

December 4, 2007

## Myth-buster reveals depth of immigrants' contribution to NY

By Rong Xiaoqing

It is hard to put a unified face on the immigrant population of New York because it is so diverse. But it is clear those involved in the scorching debate about immigrants in the US in the past year are more likely to have in mind those who were smuggled in on boats and trucks than those who entered legally, got advanced degrees and headed to the top of their professions.

This tendency may have skewed the real picture, at least from the economic perspective.

"All of the economic reports have focused very narrowly on either low-wage immigrants or undocumented immigrants or recent immigrants. People sometimes take those and assume those conclusions apply to immigrants, period. That's really wrong," said David Dyssegaard Kallick, a senior fellow of the Fiscal Policy Institute, a non-partisan think-tank based in New York.

Mr Kallick has produced a report that he thinks depicts immigrants' position in New York's overall economy in a more accurate way.

The findings of the report, *Working for a Better Life*, released last week confront common stereotypes. It points out that immigrants are not marginalised at all. Rather, they contribute US\$229 billion, or 22.4 per cent, of the GDP of New York state.

In New York City, where 37 per cent of the 8 million people are foreign-born, the population of the city would have declined since 1980 without the influx. And they are far from being just waiters, cleaners and shelf packers with low wages.

They actually provide 25 per cent of the city's chief executives, 50 per cent of its accountants and doctors and 40 per cent of its architects.

At a time when one New York Times columnist, David Brooks, could declare last week that the belligerent tough-on-immigration television presenter Lou Dobbs was winning the argument, it is clear there is little room for a sane middle ground.

Applause for the report comes from immigrant advocacy organisations hopeful that the figures will persuade policymakers how vibrant the immigrant contribution is. On the other hand, those wanting to restrict immigration further question the significance of the report.

"They were just trying to report how much bigger New York's economy was because of immigrants. In my mind, it's not that important. It doesn't answer the question that everyone really wants to know: how much better off are natives by the arrival of immigrants?" said Steven Camarota, director of research at the Washington DC-based Centre for Immigration Studies.

Mr Camarota did his own research. His report estimated that, nationwide, immigrants get bigger benefits from the growth of the economy than the American-born.

The line is not only drawn between immigrants and native New Yorkers, but also between legal and illegal immigrants.

The differences between the two groups have simmered since last year when various attempts to improve the situation for illegal immigrants failed - from President George W. Bush's proposed temporary worker's visa to New York governor Eliot Spitzer's ill-fated driver's licence policy.

Those in the US legally but trying to get permanent status say they are being punished through processing delays that can last many years.

So Mr Kallick's efforts to put everyone under the same roof in his report drew a negative reaction from immigrants as well.

"I feel people who take higher paid jobs like CEOs or accountants are more likely to have legal status, so why pull illegal immigrants in to share the honour?" said Billy Lin, an office administrator who has a working visa and has been waiting for three years for his green card.