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Report: Immigrant entrepreneurs bolster local economy

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When Krishna Kuikel lived in Nepal, he slept with six other family members in a bathroom-sized bamboo hut.

Now, the 33-year-old refugee and his wife, Bindu, own a corner building on Scranton's South Side where they live and run a thriving business — and plan to expand.

After a stop in Burlington, Vermont, in 2008, he and his wife noted the growing Bhutanese population in Scranton, where his sister had settled, and recognized a business opportunity. They opened a market in 2013 to cater to the needs of his countrymen and -women.

“We are the people of the different taste,” he said Monday behind the counter of the Namaste Grocery Store, 730 Prospect Ave.

The current political climate has been a tense one for many immigrants, with some reading President Donald Trump's slogan of “America First” as an attempt to blame them for some of the country's economic problems.

But the economic contributions of immigrants often strengthen local communities, according to a new report from the New American Economy, a bipartisan think tank of mayors and business leaders, including Rupert Murdoch, which argues for immigration reform.

The report is based on analysis of data from the 2014 U.S. Census and the Institute of Taxation and Economic Policy, said Annie Schlossman, a New American Economy spokeswoman. It does not distinguish between those who are here legally and undocumented immigrants.

Of the nearly 700,000 residents of the 17th U.S. Congressional District, which includes Scranton and stretches from Pottsville up past Wilkes-Barre and down into Easton,

1,162 are immigrant entrepreneurs like the Kuikels, according to the report. The nearly 40,000 total immigrants in the district made up about 6 percent of the population and paid \$321.8 million in taxes in 2014.

With his market and import business, Kuikel estimated he paid about \$22,000 in federal, state and import taxes last year. Jonathan Christiansen

, a sociology instructor at Marywood University who studies social movements and labor, said he could think of three businesses in his Hill Section neighborhood run by people not born in the U.S. It's an example, he said, of economic green shoots in an area that has generally suffered from decline.

"Immigration might be the thing that saves Northeast Pennsylvania and Scranton," he said.

And maybe the state, too. More than 800,000 immigrants live in Pennsylvania, and without the influx of foreign-born residents, the state's population would have declined by almost 78,000 people between 2010 and 2014, according to the report.

Immigrants are more likely than the native population, in both the country and the state, to be between 25 and 64, the prime age of workers who pay into programs like Social Security.

And in the state, foreign-born workers currently make up more than 10 percent of all entrepreneurs, despite accounting for 6.4 percent of Pennsylvania's population, according to the report.

Immigration could have a negative effect on a community if waves of poor people entered without prospects for jobs, Christiansen said.

"But this data points out that doesn't tend to be the case," he noted.

Specifically regarding undocumented immigrants, an estimated 11 million live in the U.S. And while at least one study has suggested they depress wages for the lowest-skilled workers, virtually all other studies on the subject have found that claim to be false, according to the Cato Institute, a free market think tank.

The Kuikels have come far since working in factories in Vermont. They now have two girls, ages 3 and 1, who keep Bindu Kuikel, 27, busy as she runs the market from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m., seven days a week. Business is good, and the family has plans to open a Nepali restaurant.

"We start from little," she said, "and growing, growing, growing."