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## Immigrant population balloons in the Valley

By Beth Barrett  
Staff Writer

The San Fernando Valley's foreign-born population soared in the 1990s by 32.3 percent, dramatically changing the community's political and social makeup, according to new U.S. Census figures released Tuesday. The immigrant population jumped from 397,369 to 525,988 in the Valley, putting its proportion of foreign-born residents virtually on a par with that in the rest of city, which had only a 5.2 percent increase in the decade. Overall, the Valley's population is 38.8 percent foreign-born, and in the rest of the city, it's 42.2 percent foreign-born.

Demographers and political leaders see the surge in the immigrant population as a major shift that sets Los Angeles as a whole apart from other Southern California and U.S. communities in its balance of immigrants, native-born and non-Hispanic whites and people of other races and nationalities.

Bruce E. Cain, director of the Institute of Governmental Studies at the University of California at Berkeley, said the population changes represent "perhaps the most important transformation in Los Angeles" in decades.

"There are enormous political consequences," he said. "Witness secession: It could die because Latinos in the Valley were pressured by Latinos in the the inner city to pull (state Sen. Richard) Alarcon out of the race and to get on board with the anti-secessionists. These kinds of things matter."

Alarcon, a Van Nuys Democrat who said his decision to oppose secession rather than run for mayor of a Valley city was a matter of conscience, described the wave of immigration as an exciting opportunity that has already changed the Valley in positive ways.

"There's this incredible sensitivity, as I've never seen it before, where issues transcend a single ethnicity," Alarcon said. "There is a burgeoning new reality in human relationships, and that excites me about the new wave."

Poverty and other challenges associated with a large immigrant population are offset by the energy that new arrivals bring to the pursuit of the American dream, he said.

Cain said the increase in immigrants presents challenges both for public-service providers and policy-makers who will have to address different cultural expectations.

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"It changes the demands for public service in the Valley as more people send their children to school with language issues, and they'll have to be catered to," Cain said.

In a decade, the proportion of Valley people past the age of 4 who spoke only English dropped by 14 percent, from 53.4 percent of the population in 1990 to 41.4 percent of the total population in 2000, census figures show.

Eugene Turner, professor of geography at California State University, Northridge, who analyzed census data for the Daily News, said the shift in the Valley could be a positive indicator of upward mobility for many immigrants.

"It could be a good sign that people are moving up the ladder a little," Turner said.

Turner said the flight of non-Hispanic whites during the decade may have created openings in housing and other opportunities for immigrants.

The Valley added 185,933 Latinos during the 1990s, a 48.5 percent increase. Latinos in 2000 made up 42.1 percent of the Valley's population, while non-Hispanic whites made up 41.6 percent.

Overall, the census set the Valley population at 1.35 million, with the immigrant population at 525,988. Population in the rest of the city of Los Angeles was 2.33 million, including 939,296 immigrants.

Assemblyman Tony Cardenas, D-Mission Hills, called the growing immigrant base a great opportunity for the Valley and Los Angeles.

"It's incredible," Cardenas said. "Many people in the San Fernando Valley have a direct connection to other countries. They have access to the global economy. They create jobs not seen before. You're probably looking at more small businesses, with people doing business throughout the world."

Cardenas said the only downside to a growing immigrant population would come if the larger community failed to recognize the opportunity and didn't deal with the newcomers in a positive manner.

Both the Valley and Los Angeles as a whole have the chance to bring up "a whole generation of people thinking the world is colorblind," he said.

Results of Turner's analysis were almost identical to those of researchers in the Lewis Mumford Center at the State University of New York at Albany, who found that Los Angeles County's urban population was 38.6 percent foreign-born while the county's suburban population was 34.2 percent foreign-born.


"In 1990, the Valley was less foreign-born than the central cities. Now it's equally foreign-born. It caught up," said John Logan, director of the Lewis Mumford Center.

Logan stressed that the Los Angeles region is unusual in that its suburbs -- the Valley in particular -- have almost the same proportion of immigrants as the rest of the city. Nationally, there is also a trend for immigrants to move to the suburbs, but the gap still is wide.

"In the L.A. area, I'd explain that by there being many kinds of communities in the suburbs -- from relatively affluent, like Monterey Park, to relatively poor. And more than most areas of the country, L.A. has a history of Asian and Hispanic settlement in the suburbs. They can accommodate immigrants of all social classes."

Immigrants in the Valley were less likely than those in the rest of the city to become citizens.

The number of noncitizens in the Valley increased by 14.2 percent, while the number of noncitizens fell in the rest of the city by 4.4 percent. It could not be determined whether the Valley's noncitizens came directly from another country or from elsewhere in the United States.



Logan said that trend could reflect the relative success of naturalization campaigns during the decade.

William H. Frey, a senior fellow at the Milken Institute in Santa Monica, said the Valley is part of a hopscotch pattern in which more-established immigrant neighborhoods are interspersed, attracting family, friends and other newcomers.

"Some new migrants are going directly into the suburbs," Frey said.

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