

# Newest Oregonians

Foreign-born mothers accounted for 26 percent of Multnomah County births in 2015

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Adjusting to the physical changes and endless demands a baby brings into her life can be a struggle for any new mom.

But for many foreign-born mothers, these challenges are more likely to be compounded by post-traumatic stress, poverty, discrimination, and in some cases, the lack of any family or friends to lean on for support.

Difficulties understanding English can also make being a new parent especially challenging for immigrants and refugees as they try to navigate America's complex health care, social service and education systems.

Last year more than 2,400 babies were born to foreign-born mothers in Multnomah County, accounting for 26 percent of all births, according to the county health department.

This substantial share of new babies can be attributed to an increased immigrant and refugee population alongside a decline in the region's overall birth rate in recent decades. At its most recent count, the U.S. Census Bureau indicated 14 percent of Multnomah County's population was foreign born.

To help alleviate the hardships some of the mothers behind these numbers face, Multnomah County Department of Health is expanding support services for immigrant and refugee families with small children, including its Healthy Families program.

This program currently serves about 340 families. With turnover, it's expected to serve roughly 600 families over the course of 2016. Immigrants and refugees presently make up more than half its caseload.

"Refugee families are living off of very little monetary support, especially in Multnomah County," said the Healthy Families program specialist senior, Lizzie Fussell. "As housing prices are going up, they're having to live farther and farther out — they're disconnected from transportation, community resources and community gathering spaces."

The Healthy Families program's aim is to support vulnerable families and set their children up for success by offering a helping hand to new mothers through the crucial early development of her child.

Since the program's inception in 2001, the county has conducted more than 30,000 screenings of new parents, looking for indicators of parental stress, such as poverty and teen pregnancy.

If a family qualifies and chooses to participate, a family advocate will visit their home several times a month, helping the mother to bond with her child and bringing information on basic child care and development, birth control and nutrition. In many cases, home visitors also help families connect to resources.

According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, there is strong evidence



PHOTO BY EMILY GREEN

Nadiya Zagorodny, a 21-year-old Ukrainian immigrant, has been in the Healthy Families program since late in her pregnancy. Her son, Nathan, is 1½. Branka Krawljaca is her Healthy Families home visitor.

this home-visiting model comes at a cost savings to taxpayers because it promotes healthy childhood development, which in turn sends fewer children into social welfare and mental health programs, and the juvenile justice system.

It's also shown to reduce child abuse and increase school readiness. In 2015, 94 percent of mothers enrolled in the county's program reported reading to their child at least three times per week.

In some cases, Healthy Families home visitors help immigrants and refugees to understand nuances of parenting in the U.S. that may seem obvious to most American-born mothers.

For example, there are villages in Africa where mothers allow their children to run around untethered because they can rely on their neighbors to keep an eye out, said Mae Chao, supervisor of the Healthy Families program at Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization, or IRCO. She said home visitors have to explain to mothers from these parts of the world that in the U.S., that can be very dangerous because no one else is watching their baby for them.

IRCO is one of several culturally specific

## Through the years: Babies born to foreign-born mothers

While it may seem like foreign-born mothers account for a large share of births, it may be less than years leading up to 1900, when 21 percent of the total U.S. population consisted of first-generation Americans. Last year, that figure was 12 percent, although it's been on the rise since 1990.

Between 1870 and 1920, the percentage of the U.S. population that was foreign born reached above what it was in 2015 (about 14 percent) several times, but then declined steadily until 1970 when it was the lowest it's been in more than 160 years at 4.7 percent.

Oregon birth trends in more recent years show the percentage of births attributed to foreign-born mothers has fluctuated between 19 percent and 24 percent since 2000. Multnomah County was only able to provide data going back to 2011, when 28 percent of births in the county were to foreign-born moms.

### U.S. BIRTHRATE FOR FOREIGN-BORN WOMEN

■ 1994 to 2010: Fluctuated between 71 and 93 births for every 1,000 women

### U.S. BIRTHRATE FOR NATIVE-BORN WOMEN

■ 1994 to 2010: Fluctuated between 57 and 62 births for every 1,000 women

### OREGON'S BIRTHRATE HAS NOT KEPT PACE WITH ITS POPULATION GROWTH

■ While Oregon's population has grown from 3.4 million in 2000 to 3.9 million in 2014, the total number of babies born in 2014 (45,557) was slightly less than it was in 2000 (45,786).

Sources: U.S. Census Bureau: Historical Times Series Tables; Oregon Health Authority: Vital Statistics Annual Reports 2000-14; Multnomah County Department of Health; Pew Research Center: Statistical Portrait of the Foreign Born Population in the United States

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