

The Role of Nonprofits and Religious Congregations in Facilitating Civic Engagement among the Foreign-Born Population

Since 1970, the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area has emerged as one of the top ten gateways for new immigrants. More than a million foreign-born residents currently live in the D.C. metropolitan area and comprise about one in five area residents. Roughly half of the region's population growth since 1990 can be attributed to the arrival of new immigrants. These newcomers are from all parts of the world, and they have settled in all parts of the region, although most notably in the District and inner suburbs.

While much has been written about the service needs of the immigrant population, less is known about how these groups engage in civil society and adapt to life in their new communities and how public policies facilitate or impede these efforts. The Urban Institute's Center on Nonprofits and Philanthropy is undertaking a pilot study to explore how community-based nonprofits and local congregations in the D.C. metropolitan area are helping immigrants participate in civic and political life. The results of the study will enable nonprofit leaders, foundation officials, public policymakers, and the community better understand the activities that immigrant-serving organizations undertake and the ways that these organizations help immigrants adjust to and incorporate into U.S. society.

Five research questions shape the design of this study:

1. How many and what kinds of immigrant-serving organizations and congregations are located in the D.C. metropolitan area?
2. What kinds of civic and political incorporation and service activities are facilitated by immigrant-serving organizations and congregations?
3. What individual leadership and organizational factors facilitate or impede political participation?
4. How do national, state, and local policies affect organizational ability and willingness to enable civic and political involvement by foreign-born populations?

Data will be collected through a series of interviews with leaders of nonprofit organizations and congregations in the D.C. region that specifically serve immigrant populations (e.g., Latinos, Asians, and Africans). The organizations will be identified through data housed at the National Center for Charitable Statistics and discussions with leaders of coalitions that serve immigrant populations. Leaders of the nonprofits and congregations that serve immigrants will be asked about the factors and policies they see as facilitating or impeding their work to promote civic engagement. The analysis will use qualitative methods to examine the relationship between organizational characteristics, the policy environment, and the types of activities that encourage political participation by ethnic immigrant groups.