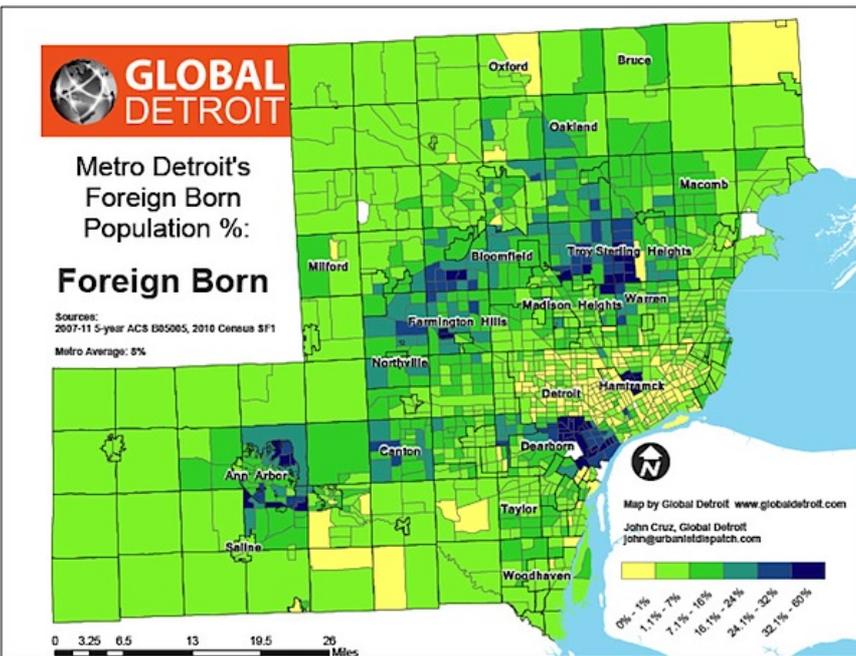


Features

Global Detroit: Attracting immigrants key to Detroit growth

FRANCIS GRUNOW, KURT METZGER AND STEVE TOBOCMAN | TUESDAY, JULY 30, 2013



FOREIGN BORN POPULATION MAP

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Detroit's bankruptcy grabbed last week's headlines and the attention of the nation. The legal filing was a milestone in the half-century decline from its pinnacle as America's fourth largest city and the Arsenal of Democracy. At its height, Detroit was characterized by its economic innovations in manufacturing, attracting workers from the Deep South, Appalachia, Southern and Eastern Europe, and even Latin America and the Middle East.

In fact, from 1900 to 1950, immigrants made up a significant percentage of Detroit's population, slowly declining from 34 percent to 15 percent of the city's residents during that period.

So it may not be surprising that the media frenzy after the bankruptcy filing contained no fewer than six national stories about how immigration was one strategy the city should pursue in its long-term recovery plans. And while immigrants cannot "save" Detroit (nor does the city necessarily need saving), they can be an incredible force for neighborhood revitalization. In fact, immigrants may be the most universally effective, time-tested strategy that has worked across urban America. And the evidence is clear that if Detroit were able to attract a reasonable number of immigrants, the recent population trend would look very

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different.

Two days before the bankruptcy filing, a telling [demographic study](#) of the region's foreign born was released by [Global Detroit](#), a regional economic development initiative designed to create job and economic growth by tapping into the benefits of immigration, and [Data Driven Detroit](#) (D3), a premiere regional data analysis firm with a mission to provide information to drive informed policy-making decisions. The study was one of the most comprehensive analyses of Metro Detroit's immigrant, or foreign-born, population to date. It documented the tremendous diversity, international character, and global connectedness of our region.

One critical finding of the study was that the City of Detroit has one of the lowest shares of immigrants (5 percent) among all communities in the region. In fact, Wayne (excluding Detroit), Oakland, Macomb, and Washtenaw counties all have approximately twice the foreign born concentration than Detroit. Each of those range between 9 and 12 percent foreign-born, slightly less than the 13 percent national average.

What should be of more concern is the fact that Detroit has the lowest percentage of immigrants of any of the 25 largest cities in the nation. Its 35,000 immigrants are significantly less than the next two "least internationally diverse" cities -- Indianapolis (67,000) and Memphis (43,000). The chart at left clearly illustrates this gap.

While each of the top 10 cities in overall population also rank in the top 12 in foreign born, there is relatively wide variation once one moves to the next tier. However, no other city drops below 100 in foreign-born except Detroit. Our closest competitor for ranking discrepancy is Memphis, which drops 74 places from 20 to 94.

Detroit, however, falls a whopping 117 places, from 18 to 135.

Let's play the numbers game for a moment. If Detroit simply maintained its ranking of 18 on the foreign-born scale, we would experience a population gain of 108,586 residents. That is almost half of the 250,000 residents Detroit lost over the last decade.

But it's not just a numbers game. Historically, immigrants are important to cities because they breathe new life into disinvested and declining neighborhoods. According to researchers at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and the Urban Institute "immigrant businesses often expand into underserved markets; they seek out enterprises with low start-up costs and low economies of scale; and they provide goods when demand is unstable or uncertain." These foreign-born retailers can serve as the initial spark to stabilizing and/or revitalizing struggling communities.

Lou Glazer at [Michigan Future](#) describes the process this way:

"Once immigrants settle in a neighborhood they attract the next wave of immigrants who want to live in close proximity to their countrymen. This process transforms once deteriorated neighborhoods. Housing stock is upgraded as homes are renovated and new housing is built where abandoned buildings and vacant lots used to be. Immigrant entrepreneurs open neighborhood restaurants, stores, and entertainment venues to serve neighborhood residents. The most successful of these neighborhoods attract customers from across the region -- some even becoming tourist destinations."



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An increasing number of city leaders are realizing that immigrant groups stabilize residential neighborhoods and commercial retail corridors that are critical to the quality of life. Additionally, internationally diverse populations bring food, language, culture, goods, and services that help attract and retain the skilled knowledge workers that drive the new economy.

Last month's Model D [article](#) on the [Global Great Lakes Network](#) convening demonstrated that leaders in Detroit, Cleveland, Pittsburgh, Dayton, Columbus, Indianapolis, St. Louis, and Lansing have all come to realize that fast-growing immigrant populations experience decreasing blight and abandonment, increasing employment and property values, improved quality of life, and changes that add to the richness and vibrancy of the whole city.

Where immigrant populations have concentrated -- Southwest Detroit, Hamtramck, the neighborhood just to north and east of Hamtramck, where a thriving Bangladeshi community has settled -- micro-economies have ramped up, neighborhoods stabilized.

Immigrants created many of the businesses that made our region an economic powerhouse during the last century (Dow, Masco, Meijer), and they continue to create the businesses that will build our future. Just over the last two decades, experts have estimated that Michigan's immigrants created businesses at three times the rate of the general population, and started almost a third of all the high-tech startups in Michigan at a rate nearly six times that of the general population. These are firms that add jobs and economic activity that benefit everyone in Metro Detroit.

The Global Detroit and D3 study chronicles the tremendous economic and social asset that is our immigrant community. As we face Detroit's bankruptcy, and we debate the policies and the social and economic factors that have contributed to this reality, Detroiters might be heartened to know that Global Detroit and Gov. Snyder's Global Michigan have laid the foundation for an economic development infrastructure designed to capitalize on a new era of American immigration.

Specifically, Global Detroit has built new initiatives around micro-enterprise development, immigrant welcoming, a welcome mat network of immigration services, international student retention, and skilled immigrant integration. These programs are preparing Detroit to attract and retain future immigrants who will play a significant role in stabilizing neighborhoods, population loss, and a return to prosperity.

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