



Editorial

A portrait of immigration

Regional profile adds to the debate

November 30, 2007

In Wednesday's YouTube debate, Republican presidential hopefuls vied for the mantle of immigration tough. Meanwhile, their Democratic counterparts have been timidly tiptoeing around the subject. As the fight over illegal immigration bubbles and boils, the broader picture of immigration - legal and illegal combined - has been obscured by the steam.

The nonpartisan Fiscal Policy Institute has added some light to the heat with its recent report, "Working for a Better Life: A Profile of Immigrants in the New York Economy," a joint project with the New York Immigration Coalition. Findings in the downstate suburbs - Nassau, Suffolk, Westchester, Rockland and Putnam - may confound some conventional wisdom.

There are 261,428 foreign-born people living in Nassau County, and 183,360 in Suffolk County.

While many immigrants are employed as maids, landscapers and child-care workers, the profession with the largest number of immigrants is (drum-roll please) nursing.

41 percent of physicians and surgeons in the region are foreign-born. So are 28 percent of college and university professors and 22 percent of accountants and auditors.

More than half of the immigrants in downstate suburbs have been in this country for 15 years or more.

55 percent have some college education.

67 percent live in owner-occupied homes.

Only about 6,000 to 8,000 day laborers are hired through shape-up sites in the metropolitan area. Half to two-thirds of those are estimated to be undocumented.

Suffolk has the second-lowest percentage of immigrants (13 percent). Only Putnam is lower (11 percent). Tops is Westchester (25 percent), then Nassau (20 percent).

Only 5 percent speak no English at all.

There's no question that the volatile issue of immigration has moved front and center in the nation's political dialogue. More information about the area's immigrants should make for a more productive conversation.