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NEW AMERICANS IN THE VOLUNTEER STATE: The Political and Economic Power of Immigrants, Latinos, and Asians in Tennessee

Immigrants, Latinos, and Asians account for large and growing shares of the economy and population in Tennessee. Immigrants make up roughly 4% of the state's population, and nearly one-third of them are naturalized U.S. citizens who are eligible to vote. Latinos and Asians account for nearly 5% of Tennesseans and wield \$7.8 billion in consumer purchasing power. At last count, the sales and receipts of businesses owned by Latinos and Asians totaled \$3.2 billion and employed roughly 30,000 people. The Memphis metropolitan area is home to the state's largest proportion of Latinos, whose economic contributions totaled \$1.02 billion in 2001. Immigrant, Latino, and Asian workers, consumers, and entrepreneurs are integral to Tennessee's economy and tax base.

Immigrants and their children are growing shares of Tennessee's population and electorate.

- **The foreign-born share** of Tennessee's population rose from 1.2% in [1990](#),¹ to 2.8% in [2000](#),² to 4.1% in [2007](#),³ according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Tennessee was home to 249,552 immigrants in [2007](#),⁴ which is roughly equal to the total population of [Lincoln, Nebraska](#).⁵
- **31.2% of immigrants (or 77,896 people) in Tennessee were naturalized U.S. citizens in [2007](#)**⁶—meaning that they are eligible to vote.
- **1.3% (or 36,764) of all registered voters** in Tennessee are “New Americans”—naturalized citizens or the U.S.-born children of immigrants who were raised during the current era of immigration from Latin America and Asia which began in 1965—according to an analysis of 2006 Census Bureau data by [Rob Paral & Associates](#).⁷

Nearly 5% of Tennesseans are Latino or Asian.

- The **Latino share of Tennessee's population** grew from 0.7% in [1990](#),⁸ to 2.2% in [2000](#),⁹ to 3.4% (or 209,328 people) in [2007](#).¹⁰ The **Asian share of the population** grew from 0.6% in [1990](#),¹¹ to 1.0% in [2000](#),¹² to 1.3% (or 80,037 people) in [2007](#),¹³ according to the U.S. Census Bureau.
- Latinos comprised 1.4% (or 34,000) of Tennessee voters in the 2008 elections, and Asians 0.7% (or 18,000), according to the [U.S. Census Bureau](#).¹⁴

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The Memphis metropolitan area has the largest proportion of Latinos in the state, and they contribute to the economy.

- **The Latino share of the population in the Memphis metropolitan area** rose from 0.75% in [1990](#),¹⁵ to 2.4% in [2000](#),¹⁶ to 3.6% (or 46,291 people) in [2007](#),¹⁷ according to the U.S. Census Bureau.
- Latino workers had a **total economic impact of \$1.02 billion** in the Memphis area, according to a 2001 report from the [University of Memphis](#).¹⁸
- Latino workers in the Memphis area earned **\$570.8 million in wages and salaries** in 2000, paid at least **\$85.6 million in payroll and income taxes**, and generated approximately **\$12.3 million in local and state sales tax**, according to the [same study](#).¹⁹
- Latinos spent more than **\$359 million in the local Memphis area economy** in [2000](#),²⁰ including:
 - \$45 million in local grocery stores
 - \$20.2 million in restaurants
 - \$74.8 million for housing
 - \$49.4 million for utilities, furnishings and household supplies
 - \$23.1 million for clothing
 - \$69.0 million for transportation or car operation
 - \$14.2 million for health care services
 - \$38.1 million for other consumption items
 - \$26.0 million for savings in local banks

Latino and Asian entrepreneurs and consumers add billions of dollars and tens-of-thousands of jobs to Tennessee's economy.

- The 2008 **purchasing power of Tennessee's Latinos totaled \$4.6 billion**—an increase of 1053% since 1990. **Asian buying power totaled \$3.2 billion**—an increase of 565.4% since 1990, according to the [Selig Center for Economic Growth](#) at the University of Georgia.²¹
- Tennessee's 7,241 **Asian-owned businesses** had sales and receipts of \$2.2 billion and employed 21,971 people in 2002,²² the last year for which data is available. The state's 4,301 **Latino-owned businesses** had sales and receipts of \$1.0 billion and employed 7,995 people in 2002,²³ according to the U.S. Census Bureau's Survey of Business Owners.

Immigrants are essential to Tennessee's economy as workers.

- Immigrants comprised **5.2% of the state's workforce** in [2007](#) (or 160,290 workers), according to the U.S. Census Bureau.²⁴
- Unauthorized immigrants comprised **3.6% of the state's workforce** in [2008](#) (or 110,000 workers), according to a report by the Pew Hispanic Center.²⁵
- If all unauthorized immigrants were removed from Tennessee in 2008, **the state would lose \$3.8 billion in expenditures, \$1.7 billion in economic output, and approximately 25,919**

jobs, even accounting for adequate market adjustment time, according to a report by the [Perryman Group](#).²⁶

Naturalized Citizens Excel Educationally.

- In Tennessee, **39.0% of foreign-born persons** who were naturalized U.S. citizens in [2007](#) had a bachelor's or higher degree, compared to 23.7% of noncitizens. Only 15.7% of naturalized citizens lacked a high-school diploma, compared to 40.5% of noncitizens.²⁷
- The number of immigrants in Tennessee with a college degree **increased** by 56.0% between 2000 and 2007, according to [data](#) from the Migration Policy Institute.²⁸
- 29.2% of Tennessee's foreign-born population age 25 and older **had a bachelor's or higher degree** in [2007](#), compared to 21.5% of native-born persons age 25 and older.²⁹
- In Tennessee, **71.5% of all children** between the ages of 5 and 17 in families that spoke a language other than English at home also spoke English "very well" as of [2007](#).³⁰

Endnotes

¹ U.S. Census Bureau, [The Foreign-Born Population: 2000](#), December 2003.

² Ibid.

³ 2007 American Community Survey (1-Year Estimates).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Rob Paral and Associates, [The New American Electorate: The Growing Political Power of Immigrants and Their Children](#) (Washington, DC: Immigration Policy Center, American Immigration Law Foundation, October 2008).

⁸ U.S. Census Bureau, [The Hispanic Population: 2000](#), May 2001.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ 2007 American Community Survey (1-Year Estimates).

¹¹ U.S. Census Bureau, [The Asian Population: 2000](#), February 2002.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ 2007 American Community Survey (1-Year Estimates).

¹⁴ 2008 Current Population Survey, [Table 4b: Reported Voting and Registration of the Voting-Age Population, by Sex, Race and Hispanic Origin, for States: November 2008](#).

¹⁵ U.S. Census Bureau, [1990 Census of Population and Housing](#).

¹⁶ U.S. Census Bureau, [2000 Census of Population and Housing](#).

¹⁷ 2007 American Community Survey (1-Year Estimates).

¹⁸ Marcela Mendoza, David H. Ciscel, and Barbara Ellen Smith, [Latino Immigrants in Memphis, Tennessee: Their Local Economic Impact](#) (Memphis, TN: University of Memphis, 2001).

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Jeffrey M. Humphreys, [The Multicultural Economy 2008](#) (Athens, GA: Selig Center for Economic Growth, University of Georgia, 2008).

²² U.S. Census Bureau, [Asian-Owned Firms: 2002](#), August 2006.

²³ U.S. Census Bureau, [Hispanic-Owned Firms: 2002](#), August 2006.

²⁴ 2007 American Community Survey (1-Year Estimates).

²⁵ Jeffrey S. Passel and D'Vera Cohn, [A Portrait of Unauthorized Immigrants in the United States](#) (Washington, DC: Pew Hispanic Center, April 14, 2009).

²⁶ The Perryman Group, [An Essential Resource: An Analysis of the Economic Impact of Undocumented Workers on Business Activity in the US with Estimated Effects by State and by Industry](#) (Waco, TX: April 2008).

²⁷ Migration Policy Institute Data Hub, [Tennessee: Language & Education 2007](#).

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.