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Study Belies Image of Immigrants in the Work Force

By **JULIA PRESTON**

ST. LOUIS — After a career as a corporate executive with her name in brass on the office door, Amparo Kollman-Moore, an immigrant from Colombia, likes to drive a Jaguar and shop at Saks. “It was a good life,” she said, “a really good ride.”

As a member of this city’s economic elite, Ms. Kollman-Moore is not unusual among immigrants who live in St. Louis. According to a [new analysis of census data](#), more than half of the working immigrants in this metropolitan area hold higher-paying white-collar jobs — as professionals, technicians or administrators — rather than lower-paying blue-collar and service jobs.

Among American cities, St. Louis is not an exception, the data show. In 14 of the 25 largest metropolitan areas, including Boston, New York and San Francisco, more immigrants are employed in white-collar occupations than in lower-wage work like construction, manufacturing or cleaning.

The data belie a common perception in the nation’s hard-fought debate over [immigration](#) — articulated by lawmakers, pundits and advocates on all sides of the issue — that the surge in immigration in the last two decades has overwhelmed the United States with low-wage foreign laborers.

Over all, the analysis showed, the 25 million immigrants who live in the country’s largest metropolitan areas (about two-thirds of all immigrants in the country) are nearly evenly distributed across the job and income spectrum.

“The United States is getting a more varied and economically important flow of immigrants than the public seems to realize,” said David Dyssegaard Kallick, director for immigration research at the [Fiscal Policy Institute](#), a nonpartisan group in New York that conducted the data analysis for The New York Times.

The findings are significant because Americans’ views of immigration are based largely on the work immigrants do, new research shows.

“Americans, whether they are rich or poor, are much more in favor of high-skilled immigrants,” said [Jens Hainmueller](#), a political scientist at [M.I.T.](#) and co-author of [a survey of attitudes toward immigration](#) with [Michael J. Hiscox](#), professor of government at [Harvard](#). The survey of 1,600 adults, which examined the reasons for anti-immigration sentiment in the

United States, was published in February in *American Political Science Review*, a peer-reviewed journal.

Americans are inclined to welcome upper-tier immigrants — like Ms. Kollman-Moore — believing they contribute to economic growth without burdening public services, the study found. More than 60 percent of Americans are opposed to allowing more low-skilled foreign laborers, regarding them as more likely to be a drag on the economy.

Those kinds of views, in turn, have informed recent efforts by Congress to remake the immigration system. A measure unveiled last month by [Senator Lindsey Graham](#), Republican of South Carolina, and [Senator Charles E. Schumer](#), Democrat of New York, aims to reshape the legal system to give priority to high-skilled, high-earning immigrants, offering narrower channels for low-wage workers. (A bill in 2007 by the Bush administration tilted even more sharply toward upper-tier immigrants; it failed in Congress.)

Yet while visa bottlenecks persist for high-skilled immigrants, on the whole, the census data show, the current system has brought a range of foreign workers across skill and income levels. The analysis suggests, moreover, that the immigrants played a central role in the cycle of the economic growth of cities over the last two decades.

Cities with thriving immigrant populations — with high-earning and lower-wage workers — tended to be those that prospered the most.

“Economic growth in urban areas has been clearly connected with an increase in immigrants’ share of the local labor force,” Mr. Kallick said.

Surprisingly, the analysis showed, the growing cities were not the ones, like St. Louis, that drew primarily high-earning foreigners. In fact, the St. Louis area had one of the slowest growing economies.

Rather, the fastest economic growth between 1990 and 2008 was in cities like Atlanta, Denver and Phoenix that received large influxes of immigrants with a mix of occupations — including many in lower-paid service and blue-collar jobs.

In metropolitan Denver, where the economy doubled between 1990 and 2008, 63 percent of immigrants worked in jobs on the lower end of the pay scale.

Denver “did a great job of attracting people from other places in the world,” said Rich Jones, director of policy and research at the [Bell Policy Center](#), a nonpartisan group in that city that focuses on the impact of economic and fiscal policies in Colorado. “They are coming with a variety of skills,” Mr. Jones said. “They created demand for goods, services and housing that began a dynamic.”

The figures on jobs and earnings of immigrants in American cities are based on an analysis by the Fiscal Policy Institute of census data for the 25 largest metropolitan areas from 1990 to 2008. The data from 2008 are the most current in-depth census statistics on immigrants' places of residence and earnings; they also include the first year of the severe [recession](#). The analysis includes legal and illegal immigrants and naturalized citizens.

St. Louis is a good vantage point to observe the census analysis play out on the ground — both in the past and, possibly, the future.

Here, a pattern of stalled growth and low immigration prevailed for decades. But more recently a new pattern is emerging: even in the recession, some corners of the metropolitan area are sputtering to life, and new immigrants with a mix of skills are playing a conspicuous part.

“If you look at what feeds the core of many American cities, it’s the arrival of the immigrant groups,” said Anna Crosslin, president of the International [Institute of St. Louis](#), a refugee resettlement and immigrant aid agency here. “Then one generation moves out, and they’re replaced by another generation. We didn’t have that here in St. Louis.”

In its heyday as a commerce hub in the 1950s, St. Louis was one of the nation’s premier cities. Since then, business has stagnated, the population of the city proper declined by more than half, and immigration to the area has been slow. Today, in the St. Louis metropolitan area, only 111,000 residents are foreign-born, out of 2.3 million total, according to the census data.

Many immigrants who were drawn here were doctors, researchers and business executives, attracted by the city’s corporate headquarters, universities and medical centers.

Ms. Kollman-Moore, 60, came to St. Louis in the 1970s and rose through the ranks at Mallinckrodt, a medical supply company, to become president of the Latin American division, a \$100 million business. She retired when the company was sold in 2000 and is now a consultant and business school professor. She planted a grove of tropical shade trees in the center of the living room in her home on a posh suburban cul-de-sac, a literal reminder of her roots.

“I made a wonderful career out of understanding the cultures of Latin America and the culture of the United States and how to do business in both,” said Ms. Kollman-Moore, a naturalized American.

During the 1990s, a wider variety of foreigners began to settle in the metropolitan area. Bosnians fleeing the Balkan wars have now made this city their largest community in the United States. Sukrija Dzidzovic, 52, publisher of the Bosnian weekly newspaper [SabaH](#), moved the paper here from New York in 2006 to be closer to the core of his readers.

Bosnians run the gamut, from truckers and bakery workers to lawyers and engineers. Many Bosnians hit the ground running here because they came from Europe with savings they had stashed away, Mr. Dzidzovic said. At one time, Bosnians opened so many businesses on blighted streets that hostile rumors spread that they were receiving secret subsidies from the federal government.

Now, appreciative city officials make a point of attending Bosnian celebrations, Mr. Dzidzovic said.

Immigrants from China have also prospered here as entrepreneurs, creating jobs for other immigrants. Sandy Tsai, 59, said she and her husband chose St. Louis to start a business because they noticed it was in the middle of the country. Now their company, Baily, makes egg rolls, noodles and fortune cookies in three local factories that distribute to thousands of Chinese restaurants nationwide. Ms. Tsai said her employees ranged from egg-roll makers earning \$8 an hour to laboratory researchers with advanced degrees in food science.

"It's a good group, a good combination," Ms. Tsai said. But despite the long hard times in St. Louis, low-wage workers have not always been easy to find, she said, and her business expansion was slowed because of it.

Now, those workers have started to arrive in larger numbers. Raúl Rico, 31, said he came here 14 years ago from the Mexican state of Querétaro, the first in his family to settle in St. Louis. Today, between parents, siblings, cousins and their offspring, his local clan numbers 56.

"Every year our community is growing with all kinds of people, more workers are coming, more people are coming to invest in businesses and open stores," said Mr. Rico, a carpenter.

Ms. Crosslin, of the International Institute of St. Louis, said the emerging pattern was changing the face, and possibly the fortunes, of the city.

"We have turned the corner slightly," she said. "And one of the factors is the newcomers who are starting to arrive again."