

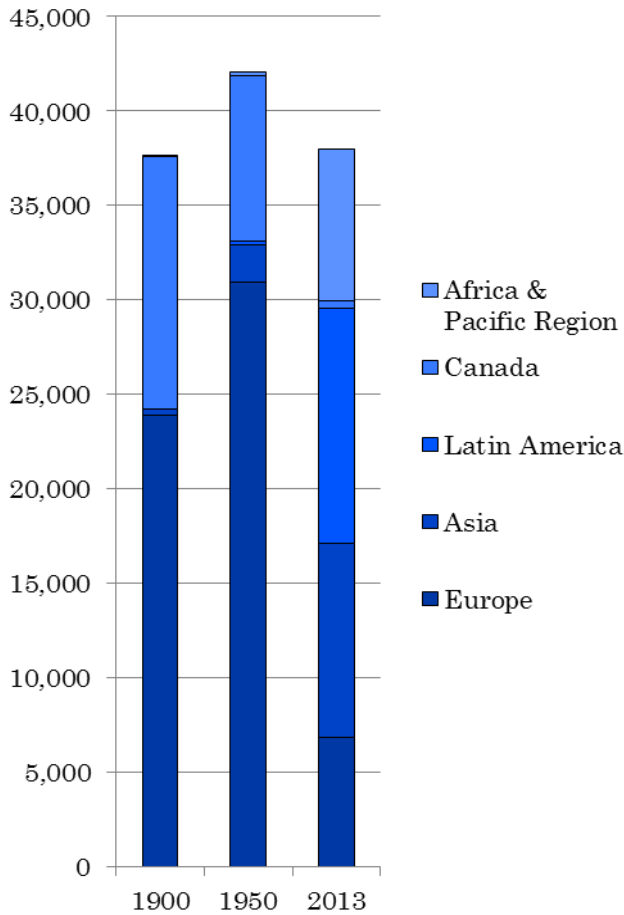


Bureau Brief—Immigrants & Refugees in Worcester

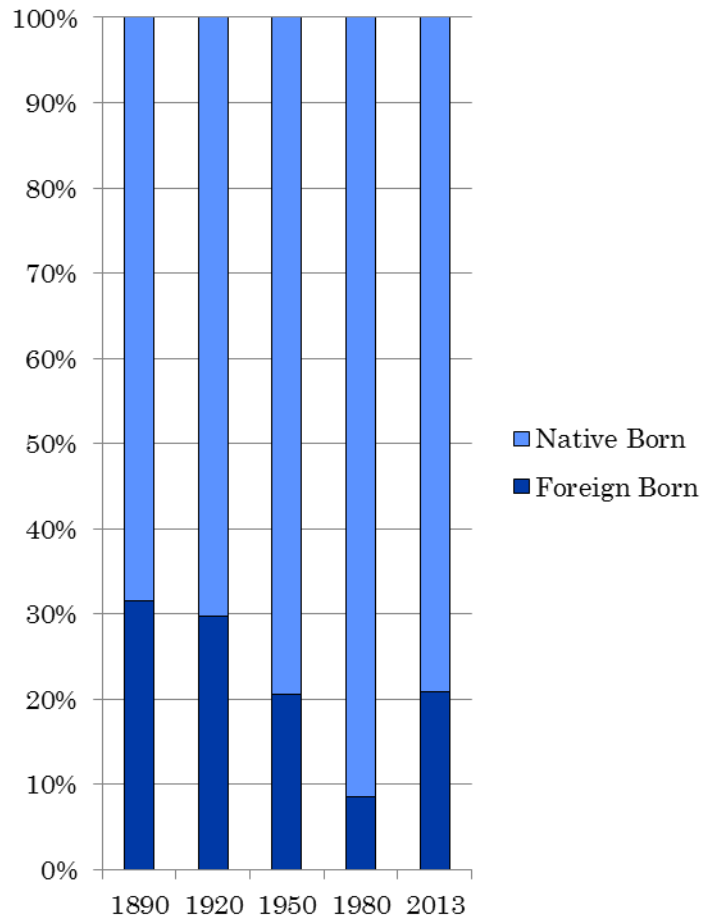
Over the years, Worcester has been home to many foreign-born residents. Since 1980, the City has experienced a renewal in the arrival of immigrants and refugees. While immigration offers an expanded talent base and cultural diversity, what strains do new immigrants place on public services? What is the role of the City in supporting new residents?

Research in the Public Interest

Region of Origin of Foreign-Born Worcester Residents in 1900, 1950, and 2013



Percentage of Foreign-Born Worcester Residents in 1890, 1920, 1950, 1980, and 2013



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 1890, 1900, 1920, 1950, and 1980 Census and the 2009-2013 5-Year American Community Survey.

Immigration over Time

While impacted by international trends and national policies, Worcester has consistently housed a large immigrant population. Many of the 20th century’s immigrants likely make up the parents and grandparents of Worcester’s current population. More than one in five current Worcester residents was born outside the United States. The largest change in Worcester’s immigration pattern is the region of origin of new residents. In the past, the majority of immigrants arrived from Europe or Canada. Today, most immigrants arrive in Worcester from Latin America, Asia, and Africa. The current wave of immigration is less than that of the late 1800s and early 1900s, but it is greater than that of the past few decades.

Immigration and Municipalities

New immigrants, like all new residents, offer potential benefits and pose potential challenges for a municipality. While immigrants bring new perspectives and new talents to a city, a municipality must address language and cultural barriers that may make it more difficult for City officials to interact with recent arrivals. More training of current employees may be needed to make sure that City staff are able to help residents access City services and participate in the civic life of the community. This is especially important in public safety situations so that firefighters and rescue personnel can communicate with individuals during emergencies and police interactions do not become confrontational. Without proper introduction, immigrants may not be aware of health and safety codes and might hesitate to communicate with the City's Inspectional Services or Public Health Departments over housing or working conditions. Currently, 18% of households in Worcester are linguistically isolated, i.e., all members of the household 14-years-old and over have at least some difficulty with English.

While there is occasional concern regarding the financial condition of recent immigrants, according to the U.S. Census Bureau foreign-born residents of Worcester (encompassing both new arrivals and long-term residents) are no more likely to fall below the poverty line than native-born residents. In 2013, approximately 21.4% of Worcester's total population was below the Federal poverty level, with 22.3% of native-born residents and 18.3% of foreign-born residents in this category. The mean earnings of native households were substantially higher, with native households earning a mean of \$69,295 compared to the mean earnings of foreign-born households at \$51,117. However, the median household income is less distinct between native and foreign-born where the median native household earns \$46,263 compared to the median foreign-born household which earned \$45,032. (This may be due to the existence of wealthy outliers among the native population, which would impact the mean but not the median.) Native residents, on average, tend to receive slightly more in Food Stamps/SNAP benefits, Social Security Payments, and cash public assistance. Foreign-born residents, on average, tend to receive slightly more in Supplementary Security Income. It is important to note that the U.S. Census does not differentiate between recent immigrants and long-time foreign-born residents.

Immigration often places strains on the public education system because students with limited English skills require both subject and language classes. 35.1% of Worcester Public Schools students are considered English Language Learners, or students with limited English proficiency. 92 different languages are spoken by students in the Worcester Public Schools. If a student's country of origin uses a different curriculum or different leveling system, a student may require extra help to successfully complete grade-level work in the Worcester Public Schools.

Refugees

The 1951 United Nations *Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees* and the 1967 *Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees* afford special protections to refugees, people who are "unable or unwilling" to return to their country of residence because of persecution or the "well-founded fear of persecution." Signatories (the United States did not sign the 1951 Convention but did sign the 1967 Protocol) cannot expel or return a refugee to a territory that threatens life or freedom. Refugees are exempt from certain immigration laws when fleeing a repressive situation. The U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration reported that 3,635 refugees resettled in Worcester from 2002 to 2014. According to the Bureau, the majority of refugees that arrived in Worcester during this period came from Iraq and Bhutan. The Massachusetts Office of Refugees and Immigrants estimates that from October 1, 2013 through September 30, 2014, 349 refugees were enrolled in the Massachusetts Refugee Resettlement Program in Worcester. The three groups that work to resettle most refugees in Worcester are Ascentria Care Alliance, Catholic Charities of Worcester, and Refugee and Immigrant Assistance Center—Worcester. These groups generally provide services such as foster care for refugee children, resettlement services, and financial self-sufficiency through business training. The Massachusetts Office for Refugees and Immigrants also provides cash support, employment services, and case management services for refugees. The resettlement period established by the U.S. government is six months, although certain refugees, based on their histories, may require more time to successfully transition.

Questions to Consider:

- What resources should the City provide to public officials and educators to overcome language and cultural barriers?
- How does the City connect recent immigrants to services and employment opportunities?
- What are the potential public and private partnerships in Worcester for supporting new immigrants?
- How can the City engage immigrants in the civic life of Worcester?
- Do refugees require different services and supports than other immigrants?

Bureau Brief

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