

Immigrants Establishing Roots in New Gateway Cities

In an effort to boost their economies, cities in the Midwest and Rust Belt have launched initiatives in recent years to attract immigrants. Are they working?

MARCH 2016

BY MIKE MACIAG



Coastal cities such as Los Angeles, Miami and New York have long been viewed as the gateways for immigrants starting new lives in America.

In recent years, however, a different set of cities has laid out the welcome mat. Many of them are older Midwestern cities that have rarely been thought of as immigrant meccas. Places like Indianapolis and Columbus and Dayton, Ohio, have pursued a wide range of immigrant-friendly

strategies, in part to prop up vulnerable economies and stem population losses. Other Rust Belt jurisdictions are joining them. “The Midwest is becoming the new gateway,” says Guadalupe Velasquez, who coordinates the New American Initiative for the city of Columbus.

But how much have these efforts actually changed migration patterns so far? While many factors influence migration, a review of the latest [Census data](#) suggests that the foreign born are increasingly establishing roots outside larger, more well-known immigrant destination cities. Often, immigrants settle first in established gateway cities, then move elsewhere as they seek better employment and housing opportunities.

Governing compared Census data collected between 2005-2009 with data from 2010-2014 for all cities with populations of at least 100,000. Although longstanding immigrant hubs saw the largest total gains, movement of immigrants to less-established gateways is increasing at a much faster rate. Cities where the foreign born make up less than a tenth of the total population recorded an average foreign born population increase of 18 percent over the five-year period, compared to 7 percent in areas where they make up more than a quarter of the population.

One reason why the foreign born are growing at a much faster rate in the Rust Belt and smaller cities is that they often make up only a very small share of the population to begin with. Aggregate totals, however, indicate a similar pattern. The 106 jurisdictions where the foreign born accounted for less than a tenth of the total population collectively added twice as many

foreign-born residents as natives. Cities where the foreign born are most prevalent, by comparison, added nearly equal numbers of foreign- and native-born residents.

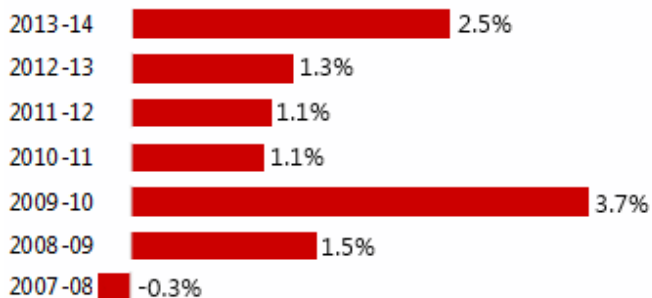
Foreign Born Share of City's Population	Average Foreign Born Change	Average Native Change	Aggregate Foreign Born Change	Aggregate Native Change	Count of Cities
Under 10 Percent	18.0%	2.7%	+233,488	+114,675	106
10-25 Percent	14.3%	7.4%	+415,729	+1,360,258	118
More than 25 Percent	7.1%	4.7%	+421,348	+430,875	77
TOTAL	13.8%	5.0%	+1,070,565	+1,905,808	301

SOURCE: Governing calculations of 2005-2009, 2010-2014 American Community Survey data

A few cities farthest along with their immigrant-friendly initiatives -- particularly Dayton -- experienced some of the steepest recent gains.

Immigrant initiatives take different forms, led by either local governments, nonprofit groups or the business community. More recently, it's the governments that have been assuming the lead role, said Rachel Peric, deputy director of Welcoming America, a national organization that works on initiatives with local communities.

Annual Change in U.S. Foreign Born



SOURCE: Census ACS 1-year estimates data

It's difficult to pinpoint what role the immigrant outreach programs have played in any population gains so far. Cities experience demographic shifts for a variety of reasons, and some of the programs have been operating for a comparatively short time. Officials say they're just beginning to evaluate their efforts, many of which are aimed more at assisting current foreign-born residents than attracting new ones.

"Everyone is very interested in measuring their performance," Peric says. "Right now, they're going about it in different ways."

All these cities, however, expect immigrant initiatives to play a key role in supporting their regional economies. “We know that doing nothing is a recipe for demographic and economic stagnation,” Peric says.

One illustration of demographic shifts within cities is to compare change in the foreign-born population with that of native residents. By this measure, cities such as Buffalo, Dayton and Peoria, Ill., all recorded sizable gains despite losing native-born residents. When only the growth in the foreign-born population is considered, more cities with the fastest growth are found in booming regions that are adding people from all backgrounds.

This table shows the 25 jurisdictions where the five-year percentage increase in the foreign born most exceeds that of the native population ([see data for all cities reviewed below](#)):

Jurisdiction	% Point Difference	Foreign Born Change	Native Change
Dayton, Ohio	72.8	62%	-11%
Peoria, Illinois	64.9	61%	-4%
The Woodlands, Texas	64.7	122%	57%
Wilmington, North Carolina	56.1	65%	8%
Springfield, Illinois	50.6	49%	-2%
Montgomery, Alabama	50.3	50%	-1%
El Cajon, California	47.4	47%	0%
Savannah, Georgia	47.1	52%	5%
Knoxville, Tennessee	46.8	44%	-3%
Springfield, Missouri	46.4	50%	3%
Columbus, Georgia	44.0	47%	3%
Fargo, North Dakota	43.2	60%	17%
Lafayette, Louisiana	42.5	49%	7%
Buffalo, New York	41.9	34%	-7%
Syracuse, New York	36.8	37%	0%

Jurisdiction	% Point Difference	Foreign Born Change	Native Change
Louisville/Jefferson County, Kentucky	36.3	42%	6%
Lehigh Acres, Florida	36.0	84%	48%
Clarksville, Tennessee	35.7	53%	17%
Chattanooga, Tennessee	34.1	34%	0%
Enterprise, Nevada	33.1	76%	42%
Sioux Falls, South Dakota	31.5	36%	4%
Spokane, Washington	31.4	34%	3%
Cary town, North Carolina	30.8	46%	15%
Metairie, Louisiana	30.1	29%	-1%
Odessa, Texas	29.5	38%	8%

SOURCE: Governing calculations of 2005-2009, 2010-2014 American Community Survey data

Most of the nation’s immigrants remain concentrated in the largest hubs, but the share of the nation's overall foreign-born population residing in these cities is slowly shrinking. Nationally, the latest Census estimates peg the total foreign-born population at 42.4 million, but estimates vary depending on how unauthorized immigrants are counted.

Naturalized citizens account for 42 percent of the foreign-born population. Legal immigrants make up another 34 percent, and unauthorized immigrants account for the remaining 24 percent, according to Migration Policy Institute calculations.

Here's a look at different immigrant initiatives in five cities.

Dayton

Dayton hasn't been known as a leading destination for the foreign-born. But in recent years, local officials have seen immigration as an opportunity to boost the city’s ailing economy. A “Welcome Dayton” initiative, approved in 2011, has helped give it a more prominent place on the immigration map.

The comprehensive initiative, which has garnered national recognition, enlists public agencies, schools, churches and the business community to better integrate immigrants into the city. The goal, says program coordinator Melissa Bertolo, is focused more on making Dayton a place that

works for existing immigrants, rather than to attract more newcomers. But this has had the effect of establishing new immigrant communities as well.

Between 2009 and 2014, Dayton's foreign-born population jumped 62 percent. That's higher than any other city reviewed that lost native residents during the same period. It was also the fifth largest gain in any locality of 100,000 or more residents.

"It's really great to see the change from 25 years ago to now," Bertolo says. "Changes are very visible, especially downtown."

It's difficult to say just how much of the growth can be attributed to the city's efforts. Bertolo says the publicity played a "small role" and resulted in many inquiries, but doesn't think it alone resulted in a dramatic effect that led people move to there. "If we are a truly welcoming and immigrant-friendly city, that will be the best strategy," she says.

One clear factor, though, is an increase in secondary migration, or movement of immigrants who relocate after initially settling elsewhere. Dayton's Ahiska Turkish community, for example, has multiplied particularly rapidly.

Not all residents have greeted the immigrant community with enthusiasm, however. An early survey found that Dayton neighborhoods with more immigrants actually reported less welcoming attitudes than others. The city responded by convening community dialogue events, block parties and an international soccer tournament.

Louisville

Louisville has emerged as one of the hottest urban centers for immigrants in recent years. Its foreign-born population rose an estimated 42 percent between 2009 and 2014, more than in any other jurisdiction with at least a half-million residents.

Migration of refugees accounts for the single largest driver of the increase, says Bryan Warren, who took over as head of the metro government's globalization office last year. An average of approximately 1,100 refugees settled in Louisville in each of the past three years -- roughly double the annual totals from a decade ago, according to federal statistics.

The U.S. State Department works with resettlement agencies on the initial placement of refugees. They may ask to live near family members, but they're otherwise generally placed where there are job opportunities, lower costs of living and resettlement agencies with adequate resources to accommodate them. The city maintains a dialogue with resettlement agencies, providing assistance in building capacity.

Louisville's metro government, which partners with the local chamber of commerce, is also working to eliminate bottlenecks for aspiring immigrant entrepreneurs. Immigrants may lack English language skills or the financial knowledge needed to start a business, for instance. Others have insufficient credit, so the city is exploring a program that allows individuals to build credit by paying rent.

Although Louisville's immigrant population remains small compared to other larger cities, its presence has already been felt. Newcomers have added diversity to the city's downtown, opening businesses along the main business corridor. "A strong immigrant and foreign community is one of the bellwethers of a great 21st century city," Warren says.

But he adds that "as the city grows, we're beginning to see the strain of housing options, and the refugee community is no different." The arrival of immigrants is further playing out in the school system, where there's a growing need to focus on foreign language instruction.

Baltimore

After years of gradual population decline, Baltimore set a goal of attracting 10,000 families to the city over the following decade.

Despite the city's challenges, Baltimore's foreign-born population has climbed 18 percent since 2009, while the native-born population has declined 4 percent.

Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake formed a task force of city agencies and community stakeholders that outlined 32 recommendations in 2014, of which the city has completed about a dozen so far. "We've had consistent growth, but it's hard for us to tie it to our initiatives," says Catalina Rodriguez Lima, director of the Mayor's Office of Immigrant and Multicultural Affairs.

A major point of emphasis from the task force was to highlight the role immigrants play as economic engines. Rodriguez Lima's office reports directly to the mayor's economic development team so that it's more nimble than if it were a separate entity.

Much of Baltimore's effort, Rodriguez Lima says, centers around giving current residents reasons to stay. These immigrants, in turn, help lure their friends and family to the city, far more effectively than any publicity. "Ultimately, it really comes down to the person you trust," Rodriguez Lima says. "The messenger is critical."

Detroit

Immigrant-friendly initiatives are well established throughout Michigan as policymakers seek solutions to prop up the state's economy.

Gov. Rick Snyder lobbied the federal government to allocate visas for highly-skilled immigrants. The governor, Detroit Mayor Mike Duggan and other elected officials frequently make public statements on the issue and appear at events.

Steve Tobocman, who heads the regional nonprofit Global Detroit, says that such pronouncements, while they might seem trivial, actually matter a lot. "It's most powerful when it's not just immigrant groups welcoming immigrants," he says, "but when it comes from the mainstream political leadership, economic development departments and chambers of commerce."

Unlike some other regions, immigrant growth areas are now increasingly concentrated outside of the city. Between 2009 and 2014, Detroit lost an estimated 23,000 foreign-born residents.

Meanwhile, the foreign born population increased 20 percent in nearby Warren and Sterling Heights, and 10 percent in Dearborn. Tobocman attributes this to immigrants moving out of Detroit and the federal government placing new refugees to live near their families in suburban communities.

As is the case elsewhere, it has been difficult to link any outcomes to specific policies or local initiatives. Global Detroit, however, did recently evaluate a statewide initiative aimed at attracting international talent to help employers fill shortages in the information technology and engineering fields. A study found steady increases in international student enrollment at the University of Michigan and Michigan State University. Optional practical training visas used by graduates of four Michigan universities rose approximately 60 percent from 2011 to 2014.

Columbus

Columbus was one of the nation's earliest adopters of immigrant-friendly outreach. Officials first took up the issue in the mid-1990s, and efforts have since shifted more to capacity building and support for various organizations that serve immigrants.

The city experienced an estimated 27 percent jump in the foreign-born population between 2009 and 2014, compared to an average increase of 9 percent for cities with over a half-million residents. About 11 percent of Columbus residents are now foreign born -- more than other larger cities in the region -- a fact Velasquez, the New American Initiative coordinator, attributes to the city's early work on the issue, along with the ample supply of jobs, affordable housing and higher education opportunities.

Like Dayton, Columbus is welcoming recent immigrants who've relocated from Chicago, Los Angeles, Minneapolis and other more prominent immigrant hubs. They've formed new neighborhoods of Bhutanese immigrants, among other newer groups.

The competition for immigrants hasn't stopped cities from collaborating. Representatives from Akron, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Columbus, Dayton and Toledo regularly share ideas as part of the recently-formed Ohio Welcoming Initiative.

"For so long, we all felt we were doing this work alone in our cities," Velasquez, says. "Now, we have a support group to help."

Foreign Born Population Data

About the data A total of 301 localities with populations of at least 100,000 were included in this report. Two Census datasets measuring the foreign-born population were used: 2005-2009 American Community Survey five-year estimates data and 2010-2014 American Community Survey five-year estimates. While this provides only a limited snapshot in time, the Census Bureau's one-year estimates published for some cities have much higher margins of error. Other published data estimate international migration, but these sources are less comprehensive and fail to account for secondary migration.