Vital for Prosperity

The facts about immigrants and their contributions to the economy of Hampton Roads

By Laura Goren and Michael Cassidy

Hampton Roads’ 92,000 immigrants make critical contributions to the region’s economy and are an integral part of family life and communities.

Immigrants in Hampton Roads are very different in many ways than the typical immigrant to the U.S. Four in 10 of the foreign-born residents in the region were born in Asia, but there are also many immigrants from Latin America, Europe, and Africa. The Philippines is the most common country of birth, accounting for 21 percent of all foreign-born residents of the region. This distribution of immigrants is different than that of the U.S. as a whole and is due in part to the importance of the military in the region’s economy.

Most foreign-born residents of the region have been in the United States for many years. Almost 4 in 10 entered the country before 1990, and more than half have been in the U.S. for more than 15 years.

And a majority of foreign-born residents in the region are naturalized U.S. citizens, a lengthy process that requires many years of legal residence and passing a test on U.S. history, laws, and customs, among other requirements. This rate is above that of all foreign-born Virginians and all foreign-born Americans.

Most immigrants in the region are working-age adults, and there are relatively few foreign-born children in Hampton Roads. However, many of these working-age adults have U.S.-born kids: 36,000 children in the region have at least one foreign-born parent. That’s about 1 in 9 kids, but is actually a lower share of all children than is typical in Virginia and the country as a whole.

As we would expect based on their ages, immigrants in the region have high rates of employment. Two-thirds of foreign-born adult residents of Hampton Roads are employed, a slightly higher rate than that of non-immigrant residents of the region. This includes almost 4,000 self-employed workers, one out of every 11 entrepreneurs in Hampton Roads.

Immigrant residents of the region, like their non-immigrant peers, work in a variety of fields, including many of the region’s largest industries. However, immigrant workers are somewhat underrepresented in active-duty military jobs compared to the large share of native-born residents in the region who are active-duty military.

Many foreign-born adult residents of Hampton Roads are very well-educated. More than 1 in 3 have a bachelor’s degree, slightly higher than the 28 percent rate for non-immigrant residents of the region. In addition, 11 percent have an advanced degree, a similar rate as that of non-immigrants.

In this report, the Hampton Roads region is defined as including the following localities: Isle of Wight and Southampton counties; and the cities of Virginia Beach, Chesapeake, Suffolk, Franklin, Portsmouth, Norfolk, and Hampton.
Despite high employment and education levels, immigrant-headed households in Hampton Roads have similar incomes to those of other households in the region. Thirty-one percent of the region’s households headed by immigrants have incomes above $75,000 a year, compared to 35 percent of native-born households in the region.

While about 3 in 10 immigrant workers in the region make less than $10.10 an hour, a somewhat higher share than that of non-immigrant workers, relatively few foreign-born residents of the area have incomes below the poverty line. One in 9 foreign-born residents in Hampton Roads lives in poverty, a slightly lower rate than that of non-immigrant residents of the region.

Most immigrants in Hampton Roads speak English very well. One in 4 foreign-born residents of Hampton Roads speaks only English and another 41 percent speak English “very well.” These rates are higher than those of all foreign-born residents of the United States, but it is important to also consider the needs of the one-third of foreign-born residents of the region who do not speak English at least “very well.” Services like English language instruction and bilingual public information can help non-English speaking adults build their skills and take a bigger role in the region’s economy and civic life.

However, even with similar education and income levels as their non-immigrant peers, many of the region’s immigrant-headed households struggle with high housing costs.

Sixty percent of immigrant-headed households in Hampton Roads are homeowners, a similar rate to that of other households in the area. However, immigrant homeowners are more likely than other residents of the area to be spending a very high share of their income on housing costs. This trend could be due to their being less likely to have inherited houses, or to higher borrowing costs. Almost 4 in 10 immigrant-headed homeowner households spend more than...
35 percent of their income on housing costs, compared to about 2 in 10 non-immigrant-headed households. High housing costs are not unique to immigrant homeowners in the area—overall a higher share of homeowners in Hampton Roads than in Virginia as a whole spend large shares of their income on housing. But this problem is particularly common among immigrant-headed households.

To make matters worse, the 4 in 10 households in Hampton Roads who rent their homes also face high housing costs as a share of their income. Forty-three percent of immigrant-headed and other renter households alike spend more than 35 percent of their income on housing, a higher rate than that of homeowners.

Another challenge facing many immigrant households is access to health insurance. Although foreign-born residents of Hampton Roads fare well on most measures of economic well-being and stability, they are somewhat less likely than non-immigrant residents of the region to have health insurance. Eighty-eight percent of non-immigrant residents of the region have health insurance, but only 77 percent of foreign-born residents have coverage. This problem is driven by low rates of coverage for non-citizen immigrants, who have low rates of private health insurance and very limited access to public coverage. The differences in public coverage by immigration status are particularly stark—26 percent of non-immigrant residents of the region have public health insurance coverage compared to 25 percent of naturalized U.S. citizens and 9 percent of non-citizens in the region. Thirty-eight percent of non-citizens—about 15,000 area residents—have no coverage. Although this data was gathered before the major coverage expansions of the Affordable Care Act, non-citizens are ineligible for many of those expansions. As a result, many non-citizens are likely to remain uninsured.

Immigrant workers and families in Hampton Roads are similar in many ways to their non-immigrant neighbors, including their high levels of homeownership, education, and employment. But some of the challenges faced by many families in the region are particularly acute among immigrants, including high housing costs and lack of access to health insurance. In order for the region to continue to move forward as a place where all workers can contribute to the extent of their abilities and all families can afford a safe and secure life for their children, it is important to address the challenges facing both immigrant and non-immigrant communities in the region.

Methodology Note

Immigrant homeowners are more likely than other residents of the area to be spending a very high share of their income on housing costs.
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Part of the analysis in this report relies on data extracted from the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS), Version 5.0, developed by the University of Minnesota. Where used, we have referenced this source as IPUMS.

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