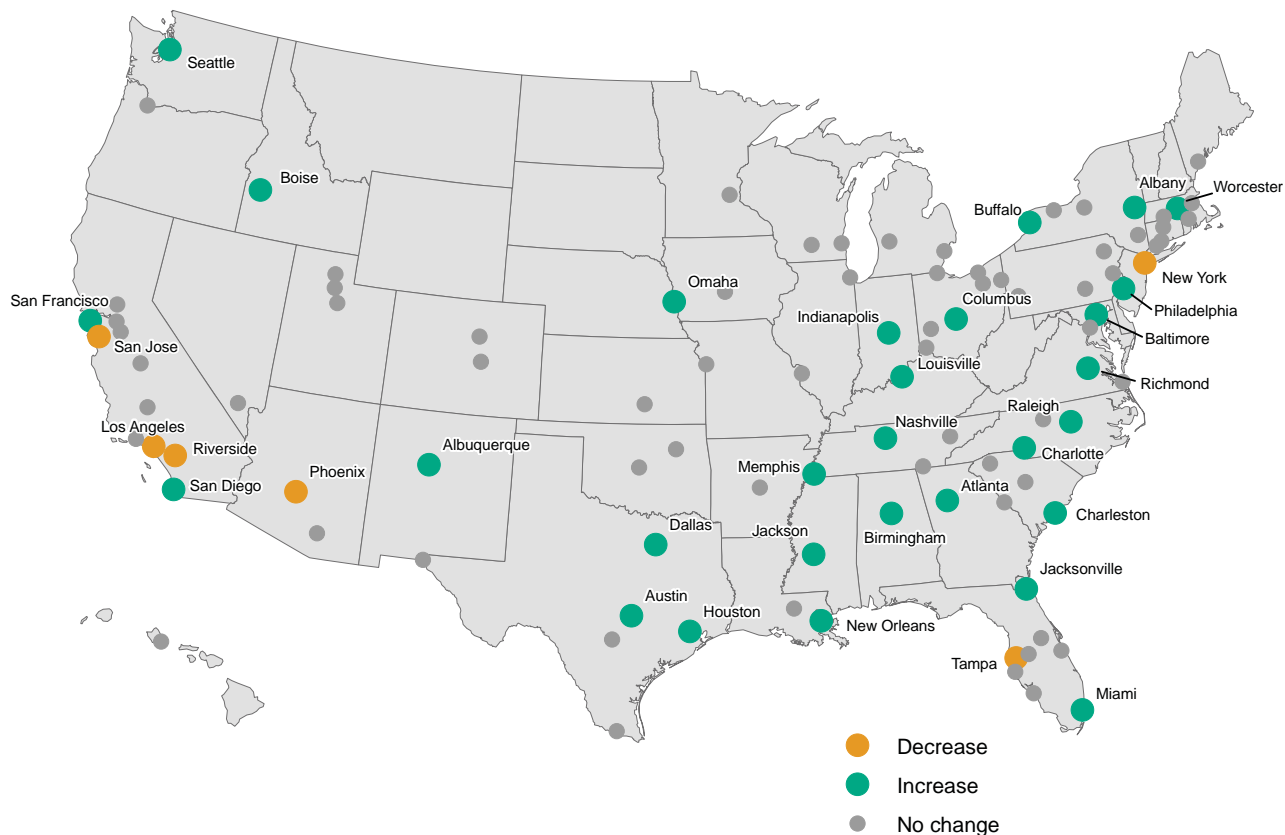
**Figure 2. Pre- and Post-Recession Change in the U.S. Foreign-Born Population**



\*not statistically significant

Source: Authors' calculations of ACS data; all differences except 2007-2008 are statistically significant at the 90% confidence level.

**Map 1. Growth in the Foreign-Born Population, 100 Largest Metropolitan Areas, 2007-2009**



Source: Brookings analysis of 2007 and 2009 American Community Survey data  
All changes are significant at the 90 percent confidence level.

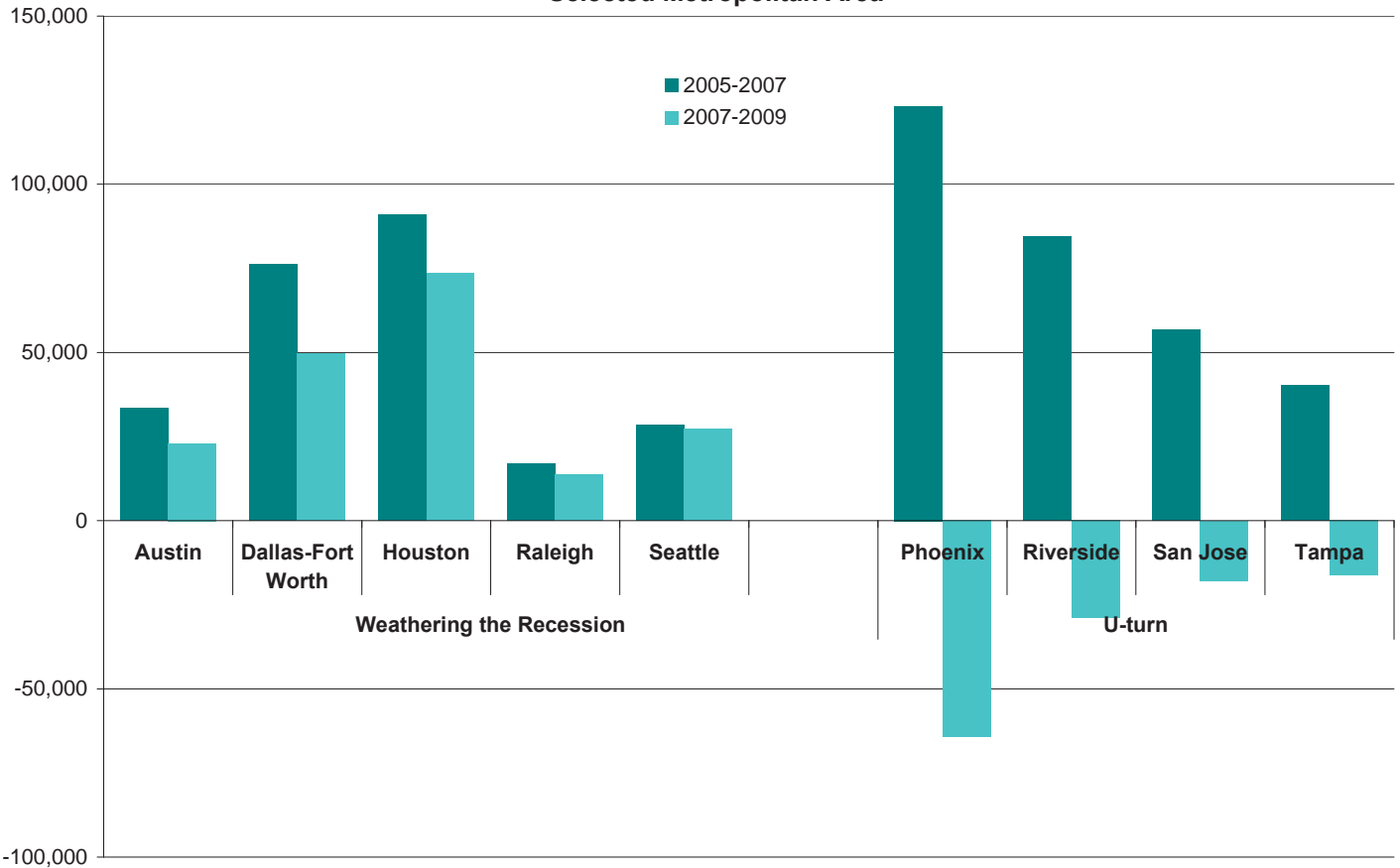
immigrant populations already. Smaller metropolitan areas with fledgling immigrant populations had the greatest percentage change in immigrants: Jackson, with only 12,000 estimated immigrants grew by half between 2007 and 2009, Birmingham increased its immigrant population by 25 percent to nearly 9,000 and Worcester and Omaha saw gains on the order of 19 percent in the same time period (See Appendix).

Several metro areas that have had the strongest economic performance during the recession have continued to gain immigrants (Figure 3).<sup>5</sup> Metro areas that have “weathered the recession” thus far include Austin and Houston in relatively robust Texas, as well as the information economy centers of Raleigh and Seattle. Also shown in Figure 3 are metro areas that have been hit hard by the recession and have seen a reversal of immigrant flows. In the several years leading up to the recession, immigrant settlement was very strong in Phoenix, Riverside-San Bernardino, and Tampa, but two years into the recession, those places began to actually lose immigrants (they also had a decline in domestic migration) as local opportunities weakened as a result of the bursting of the housing bubble and the economic crises that followed.

**C. Few impacts of the recession can be discerned in the characteristics of immigrants, pre- and post-recession.**

While it is difficult to discern from Census data precisely which immigrants have come

**Figure 3. Pre- and Post-Recession Change in the Foreign-Born Population by Selected Metropolitan Area**



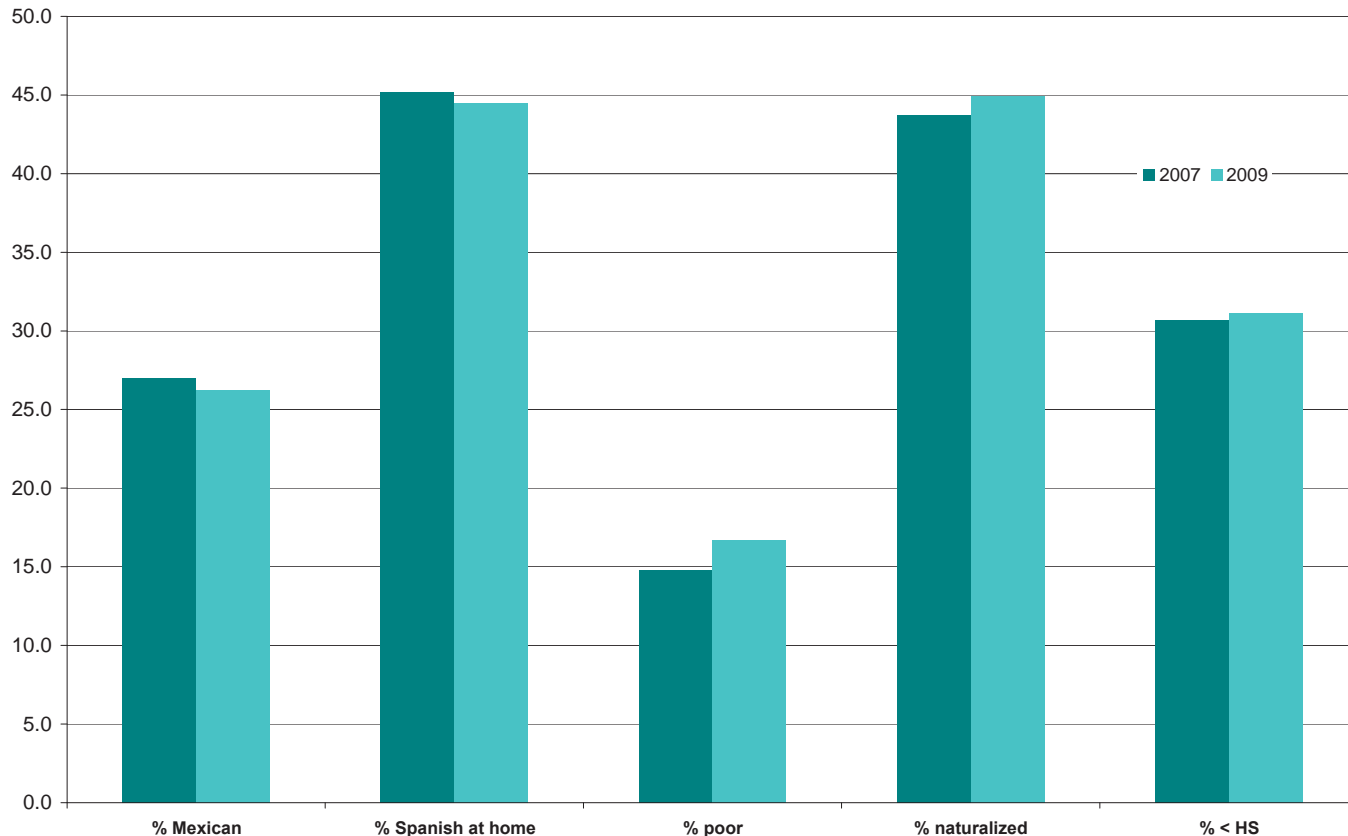
Source: Authors' calculations of ACS data; all differences are statistically significant at the 90 percent confidence level.

into the United States and which have left or died since the recession started, we look at a few key characteristics to see how the most recent trends have shaped the economic and social composition of U.S. immigrants (All changes shown in Figure 4 are statistically significant at the 90 percent confidence level).

Not surprisingly, the poverty rate for immigrants rose from 14.6 in 2007 to 16.7 in 2009, mirroring trends for the total U.S. population.<sup>6</sup> Many immigrant workers, particularly low-skill workers, were at risk of losing their jobs as the recession got underway. Workers in many industries, including the service and hospitality sectors, faced lay-offs. As the construction industry came to a grinding halt in many metropolitan areas, immigrant workers, overrepresented in many construction occupations, were some of the first to go. Immigrant workers, especially those with limited English proficiency, low education levels, and those without legal status—already precariously situated—may have slid into poverty. In fact, 34 of the 100 metros saw an increase in the size of the poor immigrant populations.

The size of the immigrant population born in Mexico (the largest country of origin nationally) appears to have declined between 2007 and 2009 resulting in a reduction of their share of all immigrants by about 1 percentage point.<sup>7</sup> Related to the decrease of the Mexican population is the corresponding drop in the percentage of immigrants whose primary language is Spanish.<sup>8</sup> There was also a slight rise in the share of immigrants with less than a high school education.<sup>9</sup> It is more difficult to say whether this is an indication of poorer, low-skill immigrants being “stuck” in the United States or new immigrants arriving, corresponding to the moderate rebound in immigration observed between 2008 and 2009.

Fig. 4. Characteristics of Foreign-Born Population, 100 Metropolitan Areas, 2007 and 2009



Source: Authors' calculations of ACS 2007 and 2009 data; all differences are statistically significant at the 90 percent confidence level.

The number and share of immigrants that were naturalized U.S. citizens increased slightly in the post-recession period from the pre-recession period. However, this cannot be attributed to the recessionary environment, but likely to the overall shifting of the composition of the characteristics of immigrants. As immigrants age they are more likely to become citizens, and varying propensities by region of origin and the size of the population eligible to naturalize also come into play.

## CONCLUSION

After three decades of nonstop growth, immigration seems to have paused. Not only have flows to the United States slowed since the recession started in late 2007, but the worldwide economic downturn has changed global migration patterns.<sup>10</sup> Metropolitan-level economic conditions within the United States have influenced immigrant settlement patterns, including those of both recession and recovery (or lack thereof).

The slowing of migration is due to a combination of fewer immigrants arriving as well as an outflow of immigrants from the United States, although how much is due to each is difficult to quantify. One study estimates that the annual inflow of unauthorized immigrants to the United States was nearly two-thirds smaller in the March 2007 to March 2009 period than it had been from March 2000 to March 2005.<sup>11</sup>

Changes in immigrant settlement patterns have been marked across metropolitan areas. Some places with fragile economies and beleaguered housing markets have seen their immigrant populations shrink when just a few years ago they were soaring. Many places

have experienced little or no change in the number of immigrants, while other places with greater stability in their labor markets have seen slower but still steady increases in immigration since the recession hit. As the national economy edges toward recovery, immigration patterns will likely mirror variable economic growth across metropolitan areas.

For the time being, metropolitan areas facing shrinking budgets, high unemployment, and greater demand for social services will feel the challenges of maintaining programs that benefit immigrants—due to both fiscal constraints and the current polarized atmosphere around immigration.<sup>12</sup>

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## ENDNOTES

1. According to the National Bureau of Economic Research (Cambridge: NBER, 2010), the 2007 recession began in December of that year and lasted 18 months until June 2009. The American Community Survey is an annual survey that is conducted on a monthly basis throughout the calendar year. Therefore, the “2007” ACS reflects respondents interviewed during the course of that year, the “2008” ACS reflects respondents interviewed during the course of that year, each averaged together. While not a perfect match, we use pre- and post-2007 periods to mark pre- and post- recession periods.
2. Rakesh Kochhar, with C. Soledad Espinoza, and Rebeca Hinze-Pifer, “After the Great Recession: Foreign Born Gain Jobs; Native Born Lose Jobs,” (Washington: Pew Hispanic Center, 2010).
3. This trend is confirmed by administrative data on the number of legal permanent residents (LPRs) living in the U.S., who make up about thirty percent of the total foreign-born population: between 2007 and 2009 the number of LPRs remained constant. See Rytina, Nancy, 2010. “Estimates of the Legal Permanent Resident Population in 2009.” Office of Immigration Statistics, Policy Directorate, U.S. Department of Homeland Security. [http://www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/statistics/publications/lpr\\_pe\\_2009.pdf](http://www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/statistics/publications/lpr_pe_2009.pdf)
4. This decrease happened prior to the passage of Arizona’s high-profile law SB1070, which passed in April 2010.
5. See Howard Wial and Richard Shearer, “MetroMonitor: Tracking Economic Recession and Recovery in America’s 100 Largest Metropolitan Areas” (Washington: Brookings Institution, 2010)
6. Elizabeth Kneebone, “The Great Recession and Poverty in Metropolitan America,” (Washington, DC: Brookings, 2010).
7. Correspondingly, immigrants from other regions saw significant changes: immigrants from Asia, Africa and other Latin American and Caribbean regions all increased, and immigrants from Europe declined.
8. As measured by those that report they speak Spanish at home.
9. During the same period, immigrants with at least a BA degree did not change significantly.
10. Demetrios G . Papademetriou, Madeleine Sumption, and Aaron Terrazas with Carola Burkert, Stephen Loyal, and Ruth Ferrero-Turrión, “Migration and Immigrants Two Years after the Financial Collapse: Where Do We Stand?, (Washington DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2010).
11. Jeffrey Passel and D’Vera Cohn, “U.S. Unauthorized Immigration Flows Are Down Sharply Since Mid-Decade,” (Washington DC: Pew Hispanic Center, 2010).
12. Scott W. Allard and Benjamin Roth, “Strained Suburbs: The Social Service Challenges of Rising Suburban Poverty,” (Washington DC: Brookings Institution, 2010).



**APPENDIX: FOREIGN-BORN POPULATION IN THE 100 LARGEST METROPOLITAN AREAS, 2007 AND 2009**

<b>Metropolitan Area</b>	<b>2007</b>	<b>2009</b>	<b>% Change</b>
Akron, OH	24,128	25,167	4.3
Albany-Schenectady-Troy, NY	51,772	59,321	14.6*
Albuquerque, NM	72,482	82,986	14.5*
Allentown-Bethlehem-Easton, PA-NJ	60,450	63,174	4.5
Atlanta-Sandy Springs-Marietta, GA	671,356	713,333	6.3*
Augusta-Richmond County, GA-SC	19,848	18,490	-6.8
Austin-Round Rock, TX	226,241	249,240	10.2*
Bakersfield, CA	162,750	159,218	-2.2
Baltimore-Towson, MD	209,463	222,678	6.3*
Baton Rouge, LA	25,975	24,979	-3.8
Birmingham-Hoover, AL	36,631	45,320	23.7*
Boise City-Nampa, ID	39,215	44,829	14.3*
Boston-Cambridge-Quincy, MA-NH	713,529	726,536	1.8
Bradenton-Sarasota-Venice, FL	80,265	83,398	3.9
Bridgeport-Stamford-Norwalk, CT	176,303	177,767	0.8
Buffalo-Niagara Falls, NY	56,829	64,115	12.8*
Cape Coral-Fort Myers, FL	89,677	84,957	-5.3
Charleston-North Charleston-Summerville, SC	28,056	32,501	15.8*
Charlotte-Gastonia-Concord, NC-SC	150,476	167,423	11.3*
Chattanooga, TN-GA	17,786	17,599	-1.1
Chicago-Naperville-Joliet, IL-IN-WI	1,679,074	1,645,920	-2.0
Cincinnati-Middletown, OH-KY-IN	75,611	81,693	8.0
Cleveland-Elyria-Mentor, OH	117,272	116,192	-0.9
Colorado Springs, CO	45,341	43,359	-4.4
Columbia, SC	34,739	32,514	-6.4
Columbus, OH	110,547	124,083	12.2*
Dallas-Fort Worth-Arlington, TX	1,092,361	1,142,122	4.6*
Dayton, OH	25,159	25,247	0.3
Denver-Aurora-Broomfield, CO	306,449	301,668	-1.6
Des Moines-West Des Moines, IA	34,866	37,400	7.3
Detroit-Warren-Livonia, MI	388,920	393,499	1.2
El Paso, TX	196,171	190,465	-2.9
Fresno, CA	196,319	196,120	-0.1
Grand Rapids-Wyoming, MI	52,832	48,723	-7.8
Greensboro-High Point, NC	51,883	56,393	8.7
Greenville-Mauldin-Easley, SC	40,145	43,199	7.6
Harrisburg-Carlisle, PA	26,837	24,125	-10.1
Hartford-West Hartford-East Hartford, CT	140,093	148,507	6.0
Honolulu, HI	175,256	174,124	-0.6
Houston-Sugar Land-Baytown, TX	1,204,817	1,278,413	6.1*
Indianapolis-Carmel, IN	90,994	101,281	11.3*
Jackson, MS	8,535	12,707	48.9*
Jacksonville, FL	91,404	106,029	16.0*
Kansas City, MO-KS	116,128	119,152	2.6
Knoxville, TN	22,897	22,249	-2.8
Lakeland-Winter Haven, FL	58,625	59,791	2.0
Las Vegas-Paradise, NV	408,796	416,214	1.8
Little Rock-North Little Rock-Conway, AR	24,863	23,884	-3.9
Los Angeles-Long Beach-Santa Ana, CA	4,488,563	4,434,012	-1.2*
Louisville-Jefferson County, KY-IN	44,760	51,995	16.2*

Madison, WI	35,955	35,673	-0.8
McAllen-Edinburg-Mission, TX	202,345	214,758	6.1
Memphis, TN-MS-AR	55,286	61,458	11.2*
Miami-Fort Lauderdale-Pompano Beach, FL	2,005,178	2,059,170	2.7*
Milwaukee-Waukesha-West Allis, WI	105,599	107,640	1.9
Minneapolis-St. Paul-Bloomington, MN-WI	289,261	296,932	2.7
Modesto, CA	100,851	106,684	5.8
Nashville-Davidson--Murfreesboro--Franklin, TN	101,932	113,418	11.3*
New Haven-Milford, CT	97,463	93,907	-3.6
New Orleans-Metairie-Kenner, LA	73,141	83,394	14.0*
New York-Northern New Jersey-Long Island, NY-NJ-PA	5,328,891	5,271,238	-1.1*
Ogden-Clearfield, UT	30,683	31,136	1.5
Oklahoma City, OK	88,349	88,693	0.4
Omaha-Council Bluffs, NE-IA	47,354	56,429	19.2*
Orlando-Kissimmee, FL	323,101	328,499	1.7
Oxnard-Thousand Oaks-Ventura, CA	185,207	183,444	-1.0
Palm Bay-Melbourne-Titusville, FL	45,392	45,384	0.0
Philadelphia-Camden-Wilmington, PA-NJ-DE-MD	508,977	553,921	8.8*
Phoenix-Mesa-Scottsdale, AZ	736,068	671,817	-8.7*
Pittsburgh, PA	72,622	70,918	-2.3
Portland-South Portland-Biddeford, ME	21,321	20,384	-4.4
Portland-Vancouver-Beaverton, OR-WA	261,816	270,099	3.2
Poughkeepsie-Newburgh-Middletown, NY	71,321	75,227	5.5
Providence-New Bedford-Fall River, RI-MA	203,250	200,641	-1.3
Provo-Orem, UT	34,070	36,409	6.9
Raleigh-Cary, NC	112,284	125,920	12.1*
Richmond, VA	68,588	76,347	11.3*
Riverside-San Bernardino-Ontario, CA	911,982	883,150	-3.2*
Rochester, NY	60,847	65,141	7.1
Sacramento--Arden-Arcade--Roseville, CA	361,231	361,596	0.1
St. Louis, MO-IL	112,233	113,742	1.3
Salt Lake City, UT	127,192	123,044	-3.3
San Antonio, TX	220,973	233,560	5.7
San Diego-Carlsbad-San Marcos, CA	674,084	694,238	3.0*
San Francisco-Oakland-Fremont, CA	1,245,007	1,273,780	2.3*
San Jose-Sunnyvale-Santa Clara, CA	671,106	653,236	-2.7*
Scranton--Wilkes-Barre, PA	17,690	20,310	14.8
Seattle-Tacoma-Bellevue, WA	508,248	535,481	5.4*
Springfield, MA	53,046	56,504	6.5
Stockton, CA	163,163	160,216	-1.8
Syracuse, NY	32,664	34,044	4.2
Tampa-St. Petersburg-Clearwater, FL	335,183	319,052	-4.8*
Toledo, OH	21,834	20,642	-5.5
Tucson, AZ	130,510	137,214	5.1
Tulsa, OK	48,556	49,894	2.8
Virginia Beach-Norfolk-Newport News, VA-NC	93,444	97,853	4.7
Washington-Arlington-Alexandria, DC-VA-MD-WV	1,088,949	1,103,271	1.3
Wichita, KS	37,405	37,732	0.9
Worcester, MA	75,608	90,140	19.2*
Youngstown-Warren-Boardman, OH-PA	14,086	12,363	-12.2
<b>100 Largest Metro Areas</b>	<b>32,474,835</b>	<b>32,869,854</b>	<b>1.2*</b>
<b>United States</b>	<b>38,059,694</b>	<b>38,517,234</b>	<b>1.2*</b>

\* Statistically significant at the 90 percent confidence level. Source: Authors' calculations of ACS data

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