Analysis Brief
Travel Characteristics of New Immigrants

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Immigration promises to make the United States a more heterogeneous nation. For the first time since the early 1900's, immigrants comprise more than 10 percent of the U.S. population, a total of 32 million people (U.S. Census, February 2003). The nations of origin have changed over the last decades—and the increase in Hispanic immigrants is marked. According to the 2000 Census, nearly half (49.8%) of recent immigrants, those who have been in the U.S. for 3 years or less, are Hispanic.

Predicting future growth in travel has traditionally depended on key characteristics: household income, family size, autos owned, driving ability, and employment. With the aging population (baby boomers) and a sizeable influx of new immigrants in the U.S., the normal distribution of key population characteristics used to forecast travel demand is changing.

Although the data shown in this brief are for the nation, immigration is concentrated both regionally and in major metropolitan areas. The foreign-born tend to be most heavily concentrated in the West and Northeast, and least heavily in the Midwest (U.S. Census, December 2003). For example, 26 percent of the residents of the state of California are foreign-born as compared to only 3 percent in Ohio.

Along with the rich cultures, foreign languages, and exotic cuisines immigrants bring different habits, constraints, and desires when it comes to travel. In 2001, the NHTS collected information on place of birth and year of entry to the U.S. This data allows for the analysis of travel behavior trends among the immigrant population so transportation agencies can incorporate this into planning and policy activities.

Exhibit 1 – Key Travel Characteristics of New Immigrants

	New Immigrants (3 years or less)	National Average
Average HH Size	3.6	2.6
Avg. Workers pr Household	2.0	1.4
Avg. Vehicles per Household	1.3	1.7
Percent of 16+ who Drive	60.6	91.5
`Percent of 16+ in Labor Force	65.2	69.8
Percent Part-time Workers	22.7	18.7
Usual Distance to Work	9.5	13.2
Usual Time to Work	24.6	25.5
Percent Home Owned	16.1	72.3
Percent Rent	82.8	27.2
Average Daily Trips per Household	10.2	9.6

Source: NHTS 2001

In the analysis of immigrant travel data, several important differences in key travel indicators emerge. One example is household size. While the national average is 2.6, immigrant households have an average size of 3.6. In areas with high concentrations of immigrant households, this difference could have a significant impact on travel demand forecasts. As shown in Exhibit 1, this is true for several other key travel demand indictors.

The slow acquisition of vehicles and the larger household sizes may reflect the socio economic status of new immigrants in the U.S. According to the 2000 Census, a higher proportion of immigrants live in poverty as compared to U.S. born residents. Fifteen percent of immigrants (non-citizens) live below the poverty level compared to 12.5 percent of the nation as a whole.

Daily Travel Differences

New immigrants make fewer trips—about 5 trips a week less than U.S. born – and a higher proportion of their travel is to work and work-related (Exhibit 2). While immigrants who have been in the U.S. more than ten years show similar trip distributions to native born, new immigrants take about 50 percent fewer trips for social and recreational purposes.

New immigrants are also more dependent than native-born on transit and walking for all their daily travel and much less likely to drive alone. The average auto occupancy of new Hispanic immigrants is 2.4, compared to 1.8 for native born.

This difference in travel mode may be related to the acquisition of vehicles and driving skills. Non-Hispanic immigrants acquire vehicles faster than Hispanic immigrants, as shown in Exhibit 3. Even U.S. born Hispanics are more likely to live in zero-vehicle households than other native-born residents.

One important reason for the slow acquisition of vehicles is that only about half of new immigrants are drivers, compared to 92 percent of adults in the U.S.

Exhibit 4 shows how varied driving is between Hispanic and non-Hispanic immigrants.
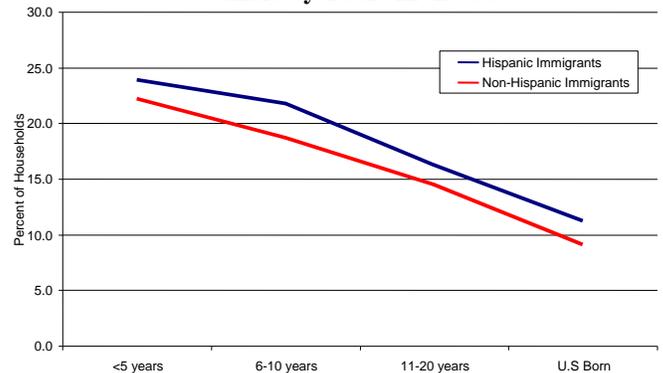
While non-Hispanic immigrant men reach U.S. driving rates after 3 years, Hispanic women are less likely to drive than other immigrants, even after 10 years in the U.S.

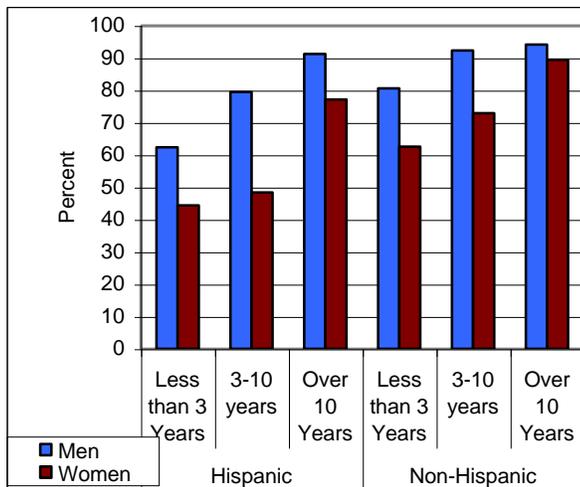**Exhibit 2 –Number of Trips by Purpose by Years in the US**
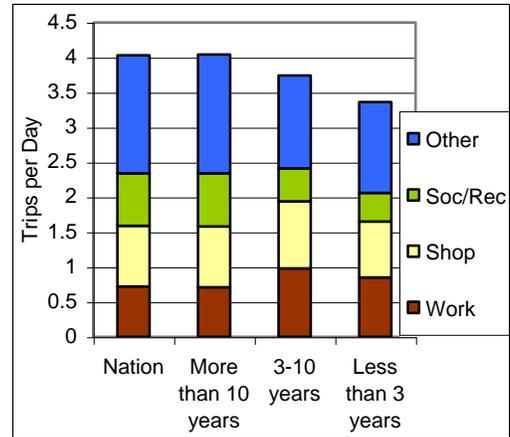
Exhibit 3 –Percent of Immigrant Households with No Vehicle by Years in the US

Source: U.S. Census

Exhibit 4 – Percent of Immigrants Who Drive by Years in the U.S.

Source: 2001 NHTS

Commuting

Work trips are the central focus of modeling and planning activities. In addition, congestion has become an important policy initiative at the national level. For these reasons, understanding commute patterns across population groups is important. Of great significance is the transit dependency of new immigrants. Immigrants are five times more likely to take transit to work than native born. In some local areas, recent immigrants are a critical market for transit service.

Another important insight about differences in commute patterns is the high use of carpools by Hispanic commuters, especially men.

In many places there are 'formal' carpools, such as rideshares arranged through local programs and consisting of workers from different households traveling together to a central location. Other arrangements include family carpools (fam-pools) that consist of people from the same household or family sharing a ride to work. Because the NHTS questionnaire specifically asks WHO was in the vehicle, fam-pools can be distinguished from other carpools. This differentiation is not possible with Census data.

These data shed light on the dynamics of vehicle sharing within a household. The NHTS shows that of all multi-occupant trips to and from work, 68 percent are made up of two or more members of the same family or household. Women are more likely to be in fam-pools than men, often as part of couples traveling together.

However, as shown in Exhibit 5, there are marked differences between Hispanic and non-Hispanic commuters. Hispanic men are much more likely than non-Hispanic men or all women to share a ride to work.

Policy Implications

America has always been a melting pot, and if current trends continue immigrants will be a large portion of travelers on the nation's roads and highways. The ethnicity of new immigrants has changed, adding a strong cultural influence to the traditional assimilation process. In addition, the location of first entry has shifted from center cities to the suburbs, changing the nature of America's suburbs.

The strong economy continues to create both high-paid and low-paid jobs, and immigrants from Latin America and Asia are drawn to fill the demand for highly qualified technicians as well as low-skilled service workers. Based on recent trends, some economists project that both highly skilled and unskilled immigrants will be providing a larger share of the labor force in the future.

Importantly for travel demand forecasting, growing immigration has both policy and planning implications as states and local areas develop travel forecasts and plan new transportation programs.

Exhibit 5 – Percent of Commutes that are Car-Pools or Fam-Pool
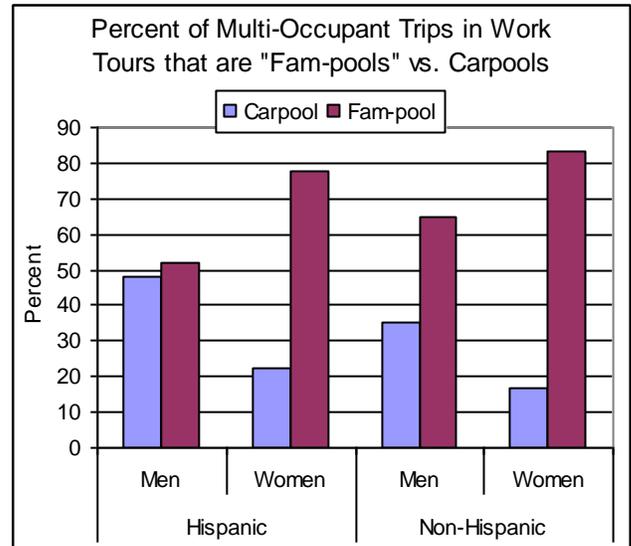
Source: NHTS 2001

For example, the increase in immigration has created diverging trends in some key indicators of travel behavior. Forecasting based on mean indicators can mask these very different patterns. For instance, overall household size is declining, but new immigrants have significantly larger household sizes than the aging, white population.

Since immigrants are more transit dependant and have higher auto occupancies, transportation initiatives focused on HOV lanes and transit development can also benefit from understanding the travel differences of this growing portion of the U.S. population.

As the U.S. society becomes more diverse, growth in travel demand will undoubtedly come from new immigrants. Therefore, the differences in travel behavior by immigrants, such as those outlined in this brief, have wide-reaching consequences for short-term policy development, planning, and travel demand forecasting.

To track the changing travel of immigrants, minority populations, and other groups, and to understand their travel in the context of current price, policy, and planning initiatives, it is vital to have trend data like the NHTS.