



# Making a Community: Filipinos in Wellington

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## About the Author

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As an American living in New Zealand, I've been observing the debate here on immigration and multiculturalism. I arrived in Wellington last year with my Kiwi husband and three-year old son – and while settling in we've spent a lot of time discovering the delights of the city and its people. The experience also gave me some perspective on being a migrant far from home.

I have a professional interest in South East Asian history, languages and culture - I just completed a PhD on the subject. I speak some Filipino, and am fascinated by the Philippines' complex history. One of the major phenomena in the Philippines since the 1970s has been the growth of the global Filipino diaspora. That story has often been full of sadness. So I was intrigued by anecdotes of positivity and success from Wellington.

Writing about how the migrant Filipino community has settled in New Zealand has been more than just a research project. It has highlighted how migration plays a role in community building. It also has meaning for me and my family's future here. I really wanted to share some of the stories that I think reflect successful outcomes from immigration over the past thirty years.

By Dr Rebecca Townsend



## Key Points

1.

Filipinos comprise 1 percent of New Zealand's population – the third largest Asian ethnic group

2.

Filipinos are a vital part of New Zealand's dairy, healthcare, construction, nursing, aged care, IT and agricultural sectors

3.

Most Filipinos in New Zealand are not Overseas Filipino Workers (OFW). They bring their families and help boost social and community ties

Migrant communities have long contributed to New Zealand's ethnic and cultural diversity. But it remains contentious, particularly in an election year, with immigration linked to national issues such as housing, employment and fiscal sustainability.

One thing that intrigued me about Wellington was how culturally and ethnically diverse it is – and given my interest in South East Asian history, I wanted to learn more about the Filipino community here: how they have adapted and integrated; and what it has meant for building New Zealand's multicultural society.

Listening to the stories of both established and more recent Filipino arrivals here, I soon found their stories flipped the narratives of the overseas Filipino workers (OFWs). While not without challenges, the overall picture is overwhelmingly positive for both Filipino migrants and for New Zealand.

## A different scenario

It is estimated that more than 10 million Filipinos work or live outside of the Philippines, including permanent, temporary and irregular migrants. The common perception of Filipino migrants<sup>1</sup> are Filipinas who leave their families to work as nannies in wealthier countries; others work as domestic helpers or in the agricultural, construction and healthcare sectors around the world. However, money earned from overseas work sometimes comes at a high cost. It is well-established that overseas Filipinos are sometimes abused, and can face appalling work conditions far away from home.

Yet New Zealand appears to present a different scenario. The policy by which Filipinos are allowed to enter and work here means they tend to arrive with specific and high skill sets and often with a job already arranged.<sup>2</sup> They bring their families and raise their children here.<sup>3</sup> Equally, they contribute to relieving significant and critical skill shortages in vital industries—the types of jobs that are foundational and keep the country running. In sum, the system and policies around migration from the Philippines seem to be working well for New Zealand.

<sup>1</sup>Commission on Filipinos Overseas, "Stock Estimate of Filipinos Overseas" (Experts Group Meeting, United Nations Headquarters, New York, October 5, 2015), <http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/events/pdf/expert/23/Presentations/EGM-S4-Tingga%20presentation.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup>Sheila Siar, "Highly Skilled Migrants' Strong Ties with Their Home Country: Evidence from Filipinos in New Zealand and Australia," *Journal of International Migration and Integration* 15, no. 4 (2013): 663.

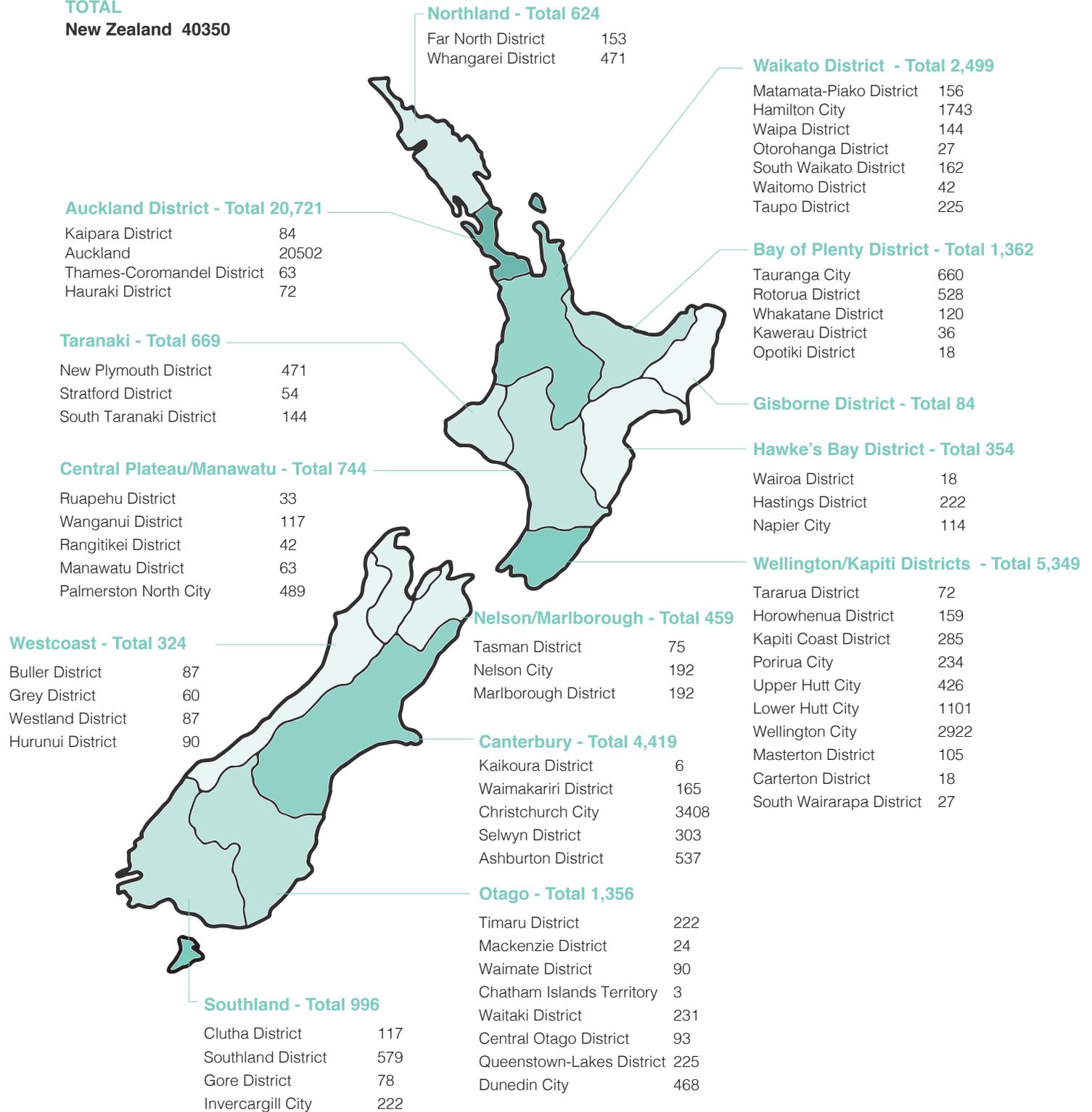
<sup>3</sup>Although the Philippines is well-known for its high birth rate, Filipinos in New Zealand were more likely than New Zealanders generally to have no children (41.6 vs 31.2 percent). The trend is similar to the general Asian population, with 40.4 percent having no children. Filipinos were also more likely than New Zealanders to have one child, but less likely to have more children. Birth rates dropped somewhat in 2013 from 2006 (58.4 vs 62.3 percent), and Filipinos born in New Zealand were less likely to give birth to four or more children.

## Filipino Population by region

Source: Statistics New Zealand

### TOTAL

New Zealand 40350



## Community building

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While Filipinos may have achieved success settling in New Zealand, there seems to be barriers around Filipino community-building – in Wellington at least.

Why might that be? Firstly, it's difficult to pin down a homogenous national culture of the Philippines, an archipelago of 7,641 islands with a total land area of 301,780 square kilometres (compared with New Zealand's 268,021). This geography, not to mention the mountainous terrain, historically made transportation difficult and separated communities. And although Filipino is the national language, people across the islands speak well over 100 languages and dialects. This means Filipinos in New Zealand do not grow up speaking the same language in their homes. They hail from vastly different regions, social backgrounds and cultures. Therefore, coming together as a national community, even as migrants, is a challenge.

It seems to be an ongoing struggle for Filipinos to create the sort of community heritage bonds that other migrant groups have established – those which provide valuable hooks for educating the next generation about the language, culture and society of their parents' country. Instead, Filipinos find comradeship with their fellow New Zealanders. It is possible that these factors have led to Filipinos adopting an outward engagement approach, rather than developing their own internal ties.

In any case, a recent survey found that Filipinos are the happiest migrants in the country.<sup>4</sup> Why is this? I spoke to four prominent leaders of the local Filipino community to provide a qualitative snapshot of the situation in Wellington, the context behind it and its evolution.

Flora Muriel-Nogoy and Anita Mansell arrived here in the 1980s, and both highlighted how their own stories inspired their careers, and what a strong Filipino community meant to them. I also spoke with the



Ambassador of the Philippines to New Zealand, Jesus (Gary) Domingo, who spoke about his efforts to engage with his constituency here. And finally, Bernadette Murfitt, the principal of Sacred Heart Cathedral School, who told me about her work with Filipino students enrolled in her school.

Our conversations highlighted the successes achieved and the challenges that lay ahead. It was clear through my conversations that there was a strong desire to maintain cultural and social connections to the Philippines; and at the same time, they felt they had something new to contribute to their adopted homeland.

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<sup>4</sup>Lincoln Tan, "Survey: Filipino Migrants Happiest in NZ, Manurewa Auckland's Happiest Electorate," *New Zealand Herald*, May 8, 2017.

## Quite Cold: The Early Years of Filipino Migration

In part, the growth in Filipino migration is a result of strengthening ties between New Zealand and the Philippines. Formal relations began in 1966 – a bit later in comparison to other Southeast Asian states. Engagement grew with the rise of regional organisations and development schemes, such as the Colombo Plan – which facilitated academic exchange and gave the opportunity for students to study in New Zealand. Likewise, the establishment of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1967 provided a framework for New Zealand-Philippines relations that endures to the present.<sup>5</sup> But numbers were small – the 1976 census recorded just 234 Filipinos in New Zealand.<sup>6</sup>

Outward migration from the Philippines is driven by limited employment opportunities in the developing country. This outward migration of labour grew dramatically when government began to systematically deploy Filipino workers overseas when new policies were put in place. The 1974 Labor Code of the Philippines created a programme for Filipinos working abroad, and is viewed as a key part of the birth of the Overseas Filipino Worker (OFW). The numbers multiplied from 36,029 in 1975 to 372,784 in 1985.

“Wellington was still very behind in many ways . . . It was a very different economy then – enclosed and insular with everything made and manufactured locally. It was very much behind Asia.”

It was during this period that Anita Mansell came to Wellington – she arrived here in 1983 with her Kiwi husband. Until then, Mansell was relatively happy living in the Philippines under the Marcos regime – she had a job and a self-sustaining lifestyle. There may have been political and employment problems in other parts of the Philippines – but in her town, she was feeling quite safe.

In New Zealand, however, she found people had different expectations of what life in the Philippines was like. “When I first came here, people would say ‘Oh, the

Philippines is a very poor country’. I didn’t realise that. When you’re in your country, you don’t ask that of your neighbours. We weren’t materialistic, we just got what we had.”

At the time, there were very few Filipinos in the capital. “It’s a change when you come to a new country. I had already made friends with my husband’s family before I came here. My mother-in-law was friendly with other Filipinos in Wellington. She introduced me to the ladies working in the supermarket and all that.”

But Mansell also remembers some isolation. “When I arrived here, people were quite cold. Where I lived, my neighbours tended to be older and European. They didn’t know how to deal with new people around.”

Like Mansell, Flora Muriel-Nogoy arrived in Wellington in the 1980s, when there were only a ‘handful’ of Filipinos. She also found that New Zealand was still very isolated, but on the cusp of change. “They were just beginning to open doors to people outside.”

Muriel-Nogoy moved from Hong Kong in 1984 after being offered a job in the design industry. She found some unexpected challenges: “Wellington was still very behind in many ways . . . It was a very different economy then – enclosed and insular with everything made and manufactured locally. It was very much behind Asia. In Hong Kong and in the Philippines, materials were much more readily available because exchange and trade was so open. New Zealand was just beginning. For example, when we were looking for tap fittings for our new house, there were only plastic tulips. And we asked, are you sure this is all that’s available?”

The differences were also evident on the dinner table. “Imagine that even Asian food was not available. At the supermarkets, it was just your basic groceries. There was no coffee – just instant coffee. There wasn’t much of a selection.”

However, this was all about to change . . .

<sup>5</sup>Rhys Richards, “Warmth without Depth: New Zealand and the Philippines,” in *Southeast Asia and New Zealand: A History of Regional and Bilateral Relations*, ed. Anthony Smith (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2005), 289.

<sup>6</sup>Carl Walrond, ‘Filipinos’, Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand, <http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/filipinos> (accessed 15 April 2017)

## From isolation to 1 percent

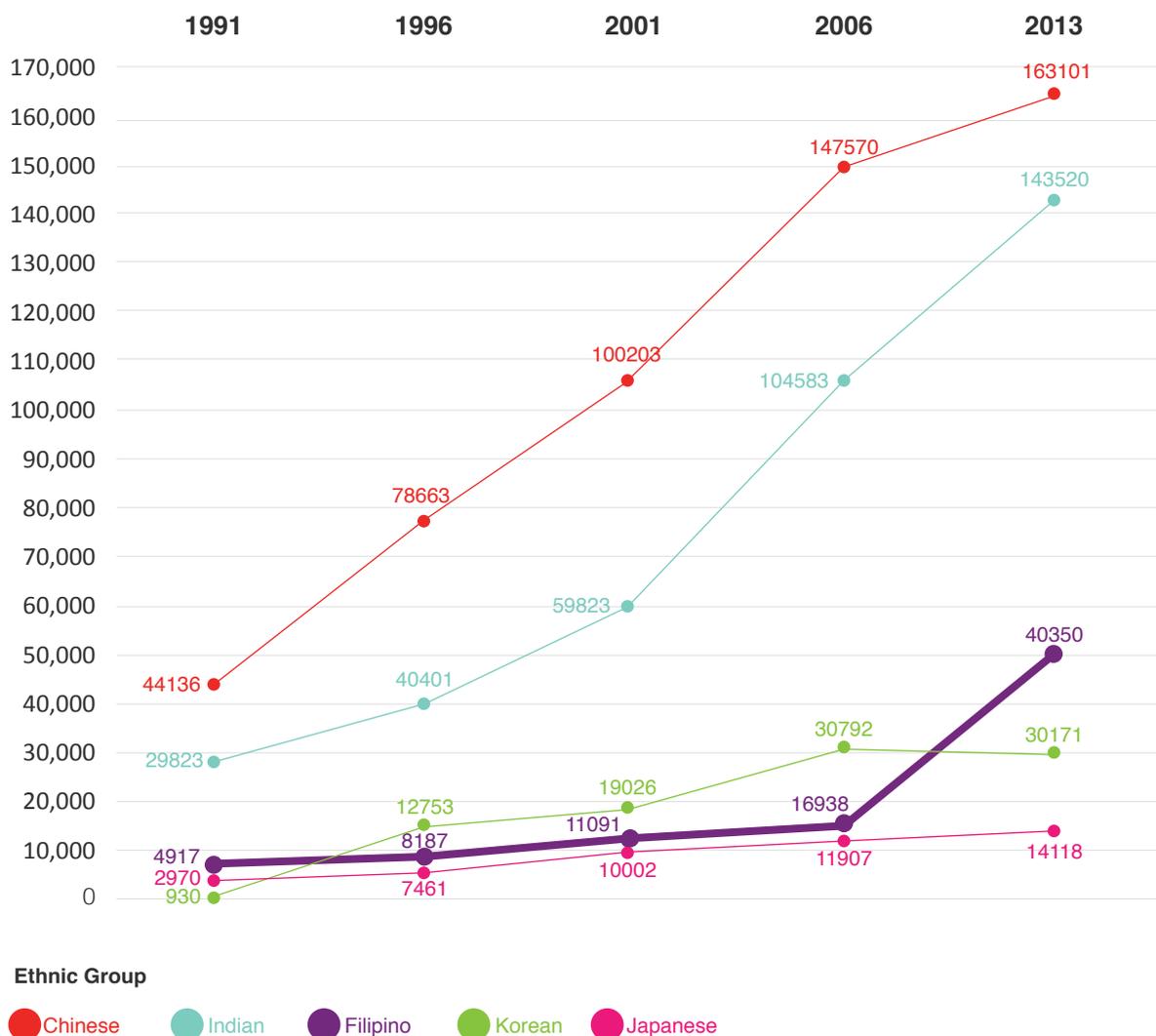
There was only a gradual increase in the Filipino population in New Zealand throughout the 1990s, but the 2000s saw exponential growth – almost tripling by the end of the decade. In 2006 there were 15,300, and surging to 40,347 in 2013 – now making up around one percent of the national population.<sup>7</sup> The majority live in the North Island (81.3 percent) and in urban areas (85.3 percent). Auckland was home to the largest Filipino population (20,502 people or 50.8 percent); 5,118 lived

in the Wellington-Wairarapa region (12.68 percent); and Christchurch had the third largest population (4,887).

But Filipinos are not just in the main cities. They have also re-energised the Catholic Church in Southland, and boosted the registrations of sporting clubs in rural and provincial townships. Wardlow Friesen’s *Beyond the Metropolises*<sup>8</sup> illustrates some of these demographic developments.

### Top five Asian ethnic groups by population (1991-2013)

Source: Statistics New Zealand



<sup>7</sup>Statistics New Zealand, “Ethnic Group Profile: Filipino,” 2013 Census (New Zealand, 2014).

<sup>8</sup><http://www.asianz.org.nz/media-release/beyond-metropolises---asian-dimension-grows-small-nz-cities>

## Not OFWs

What has brought about this shift from a “handful” of Filipinos to one of a settled community?

It’s important to note that Filipinos in New Zealand are not representative of the typical OFWs seen elsewhere around the world. The global image of many Filipinas working overseas is that of the domestic worker spending years away. But it’s not the case here.

Ambassador of the Philippines to New Zealand Jesus (Gary) Domingo, points out the changes over previous decades: “There have been waves of Filipino migration to New Zealand – beginning with just a few, a handful, a dozen, mainly of professionals in certain fields – medical, nursing, a wide range of disciplines, and spouses of Kiwis.”

Anita Mansell has observed Filipinos are now entering into new areas: “Most of them are in professional jobs – particularly information technology.”

In 2013, the most common occupations were professionals (24.9 percent), followed by labourers (14.4

percent) and community and personal service workers (13.8 percent), typically in the health care and social assistance, manufacturing, and retail trade industries.<sup>9</sup>

The higher level of skills and qualification may be indicative of this: Filipinos are more likely than either the general Asian population or the New Zealand population to have a bachelor’s degree or higher. They are less likely than either group to have no formal qualification. In 2013, their incomes were roughly equivalent to European New Zealanders (\$30,600 vs \$30,900), but higher than the general Asian ethnic group (\$20,100). The 2018 census will reveal whether Filipino incomes have risen alongside national averages. In 2013, they were also more likely than other Asians or the general New Zealand population to derive most of their income from wages, salary, commissions, and bonuses, rather than self-employment or business, or from investments.

## Qualification of Filipinos compared to other Asian ethnic groups and New Zealand general population aged 15 years and over (%)

Source: Stats NZ Filipino Ethnic Profile



<sup>9</sup>Statistics New Zealand, “Ethnic Group Profile: Filipino.”

## Distinct environment

New Zealand's immigration system also created a distinctive environment. "It's not like the US, which has long been the favoured destination. People go there, maybe as tourists, and they try their luck and look for a job. It's easy to come to New Zealand for tourism or study, but getting a job is not that easy, unlike in the US or Canada. But over the last few years there has been a big demand for workers in the dairy industry and for the Christchurch rebuild. And Filipinos took advantage of these opportunities," said Ambassador Domingo.

Skill shortages in these industries necessitated recruiting more migrant workers. The announcement of the South Island Contribution visa, provided a one-off path to residence for migrant workers and their families who had been in the South Island for more than five years, many of whom included Filipino dairy workers.<sup>10</sup> The Canterbury earthquakes in 2010 and 2011 created a need for construction workers. Statistics New Zealand

found that in 2014 the most common occupation for migrants arriving in Canterbury was "bricklayer, carpenter or joiner"<sup>11</sup>. Filipinos came on temporary work visas to help rebuild the city. That year, migrants from the Philippines replaced Japan as the main source country of migrants arriving from Asia to the Canterbury region, and became the second largest source country of migrants overall (the UK remains the largest).<sup>12</sup> Ambassador Domingo is proud of this contribution: "We're very happy to be helping to rebuild and further build up New Zealand society, both literally and figuratively."

However, the process was not without problems. Some Filipino migrant workers were brought in by scam recruiters, faced fees of up to \$20,000, had their contracts changed upon arrival, and were put into overcrowded housing.<sup>13</sup> These issues highlight the vulnerable state that many migrant workers face. Yet overall many have had positive experiences and wish to settle in New Zealand long-term with their families.<sup>14</sup>



<sup>10</sup>"Filipino Dairy Workers given Path to Residency," *Radio New Zealand*, May 18, 2017, <http://www.radionz.co.nz/news/national/331001/filipino-dairy-workers-given-path-to-residency>.

<sup>11</sup>"International Migration to and from Canterbury Region: 1996–2014," accessed May 15, 2017, [http://www.stats.govt.nz/browse\\_for\\_stats/population/Migration/international-travel-and-migration-articles/international-migration-canterbury-1996-2014.aspx](http://www.stats.govt.nz/browse_for_stats/population/Migration/international-travel-and-migration-articles/international-migration-canterbury-1996-2014.aspx).

<sup>12</sup>"International Migration to and from Canterbury Region."

<sup>13</sup><http://www.stuff.co.nz/the-press/news/10422562/Migrants-treated-like-bonded-labour>

<sup>14</sup>Tess McClure, "Migrants 'Treated like Bonded Labour,'" *Stuff.co.nz*, August 26, 2014, sec. News, <http://www.stuff.co.nz/the-press/news/10422562/Migrants-treated-like-bonded-labour>.

## New Zealand is not alien – it's home

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As they integrate into New Zealand society, Filipinos are also establishing new communities and bringing their own cultural heritage. They are reinterpreting New Zealand's multicultural environment through their own perspectives.

According to Ambassador Domingo, "Filipinos have a lot of distinct advantages. Not just because of our general genial, caring nature, but also our fluency in English; and culturally we're a very good fit because the vast majority are Catholic or Christian. And as our culture is very much a fusion culture, a very globalised culture, we fit in not only with the mainstream of Kiwi society, but also as New Zealand is becoming more multicultural."

"Filipinos are able to relate with Maori and other Polynesian communities. And it's because we look like them, our values are practically the same."

Ambassador Domingo noted Filipinos don't seek to form ethnic enclaves. "We don't form ghettos. We're very daring people."

And this is where traditional as well as modern Filipino music, food, and culture come into play. Such activities create pathways for interaction with other communities – particularly Maori and Pasifika. Ambassador Domingo notes: "Filipinos are able to relate with Maori and other Polynesian communities. And it's because we look like them, our values are practically the same. So for Filipinos, New Zealand is not alien – it's home."

Mansell agrees. "Maori culture is similar to Filipinos - the importance of family, respect for elders. They love music and food. Every time I go to any conference and stay at a marae, I always miss my family. We sit down and talk, play some guitar and sing. It feels like my people!"



## Festivals: Celebrating Filipinos in Wellington

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Filipinos organise festivals that feature Philippine music and dance. Mansell says: “It’s not only Filipinos that we ask to come, but other nationalities as well so they can learn about our culture and who we are.”

For example, in 2013, *Pistang Pilipino* (Filipino feast) was held in Wellington through the efforts of eight Filipino community groups from all over New Zealand. Activities included sports, cultural presentations, and a beauty pageant. And, of course, a wide variety of Filipino food was available. *Pistang Pilipino* demonstrated that Filipino migrants bring more than just their labour and trade here.



Such festivals are part of the Filipino community’s efforts for cultural maintenance. Mansell notes: “Since I arrived here, I’ve been involved with different organisations because I felt homesick. It’s nice to speak with my people as well, in our own dialect.”

Mansell is also involved in the group *Filifest*, which promotes Filipino culture through dance. “We have practices every week. Some of the children who were born here, have almost forgotten that their moms and dads are Filipino. We teach them about the cultural dances of the Philippines. Our first members have now grown up and are starting their own families. We want to keep *Filifest* going for the next generation.”



In this context, new questions arise. In addition to asking how Filipinos integrate into New Zealand society, Filipinos with children born and raised in New Zealand are also asking how their kids will learn about their Philippine culture and heritage.

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## Driving force behind community activities

Concern for the ability of young Filipinos to learn about their culture and heritage is a driving force behind community activities in the Wellington region. Of Filipinos born in New Zealand, only 14.2 percent spoke Tagalog, suggesting low heritage language learning.<sup>15</sup>

But given the diversity within the Filipino community, teaching Tagalog alone may not be enough. Mansell points out: “When I’m speaking to a Filipino, if I know they are from the North, I speak Tagalog. If they’re from the central region, we speak Cebuano. I speak Ilonggo as well.” These issues make even the question of which language to teach young Filipinos born in New Zealand a challenging one.

There is little evidence of strong sentiment for a pan-Asian community among Filipino migrants. Muriel-Nogoy explains this in part by referring to the Philippines’ history. “Our own community is not united. It’s just the way we are. We may look like Asians and we may fall under the category Asian. But we are so unlike Asians. We’re quite different. We’ve had Spanish influence, Chinese influence, Indonesian influence and others. If you look at our DNA you would find that we are such a mixed group of people.”

This diversity among Filipinos is echoed throughout my conversations with members of the Filipino community. The varied cultures and languages that characterise Filipino migrants mean they have some important differences to bridge within their own migrant community. These dynamics are also evident among young Filipinos attending schools here.

School-age children comprise around a quarter of the Filipino population in New Zealand, which is comparable to the general population. In 2013, 14.1 percent of the Filipino population were born in New Zealand, with 34% under the age of 20.<sup>16</sup>

The growing number of young Filipinos has resulted in more Filipino students on the rolls of Catholic schools.<sup>17</sup> Sacred Heart Cathedral School, a primary school in Thorndon, has felt this impact. Principal Bernadette Murfitt points to motivations for Filipino families in choosing Sacred Heart for their children. “Among the reasons are convenience, good academic reputation of the school, and connections with friends. But the big one is Catholic values. We know that Catholicism is huge in the Philippines.”

Murfitt views this surge as an opportunity for the school to pursue its commitment to multiculturalism. Some of the school’s recent activities have included celebration of Philippine Independence Day, taking part in a Filipino art competition, as well as working with the Philippine Embassy. “These opportunities are really important lead-ins for building a relationship. I think [my students] love it, because it’s building that connection with their home country and being able to talk to them about something quite specific about their culture,” says Murfitt.



<sup>15</sup>“2013 Census Ethnic Group Profiles,” accessed March 7, 2017, <http://www.stats.govt.nz/Census/2013-census/profile-and-summary-reports/ethnic-profiles.aspx>.

<sup>16</sup>“2013 Census QuickStats about Income,” accessed March 7, 2017, <http://www.stats.govt.nz/Census/2013-census/profile-and-summary-reports/quickstats-income.aspx>.

<sup>17</sup>72.6 percent of Filipinos in New Zealand who identified with a religion identified as Catholic. In the Philippines 81 percent of the population identifies as Catholic.

## The future of Filipinos in New Zealand

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The case of migration from the Philippines appears to be overwhelmingly positive for New Zealand and for the migrants themselves. It seems to be the result of policy that, by and large, works. Statistics indicate the Filipino migrants are placed in skill-shortage fields, where they are needed. They appear to integrate well into New Zealand's cities and towns.

But the statistics on permanent and long-term arrivals from the Philippines suggest the rapid increase in Filipino migration may already have peaked. The increase in 2016 was less than that in 2015. In year-end May 2017, the numbers were actually lower than those for year-end May 2016. Whether this is an anomaly, or part of a long-term trend is yet to be seen, but may be revealed in the 2018 census.

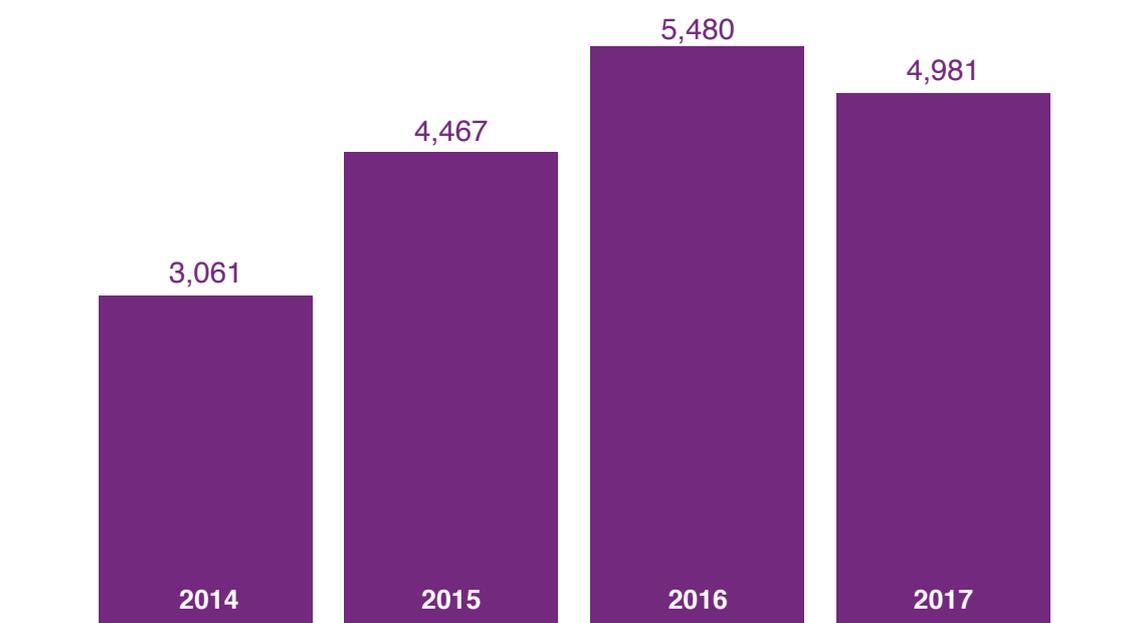
Increased immigration from the Philippines over the past 10 years has resulted in a sizeable Filipino population throughout the country. My interviews

revealed the community (in Wellington at least) is in a transitional period. Given the historically small numbers and their relative success in the regions, Filipinos seem to have little motivation to form larger Filipino community organisations (such as the Chinese or Indian associations).

Yet that may change with new considerations of maintaining cultural and social traditions and addressing the needs of heritage language learners. While we may not see dramatic increases in immigration numbers from the Philippines in the future, it is clear the Filipino community will continue to face questions of belonging and identity. Given their positive connections with other New Zealanders, Filipino community building is likely to be part of a broader conversation on multiculturalism and diversity in a changing New Zealand.

### Permanent and long-term arrivals from the Philippines

Source: Statistics New Zealand





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