GEORGIA’S IMMIGRANTS:
PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

With Atlanta at its center, Georgia has experienced a recent influx of immigrants, from both other parts of the United States and other parts of the world. This brief uses data from the most recent decennial censuses to analyze and assess the composition and experience of these immigrants to Georgia, with special attention paid to the Atlanta metropolitan area, where the majority of the immigrants have settled. Atlanta is not very different from other large American cities in terms of its experience with immigration. The influx of new immigrants is an important component of Atlanta’s and Georgia’s growth and population. Migrants from other countries make up over ten percent of metropolitan Atlanta’s population, with almost four percent consisting of migrants who have come to the area from other countries within the five years preceding the census.

This brief provides a detailed analysis of the origin of migrants to Georgia and Atlanta, and how those immigration flows changed over the course of the 1990s. It also assesses the extent to which these immigrants differ from the “native” population in terms of demographics, family structure and education. Then it turns to an analysis of the economic success of the various immigrant groups in terms of income and other labor-market indicators such as employment and wage. Finally, it characterizes and measures the assimilation experience of the various immigrant groups.

The findings of this brief can be summarized as follows.

1) Migrants from other U.S. states make up the most important group of in-migrants and make up the vast majority of non-native Georgians and Atlantans. In Atlanta, in-migrants from outside of Georgia outnumber in-migrants from other parts of Georgia by more than four-to-one and are more than twice the combined in-migration from other parts of Georgia and the rest of the world.

2) Migration is vital to the Atlanta and Georgia economies. For example, in 2000, less than half of Atlanta’s residents were born anywhere in Georgia, and more than a third of Georgians were born outside Georgia.

3) International immigration is becoming more important in Atlanta. There was more international immigration to Atlanta in 2000 than migration from other parts of Georgia, although this was not the case in 1990.

4) The largest groups of migrants are Latin Americans, Asians and Europeans, in that order. Latin American and Asian immigration into Atlanta is increasing the fastest.
5) Across a number of dimensions, immigrants tend to differ from natives, although the extent of the difference depends on the area of origin. Educational attainment is probably the most important of these differences. Immigrants from the developed world tend to be more educated, while immigrants from the developing world (especially Latin America and Africa) tend to be less educated.

6) Labor market outcomes and incomes of recent immigrants vary by region of origin. The economic success of these groups tends to reflect the educational attainment of the migrating group.

7) Recent immigrants do worse than natives across all labor market outcomes, even when we control for individual characteristics through the use of regression analysis. However, some of these differences appear to be eliminated through the process of assimilation.

8) Controlling for individual characteristics, migrants from areas where recent migrants do the worst also appear to assimilate the least so that initial differences in economic success are persistent. While assimilation is universal, disparities remain even after lengthy residence in the Atlanta region.

While overall growth of the metropolitan region will likely slow somewhat, it will probably continue to be strong, and immigration from outside the United States (as well as from other U.S. states) will continue to be an important driver of local population and economic growth. Like the past migrants analyzed here, future migrants will vary considerably in regards to education and economic success. Well-educated immigrants from the developed world and more vulnerable immigrants from the developing world are in some sense “different animals.” Natives’ feelings about and response to these different groups of migrants will (and to some extent should) vary, as will the needs and effects on the local economy and public finance.

Future immigrants will assimilate in a strong way, just as several generations of past immigrants have done in Atlanta and across the country. Meanwhile, the bi-cultural children of current immigrants will grow up even more assimilated. The response of local populations to these changes will depend on political, cultural and economic views. Those who are satisfied with the current immigration context will likely want similar responses to immigration in the future. Such satisfaction is quite reasonable, given the strong assimilation of past migrants, concurrent economic gains to the Atlanta and Georgia economies and relatively harmonious integration of ethnic communities into the metropolitan fabric. Although disparities exist across migrant groups, there does not seem to be an immigration “problem” in Georgia or Atlanta.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Douglas J. Krupka received his Ph.D. from the University of Chicago School of Public Policy, where he came for his masters degree in 1997 after graduating from the University of Virginia with majors in History and Music. From 2004 until 2007, he was an assistant professor in the Economics Department at Georgia State University in Atlanta, Georgia and he remains a Principal Associate with the Fiscal Research Center at Georgia State University. His primary interests are in Labor and Urban Economics. More specifically, his thesis examined the relationships amongst investments in location-specific human capital, migration, and the attractiveness of different kinds of cities. He joined IZA as a Research Affiliate in January 2004 and became a Research Associate in July 2007.

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FROM THE DIRECTOR

This policy brief is one of a series of reports and policy briefs that explores Georgia’s fiscal, economic and demographic features. The demographic reports will consider many different sub-populations. The well being of the state depends on the well being of its residents, so it is important to understand the economic and social conditions of population. The best way to do that is to consider each sub-population.

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