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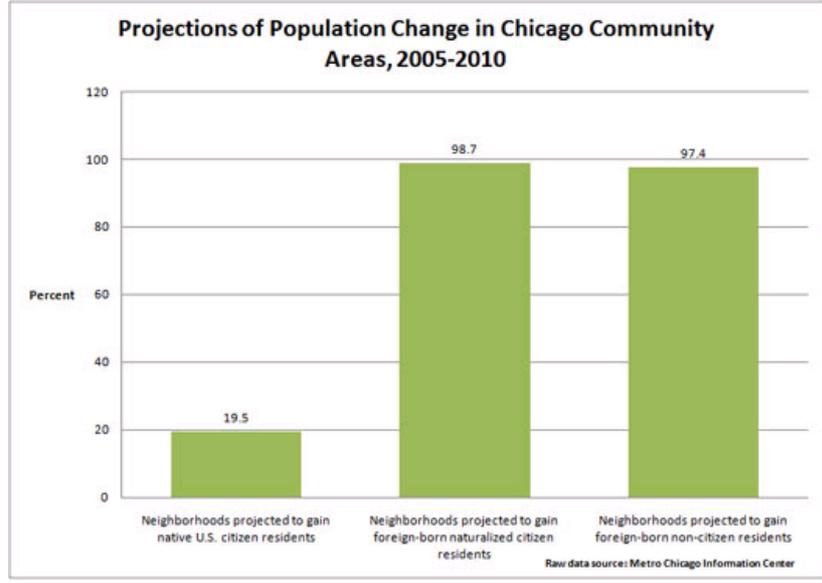
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Graph by Taras E. Berezowsky/MEDILL

Nearly all of Chicago's 77 designated community areas were projected to gain foreign-born residents from 2005-2010.

Immigrant census count in city, suburbs poised to sway regional planning

BY TARAS E. BEREZOWSKY
MARCH 11, 2010

In a city founded by a Haitian and built up by Irish, Polish and dozens of other ethnicities, it shouldn't come as a surprise that immigrants will play a crucial role in Chicago's 2010 census count.

Just how crucial? The first step to that answer starts next week, when the Census Bureau begins mailing forms.

But where Chicago's foreign-born residents are living – and whether they're counted – determines how much money the federal and state governments will distribute to the city and surrounding areas.

The Chicago region stands to gain a share of some \$400 billion in total federal dollars based on the final census count, to be used for hospitals, clinics, schools, roads and other services. In 2008, the region received at least \$12.6 billion in census-related funding, according to a recent study by the Brookings Institution, a non-profit think tank in Washington.

Nearly all of Chicago's 77 official neighborhoods were projected to gain foreign-born residents between 2005 and 2010, analysis of Metro Chicago Information Center data shows.

At the same time, the center projected nearly 80 percent of those neighborhoods to lose population of native-born residents by 2010. A non-profit research firm, the center provides area organizations with information for planning purposes.

In some neighborhoods with higher numbers of foreign-born residents, it takes greater effort to ensure that these residents fill out census forms so that their communities will get their fair share of money for services. Many immigrants, recent arrivals or not, distrust the government. Non-profit organizations are targeting hard-to-count communities with their census awareness efforts.

Hi-ho, the dairy-o! A farmer in the 'burbs

Mind-expanding retailer is expanding

Northbrook alarm company goes green with solar subsidiary

"I think the [2010] census will highlight that we're increasingly a city of recent immigrants," said Scott Allard, associate professor at the School of Social Service Administration at the University of Chicago.

Allard is also a research associate for the university's Population Research Center. While several factors may account for growth and movement of native and foreign-born residents across communities, he said, the suburbs are gaining new focus.

"A large percentage of residents in suburban communities are foreign-born," he said.

Cities such as Joliet, Elgin and Aurora have increasingly become the primary entry points for Latino immigrants over the past decade, said Flavia Jimenez, program director at the Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights. The challenge is to accurately count these residents in the census, so that these cities may develop better services for the Latino population.

"We're seeing a growth in communities outside Chicago with linguistic and cultural needs," Jimenez said. "Schools and health clinics are already underserved, and an inaccurate count will make that worse."

Many immigrant families were lured to far-flung suburbs and unincorporated areas because land and housing were cheap, said Paul O'Connor, director of communications at Chicago Metropolis 2020, a group that analyzes regional issues and development. But social services for Latinos in these communities are harder to come by. Now, in the wake of the housing slump and poor job market, many are unable to sell their houses and move to find better work, he said.

Another issue is transportation. Some people are commuting from the far west suburbs up to Lake Forest for a job, O'Connor said. A report from the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning found that while 28 percent of household income is spent on housing, 27 percent is spent on transportation. Latinos make up 25 percent of neighborhoods with high commuting and housing costs, the report found.

"The model is broken," O'Connor said. "The census will be key in finding the effect of the recession on immigrant movement between communities."

The Metropolitan Agency for Planning will launch Go To 2040, a regionwide development initiative, this fall. It will focus on creating higher-density residences around transportation hubs to alleviate costs for both city and suburban residents over the next few decades.

"The 2040 plan recognizes that there are populations likely to miss out on services," said Jon Hallas, senior planner at the agency. "We recognize that Latinos are important."