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Immigrants and Revitalization: Understanding the Regional Context

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Immigrants and Revitalization: Understanding the Regional Context

EMILY GRABLUTZ

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**Summary:**

Recent research and common-sense observation increasingly indicates that immigrants are playing a significant role in the ongoing process of revitalizing America’s cities. This phenomenon certainly merits further investigation, but it is important to note that this revitalization is occurring alongside dynamic and transformative developments in immigration patterns—for starters, immigrants have a larger presence in the suburbs than ever before. This has led to a reconfiguration of the economic and cultural relationships between cities and their outlying suburbs. No longer can cities and suburbs be looked at in isolation, or in simplistic terms of linear outward movement as a result of upward mobility. Because of this, looking at immigrant-driven revitalization only in terms of central city transformations overlooks important factors at the *regional* level that influence *why, how, and to what extent* immigrants contribute to revitalization. In short, the story is more complicated than it appears, and immigrant-driven revitalization cannot be understood without first understanding the interconnected regional landscape of contemporary immigration.

This report attempts to bring light to this issue by looking at the case of the Vietnamese immigrant and refugee community in Philadelphia and suburban Southern New Jersey, in order to illuminate how our understanding of immigrant-driven revitalization can be better discussed within a broader *regional* context.
**INTRODUCTION:**

In 2002, former-City Councilman and current Philadelphia mayoral nominee Jim Kenney was quoted in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* as saying “If we were to concentrate and have a strategy [for luring immigrants], we could rebuild this city. We wouldn’t need to invest in tearing down building. They would come, and they would do it. They would fix it.”

This quote by Kenney, coming as it does from a prominent Philadelphia politician, highlights the fact that people are increasingly noticing and paying attention to the fact that immigrants are significantly helping to revitalize cities. Since the 1970s, due to changes in national immigration policy, immigration has been increasing across the US, including to Philadelphia. What observers have noticed is that, over the past few decades, this increased immigration has contributed to population growth, an increased commercial base, job growth, a sharp increase in new businesses, and revitalization of once-deteriorating commercial corridors in cities. In fact, a 2008 report on immigration to the Philadelphia region found that “Nearly 75 percent of greater Philadelphia’s labor force growth since 2000 is attributable to immigrants.”

Focusing on the positive benefits that immigrants bring to a city is certainly a commendable approach, and finding ways to foster these advantages is a smart choice. But the situation is more complex than it has appeared in the past. In fact, immigrants’ contributions to the city since the 1970s has occurred at the same time that immigration to Philadelphia’s suburbs has increased dramatically. These two processes have reshaped the landscape of the Philadelphia region, to the point that it is no longer beneficial or accurate to talk about immigrants’ impact on Philadelphia in isolation from broader regional patterns.

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CASE STUDY: VIETNAMESE IN PHILADELPHIA

Background:

South Philadelphia—especially the area around the historic Italian Market—has a long and rich history as a home for diverse immigrant communities. Since the 1970s, it has witnessed a dramatic transformation as a result of increased immigration to the neighborhood. One of the largest ethnic groups in the area is Vietnamese, who began arriving en masse as refugees to Philadelphia (along with many other Southeast Asians) in 1975 at the close of the Vietnam War. Within just the first five years post-1975, thousands of Southeast Asians were settled in Philadelphia, and the migration has continued steadily over the subsequent decades due largely to family reunification. As of 2013, there are an estimated 15,058 Vietnamese living in Philadelphia. South Philadelphia, due to its relatively cheap rent and cost of living, and its historical associations with other immigrant populations, became home for a large percentage of the Vietnamese who settled in Philadelphia.

Each red dot on the map indicates 5 Vietnamese residents.
**Impact on the City**

Notably, the time of arrival of Vietnamese in large numbers coincided with the post-industrial decline in Philadelphia that led to a loss of jobs (particularly industrial jobs) and slashes in welfare that contributed to a flight out of city by native born middle class. Indeed, while South Philadelphia’s overall population has been decreasing since 1980, the Vietnamese population has been increasing, indicating that the influx of Vietnamese has helped stemmed the tide of population loss in South Philadelphia, one indicator of revitalization.
Beyond stemming population loss, the energy and numbers that the Vietnamese have brought to the area has stimulated the economy in positive ways. As the Philadelphia Business Journal noted in January 2005, “Much of the growth in South Philadelphia has been fueled by the influx in the past three decades of Southeast Asians, especially Vietnamese.”

This growth has come in the form of new construction, jobs, and businesses. Self-employment is known to be a relatively common path for immigrants, as it is a relatively easy way to enter the labor market for immigrants and because immigrant communities are often underserved by native-born-run services. In fact, the 2008 report on Philadelphia immigration characteristics found that 11 percent of the foreign born in Philly are self-employed compared to 8 percent of the native born. For the Vietnamese, much of this enterprise is concentrated around east Washington Avenue (see Page 7). Business success means some Vietnamese immigrants are able to achieve middle class status by the second or third generation, but it is not a homogeneous process and not everyone has benefitted equally.

One indicator of the revitalization that has occurred is the rising property values throughout South Philadelphia, particularly in some neighborhoods such as Bella Vista, just north of Washington Avenue. Rising property values and rent has made the neighborhood more attractive for some, but less accessible for others.

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4 Singer et. al., 2008, 24.
One of the most visible impacts the Vietnamese community has had in Philadelphia can be seen in the revitalization of Washington Avenue. The avenue—which at the height of industrial Philadelphia had been lined with busy factories—was filled by the 1960s and 1970s with abandoned warehouses, vacant properties, and a decrepit graveyard. Then, in a dramatic turn-around, the strip that had once been known by some as “Ruin Street” was built up again, as new enterprise was brought in in the form of supermarkets, strip malls, and wholesalers, largely catalyzed by the efforts of Vietnamese and other Southeast Asians. Today, three large shopping plazas anchor one of the busiest commercial strips in South Philadelphia and serve the still-growing Vietnamese and Asian population in the neighborhood.
COMPLICATING THE STORY: SUBURBAN CONNECTIONS

The Catch...

While it seems clear that Vietnamese immigrants in Philadelphia have helped contribute to revitalization in meaningful ways, this is not the end of the story. Because Philadelphia does not exist in isolation, and neither does its Vietnamese community. In fact, what has been happening since the 1970s is a dramatic growth in suburban immigration. The share of the metropolitan immigrant population residing in Philly’s suburbs has increased since 1970. Compared to the immigrant population living in Philadelphia proper, the population of immigrants living throughout the suburbs is growing faster—which is a major and recent development in the history of immigration.

In terms of the Vietnamese, much of this population growth is occurring in South Jersey, where there are large and growing Vietnamese populations in places such as Pennsauken Township, Atlantic City, Egg Harbor Township, and Camden City.

Each red dot on the map indicates 100 Vietnamese residents.

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5 Bahadur, 2002.
6 Singer et. al. 2008, 1.
Importantly, the dispersal of immigrants into the suburbs is not occurring merely on a residential level; the South Jersey suburbs are also becoming an important site of job markets available to immigrants. Immigrants now make up 28% of NJ’s workforce. In South Jersey, many suburbs are becoming hubs for Vietnamese workers—including many workers who travel to the suburbs to work but continue to live in Philadelphia.

“Immigration is a metropolitan-wide issue … Immigrants no longer cluster in central cities. Like most of the American population, many immigrants have become suburban, spreading the challenge of providing them with everyday services in schools, hospitals, transportation, and housing throughout the region… Many live in one municipality, work in another; and seek assistance, worship, and shop in a third area.”

Describing the Suburban Job Market

Looking closer at details of how the Vietnamese job market in South Jersey operates exposes how interconnected the city and suburbs have become. For example, there are hired vans that travel daily to bring workers from the city to jobs on farms, factories, and processing plants. Camden in particular is a hotspot for jobs in manufacturing, construction, and landscaping. South Jersey has a large amount of productive farmland, and a great deal of the workers on those farms are Vietnamese day laborers.

In addition, there are countless flyers throughout South Philadelphia, particularly on Washington Ave, that advertise for jobs in South Jersey (see Page 10). The existence of these flyers indicate a thriving social network facilitating the acquisition of jobs across the region—there is much more that goes on in much less visible ways to facilitate this hiring system.

7 Fine et al., Meet the Neighbors: Organizational and Spatial Dynamics of Immigrant New Jersey, Report (Rutgers University, 2014).
8 Singer et al., 2008, 32.
Visible Evidence of Suburban Connections

Within the Asian shopping centers along Washington Ave, the walls are plastered with notices, apartments listings, and job ads. Other than the occasional job ad in English, most are in Vietnamese or bilingual (Vietnamese/English). Amazingly, while some of the flyers advertised positions in Philadelphia, the majority advertised jobs in South Jersey—particularly, Gloucester County, Egg Harbor Township, and Washington Township (in Gloucester County). The bulk of the job postings were taped to a couple large bulletin boards that each contained many job flyers, suggesting that they are places used for valuable community communication, and an indicator of the economic connections between city and suburbs.
**DISCUSSION:**

**HOW TO ACCOUNT FOR THESE OBSERVATIONS**

The immigration patterns described above are neither simplistic nor easily described by any common theory of immigration. Some relevant immigration theories and their reflective pros and cons are listed below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Traditional Assimilation Theory</strong></th>
<th><strong>Ethnoburb Theory</strong></th>
<th><strong>“Incubator” Theory</strong></th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Immigrants settle in dense inner city enclaves, gradually gain economic mobility, later generations learn English and become “Americanized”, eventually move out to middle class suburbs which are less ethnically homogeneous</em></td>
<td><em>Describes contemporary Chinese dynamics; Uptown (outer-ring suburbs, well-to-do, managers and real estate managers) vs. Downtown (central city, poor/working class, newer to country); central city Chinatowns remain cultural center for ethnic group</em></td>
<td><em>Working theory proposed by Michael Katz; suburban growth districts depend on supply of low-cost immigrant labor from the city; cities can be seen as “incubators” for low wage-workers who depend on regional labor market</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Some Vietnamese have moved to middle class suburbs</td>
<td>✓ Attempts to address intra-group dynamics</td>
<td>✓ Explains urban/suburban split</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Vietnamese never extremely geographically homogeneous (live near other ethnicities)</td>
<td>✓ Center city strong cultural hub</td>
<td>✓ Doesn’t assume suburban are all middle class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Ignores intra-group dynamics (new vs old arrivals, wealthy vs working class, etc)</td>
<td>Ø Can the experience of Chinese be extrapolated to other groups?</td>
<td>✓ Explains why some continue to live in the city while working outside of it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Assumes suburbs are generically middle class and white-dominant</td>
<td>Ø Again assumes all suburbs are middle class</td>
<td>Ø Theory described for smallish cities—could it apply to Philadelphia?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As the chart indicates, while pieces of each of these theories apply to the Vietnamese community in the Philadelphia region, none does a great job at describing all of the factors observed. The Incubator Theory does the best job at accounting for why so many workers continue to live in the central city yet work in the suburbs, which is perhaps the most notable finding in this study—yet the theory has never been described for larger...
cities, and it remains to be seen if the situation in Philadelphia is similar at all to the mid-sized towns the theory was originally designed to describe. Additionally, none of these theories spend much time on describing social networks that facilitate the development of the types of interconnected economic patterns that we see.

What we are seeing in this case therefore is a new paradigm that needs to be studied more; the literature needs to catch up with reality. The bottom line, though, without getting too bogged down in academic theories, is that:

1. Vietnamese immigrants are contributing to the revitalization of South Philadelphia/Washington Ave—but this story is more complicated than it appears;
2. Philadelphia and its suburbs are symbiotically connected; they depend on each other to prosper and grow; and
3. It would not make any sense to talk about the Vietnamese community in Philadelphia without talking about the community in South Jersey, and vice versa.

**Implications**

This report started from the observation that a growing number of people—in Philadelphia and elsewhere, in and out of academic circles, and all along the political spectrum—aware of the fact that immigrants are important drivers of urban revitalization. These individuals, commendably, might hope to find ways to foster further revitalization, by creating conditions that are favorable for immigrant enterprise and healthy immigrant communities. While much further investigation is needed before policy suggestions can be offered, there are some significant implications to be drawn from these initial findings.

First of all, there is a sense that existing theories about immigration need to catch up with reality if they are going to be useful in any practical ways. No known theory is able to properly capture the dynamics and realities of the Vietnamese immigrant community
in the Philadelphia region. New models should be developed so that these issues can be discussed in clearer terms that are more easily generalized.

Secondly, it is clear that cities and suburbs need each other, and not in a simplistic, outdated sense. It is likely that suburban immigration will continue to increase, both from the city to the suburbs, and direct to suburbs; at the same time, suburbs continue to rely on cheap labor from the city. Since cities are only becoming more interconnected with suburbs in various ways, it no longer makes sense to think about immigration policy on a municipality by municipality basis, or exclusively in terms of what is best for central cities.

With so many moving parts in the intricate landscape of contemporary immigration, policies that focus too narrowly on cities could have unintended consequences that end up disturbing the regional balance. As Singer, et. al. say in their 2008 report on regional immigration to Philadelphia, “Policies and programs confined to individual localities will not serve the greater needs of immigrants.” Rather, they say that immigration policy should be a “shared regional goal.”

Some questions to be asked at a collaborative, regional level include: What about the city is driving immigrants—new and old—away? At the same time, what about the city is keeping so many there? How can the system be made to benefit both city and suburbs? How can they capitalize on mutual goals and connections rather than being in competition?

Further, it is likely that the gap between middle-upper class/working class immigrants will likely grow larger under current dynamics, and this will not happen exactly along urban/suburban lines. With such uneven experiences among immigrants, there is a suggestion that revitalization often comes at a cost and does not serve everyone equally. It should be a priority to investigate who is being served by available resources and

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9 Singer, et. al., 2008, 32.
10 Singer, et. al., 200, 32.
services. Who is best positioned to take advantage of advantageous conditions, and who is more vulnerable? Does one group or sub-group always have to be the “loser” in this situation?

The biggest takeaway from these findings is simply that it is imperative to take into account the *regional* picture of what immigration looks like, and to understand that it is a complicated landscape of overlapping immigrant groups and differences based on class, time in country, language skills, job access, and so on. To disregard this understanding will benefit neither immigrants nor cities.

**SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY:**

Time and resource concerns limited the scope of this project, but there is much more to be said about this topic on many fronts. For starters, more investigation into the specific nature of South Jersey’s Vietnamese labor market is needed. The focus of the study could also be expanded beyond South Jersey to the rest of the Greater Philadelphia region, including suburbs in Delaware and Pennsylvania.

This preliminary report has indicated that the landscape of immigration patterns and how they connect to revitalization is more complicated than it appears, but more work needs to be done to capture the full complexity of the situation. Little has been said here about inter-group dynamics. The conversation could be enriched greatly by considering, for starters, other Southeast Asian communities in the Philadelphia region. *Intra*-group complications have also been glossed over here, but would be extremely interesting to explore further. There are important questions to be asked about the experiences of those who are English-proficient vs. non-English-speaking; educated vs. non-educated; recent arrivals vs. older arrivals, and so on.

Finally, expanding the conversation beyond the Philadelphia region and beyond the Southeast Asian community is necessary to illustrate the full significance of these findings.
REFERENCES:

All maps and charts made with US Census and ACS data on SocialExplorer.com


