



REVITALIZATION IN THE HEARTLAND OF AMERICA

*Welcoming Immigrant
Entrepreneurs for
Economic Development*

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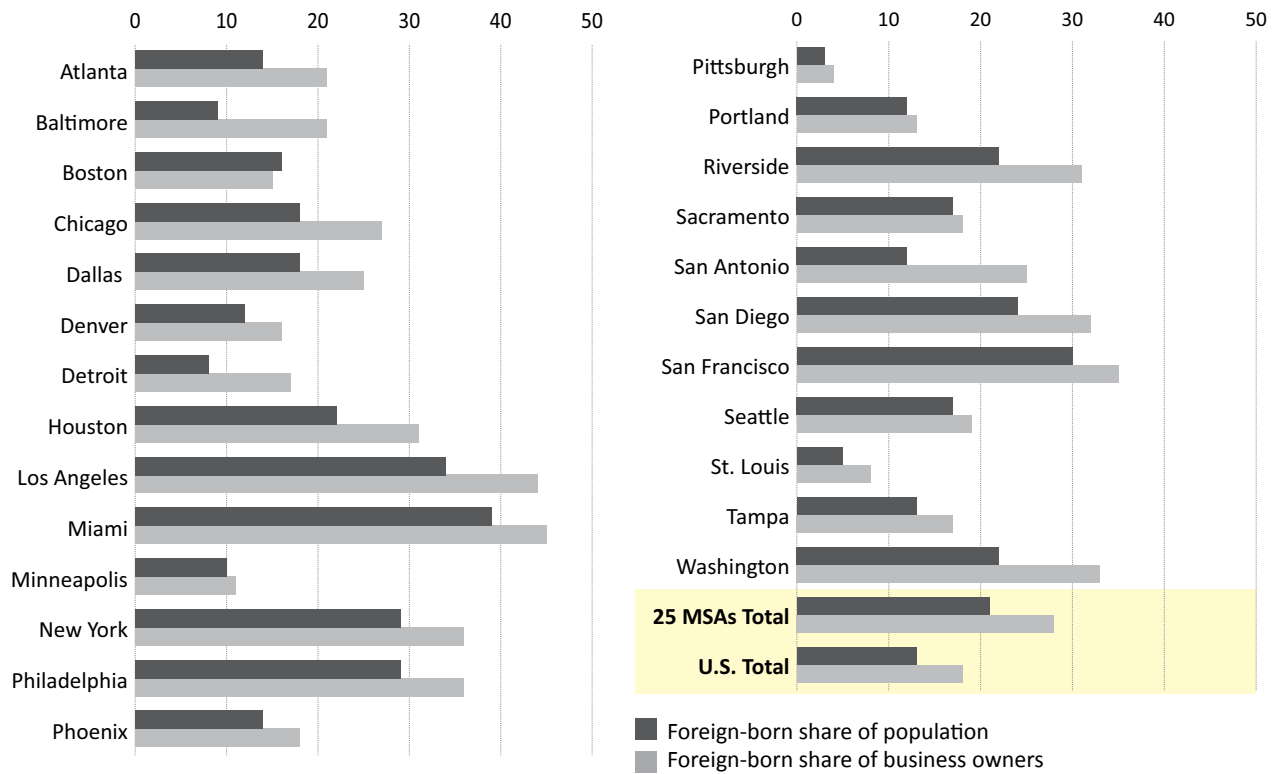
A potent combination of declining population growth and economic stagnation has led many cities and metropolitan regions to rethink how to reinvigorate their communities. The Midwest is a prime example of this trend. According to the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, “the Midwest cannot hope to keep up with other regions or international competitors without a vital entrepreneurial sector.”¹ The Council notes that “immigrants, risk takers by nature, are unusually successful entrepreneurs, more than twice as likely as native-born Americans to start their own firms.”² As a result, immigration is one of the strategies to which communities are repeatedly turning to fuel economic growth. A budding place-based awareness of the important contributions that new and existing immigrants make to neighborhood revitalization is seen in the increasing number of cities pursuing a nexus of immigrant welcoming, integration, and economic development initiatives. In this report, we focus on the journeys of three places—two cities and one state—in their efforts to implement strategies for future economic success that depend on immigration. The initiatives are taking place against a backdrop of tepid progress toward comprehensive federal reform of the U.S. immigration system.

FACED WITH DEMOGRAPHIC AND ECONOMIC DECLINE, PLACES SEEK WAYS TO JUMPSTART GROWTH

For some cities, particularly those in the Rust Belt, stagnant population growth or outright population decline—due in part to aging and out-migration of the native-born population—is a serious concern. Community leaders who seek to turn this trend around look at a variety of strategies. Increasingly, attracting immigrants is on the list. Backed by a broad base of quantitative and qualitative research, these places are pursuing strategies to attract, welcome, and retain newcomers. Immigrant workers, entrepreneurs, and small business owners in some towns already have helped stem population decline, alleviate skills gaps, and revitalize local economies.

As numerous studies have documented, immigration has re-emerged over the past 25 years as a potent force influencing the size and composition of the population in U.S. cities. According to economist David Card, immigrants’ impact on population growth has a corresponding positive impact on a region’s wages, housing prices, rents, and cultural diversity.³ Similarly, the Brookings Institution finds that immigration has a positive influence on metro areas by reversing population losses, expanding the workforce, boosting home values, and reducing vacancy and foreclosure problems.⁴ Further, the Fiscal Policy Institute has examined the economic role of immigrants in the country’s 25 largest metropolitan areas (Figure 1) and finds that immigration and economic growth of metro areas go hand in hand.⁵ Economist Jack Strauss notes that rising rates of immigrant entrepreneurship over the last decade have led to greater job creation in metro areas.⁶ He observes that this has “considerable public policy implications as many cities are currently promoting more immigration to improve their economy. Hence, it is critical to analyze the effects of immigration on job growth and unemployment.”⁷ Strauss points specifically to many metro areas—particularly in the Midwest—that are confronted with aging populations and low employment growth.⁸ Findings such as these offer a guidepost to the growing

Figure 1. Immigrant Business Ownership in the 25 Largest Metropolitan Statistical Areas in 2010



Source: David Dyssegaard Kallick, *Immigrant Small Business Owners: A Significant and Growing Part of the Economy* (New York, NY: Fiscal Policy Institute, 2012). **Note:** In 2010, these 25 metro areas made up 41 percent of the U.S. population and 66 percent of the foreign-born population.

number of cities across the country that are launching immigrant welcoming and integration initiatives as a foundation of their economic development strategies.

Entrepreneurship is one of the primary drivers of any local economy. It generates new employment opportunities for local residents and promotes greater regional economic development. Because immigrants are more entrepreneurial and have higher business formation rates than the native-born population, immigrant-owned businesses make sizeable contributions to the U.S. economy nationally and locally.⁹ In many places, immigrant entrepreneurs play an important role in a local community’s business development. They open retail shops, restaurants, and markets, and start service businesses as CPAs and electricians. They fill in the gaps within certain niches where particular goods and services are needed.¹⁰ And immigrant businesses can help to revitalize streetscapes and neighborhoods—places within a town or city that may have been in decline and at risk of becoming areas of blight. Recognizing the importance of immigrant entrepreneurs in local economies, a growing number of initiatives have sprung up in cities and towns throughout the Rust Belt and beyond.¹¹ Public and private organizations and partnerships are launching business incubators for immigrant entrepreneurs, and are seeking ways to help skilled immigrants put their foreign credentials to use in the U.S.¹² Consider the following examples of Detroit, Michigan; St. Louis, Missouri; and rural towns throughout Iowa.

Detroit

Detroit, Michigan is a prime example of a Rust Belt city experiencing post-industrial population decline (Table 1) and economic sluggishness. Local and regional leaders who are devising strategies to restart Detroit’s population and economic growth have singled out immigration, entrepreneurship, and innovation as potential growth strategies. Leaders from southeast Michigan in 2010 released a comprehensive study documenting the impacts immigrants have on the regional economy and identifying strategic initiatives that would help revitalize the broader regional economy.¹³ The results of the “Global Detroit” report led to the creation of the Global Detroit initiative, a regional effort to revitalize southeast Michigan’s economy.¹⁴

Table 1. Population of Detroit, Michigan, 1950 to 2012

Census	Detroit City Population	Percent Change	Detroit Metropolitan Area Population	Percent Change
1950	1,849,568	-	3,016,197	-
1960	1,670,144	-9.7	3,762,360	24.7
1970	1,514,063	-9.3	4,307,470	14.5
1980	1,203,368	-20.5	4,353,365	1.1
1990	1,027,974	-14.6	4,382,299	0.7
2000	951,270	-7.5	4,452,557	1.6
2010	713,777	-25.0	4,296,250	-3.5
2012 Estimate	701,475	-1.7	4,292,060	-0.1

Source: Decennial Census and American Community Survey.

One focus of Global Detroit is strengthening, growing, and revitalizing Detroit neighborhoods through immigration. This emphasis acknowledges that immigrants are essential to urban population growth and stability.¹⁵ Detroit recognizes what other welcoming cities understand: that immigrant populations help to stabilize residential neighborhoods, revitalize commercial retail corridors, and bring a diversity of culture, food, language, goods, and services—all of which help decrease blight and abandonment; increase job creation, employment, and property values; improve neighborhood quality of life; and foster a greater vibrancy and richness for the urban experience throughout a city.¹⁶ The Global Detroit report notes research showing that the foreign-born population in metropolitan Detroit is statistically more likely to start new businesses than the native-born population and is therefore a driver of new business and job creation in the area. Immigrants are also more likely to be the innovators behind new technology and patents that also lead to new industries and new jobs.¹⁷

In Detroit, immigrants have already been moving to and starting businesses in neighborhoods such as East Dearborn, Hamtramck, and Southwest Detroit.¹⁸ Global Detroit is working to further encourage immigrant-led neighborhood revitalization. As the Global Detroit report notes, “nothing is more powerful to remaking Detroit as a center of innovation, entrepreneurship and population growth, than embracing and increasing immigrant populations and the entrepreneurial culture and global connections that they bring and deliver.”¹⁹ Indeed, a 2013 study of several cities, including Detroit, documents the important role that immigrant small business owners play in helping to revitalize depressed communities and economies.²⁰ In places such as Detroit, the study notes, “immigration is slowing—and in some cases reversing—decades of population decline in American Rust Belt communities.”²¹

Global Detroit is already producing positive results for the Detroit region. The initiative has sparked efforts in southeast Michigan to make the region more welcoming to immigrants and to capitalize on the economic opportunities the region’s international population brings. Within the program’s first two years, over \$4 million in philanthropic funding had been raised for innovative initiatives which the Global Detroit study identified.²² These include international student retention, the Welcoming Michigan campaign, an urban neighborhood microenterprise training and lending program, the Global Detroit Welcome Mat network of immigration services, and ethnic and minority media reporting on entrepreneurship. As the initiative continues, other positive outcomes include efforts focusing on neighborhood revitalization. Global Detroit raised \$2 million from the Kellogg Foundation to launch ProsperUS Detroit, a microentrepreneurship and community-building initiative.²³ The initiative offers access to microloans, entrepreneurship training, and free or low-cost technical assistance.

The communities to which immigrants have moved, suggests Steve Tobocman, the Director of Global Detroit, have seen stabilization and revitalization. Despite Detroit’s 2013 bankruptcy, local leaders aren’t backing away from the initiative. Tobocman stated: “I don’t think we’re offering that immigration is a panacea. But that being said, I do think it [immigration] may be the single great urban revitalization strategy in modern-day America, and it’s one that doesn’t cost tax dollars.”²⁴ Tobocman went on to suggest that “immigration reform would help the city. International immigration seems to be by far the most important population growth or population stabilization strategy.”²⁵

St. Louis

St. Louis, Missouri, is another example of a place that has experienced a demographic dilemma in recent years (Table 2). Like Detroit, St. Louis is dealing with the issues of recruitment and retention of finite human capital. As a result, local leaders who care about both the St. Louis region and immigration reform commissioned an economic study to discover just what the impact of immigration has been for their region. The 2012 research report from the Simon Center for Regional Forecasting at Saint Louis University, by economist Jack Strauss, documents the St. Louis region’s relatively small immigrant population compared with other cities of similar size. The report statistically demonstrates that the city

is missing out on the economic contributions more immigrants would bring to the area and notes that the relative dearth of immigrants helps explain the area’s poor economic growth.²⁶ The report found that immigrants are 60 percent more likely to be entrepreneurs in the region. But the relative lack of immigrants is one factor in explaining the region’s relative shortage of new business startups.²⁷

Table 2. Population of St. Louis, Missouri, 1950 to 2012

Census	St. Louis City Population	Percent Change	St. Louis Metropolitan Area Population	Percent Change
1950	856,796	-	2,654,631	-
1960	750,026	-12.5	3,441,651	29.6
1970	622,236	-17.0	2,998,154	-12.9
1980	452,801	-27.2	2,911,233	-2.9
1990	396,685	-12.4	2,351,326	-19.2
2000	348,189	-12.2	2,352,614	0.1
2010	319,294	-8.3	2,830,355	20.3
2012 Estimate	318,172	-0.4	2,900,605	2.5

Source: Decennial Census and American Community Survey.

The Simon Center report served as the impetus for the St. Louis Mosaic Project. In June 2013, the St. Louis Regional Immigration and Innovation Steering Committee, part of World Trade Center St. Louis, became the St. Louis Mosaic Project with the goal of making St. Louis the country’s fastest-growing metro area for immigrants by 2020. The Project seeks to promote regional prosperity through immigration and innovation.²⁸ Betsy Cohen, the director of the Project, remarked that this initiative “will play a key role in not only making foreign born individuals feel welcome on our buses and trains, but also in our communities, and that’s something that will help us to attract and retain the entrepreneurial, innovative people that will help our region to grow.”²⁹ As Cohen indicated, immigrants “are economic drivers in the regions where they live. We need to pick up our pace if we want to keep up.”³⁰

Although the program is new, the St. Louis Mosaic Project is already working on immigrant engagement activities and is seeing positive results. The Professional Connector Program, for example, opens opportunities for foreign-born professionals to network with well-connected and globally-minded professionals in the St. Louis bi-state region.³¹ Other actions include broad regional messaging about the positive impacts of entrepreneurship and population growth, as well as the assets St. Louis has to offer to newcomers. In fact, most of the more than 60 national and regional media stories this year about the St. Louis Mosaic Project featured local entrepreneurs. Another focus area for the

initiative is education through over 250 Mosaic Ambassadors about how new citizens spur economic growth and why immigration and innovation are economically important for the region. The Mosaic Project is engaging local, regional, and federal government leaders to reduce hiring barriers; build on local, Midwest and national dialogues for immigration reform; and work across state lines to improve professional re-credentialing.³² Working on issues involving infrastructure for immigrants, engaging with universities to attract and support international students, and developing effective communications strategies are also focus areas.³³ The St. Louis Mosaic Project serves as yet another example of a broad base of community leaders charting a course for their city and broader region to be on a welcoming path. These leaders recognize the benefits that additional immigration would bring to their city, and are proactively working to attract immigrants and to implement strategies and initiatives for more efficient immigrant integration.

Rural Communities in Iowa

Population decline has been an issue for rural communities throughout the Midwest and Great Plains. While decreases in population have led to economic decay in small-town America, immigrants often help reverse that trend. Rural communities in Iowa offer examples of immigrant settlement and immigrant small-business formation leading to revitalized or refurbished main streets and a reversal of population and economic decline. According to ongoing research by the Department of Sociology—Extension and Outreach at Iowa State University, immigrant-established businesses in rural Iowa towns include retail stores, auto repair shops, labor-contracting businesses, specialty farms, translation services, and small-scale manufacturing.³⁴ The research points out that “most immigrants establish their businesses without assistance from local banks, relying heavily on family labor, and family and personal savings to fund business growth.”³⁵ Furthermore, immigrant businesses generate tax revenues and employment locally for the towns within which they are located. Immigrant businesses also contribute to the revitalization of downtown streetscapes and neighborhoods while providing another option for native-born and immigrant consumers to purchase goods and services.³⁶

Small towns that have lost residents benefit from the influx of immigrant entrepreneurs because these places need more people and businesses and the economic boost they bring. Moreover, given their greater isolation and, possibly, more segregation due to language barriers and a lack of cultural understanding, small towns can be a particularly hard fit for newcomers. Therefore, the Iowa State University program is working with local communities to promote entrepreneurship and immigrant integration as part of a community and economic development strategy in small towns. In the southeast Iowa town of Ottumwa, for example, Himar Hernandez, Associate Director of Community and Economic Development with Iowa State University Extension and Outreach, helps create opportunities that attract new residents and encourages immigrant entrepreneurship. According to Hernandez, “First generation immigrants are very entrepreneurial. But minority business owners face very big challenges. Permits and regulations, language, where do they get funding to expand, how

do you keep the books. And I try to get them to market to more [than just] the Latino community.”³⁷ Hernandez, as a facilitator who works with potential business owners as they navigate the business startup process, notes also that educating the broader community about the contributions immigrants bring is an important component of the two-way process³⁸ of immigrant integration.³⁹ “It’s when we get to know our neighbors by name that we start seeing them as people like ourselves,” he said.⁴⁰

The Iowa State University Extension and Outreach office is also responsible for the Iowa Community Voices program, which provides a space for education meetings designed to bolster the leadership skills and civic understanding of newly arrived immigrants to Iowa.⁴¹ The program’s objectives include introducing local established leadership in a community to new immigrant residents, opening a mutual dialogue and giving new residents the knowledge and confidence to actively participate in the life of their communities.⁴² This two-way process is key to effective immigrant integration at the local level.

IMMIGRANT ENTREPRENEURSHIP, LOCAL PLACE REVITALIZATION, AND IMMIGRATION REFORM

The initiatives taking place in Detroit, St. Louis, and Iowa, as well as in other regions, began with local leaders recognizing that immigrant entrepreneurship is beneficial for several reasons. Immigrant small businesses help to revitalize neighborhoods, add a boost to the local economy, and create more jobs for the local population. Additionally, immigrant businesses can, in part, help with immigrant integration into the broader community. Immigrant and ethnic businesses concentrated in particular co-ethnic neighborhoods, for example, can facilitate and encourage unique social structures conducive to upward socio-economic mobility and stronger integration.⁴³ And immigrants themselves are more entrepreneurial than the native-born population, as the act of choosing to uproot and migrate is itself entrepreneurial.⁴⁴ Furthermore, entrepreneurship for immigrants is a means of maintaining ties to traditional cultures while at the same time integrating into a new place.⁴⁵

While many cities recognize the need to attract and grow their human capital, and are pursuing productive strategies to encourage immigration and entrepreneurship as a component of their economic development strategies, their efforts are often at odds with an inefficient federal immigration system. City and regional leaders recognize that their recruitment and development efforts cannot fully succeed if the federal immigration system is outmoded and ineffective. In the absence of comprehensive reform, their efforts, no matter how visionary, may be impeded.

Despite stalled federal efforts at reform, cities and states are embarking on new and exciting ventures to attract immigrants to their communities, to support new and existing immigrant entrepreneurs, and to more explicitly create synergy between immigrants and native-born citizens. For example, as of January 2014, there were 18 initiatives across the country that were Welcoming America⁴⁶ affiliates,⁴⁷ and 25 city and county-based programs have joined Welcoming America’s Welcoming Cities and

Counties initiative.⁴⁸ In addition to those affiliates, other initiatives are found in places throughout the country. With this trend, there is a growing recognition of the significance of immigration as an economic factor, but also major rethinking of how individuals and communities accept and welcome newcomers and encourage their successful integration.

Ultimately, cities are the places where people go about their daily lives and where immigration and integration policies play out on a daily basis. Clearly, the extent of a place's welcoming climate and the ability for newcomers to effectively integrate into a community are part of a place's resiliency to economic vacillations. William Lester and Mai Thi Nguyen, in the Department of City and Regional Planning at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, find that regions with more successful immigrant integration were more resilient when faced with economic shocks.⁴⁹ And as John Mollenkopf and Manuel Pastor of the Building Resilient Regions Research Group state, "regional leaders who want their metropolitan areas to weather the country's inevitable economic and demographic changes will likely need to weave immigrants into their regional narratives and visions for their regional futures, helping to calm the political waters by highlighting how immigrants and their children can be assets rather than problems."⁵⁰ In so doing, local leaders "will help facilitate a broad and much-needed recognition that a region's resilience is based not on struggling with strangers, but rather on welcoming with the warmth that will help newcomers maximize their contributions to our country's metropolitan future."⁵¹ Local leaders must help national leaders understand that positive impacts of immigrants in cities are linked with the need for effective immigration policy at the national level.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS MOVING FORWARD

As the initiatives in Detroit, St. Louis, and Iowa show, cities and metropolitan areas are clearly interested in doing something more to cultivate a welcoming environment for newcomers as a component of economic development. Cities interested in charting a welcoming path can learn from those places already planning and implementing such initiatives and programs. In this regard, there are a few questions of which to be mindful: What are particular lessons learned from cities already on a welcoming path? And what are particular paths forward for other cities and towns? How can national legislation help to strengthen these initiatives or support local integration efforts, as well as immigrant entrepreneurs and innovators themselves?

In light of the well-documented contributions of immigrants in local communities throughout the United States, there are several recommendations local, state, and national policymakers should bear in mind:

- Policies of inclusion and welcome, which help grow opportunities for integration into a local area, are important at the local, state, and federal level. In particular, access to language and cultural competency learning, information about local resources, and civic engagement opportunities are important components of integration processes.

- Partnerships between the immigrant and native-born business and entrepreneurship community are important for ensuring that immigrant business owners are aware of the business resources available in a place (such as the local chamber of commerce and other business organizations).
- Entrepreneurs' access to credit and capital—through microloan programs, business incubators in local communities, and other methods—can also help spur immigrant small business growth, new markets, and job creation.
- At the national level, policymakers should enact comprehensive immigration reform that modernizes the U.S. immigration system, creating the necessary legal pathways that work for entrepreneurs, innovators, students, families, businesses, employers, and all types of workers. Immigration reform, in addition to recognizing that immigrant entrepreneurs come through all immigration pathways—family, employment, refugee, and others—should also ensure better recognition of foreign-earned credentials in licensed professions so that skilled immigrants' talent isn't wasted in the places in which they already reside in the U.S.
- Immigrant integration strategies should be a component of comprehensive immigration reform.⁵² In addition to modernizing and streamlining visa pathways, clearing backlogs, and providing a pathway to citizenship for the undocumented population, reforms must provide immigrants and the communities in which they live with the tools to prosper.⁵³ For effective legislative outcomes, cities and towns interested in pursuing immigrant integration and welcoming must ensure their own voices and perspectives reach the ears of national policymakers. And national leaders in Washington must listen to what local leaders are telling them about what's going on in their communities.⁵⁴

To make the most of local immigration recruitment, development, and welcoming initiatives, there needs to be a thoughtful, comprehensive effort to modernize the U.S. immigration system. In the meantime, local places will continue to compete for human capital. Those cities which welcome the initiative and drive of immigrants will not only experience economic and social dividends, but will be poised to prosper even more under a new era of immigration reform.

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