

Immigrant population gaining: Most newcomers Asian or Hispanic

By Randolph E. Schmid

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WASHINGTON - In some ways, the American population of today is beginning to resemble that of 1850, with nearly one resident in 10 born in another country. But the resemblance is largely statistical, with the 19th-century influx coming largely from Eastern Europe, while today's new arrival is more likely to be Asian or Latin American.

During the 1990s, the nation's foreign-born population increased nearly four times faster than that of the native-born population, the Census Bureau says in a report released Friday.

As of July 1, 1998, there were 25.2 million foreign born U.S. residents-- 9.3 percent of the population. That was up from 19.7 million in the 1990 census, when they were 7.9 percent of the population.

The current share is close to the 9.7 percent recorded in 1850, the first year the Census Bureau asked people their place of birth.

"Right now the biggest immigration groups are Hispanics and Asian-Pacific Islanders," said census demographer Robert Perkins.

The number of foreign-born Hispanics grew 34 percent from mid-1990 through mid-1998, from 8.0 million to 10.7 million.

And among Asians and Pacific Islanders, the increase was from 4.6 million to 6.4 million in the same period. Foreign-born Asians outnumber native-born Asians, 6.4 million to 4.1 million.

During that time span, the foreign-born population grew by 27.1 percent, nearly four times the 7.1 percent increase in the native population, which increased from 228.9 million to 245.1 million.

The foreign-born share has been steadily increasing since its low point of 4.7 percent of the population in 1970. However, it remains well below the peak of 14.8 percent in 1890.