

2014

# The San Francisco Immigrant Integration Project: Findings from Community-Based Research Conducted by the San Francisco Immigrant Legal & Education Network (SFILEN)

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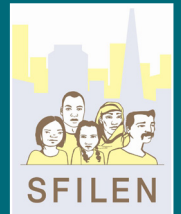
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# The San Francisco Immigrant Integration Project

Findings from Community-Based Research Conducted by the San Francisco Immigrant Legal & Education Network (SFILEN)



## About SFILEN

The San Francisco Immigrant Legal & Education Network (“SFILEN”) was founded in 2007 with a mission to promote full access to social services, direct legal services, civic engagement, legalization, freedom of movement, and reunification with family and community, for all immigrants and their families regardless of their immigration status.

SFILEN works to achieve this mission of immigrant rights through building grassroots leadership, providing free immigration legal services and comprehensive legal assistance, promoting community education, and organizing to empower the immigrant community. As an immigrant centered Network, SFILEN focuses on our work locally, learning from other organizations nationally, and with a critical perspective on how international political and economic trends impact our communities. The network seeks to fulfill this vision by working across racial communities and across social movements.

### SFILEN Legal and Outreach Organizations

African Advocacy Network

Arab Resource & Organizing Center

Asian Americans Advancing Justice - Asian Law Caucus

Asian Pacific Islander Legal Outreach

Causa Justa :: Just Cause

Central American Resource Center

Chinese for Affirmative Action

Dolores Street Community Services\*

Filipino Community Center

La Raza Centro Legal

La Raza Community Resource Center

Mujeres Unidas y Activas

People Organizing to Demand Environmental & Economic Rights (PODER)

*\*Dolores Street Community Services is the lead and fiscal agent of SFILEN*



# The San Francisco Immigrant Integration Project

Findings from Community-Based Research Conducted by the  
San Francisco Immigrant Legal & Education Network (SFLEN)

2014

# Acknowledgements



This report is dedicated to Eric Quezada, former Executive Director of Dolores Street Community Services. The research results, collaboration, and empowerment that came out of this report would not have been possible without his leadership and vision. Any immigrant rights advocacy and progress made from this report will be in memory of Eric.

SFILEN greatly appreciates The San Francisco Foundation and the Mayor's Office of Housing, Community Development Division for their generous support in implementing this project.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## The San Francisco Immigrant Legal & Education Network

The San Francisco Immigrant Legal & Education Network (“SFILEN”) is a collaboration of thirteen multiracial, multilingual community-based organizations that provide critical legal services and outreach to San Francisco immigrants. SFILEN clients face barriers in accessing social services, have fear of local law enforcement, and are being detained and deported in record numbers. SFILEN staff has direct experience supporting low-income, underserved immigrants with culturally and linguistically appropriate services to address the barriers facing San Francisco’s immigrant communities.

## The San Francisco Immigrant Integration Project

SFILEN conducted a two-year community research effort, the San Francisco Immigrant Integration Project (“Integration Project”). The goal of the Integration Project was to engage a broad range of stakeholders on immigrant integration issues, to document the unique needs of the immigrant community, and to propose relevant policies and practices for meaningful integration.

Based on figures from the American Community Survey, San Francisco’s adult foreign-born population (18 years and older) comprises nearly 40% of the city. While San Francisco is often perceived as an immigrant friendly and welcoming sanctuary city, participants in the integration project have stated otherwise. Many are immigrants struggling to find a job and affordable housing in an expensive city. The warm welcome of San Francisco is sharply contrasted with the lack of access to city resources and limited meaningful engagement from city stakeholders.

This project documents how San Francisco immigrant communities struggle to gain access to services and what they do in the face of these service gaps. This project also provides recommendations for San Francisco to improve immigrant integration through an emphasis on effective and accessible city services, the removal of cultural and linguistic barriers, and the participation of all stakeholders.

The Integration Project consisted of three community-based phases: (1) collaborative, multilingual planning and research, including a preliminary interview process with select community members; (2) community-based research with focus groups and administration of a multilingual survey to San Francisco immigrants; and (3) a community engagement process to present the project’s findings and begin to frame future policy or advocacy recommendations for SFILEN.

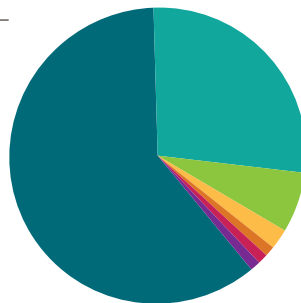
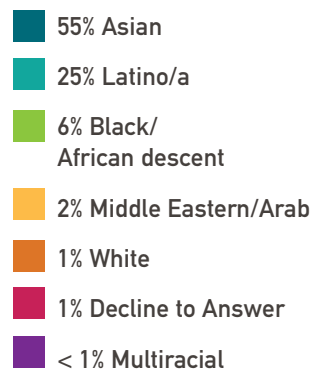
SFILEN staff and community leaders surveyed 625 San Francisco immigrants with 609 valid, complete surveys. The Integration Project was distributed in the community for six weeks and the survey was available in Spanish, Chinese,

Tagalog, Arabic, Tigrinya, and English. All participants were San Francisco residents, 18 years or older, and “immigrant” was defined as those born outside of the United States. Most survey participants were clients of SFILEN’s legal services, constituent members of SFILEN organizations, or other immigrant residents that came in contact with SFILEN service providers. The staff at the University of San Francisco’s Leo T. McCarthy Center for Public Service and the Common Good was instrumental in the survey design, processing and disaggregation of quantitative data from the surveys.

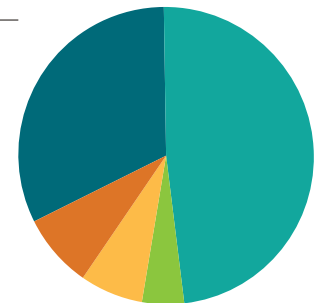
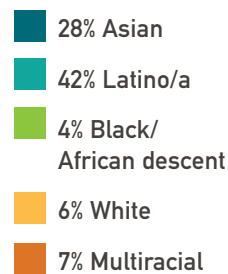
In addition to the survey, SFILEN staff and community leaders conducted more than 30 one-on-one interviews, nine in-language focus groups, and brought together more than 150 community members for convenings to share the results. In total, SFILEN engaged more than 800 San Francisco community members and immigrants.

## Race

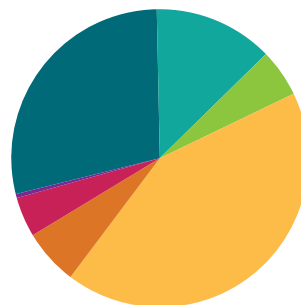
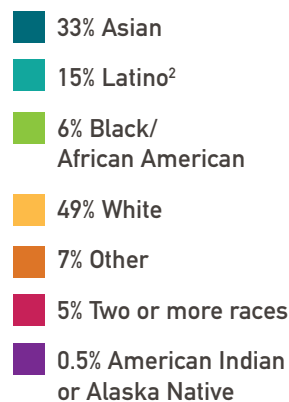
Survey Participants



SFILEN Clients



San Francisco Citywide<sup>1</sup>



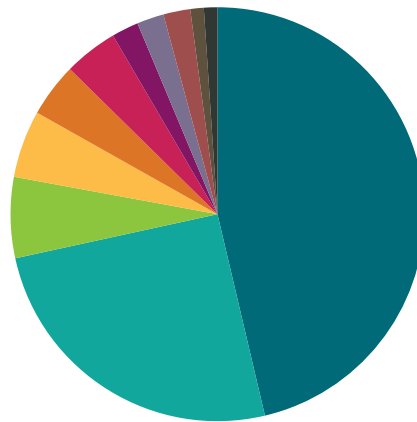
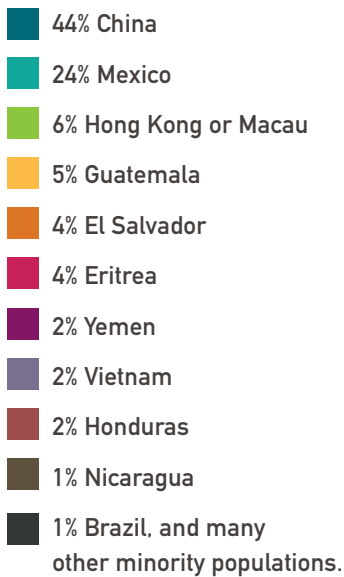
1. 2010 United States Census.

2. The U.S. Census tracks “Hispanics or Latinos” of any race or “non-white Hispanics and Latinos.” The number listed for “Latinos” represents non-white Hispanics and Latinos



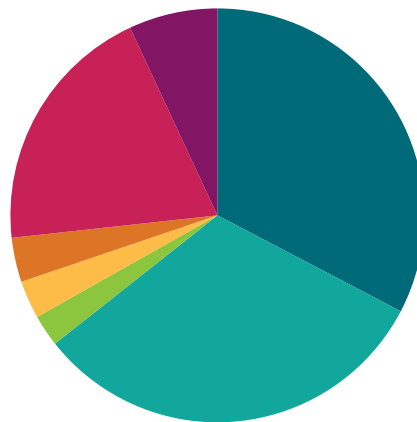
## Country of Origin

### Survey Participants:



## Immigration Status

### Survey Participants:



## Key Findings

- 1. Common Dreams:** Nearly 63% of survey participants indicated that they came to the U.S. for “a better life.” Focus group participants further explained that they had hope for better employment and educational opportunities, to reunite with family members, or to escape political turmoil in their home countries.
- 2. Access to Services:** Despite feeling welcome in San Francisco (63% of respondents said they felt adjusted to U.S. culture), most immigrants still face barriers to critical services and programs. All survey participants indicated they had unmet needs when it comes to accessing basic support.

3. **Key Challenges:** The San Francisco immigrant community has the most difficulty with employment and housing. San Francisco immigrants are unemployed and underemployed with 45% indicating they are out of work and 21% working only part time. They indicated that employment services are inaccessible due to language barriers or being difficult to locate. Additionally, 45% of participants indicated that their housing needs are not being met and 58% have difficulty accessing housing services.
4. **Immigrant Access to Healthcare:** A majority of immigrants indicated that their health care needs are being met, but there is still some confusion and misinformation about eligibility for local health care programs. Nearly 70% of all immigrants indicated they have been able to access health services. But many immigrants indicated that they were not entirely clear about the requirements for health care programs, including some people fearing that their information would be turned over to immigration officials.
5. **Undocumented Immigrants:** Approximately 20% of survey respondents indicated they are undocumented while 7% declined to state their immigrant status. San Francisco's undocumented immigrant community faces additional barriers when it comes to accessing city services. Undocumented immigrants have difficulty accessing most programs because of a lack of documentation/identification and limited funds. Additionally, fear of law enforcement is a daily challenge for most immigrant communities, but particularly Latino immigrants who witness increased police presence in their neighborhoods. They also witness growing collaboration between police officers and immigration authorities.



6. **Civic Participation:** Most immigrants, 60% of survey participants, indicated that they wish civic participation was a bigger part of their lives. They wish to participate in voting, community education events, attend city hearings, and community rallies more to be a part of improving their own communities.
7. **Support systems:** Immigrant communities utilize creative, community-based support systems because they lack access to or do not trust city agencies. Immigrant communities are using mutual aid programs, cooperative models, and informal networks between friends to try to fill service gaps.

## Recommendations

1. **Redefine immigrant integration to move beyond welcoming messages and cultural celebrations.** What is most meaningful to new immigrants is access to critical services (such as housing, employment, and health care) that are needed for a good quality of life.
2. **Expand community education and outreach.** Immigrants in San Francisco have trouble accessing services due to lack of information or misinformation. They are also unaware of pro-immigrant policies and programs that they could benefit from. Targeted education and outreach conducted by community members with existing relationships and linguistic and cultural competency can fill the gap.
3. **Promote best practices and innovative strategies to increase access to services.** San Francisco stakeholders can implement a number of initiatives to increase access for immigrants such as workforce training initiatives for low-skilled workers, expanding worker protection laws, and creating a centralized housing database. Best practices account for linguistic, cultural, and educational barriers that immigrant communities most often face.
4. **Build bridges with the receiving community.** The existing neighborhoods and residents of a demographically changing city have a stake in this as well. With better immigrant integration, our local schools, local economy, and neighborhood relationships all improve. Greater interactions, relationship-building, and mutual support between immigrants and receiving communities should be promoted and supported by city officials.
5. **Support community-based research.** The Integration Project was the first of its kind to document the experiences of a significant number of undocumented and underserved immigrants. Because it was a community-driven process, immigrants felt comfortable being candid and direct about their experiences accessing services in San Francisco. The project opened up many new research inquiries that require follow up to properly assess how all communities can thrive in San Francisco.



## INTRODUCTION

The thirteen member organizations of SFILEN live, organize, and provide critical services in the heart of San Francisco’s immigrant neighborhoods. The membership of SFILEN represents a multiracial, multilingual cross-section of immigrants and advocates facing complex immigration and integration struggles. SFILEN advocates are often the first and last line of defense and have become community experts when it comes to understanding the legal and societal barriers immigrants are facing.

SFILEN did not need to conduct focus groups or surveys to understand the challenges faced by SFILEN clients, as they bring these struggles to SFILEN offices on a daily basis. However, the surveys and focus groups were efficient tools to thoroughly document the lived experiences of SFILEN clients and community members. The San Francisco Immigrant Integration Project (“Integration Project”) provided a critical opportunity to allow immigrant communities to not only participate in, but lead a community-based process, and give voice to their own experiences.

Based on figures from the American Community Survey, San Francisco’s adult foreign-born population (18 years and older) comprises nearly 40% of the city. While San Francisco is often perceived as an immigrant-friendly sanctuary city, participants in the Integration Project reflect a different reality. Many are immigrants trying to find a job and housing in an expensive city. The warm welcome of San Francisco is sharply contrasted with the lack of access to city resources.

This project also highlights the ways in which San Francisco immigrant communities struggle to gain access to services. In light of these service gaps, immigrant communities have remained strong, resilient, and resourceful. Finally, the Integration Project provides recommendations for all stakeholders to contemplate. Elected officials, media, city agencies and community members should consider ways to improve integration—emphasizing access to services and the removal of cultural and linguistic barriers.

## About the Integration Project

Eric Quezada, former Executive Director of Dolores Street Community Services, originally conceived of the Integration Project as a vehicle to engage a wide range of stakeholders in changing the face of sanctuary—from a reaction to immigration enforcement towards a more proactive approach that takes bold steps to integrate immigrant communities and promote economic stability and civic and social participation. Towards that end, SFILEN understands “immigrant integration” as a means of supporting immigrants to live dignified lives, with access to effective city services without fear or cultural and linguistic barriers.

The goals of the Integration Project were: (1) to provide a community-based picture of the immigrant experience in San Francisco, including what their unique needs and concerns are; (2) to propose relevant city policies and practices among all stakeholders to respond efficiently; (3) to increase civic and social participation of disenfranchised immigrant communities; (4) to strengthen local government’s accountability to immigrant constituents; (5) to recognize the diverse contributions of San Francisco immigrants; (6) to support cross cultural understanding and inclusion; and (7) to promote the sharing of resources among a wide-range of service providers and community-based organizations.

The Integration Project consisted of three community-based phases: (1) collaborative, multilingual planning and research, including a preliminary interview process with 35 select immigrant community members; (2) community-based research involving 9 focus groups with 72 participants and administration of a multilingual survey to 625 San Francisco immigrants; and (3) a community engagement process to present the project’s findings to over 125 community members in three San Francisco neighborhoods that are densely populated with immigrants: Chinatown, Excelsior, and Mission.

## Phase 1: Collaborative Planning

With representatives from the African, Latino, and Chinese communities, a team of SFILEN staff members and immigrant community leaders participated in preliminary one-on-one interviews. The interviews covered immigrant integration



issues such as the experience of coming to and living in San Francisco, access to services, and existing support systems for immigrants. The content of these interviews informed the design and development of the larger focus group and survey questions.

## Phase 2: Community-based Research

SFILEN staff coordinated the implementation of 9 focus groups with a total of 72 immigrant participants. Focus group participants represented the Latino, Chinese, Arab, Laotian, Thai, and Mayan communities.

SFILEN staff and community leaders surveyed 625 San Francisco immigrants with 609 surveys being valid and complete. The survey was distributed in the community for six weeks and was available in Spanish, Chinese, Tagalog, Arabic, Tigrinya, and English. All participants were San Francisco residents, 18 years or older, and “immigrant” (which was defined as those born outside of the United States). Most survey participants were clients of SFILEN’s legal services, constituent members of SFILEN organizations, or other immigrant residents that came in contact with SFILEN service providers. Staff from the University of San Francisco, Leo T. McCarthy Center for Public Service and the Common Good were instrumental in the survey design, processing and disaggregation of quantitative data from the surveys.

## Phase 3: Community Engagement

The third and final phase of the Integration Project involved three neighborhood-based community gatherings to present the findings of the project and receive community feedback. Taking place in Chinatown, the Excelsior, and Mission neighborhoods of San Francisco, the three community gatherings provided translation or were conducted in language for the Spanish, Chinese, and Tagalog-speaking immigrant communities. Community testimony at these gatherings confirmed the Integration Project was an accurate portrayal of the immigrant experience in San Francisco.

# COMMUNITY DEMOGRAPHICS

The San Francisco Immigrant Integration Project resulted in the completion of 609 valid surveys. The survey was not administered as a truly random sampling. Participants were immigrants who came in contact with SFILEN staff, often as clients, organizational members, workshop attendees, or just general community members in the area. This data is not a complete representation of immigrants citywide. However, because the participants are primarily immigrants who come in contact with SFILEN, it is a significant representation of the most vulnerable and underserved immigrants in San Francisco.

Due to the limited capacity of SFILEN staff to administer the survey, the Integration Project does not fully capture minority and emerging communities in need (such as African, Arab, Filipino, Southeast Asian, and South Asian immigrants.) The underrepresentation of these racial and ethnic groups in this project does not lessen the needs of these communities. On the contrary, it highlights the lack of resources and outreach going to smaller immigrant groups with different language, cultural, and social barriers.

## RACE

Figure 1: Race of Survey Participants

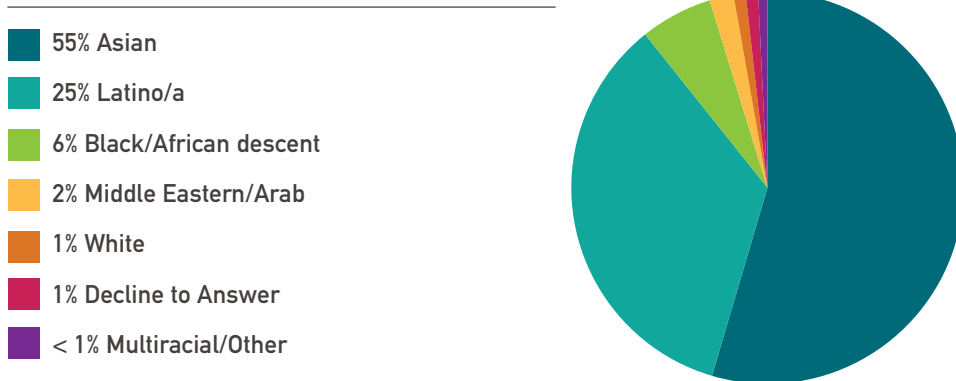
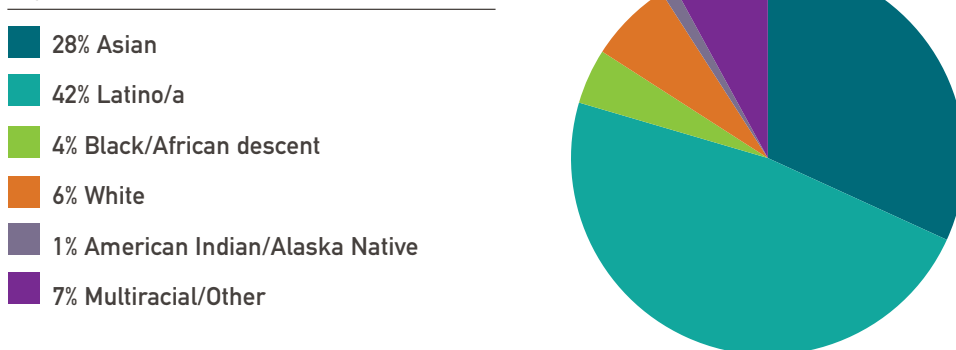


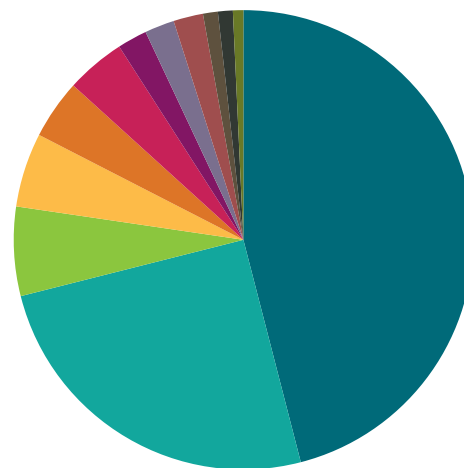
Figure 2: Race of SFILEN Clients



The majority of immigrant participants were Asian or Latino. A smaller segment of immigrants also participated, including African and Middle Eastern/ Arab immigrants. These numbers differ slightly from SFILEN’s client population as tracked by the Mayor’s Office of Housing.

### COUNTRY OF ORIGIN

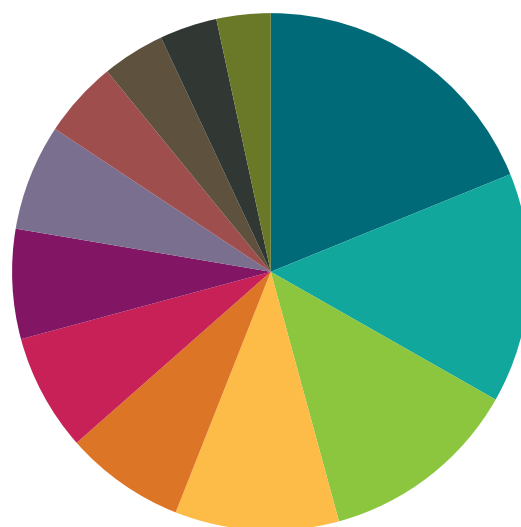
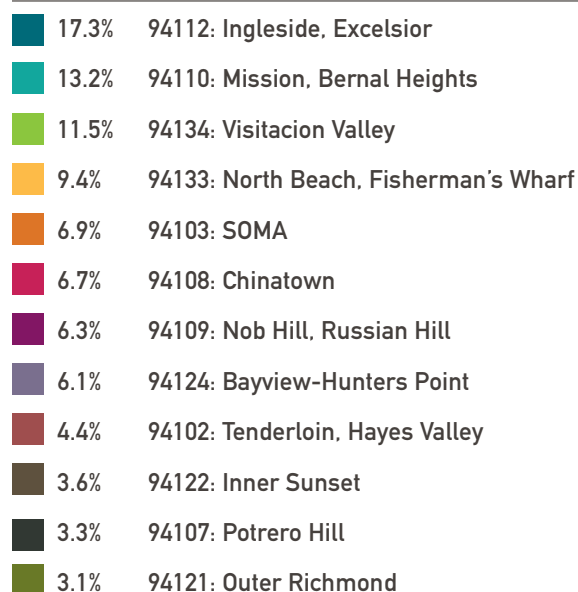
Figure 3: Country of Origin



### NEIGHBORHOOD

The neighborhoods of survey participants match the low-income, immigrant neighborhoods served by SFILEN organizations. Data shows that immigrants are living all over San Francisco, but concentrated mostly in the densely packed South of Market, Tenderloin, Excelsior, Mission, Visitacion Valley, Bernal Heights, and Bayview-Hunters Point neighborhoods of the city.

Figure 4: SF Residency of Survey Participants



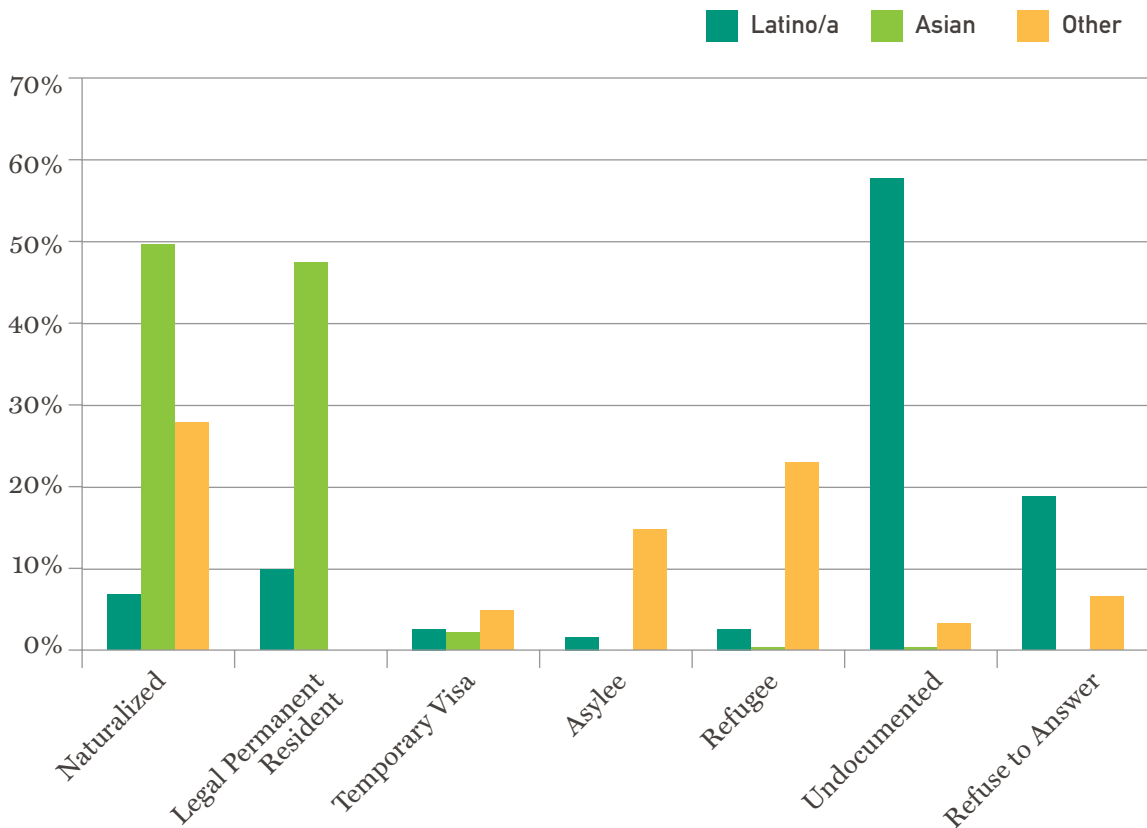


## IMMIGRATION STATUS

Disaggregating data by immigrant status illustrates the different trends in each racial group (most Latino/as surveyed were undocumented or refused to answer and most Asians surveyed were naturalized or green card holders). However, this data is not representative of the entire immigrant population in San Francisco.

While the Integration Project participants are just a small segment of the larger San Francisco immigrant population, the number of undocumented immigrants that participated is incredibly significant. This speaks largely to the trust, community relationships, and credibility that SFILEN organizations have with vulnerable and underserved populations in San Francisco.

Figure 5: Immigration Status of Survey Participants



The survey data did not capture information by family, but anecdotally from SFILEN referrals and services, SFILEN organizations know there are many mixed-status families—where family members have different immigration statuses. Confusion or misinformation, or fear of being reported to U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), can lead to an underutilization of services—even if one or more family members is eligible to receive those services or benefits.

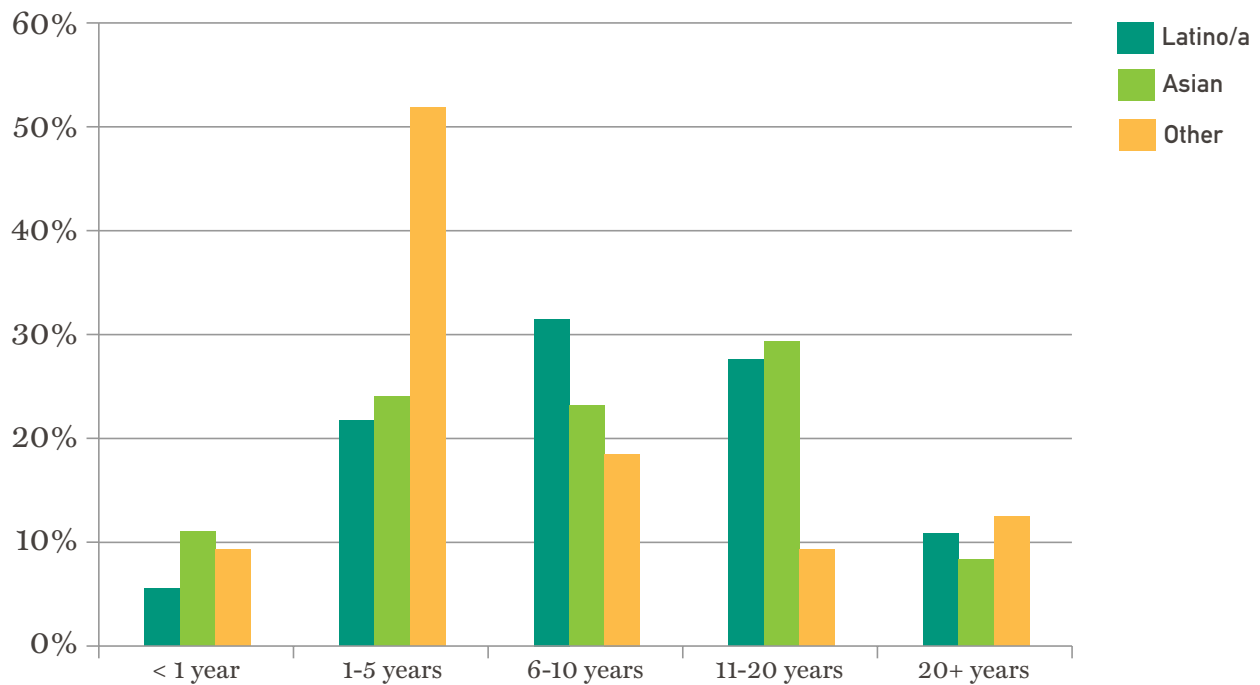
## GENDER

The majority of survey respondents, 65%, identified as women while 35% identified as men.

## TIME IN THE UNITED STATES

Survey participants varied in how long they have lived in the United States from those who have lived here just a few years to those who have been here decades.

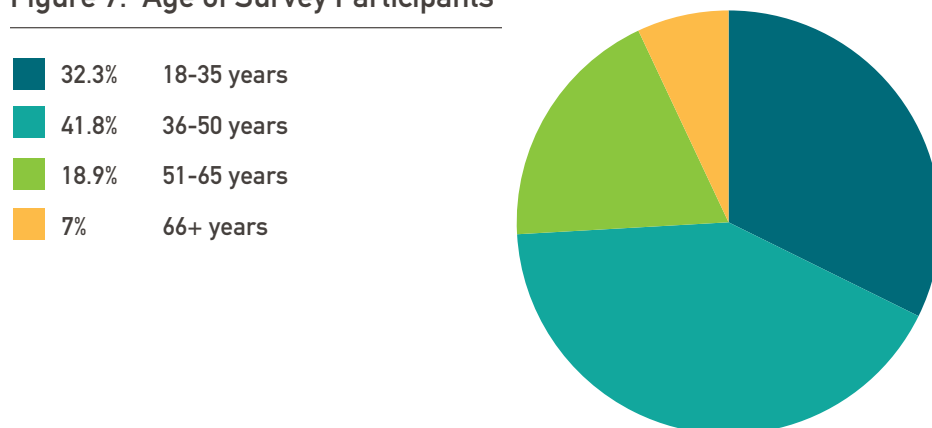
Figure 6: Time in the U.S.



## AGE

Survey participants were limited to residents 18 years and older with the majority of surveys filled out by young or middle aged immigrants.

Figure 7: Age of Survey Participants



## SEXUAL ORIENTATION

Participants were asked if they identify with being gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or queer. The majority of respondents, 89%, responded no, approximately 4% answered yes, and 7% declined to answer.

## FORMAL EDUCATION

Participants were asked what their highest level of formal education is (either in the US or from their home country), and more than 40% of immigrant participants did not graduate from high school. Additionally, 37% have a high school diploma without any further education. These findings were true for both Latino/a and Asian immigrants. For the non-Latino, non-Asian racial minorities, the same percentage of people (37%) have a high school diploma. But 22% had some vocational training and 20% had a degree from a 4 year college, making the overall educational levels higher for the “other”, non-Latino, non-Asian immigrant group.

## UNDERREPRESENTED COMMUNITIES

The following communities were underrepresented in the survey and focus group results, but are very much part of the underserved populations that SFILN reaches. Below are brief summaries of the challenges faced by underrepresented communities—these challenges may not be captured in the survey results but deserve equal consideration by stakeholders.

### The Arab and Arab American Community

The Arab immigrant and Arab American community, as described by the Arab Resource and Organizing Center (AROC), share similar yet unique immigrant struggles. Most Arab immigrants arrive through family-based petitions. However, there is a growing number of asylum seekers as a result of the political developments in the Arab World, particularly in the countries of Syria, Yemen, Egypt, and Palestine. The second wave of asylum seekers coincides with the start of the uprisings in 2011 and the subsequent economic and political instability. AROC has also observed that there is a growing Arab refugee population in the Bay Area. Following recent trends, this coming year, the largest incoming refugee population in the Bay Area will be from Iraq and Afghanistan due to the impacts of war and occupation abroad. Similarly, since the start of Syria’s civil war, Temporary Protected Status (TPS) has been granted. Many of AROC’s clients are Syrians who have come as visitors, but overstay their visas due to fear of political persecution. Those who are ineligible for TPS ultimately remain, unlawfully present and undocumented.

Asylum seekers face particular challenges in securing housing and employment. Those with refugee status typically have more supportive services, but AROC clients

who are seeking asylum are in constant search of housing, employment, and medical services. The lack of access is exacerbated by city agencies generally lacking cultural competency with the Arab community. Language barriers are also a tremendous challenge with few resources for Arab interpretation and translation coming from the city. AROC's Language Access campaign attempts to address this through community-led efforts to advocate for more Arabic language services.

Furthermore, the Arab community suffers disproportionately from anti-Arab discrimination and FBI or police harassment. Arab participants in Integration Project focus groups described being questioned by the FBI during the start of the Iraq war. Another Arab immigrant was interrogated about how she had obtained her visa. Arab immigrants have since become accustomed to carrying their immigration documents with them at all times out of fear of being questioned or racially profiled. These interactions with law enforcement have left Arab community members distrustful of not only law enforcement, but all city agencies, contributing to their isolation from city services. The Arab community is dependent on cultural competent community-based organizations for empowerment trainings, Know-Your-Rights workshops, and to bridge the gap with city services.

### **The African and Afro-Caribbean Immigrant Community**

As described by the African Advocacy Network (AAN), the African and Afro-Caribbean immigrant community are in need of culturally competent immigration legal services, as many of them are immigrants and refugees who have fled their home countries because of political persecution. They are also low-income, with 85% of AAN's client base making less than \$10,000 per year. AAN's clients and their families primarily reside in the Tenderloin, Western Addition, Bayview and the Mission neighborhoods.

After legal services, language isolation is the next biggest challenge, as the African immigrant community represents an incredibly diverse range of minority languages such as Tigrinya, Amharic, French, Haitian Creole, and Swahili just to name a few. Over 90% of AAN's clients are limited English proficient. Securing vital information in a minority African language is a daily challenge, leaving many communities isolated. When interpretation or translation is provided by city agencies, it is often only in Spanish or Chinese. The African and Afro-Caribbean immigrant community struggles to interact directly with city departments (they often depend on AAN staff to translate), and have difficulty getting information about their children in the school district.

### **The Filipino Community**

The Filipino immigrant community, as described by the Filipino Community Center (FCC), shares challenges with other immigrant communities. Many Filipino immigrants served by FCC are undocumented or "TNT" status ("tago-ng-tago" which means "always hiding"). Many of them overstay visas to be united with their families or stay here for work. While they do not have work authorization, they

work in the underground economy, primarily domestic work. This has allowed them to support their families but leaves them particularly susceptible to workplace exploitation. Migrant workers also suffer from family separation or having multiple families in different countries.

FCC's program areas are matched to the needs of these communities through their use of community education and empowerment workshops, assistance in wage claims, and referrals to community-trusted attorneys. Their programs also address isolation through community building.

FCC engages with the Filipino community in multiple formats to meet the multi-generational needs of this Bay Area community. The community primarily served by FCC is concentrated in the Excelsior neighborhood and surrounding District 11 areas. This neighborhood is primarily low-income with a high concentration of families. About half of the Filipino immigrants served by FCC are limited English proficient, preferring to speak in a Filipino language. The language needs are diverse, including Tagalog (the official Filipino national language), and smaller languages such as Cebuano, Ilokano, Illonggo, Pangasinan, and Kapampangan.



## KEY FINDINGS

The Integration Project uncovered dozens of challenges faced by San Francisco's immigrant community. Each of the individual issue areas needs to be explored with additional research and advocacy as the Integration Project allowed for only a broad introduction into immigrant needs. Based on the limited scope of the project inquiries and data, these findings focus on immigrant *access* to services and the overall immigrant experience in San Francisco. The data does not speak to specific findings within the various issues or services areas that arose during the project. Much more research is needed to fully capture the nuanced and complicated issues faced by immigrants within specific issue areas.

- 1. Most immigrants migrated to the United States or San Francisco for similar reasons.** Survey participants were asked why they came to San Francisco and could check off any number of the following answers: better life, employment, to be with family, to be with spouse, access to a large network or immigrant community, safety, medical reasons, or other. Nearly 63% of all immigrants (naturalized citizens, legal permanent residents, asylees, refugees, and undocumented immigrants) responded that they came to San Francisco for a "better life." About 40% immigrants also listed that they migrated to be with family and about 38% for employment opportunities.

*"We came here because there are human rights here that are not available in other countries. People across the world are suffering."*  
- Arab immigrant participant

While the specific reasons are all different depending on the community or individual, there is undoubtedly a shared hope to find a better life. Some communities come here for educational opportunities for the next generation; some are fleeing political or religious persecution; or some come here for hopes of better economic and employment opportunities. Regardless of the racial, ethnic, religious, and class differences, the shared hope for a better future is what binds the immigrant community.

- 2. Despite feeling welcome in San Francisco, most immigrants still face barriers to critical services and programs.**

*"This city just says that they welcome immigrants, but at the end of the day they just use us. We do the work no one wants to do, and they still make us feel like criminals for working to pay rent and bring food to the table."*

- Mission focus group participant

Nearly two-thirds of survey participants (64%) indicated they are satisfied with their life in San Francisco and that they had adjusted to U.S. culture (63%). While this was a positive finding for the project, immigrant participants cautioned that their experience is far more complicated than simply feeling welcome.

Data from the surveys, focus groups and community gatherings all highlighted complicated feelings of being in a welcoming city, while simultaneously feeling unsupported with a lack of accessible services. Furthermore, many participants generally express being content with their lives here in San Francisco for one of two reasons: (1) their situation in their home countries were more severe or challenging (which prompted them to migrate in the first place); or (2) immigrants feel that elected officials and city agencies will never change course and consider the needs of immigrants, so immigrants themselves have come to accept their current circumstances of being without services.

*“We are doing better here than in other countries, but we still need our city to strengthen programs for immigrants and really implement the laws that we have.”*

– Focus group participant with PODER

The Integration Project proved to be an instrumental intervention for immigrants by allowing them to fully identify their needs and priorities, and document the barriers to services. This section provides an overview of the most pressing needs in the immigrant community: employment and housing, as well as other service areas.

- 3. The biggest challenges for San Francisco immigrants are employment and housing.** Data from the over six hundred surveys and the nine focus groups overwhelmingly indicated that finding stable employment and housing are the biggest challenges for San Francisco immigrants with language barriers, limited skills, limited funds, and citizenship barriers.

When asked what top three resources are needed for a good quality of life in San Francisco, participants listed housing, employment, and health care. Fortunately, nearly two-thirds of the participants followed up that their healthcare needs were being fulfilled. However, housing and employment needs are far from being met in the immigrant community.

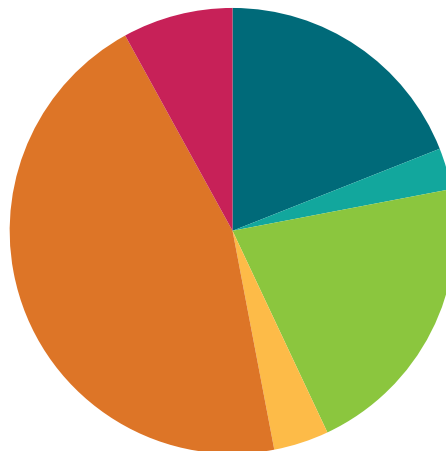
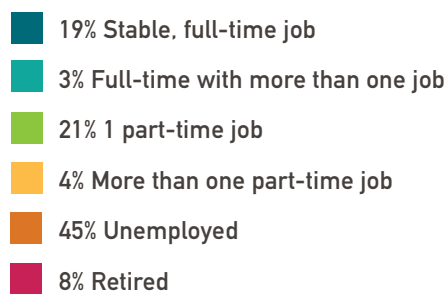
The issue of employment was discussed in a variety of ways: immigrants have difficulty in securing a job, they have difficulty accessing city-based employment

services, and most immigrants work in low-wage, low-skill positions without worker protections.

In San Francisco, one of the most expensive cities in the country, immigrant communities struggle to find affordable housing or find information about public housing options. The high rates of unemployment among immigrants have also impacted housing due to limited financial means among participants.

4. **The immigrant community suffers from chronic unemployment and worker exploitation.** At the time of the Integration Project, the country was still in the midst of an economic recession with business activity low while unemployment rates remained stubbornly high. Even today immigrant community members still struggle to find fulltime work. Finding sustainable employment was and is difficult for all job seekers, but is even more difficult for immigrants with limited English, lack of work authorization, and very little applicable job skills for growing high-skill industries.

Figure 7: Employment Status



Nearly half of all survey participants noted that they were unemployed or underemployed, working only one part time job. Some participants were also working multiple part time jobs or working multiple jobs to equal the same hours or pay as a full time job. The narrative accounts from the focus groups and community gatherings indicate that most of these working conditions are exploitative and without a living wage.

*“The income we earn is not enough. Housing is so expensive and it’s unpredictable. Fifty percent of the time I can eat and pay bills, and fifty percent of the time, I can’t.”*

- Excelsior community member

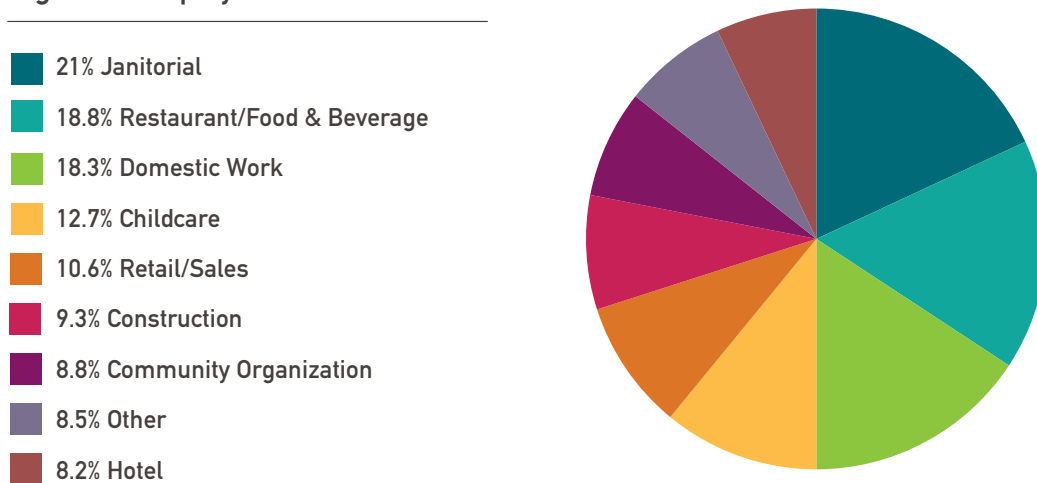


The survey results also confirmed that most immigrants were working in low-wage and often unregulated industries such as hospital work (janitorial and food service), and domestic work taking care of elders and children.

*“We have cleaned the bathrooms, taken care of the children, and taken care of the elderly and the disabled. We have done very important work that should be recognized.”*

– Excelsior community resident

Figure 8: Employment Industries



For survey participants who are working (either fulltime or part-time), Figure 8 represents the most common types of employment for immigrants.

**5. Employment services are inaccessible due to language barriers and immigrants having difficulty finding them.** In the community gatherings, immigrant community members expressed frustration at not being able to effectively access city employment services. Participants pointed to language access and difficulty locating the service as the two barriers to accessing employment services. The services are difficult to find for two reasons: information about services is not made available to underserved communities and services are geographically difficult to find or far away from isolated communities. Community members voiced that they have been doing important work for the city and their work contributes to the city’s economy, yet they do not have access to job opportunities or on the job training.

*“We go to community centers for job referrals and because they provide bilingual services.”*

– Chinatown focus group

*“I’ve been through several city job training programs but I still can’t find a job.*

– Chinatown focus group

With job training and job-readiness services being the primary needs of survey participants, nearly half of participants (45%) noted that these needs are not being met by city employment services. They seek jobs through word-of-mouth, tips from family and friends, or seek assistance from community-based organizations.

6. **Nearly half of all immigrants do not have their housing needs met.** Among survey participants, 48% of participants indicated that their housing needs were not being met and 58% have difficulty accessing housing services. Participants at all stages of the project (interviews and project design, surveys, focus groups, and community engagement gatherings) emphasized the challenge in accessing housing services. Housing is inaccessible because there are limited options and high demand, but also because at a basic level, community members do not know how to find information about public and affordable housing. Information about public housing options, the lottery system for housing, or eligibility requirements is not readily available, publicly posted, nor linguistically accessible for limited English proficient immigrants.

For those who do find information on affordable housing and sign up on a waiting list, many participants shared they had been on a waiting list for over a decade. Furthermore, the current housing situations that immigrants find themselves in (often private rentals) have their own challenges with unscrupulous landlords providing inhabitable dwellings and charging high rates for rent. The high housing rates are particularly hard hitting for unemployed and low-wage workers.

*“Even if I am documented, even if I work and get paid proper wages, 75% of my income goes directly to paying for rent.”*

– Filipino community member

*“Landlords are greedy and there is no control over how they increase their rent. And the conditions of some of these apartments are not habitable, but we don’t have options. We squeeze big families into these small places that are not maintained by the landlords.”*

– Excelsior community member

The challenges for housing are very similar for employment: not many have access to it and there is very little regulation or oversight for unscrupulous landlords taking advantage of immigrant, low-income tenants.

- 7. Immigrants prioritize access to health care for a good quality of life and most have their health care needs met.** More than two-thirds, 67% of survey participants reported that for the most part, they have been able to access health care services and their health care needs are taken care of. This is significant progress for the immigrant community as they identified health care as one of the top three resources needed for a good quality of life in San Francisco.

For the remaining third of participants who are still having trouble accessing health care, the barriers mentioned were most commonly limited funds and no insurance. Given that San Francisco has a “Healthy SF” Program for uninsured residents, regardless of immigration status, the difficulty in accessing health care may be due to an inability to access information about health care programs, confusion about eligibility, and a lack of community outreach or education generally.

Many of the focus group participants also indicated confusion about the eligibility for Healthy SF and local health care programs. There was a widely shared assumption that they would be asked to provide a social security number or proof of legal status, when Healthy SF only requires proof of San Francisco residency and a form of identification. Nevertheless, focus group participants shared that they do not go to the doctor, community clinics, or seek city health services out of fear of being asked for documentation they cannot provide.

- 8. Undocumented immigrants face particular barriers when accessing services.** The number of undocumented immigrants that participated in the project is one of the most significant findings to document not only the substantial presence of undocumented immigrants in San Francisco, but also that they trust and interact with SFILEN organizations. Through the existing trust of SFILEN organizations, undocumented immigrants were able to share their needs and experiences – many of them shared with the rest of the immigrant participants – but also highlight some struggles that are unique to those without lawful presence.

Like the rest of the immigrant community that participated in the project, undocumented immigrants struggle with accessing job opportunities and training, and also affordable housing. For undocumented immigrants, housing and employment services are particularly inaccessible because of their lack of identification (making them ineligible for most government programs), and they have limited funds to pay for services elsewhere. Their lack of documentation only compounds their struggles with other barriers, such as language, inability to find services, and fear of being reported to ICE.

In addition to housing and employment services, undocumented immigrant participants have particular struggles that were not shared by other immigrants. Disaggregated data showed that undocumented immigrants have difficulty accessing cash assistance, other public benefits, and adult educational or professional training programs. The barriers to these services remain the same: lack of documentation and limited funds.

Overall, the experiences of undocumented immigrants accessing public services can be similar as all immigrants, but the pervasive and somewhat permanent nature of their barriers (barring any future legalization efforts), is what is vastly different for the undocumented community.

**9. Fear of law enforcement is a daily challenge for many immigrant communities.** In the focus groups, many immigrants, particularly Latino immigrants, spoke candidly about the fear that they experience on a daily basis. The fear is specific to law enforcement and focus group participants did not distinguish between police officers and immigration authorities because the two are very much seen as working in real collaboration with each other. Whether or not an immigrant knows of the practicalities of 287(g) agreements or S-Comm (Secure Communities), which formalize the relationships between police and immigration enforcement, their lived experience is that police and immigration enforcement are one in the same.

As described by immigrant residents of the Mission, “Undocumented people are afraid to even ride their bike down the street. Cops do not believe we are residents or citizens and they are always harassing us – stopping us without



justification. We don't see the same happening to white people, only Latinos." A participant in the focus group with Mayan immigrants said, "I have lived here for over 30 years. I have always seen how the police harass us more than any other group." Another participant described the hopelessness in the face of this racial profiling and harassment, "I feel like nowhere in the US will they receive us with open arms. They do not like us, which is why they make it so hard for us – to take us out."

One immigrant parent described the troubling fear that not only impacts parents, but their children in schools. "As a parent, I'm ignored by the teachers because I cannot speak English. I also see students with status get better care than the ones without social security numbers. I know a teenager who was kicked out of school for a false accusation and then he was taken to juvenile hall and deported soon after." Other parents agreed that they, as adults, are treated the same in the work place. "Employers take advantage of workers without status, dismissing them without pay."

One Latino immigrant summed it up as, "We are not received well anywhere: schools, jobs, hospitals, and in the street it is the worst... The nation forgets that we are all immigrants."

**10. Civic Engagement in the Immigrant Community.** Immigrant participants were surveyed about how they spend their time in San Francisco. For most immigrants, recreational, religious, and community events from their home culture were prioritized as important activities. From the follow up questions, a significant and surprising finding emerged that 60% of participants wished civic engagement was a bigger part of their lives.

Civic engagement was described as activities such as voter education, voting, attending city hearings, and participating in rallies. This was a positive and hopeful finding for SFILEN organizations who are constantly reaching out to community members not only for critical information, but to engage them in civic participation and leadership development opportunities.

The survey provided important information about the barriers that prevent immigrant communities from participating more in civic engagement. Common barriers include a lack of time (particularly for working families), or a general lack of information about how to engage in these activities. Among Latino immigrants in particular, a fear of being reported to ICE is enough to keep them away from civic engagement opportunities. For Asian immigrants, language barriers often limit their involvement in such activities.

With these new findings about barriers, both the city and SFILEN partners can adapt outreach strategies to remove some of these challenges and build civic engagement opportunities in the immigrant community.

**11. Resiliency and support systems in the immigrant community.** In light of the many service gaps and barriers, immigrant participants in the focus groups shared that they provide mutual support for one another to try and survive, even if they cannot thrive. An existing immigrant community with strong roots has helped many individuals to fill service gaps and needs. Many immigrant participants in the focus group also highlighted the important role that community-based organizations, with linguistic and cultural competency, have played in ensuring immigrants can get the help that they need.

For example, immigrant participants from the Mission and Excelsior mentioned how instrumental PODER has been in their “time bank” program or Mutual Aid Community Cooperative program. Through this member-based community co-op, PODER members offer their skills or receive help from other members through a system of exchange in which value and reciprocity is measured in hours, not money. Other participants mentioned that Dolores Street Community Service’s Day Labor Program has helped provide structure and support as they struggle to find employment.

Other immigrant community members shared that they collaborate with their neighbors and family members to share childcare, translate for one another, assist in applying for public benefits, and provide referrals to community-based services. Their much needed sense of community can even be as simple as providing a meal for one another or planning a social gathering. The organized space is particularly important for smaller, minority communities, such as the Arab, Lao, Thai, and African immigrant communities.



# RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. Redefine Immigrant Integration.** Immigrant integration often focuses on providing welcoming messages to immigrants and embracing diverse cultures. In a statewide study<sup>1</sup> of immigrant integration, San Francisco ranked highest among all California counties in “warmth of welcome” metrics – that is, how open the region is to immigrants. San Francisco’s high ranking was due to media messaging, the wide coverage of immigrant-serving community-based organizations, and the ability of high schools to prepare English learners, among other factors. However, the same study showed that San Francisco ranked the lowest in providing economic mobility for immigrants.

The Integration Project findings mirror this statewide study. While nearly two-thirds of immigrants feel welcome in San Francisco, nearly all immigrants surveyed had unmet, critical needs. The focus group participants and community gatherings confirm that feeling welcome is not as important as having a place to live or a job to support their families.

The emphasis on assimilation and cultural celebration can overshadow the complex experiences, challenges, and needs of diverse immigrant communities. Furthermore, traditional immigrant integration efforts can send contradictory messages to immigrant communities. While some cities promote and build tourism around diverse cultures and ethnic enclaves (such as Chinatown tours and Latino arts and food in the Mission), simultaneously the immigrant communities working, living, and struggling in these ethnic enclaves have critical needs that are ignored.

SFILEN seeks to change this one-dimensional understanding of immigrant integration. SFILEN has redefined immigrant integration to be, “a means to supporting immigrant communities in living dignified lives with access to effective city services without fear or cultural or linguistic barriers.”

Indeed, true immigrant integration must be re-imagined and redefined to think of immigrants not only as needing assimilation or contributing to our economy and public reputation. Rather, immigrant integration must view immigrants as individuals, families, and communities with basic needs to not only survive, but also thrive in American cities like San Francisco. Integration efforts must address the cultural and linguistic barriers that are preventing a genuine integration into our local communities.

- 2. Expand Community Education and Outreach.** The findings from the Integration Project indicate that San Francisco immigrants are having difficulty

1. *The Center for the Study of Immigrant Integration, University of Southern California, California Immigrant Integration Scorecard, September 2012*



accessing services due to a lack of information. Additionally, many immigrant participants had not heard of local pro-immigrant initiatives such as the Sanctuary City Ordinance, the San Francisco City ID card, or the Immigrant Rights Commission. For those who had heard of them, they could not speak specifically to how these policies and programs had helped them. Direct community education and outreach is one of the most effective ways to support underserved and hard-to-reach immigrant communities. Despite this best practice, critical outreach activities are most often underfunded in an outcomes-based funding environment that prioritizes traditional service delivery.

- a. **Outreach to address information gaps and correct misinformation:** The San Francisco Immigrant Integration Project indicates to all stakeholders that San Francisco immigrants not only suffer from a lack of information, but sometimes harmfully inaccurate information. The misinformation is most frustrating if inaccurate information induces further isolation for these communities. Community-based organizations with cultural competency are well established to build bridges between immigrants and city agencies, and to ensure the proper delivery of services and support to those who are eligible. The initial step always begins with community education and outreach.
- b. **Targeted outreach:** Outreach must be targeted to the most vulnerable, hard-to-reach communities. For San Francisco immigrants, this means that community outreach must be culturally competent and in language. To be truly accessible, information must be in a format utilized by ethnic and immigrant communities: ethnic media, translated flyers and pamphlets, distributed at community fairs and workshops in language. Complicated technical information is inaccessible for immigrants with lower literacy or education levels. Online information is also inaccessible for low-income communities without access to a computer or Internet. Finally, information about services must be distributed to geographically isolated communities. Both Census data and survey data confirm the growing concentration of



immigrant communities in the Southeastern neighborhoods of San Francisco (away from City Hall and city-based services). Existing community-based organizations located in these immigrant communities are best situated to do outreach.

- 3. Build Bridges with the Receiving Community.** For decades, immigrant interests and those of existing populations were typically divergent, further fueling anti-immigrant rhetoric, policies, and practices. However, even non-immigrant communities have learned that the immigrant community is growing, present, and will soon be the majority of many states in the US. Furthermore, non-immigrant communities experienced a shocking shift in the 2012 election when naturalized immigrants and the children of immigrants turned out to the polls in historic numbers, and made their voices heard. Particularly for immigrant rights issues, the election's results were startling for communities that had previously ignored the needs of immigrants. The receiving community can no longer ignore the needs and existence of an immigrant community that is growing.

Immigration and immigrant integration impacts all communities in a city or county. The receiving community is often overlooked for immigrant rights or integration efforts. However, new studies<sup>2</sup> show that the convergence of immigrant interests with those of the receiving community is critical to successful immigrant integration. Local elected officials and city agencies should proactively promote opportunities for both newcomer and established communities to interact, build relationships, and collaboratively shape their neighborhoods. Key strategies to engage receiving communities includes: encouraging leadership to address the changing demographics of local communities, fostering contact and relationships with new residents, building integration partnerships within local government, and reframing issues to counter negative stereotypes and misconceptions about immigrants.

- 4. Support Continued Community-Based Research.** The Integration Project highlighted the powerful relationships and trust between SFILEN organizations and underserved immigrant communities in San Francisco. Immigrants across racial, linguistic, and status lines came forward to share their experiences because they trusted SFILEN staff as they facilitated the survey and focus groups. The results of this research opened many new research inquiries and issues faced by the immigrant community. Additional research is very much needed to identify the nuanced needs and challenges within certain issue areas, such as health access, employment and job training, worker rights, housing, education, and immigration enforcement. Furthermore, the Integration Project was entirely dependent on the outreach capacity of SFILEN staff for a very limited time.

2. *Michael Jones-Correa, Center for American Progress, All Immigration is Local: Receiving Communities and Their Role in Successful Immigrant Integration, September 2011.*

With additional funding to hire or train canvassers and volunteers, the projects reach could have easily increased to have proper representation of all immigrant communities. In particular, the Filipino, Arab, African immigrant, and Southeast Asian communities need to be further engaged to document their needs.

5. **Promote Best Practices & Innovative Strategies to Increase Access to Services.** There are a number of best practices and innovative strategies (both big and small) that can be implemented to create meaningful progress in immigrant integration. Below are some examples of programs and initiatives for San Francisco to consider, with particular emphasis on housing and employment issues as those were key priorities identified in the project.
  - a. **Identify workforce pipelines for low-skilled immigrant workers** within the growing industries of technology and health care. Ensure that high-skilled businesses opening in San Francisco include workforce opportunities for low-skilled workers in need (e.g. hiring local workers for hospitality positions such as food and janitorial services).
  - b. **Expand and enforce worker protection laws**, such as San Francisco's Wage Theft Prevention Ordinance. Enforcement of worker protection laws also requires expansion of community education and outreach on worker rights.
  - c. **Increase access to employment support services** within underserved communities. Referral services, application assistance, and skills development should take place with linguistically and culturally competent staff and organizations to address language barriers.
  - d. **A centralized housing database** would alleviate the information gap for affordable housing in San Francisco. A central database could be accessed by community-based organizations or individual and all public and non-profit housing providers would be required to list available units so this information



would be accessible at all times from multiple locations around the City. This would greatly improve access to information, not only for immigrants, but for anyone seeking affordable housing in San Francisco.

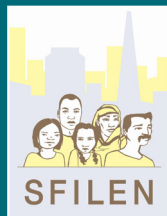
- e. **Utilize unrestricted, local funds** to create housing options that are accessible to all immigrant communities. Due to restrictions from some federally-funded housing programs, many immigrants do not qualify for the limited affordable housing units that are created each year. However, with the recent passage of the Housing Trust Fund, San Francisco, working with non-profit housing developers, has an opportunity to create innovative housing models that would also allow access to immigrant communities.
- f. **Support tenant rights in the private market** as many immigrants have no other options but to rent privately. Unscrupulous landlords view immigrant renters with language and cultural barriers as easy targets. Community-based organizations that provide code enforcement monitoring, eviction prevention services, and tenant rights education to immigrant communities need greater support from city agencies.
- g. **A Multi-language information line** could reach low-income immigrants lacking internet access and computers. Online information about city agencies is not accessible to underserved communities and many times the information online is not in language. A multilingual telephone hotline with information would be a more effective way to reach immigrant communities. Even in cities and counties with limited resources and who cannot afford multilingual dispatchers, a simple answering machine with multilingual messages is better than no information at all.
- h. **Utilize public broadcasting programming and ethnic media** as a community outreach strategy. In Indianapolis, the local public broadcasting station has multiple resources for immigrants and non-English speakers. Their television and radio programming includes resources for civic education, adult education, ESL, and developing workplace skills. They also have literacy programming and learning programs for pre-K, K-12, and parents to address the immigrant and Spanish-speaking community in central Indiana. They even developed a TV series called, “Crossroads Café Indianapolis” with basic ESL lessons and information about how to access more in-depth ESL resources.
- g. **Partner with CBO’s for cultural competency trainings.** Particularly for city agencies with high public contact or in high demand for the immigrant community, meaningful partnerships could be formed with CBO’s to collaborate on increasing access to service. CBO’s can share information about how best to access resources, eligibility, geographic location, and language capability.

## CONCLUSION

The Integration Project was a new type of work for SFILEN, as it strayed from typical legal services and community education. However, the hard work that went into the planning, design, and implementation of the research resulted in a robust account of San Francisco immigrant lives. It is also one of the most significant documentations of San Francisco's undocumented immigrant population, which was directly because of the trust and relationships SFILEN has in the community.

The findings of the Integration Project were not surprising. The project confirmed what SFILEN staff see anecdotally each day through their clients: immigrants struggle to access comprehensive services due to a lack of information, misinformation, language barriers, and a lack in cultural competency. SFILEN understands that these barriers that immigrants face are systemic problems that will require a lot of resources. However, with leadership from San Francisco city agencies and elected officials, SFILEN is confident that meaningful changes can improve immigrant integration and San Francisco can become a truly immigrant-friendly city.





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