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## IMMIGRATION: Immigration study dispels myths

A Florida International University study painted a promising picture of the state's immigrant population.

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Immigrants living in Florida are as likely to hold an advanced college degree and more likely to be entrepreneurs than their native-born counterparts, according to a new study by Florida International University.

Foreign-born Floridians, who make up nearly a quarter of the state's workforce, also receive less public assistance and government healthcare benefits than their native-born neighbors, according to the study.

The study's release comes days after the U.S. Senate and the White House produced a bipartisan measure to overhaul the country's immigration policies, which have drawn heated criticism from Democrats and Republicans not satisfied with the compromise proposal.

"For us it combats some of the myths of immigration," Maria Rodriguez, director of the Florida Immigrant Coalition, said of the study. "Immigrants don't pay taxes, immigrants are a burden on the system: We know that's not true."

The study is the work of FIU's Research Institute on Social and Economic Policy, which picked the topic for its spring project after a year of increasingly heated debate over immigration policy, said Emily Eisenhauer, a research associate and one of the report's authors.

Researchers used figures compiled by the U.S. Census, from 2000 to 2005, that included legal immigrants and those who are undocumented. Nationally, there are an estimated 12 million illegal immigrants -- about 850,000 to a million in Florida.

The FIU study did not distinguish between undocumented immigrants and those legally living in the United States.

### \$1.8 BILLION COST

The Washington-based Federation for American Immigration Reform, which wants to increase border security and end illegal immigration, estimates illegal immigrants cost Florida at least \$1.8 billion a year in emergency medical care,

education and incarceration. The FIU study did not specifically mention some of those categories.

Miami-Dade and Broward counties continue to lead the state in total immigrants, the FIU study found. Miami-Dade had the highest percentage statewide, with almost 51 percent. About 30 percent of Broward residents were born in another country.

Other findings:

\*\* While the U.S.-born population in Florida grew 8.7 percent from 2000 to 2005, the foreign-born population grew by more than 20 percent -- and makes up nearly a quarter of the workforce.

\*\* Immigrants have higher rates of self-employment and entrepreneurship than do the total labor force. In 2005, immigrants represented 26 percent of all self-employed workers, compared to 23 percent of the labor force overall.

\*\* Immigrants contribute significantly to state and federal coffers but receive fewer government benefits than native-born individuals. Immigrants, legal and illegal, receive on average \$1,619 per capita in public assistance like Social Security, food stamps and welfare, while nonimmigrants average \$2,217 annually.

The imbalance goes up when Medicare and Medicaid are factored in: Immigrants get \$3,256 in health benefits on average, compared to nonimmigrants, who average \$3,873.42. Some reasons for the gap, said Eisenhower: Undocumented immigrants are ineligible for some programs, and others may have difficulty obtaining social services.

\*\* While immigrants are more likely to lack a high school diploma than native-born individuals, that gap decreased over the five-year period of the study.

\*\* Immigrants are just as likely to hold a master's degree or higher than U.S.

born: About 8.5 percent of both groups held advanced degrees in 2005.

In 2005, the median income for a Florida immigrant was \$20,000, compared to \$23,400 for nonimmigrants.

The study also examined immigration patterns as immigrant populations take root.

Cuban-born immigrants represent over 680,000 people, or 21.1 percent of Florida's immigrants, and continue to make up the largest chunk of the foreign-born population in Miami-Dade. Broward, Palm Beach and Hillsborough counties are growth areas for Cuban-born residents.

**HAITIAN SHIFT**

Haitian populations are likewise mostly concentrated in Miami-Dade -- as well as Broward -- but are moving to Pinellas and Orange counties.

Mexicans had the largest percentage increase -- nearly 50 percent between 2000 and 2005. Mexicans remain scattered through non-urban counties like Collier and Polk but are increasingly finding homes in metro areas such as Orange and Broward counties.

