

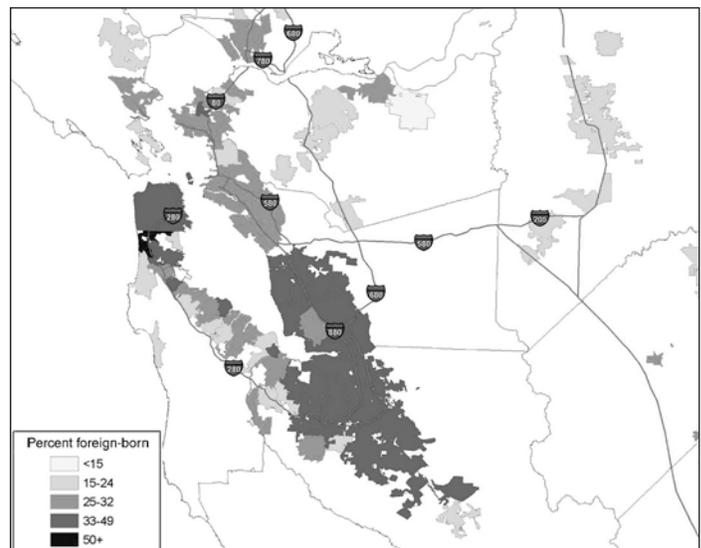
Are Immigrants Seen and Heard in City Hall?

More than one-quarter of California residents are foreign-born. And although many studies have addressed the social and economic effects of immigration, very little is known about the effects of immigration on public policy-making and representation at the local level.

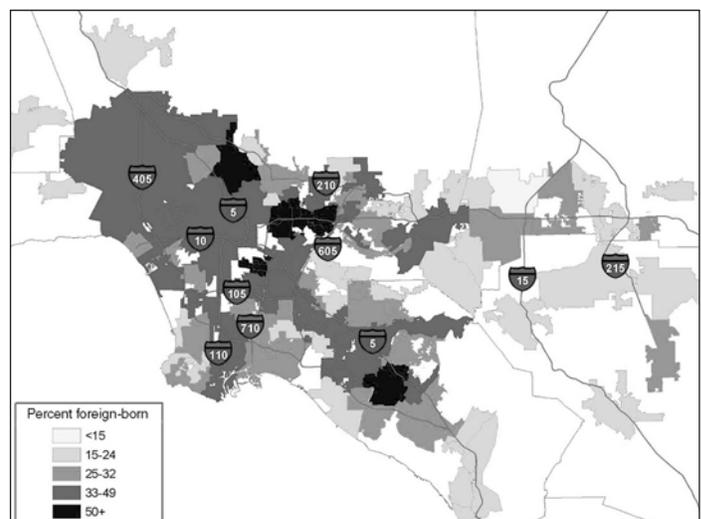
A city's residents can affect local policy through voting and a variety of organized interests, but such mechanisms of representation and influence are less likely to be available to immigrant populations. First, a high proportion of immigrants either cannot or do not vote; and, second, the groups and associations in which they participate often lack direct connections with mainstream politics.

In *Immigrants and Local Governance: The View from City Hall*, S. Karthick Ramakrishnan and Paul G. Lewis address three major questions. First, how do municipal officials become aware of the needs and preferences of immigrant populations? Second, how do they attempt to communicate city policies to their immigrant constituents, some of whom may not speak English or understand the process of local government in the United States? Third, how—if at all—does the presence of immigrants alter the policies and routines of city government?

To address these questions, the authors conducted mail surveys of mayors and councilmembers, police chiefs, and planning directors in 304 “immigration destination” communities in California (i.e., those communities in which the foreign-born account for a sizable proportion of residents). They also conducted widespread interviews with leaders of civic organizations, immigrant and ethnic advocacy groups, elected officials, and city employees in four large suburban cities. Finally, they reviewed print media coverage of immigrant-related issues and controversies from cities throughout the state. In the study, the authors focus in particular on the needs and effects of immigrants in two areas: law enforcement and housing conditions and policies.



San Francisco



Los Angeles

In most San Francisco Bay Area and Los Angeles area cities, immigrants represent a large proportion of the population.

Major Findings

Communication between immigrants and elected officials is quite limited, and immigrants' influence in local politics is perceived to be low in most cities. Immigrant and ethnic organizations rank near the very bottom of a list of groups in terms of their perceived influence in city politics. Most elected officials could not name a single organization they would contact if they wished to engage in outreach to local immigrants. Hispanics and Asians are underrepresented among local elected officials and appointive board and commission members. This lack of influence is generally in keeping with the lower level of political participation among the foreign-born, but it also reflects a general lack of outreach by city government to immigrant communities. In many cities, elected officials have taken a reactive rather than proactive approach, expecting that immigrants will mobilize and organize themselves if they are concerned about local issues. Only a small percentage of cities regularly translate their city documents into non-English languages.

To some degree, "demography is destiny" in influencing city responses to immigrant concerns. Officials in cities with higher proportions of foreign-born residents say that they hear from more information sources about local immigrants and are more likely to say that immigrant-related issues have been topics of local political debate. Cities with more immigrants are also more likely to make interpreters available so that residents can communicate with City Hall. However, elected officials in cities with a higher share of immigrants are also more likely to report mistrust of police as a significant problem.

The size of a city and the characteristics of its local governing coalition affect interaction with immigrants. Immigrant-serving organizations often concentrate their efforts in the largest cities, with much less advocacy work in suburbs and smaller communities. Larger cities are also more likely to have the resources necessary to provide support in the form of translated documents, interpreters, and bilingual police officers.

In communities where the majority of council members identify themselves as conservative, the city government is less likely to provide translation of government documents, to fund a hiring center for day laborers, or to report that ethnic organizations are influential in city politics.

Few cities consider the special needs of immigrants in their housing plans. According to the study's survey, local officials view housing as the biggest challenge facing immigrant residents. Crowding is more common and affordability slightly worse in cities with a higher proportion of immigrant residents. Yet only 20 percent of planners in the high-immigration cities surveyed reported that the housing element of their city's general plan discusses the housing needs of immigrants.

Policing techniques appear to be more responsive than housing policy to the demographic shifts in high-immigration cities. Local police forces are considerably more ethnically diverse than the elected officials in high-immigration communities. An overwhelming majority of departments consider bilingualism to be a positive factor in recruiting new officers and offer a pay increment to bilingual officers. Most departments use such officers in situations where translation is necessary. Community policing techniques, such as meeting with neighborhood groups and local schools, are widely embraced in most immigrant destination cities.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Overall, city governments are moving somewhat slowly in reacting to the new issues and needs presented by immigration. The authors suggest that cities could take a more proactive and long-term approach in reaching out to local immigrants, specifically through recruiting them to serve on city boards and commissions, which would improve communication flows and encourage the involvement of more immigrants in local affairs. Public officials may also find it beneficial to work with local religious congregations and other organizations serving immigrants to find out about the concerns of foreign-born residents and to inform them of city programs and policies. The authors also recommend that larger cities dedicate a staff position to coordinate outreach to immigrant residents, that local plans more explicitly address the housing needs of immigrants, and that police departments reach out to ethnic associations and immigrant-owned businesses. Finally, nongovernmental organizations with an interest in facilitating immigrant adaptation can play an important role in helping immigrants connect with and understand local civic affairs. These intermediary groups can help make the difference between a politically invisible immigrant population and one that is taken seriously by the local government.

This research brief summarizes a report by S. Karthick Ramakrishnan and Paul G. Lewis (2005, 134 pp., \$12.00, ISBN 1-58213-113-9), Immigrants and Local Governance: The View from City Hall. The report may be ordered online at www.ppic.org or by phone at (800) 232-5343 or (415) 291-4400 [outside mainland U.S.]. A copy of the full text is also available at www.ppic.org. The Public Policy Institute of California is a private, nonprofit organization dedicated to independent, objective, nonpartisan research on economic, social, and political issues affecting California.
