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Immigrant Employment Gains in New York

By Joseph De Avila

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Immigrant workers in New York City are more likely to have a job than their U.S.-born counterparts, according to a new analysis by an economic policy group.

Some 8.8% of New York immigrants were unemployed in the first five months of this year, compared with 10.9% of U.S.-born workers in the city, according the Fiscal Policy Institute, a left-leaning economic policy group.

Both groups saw their unemployment rate surge in the recession, but labor experts say that some low-wage service jobs have returned to provide some relief to foreign-born workers in the city.

"In tough economic times, immigrants are more likely to send people into the labor force," said James Parrott, deputy director of the Fiscal Policy Institute. "They are likely to take the first job that comes along," he said. Participation in the labor force—the proportion of working-age people who have jobs or are actively looking for one—also favored immigrants. The labor-force participation rate for immigrants in the city was 64.1%, compared with 57.1% for natives.

While industries such as construction and manufacturing still haven't recovered, immigrants might be finding more opportunity doing odd jobs and in part-time work, said Rakesh Kochhar, associate director for research at the nonpartisan Pew Hispanic Center.

Cecila Negra, 35 years old, is one such immigrant who is working part-time. During the weekend, Ms. Negra, an immigrant from Ecuador, sells ceviche from a cart in her neighborhood of Ozone Park, Queens. She used to work as a taxi driver, but had to give up her job after she had a baby.

Now Ms. Negra sells the Latin-American seafood dish for a living. "I wanted to try it, to see how it was and if I could make money," Ms. Negra said.

In its analysis, the Fiscal Policy Institute examined New York City data from the Current Population Survey, a monthly poll conducted by the Bureau of Labor Statistics. The institute analyzed data from about 13,000 respondents from New York City for the first five months of

2008 and 2010. Economists caution that the data can be skewed due to its sample size, which includes a mix of legal and undocumented immigrants.

New York's jobless figures mirrored recent national trends. The Labor Department reported earlier this month that the national unemployment rate for June was 8.7% for immigrants and 9.8% for native-born workers.

The national jobless data, however, indicate a demographic shift. From 2004 to 2008, the national jobless rate for immigrant workers matched or was lower than that of U.S.-born workers. In 2009 and for the first three months of this year, it was higher than that of natives.

"Immigrants got displaced early on from construction and some of them have found other jobs in other sectors, or have left the country, or more likely, new immigrants that would have come for those jobs didn't come," Mr. Parrott said.

Low-wage service jobs in sectors reliant on immigrants, such as the restaurant and retail industries, have seen growth in the city. Several thousand restaurant and retail jobs have been added in the city this year.

While immigrants appear to be finding more work more easily than native-born workers in New York, their jobless rate remains high. During the first five months of 2008, the unemployment rate for immigrants in the city was 4%, according to the Fiscal Policy Institute's analysis.

Jobs for domestic workers, another industry reliant on immigrant labor, remain scarce in 2010, said Priscilla Gonzalez, director of Domestic Workers United, a coalition of housekeepers and caregivers. Many immigrants who were working as domestic workers are taking odd jobs to make ends meet, she said.

"In the wake of the economic crisis, they have really borne the brunt of the financial meltdown," Ms. Gonzalez said.