

National Journal

THE NEXT AMERICA | ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

Come One, Come All

Shrinking American cities are increasingly betting their economic futures on immigration.

8 May 2014

Sophie Quinton



In need of newcomers: Detroit. (Jeff Kowalsky/Bloomberg via Getty Images)

Each month in St. Louis, one immigrant who was an engineer in his or her home country but isn't currently working in the field is invited to the Engineers' Club's regular networking dinner. The practice began earlier this year, after the club met with the St. Louis Mosaic Project, a public-private partnership founded by civic leaders to get the whole city working together to promote St. Louis as an immigrant-friendly place. The project has also been working to make it easier for some 6,000 international students at local colleges to find jobs in the area when they graduate, by persuading the Regional Business Council to include international students in its internship program, for example.

St. Louis is hardly alone in rolling out the welcome mat for immigrants. Over the past half-decade, many cities in the Midwest and beyond have been looking to boost their declining populations and strengthen their local economies by making their communities as enticing as possible to new arrivals from other countries.

Such efforts—from Ohio's Welcome Dayton initiative to the nonprofit Global Detroit—have become so common, in fact, that groups representing 20 metro areas, from Buffalo, N.Y., to Minneapolis, will head to the Global Great Lakes conference in Pittsburgh this June, where they'll swap ideas on promoting immigration as an economic-development opportunity. Pittsburgh's new mayor, William Peduto, who made welcoming immigrants part of his campaign platform, will speak at the event.

The population loss has been traumatic, says Anna Crosslin, president and CEO of the International Institute of St. Louis, a refugee- and immigrant-resettlement agency. "Because of that, there simply aren't enough individuals to buy goods and services that others in the community want to be able to sell," she says. A declining population skewed toward retirees also means a smaller tax base.

St. Louis civic and business leaders got serious about making a pro-immigration strategy part of the city's economic-development efforts in 2012, spurred by research from then-Saint Louis University professor Jack Strauss. Through statistical analysis, Strauss found that St. Louis's income growth would have been greater, housing prices would have been higher, and more new businesses would have been formed over the previous decade if immigration had occurred at a higher rate, comparable to those of other major cities.

Strauss's report also noted that immigrants to the U.S. now tend to be either lower-skilled or higher-skilled than native-born workers. Because they have different skills, those immigrants tend to complement, rather than supplant, existing workers—a finding that cuts against the common belief that more immigrants will mean fewer jobs and lower wages for locals. In fact, in earlier work, Strauss had analyzed census data and found that immigration from Latin America improves wages and job opportunities for African-Americans living in the area.

Immigrants also often create jobs for themselves and others: The Small Business Administration has found that immigrants are more likely than others to start and own their own businesses. And a 2010 study by McGill and Princeton researchers found that immigrants patent inventions at twice the rate of native-born residents because they're more likely to have expertise in science, technology, engineering, or math.

Local business and civic leaders obviously can't reform the nation's immigration system—only the federal government can increase the number of employment-based visas available or create a path to citizenship for undocumented residents. And, unlike Canada, the U.S. doesn't allow people to apply for residency in specific areas of the country—although some Midwest leaders wish it would. (Earlier this year, Michigan Gov. Rick Snyder, a Republican, asked the federal government to approve 50,000 additional visas over the next five years for skilled immigrants destined for Detroit.)

But cities can do some things themselves to better support existing immigrant communities and to encourage new arrivals—and they're doing them. "People are recognizing this opportunity right now, while our federal government is dealing with much bigger politics," says Steve Tobocman, director of Global Detroit and a former Michigan state representative. "And folks are saying, regardless of whatever happens on the national scene, there are things we could be doing to improve our economic future."