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# THE EMERGENCE OF THE GLOBAL HEARTLAND

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# ABOUT HEARTLAND FORWARD

HEARTLAND FORWARD'S MISSION IS TO IMPROVE ECONOMIC PERFORMANCE IN THE CENTER OF THE UNITED STATES BY ADVOCATING FOR FACT-BASED SOLUTIONS TO FOSTER JOB CREATION, KNOWLEDGE-BASED AND INCLUSIVE GROWTH AND IMPROVED HEALTH OUTCOMES. WE CONDUCT INDEPENDENT, DATA-DRIVEN RESEARCH TO FACILITATE ACTION-ORIENTED DISCUSSION AND IMPACTFUL POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS.



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A major shift in the demographic evolution of America is occurring, largely out of sight in the national media, but profoundly affecting communities throughout the Heartland.

**The 20 state region,<sup>i</sup> which extends between the Appalachians and the Rockies, has for generations been largely unaffected by the massive movement of people from abroad that has so dramatically transformed the great metropolitan regions of coastal America.**

In the national media, the Heartland represented a region, as the New York Times<sup>ii</sup> described it, as 'not far from forsaken,' a depopulating place where the American dream has come and gone. Others have seen the region as an unreconstructed mecca for intolerance, one that had few immigrants and poor race relations, and seems destined to suffer for it. As one professor<sup>iii</sup> at Vanderbilt suggested recently, the region was "dying from whiteness," and that its "politics of racial resentment is killing America's heartland."

Perhaps it is time to change that narrative. Over the past decade, the Heartland's share of the foreign-born population has risen from 23.5 percent in 2010 to 31.1 percent in 2019. This shift can be seen in many Heartland communities, some such as Louisville, Columbus and Nashville, have seen their immigrant populations swell more than 40 percent from 2010 to 2019, often helping to reverse generations of demographic decline. They are now growing their foreign-born populations faster than such historic immigrant hubs as New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Boston and Philadelphia.





The reasons include many factors also seen in our previous studies on entrepreneurs<sup>iv</sup> and millennials:<sup>v</sup> lower costs, economic growth and better access to good schools. Perhaps the most underappreciated may be the spirit of friendliness that has been cited by the vast majority of the people we interviewed. For people who have migrated great distances, and sometimes at personal risk, the reception in the Heartland—sometimes described as a hotbed of nativist and xenophobic attitudes<sup>vi</sup>—often instead has been both warm and inspiring.

“Each immigrant comes with different potential and dreams,” observes Ahmed Elkhady, a half Palestinian, half Egyptian resident in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, known as the Motorcycle Imam, who works with underprivileged children. “I have big hope in this first migrant generation. They come with unique perspectives from all over the world. They come to grow in a new place they get to help create.”

This shift in migration is good not only for the Heartland but also for the nation. Spreading new talent to areas that need it, it also takes the pressure off already overcrowded areas. For too long, essentially since the 1970s, the Heartland, with the notable exception of Texas, was on the sidelines in the nation’s demographic transition, leaving a large part of the country facing much slower population growth and rapid aging. It is on the sidelines no longer.



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## INTRODUCTION

In the period of Western expansion, immigrants, mainly from Northern Europe and Scandinavia, settled much of the country's vast western plains.

**The immigration from these countries was not as restricted as from Eastern and Southern Europe and Asia. During the 1920s and beyond, the flows of newcomers essentially dried up. Decades of economic and demographic stagnation followed, as many local residents left but few newcomers came.**

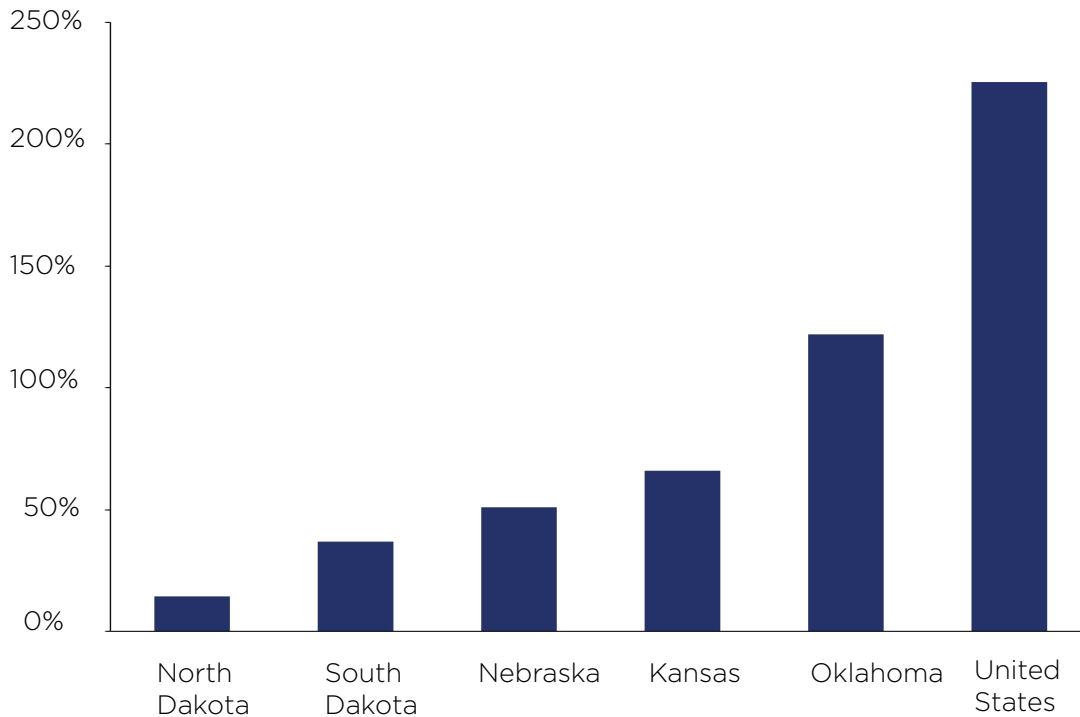
This is illustrated by the 1910 to 2010 population trend of the Great Plains states, four of which grew at less than one-fourth the national rate. Only southern-most Oklahoma grew more quickly. The losses were most severe outside metropolitan areas, although most metropolitan areas eked out small gains. Overall, for decades, people were leaving places like North Dakota, reducing tax revenue, and leaving a residue of boarded-up buildings, abandoned farmsteads and empty houses.<sup>vii</sup>

One native, the legendary newsman Eric Severeid, described the region as “a large rectangular blank spot in the nation’s mind,” a place that seemed to him “some cruel mistake, a lost and forgotten place upon the far horizon of my country.”<sup>viii</sup> By the early 2000s, many assumed that large parts of the Plains would be abandoned—what the *New York Times*<sup>ix</sup> labeled as “an epic failure”—and turn back to becoming primarily a home to Native Americans and Buffalo. This concept was memorialized by New Jersey academics Frank and Deborah Popper of an emerging “Buffalo Commons,”<sup>x</sup> largely abandoned by the European settlers and unattractive to all other migrants, native or foreign.





## Population Growth in Great Plains States and the U.S., 1910-2010



Yet widely unrecognized by academics or the media, this long period of demographic stagnation is coming to an end. It started with the area's rapid development of refugee services in the late 1970s, following the Vietnam War; rural areas began attracting Hispanic immigrants<sup>xi</sup> in large numbers by the early 2000s, helping to erase losses among the majority Anglo population. By the first decade of this millennium, small towns and rural areas actually grew three times faster than urban areas, although at barely half the national rate.<sup>xii</sup>

Through the stories of both individuals and communities, we honor the immigrants and their contributions throughout the Heartland. As with the first settlers during the Western expansion, their stories reflect determination, resilience and economic opportunity, and their experiences have forever enriched the communities in which they settled. Indeed, immigrants have brought hope and renewal for many Heartland communities through population growth, new businesses, diverse opinions and shared cultural experiences.

## EMERGENCE

When Laolu Davies-Yemitan<sup>xiii</sup> arrived in Houston, a 12-year-old fresh off the plane from Nigeria, he felt very much an outsider.

**“I remember being picked on at school,” he recalls a quarter-century later. “The Black kids at school made fun of me as an ‘African Booty Scratcher.’ We were not considered the cool kids.”**

Davies did find support elsewhere in school from fellow immigrants, most of them from Mexico. “They were outsiders too,” he recalls. “I am Black but not black in the context we see in America. As an immigrant, I shared more with the Latino kids because they were new as well.”

But over time, as more immigrants from around the world arrived, attitudes changed. Today Houston is no longer defined by the decades-old, often troubled relationship between African American and white-non-Hispanic populations. It is now widely considered the most diverse major metropolitan area<sup>xiv</sup> in the country. In 1960, Harris County,<sup>xv</sup> which includes Houston and many of its suburbs, was 70 percent white-non-Hispanic and 20 percent African American. Today, the county’s total population is 31 percent white-non-Hispanics, 42 percent Hispanic, 19 percent Black and 8 percent Asian. The share of foreign-born Houstonians has blown up, while the average for the nation’s 50 most populous metros is 14.5 percent.

“Driving down any major road in Southwest Houston,” said Anima Adjepong,<sup>xvi</sup> a doctoral candidate in sociology at the University of Texas at Austin, “whether on Westheimer, Bissonnet, Gessner or Fondren, it is impossible to miss the signs for African grocers (no country specified,) churches with names of Nigerian pastors and restaurants, interspersed with shop signs in Spanish, Indian grocers, and Pakistani tailors, along with signs advertising lawyers and accountants from these countries.”

Houston has the fifth largest African population<sup>xvii</sup> in the country, some 60,000 strong, with Nigerians constituting the largest group. They have



also been among the most successful, most notably as entrepreneurs. They possess the highest levels of education in the region, according to Census data bolstered by an analysis of 13 annual Houston-area surveys conducted by Rice University.<sup>xviii</sup>

“In the past, you would go to New York, but people have found life was very challenging there,” Davies recalls. “It’s hard to find a place to live. By the 1990s, people started going to places like Houston, which have lower entry costs for housing and better business environments. Getting that first apartment, or a lease for a business is so much easier.”

Davies, now 38, lives in Houston’s historic African American Third Ward and has been part of that process as a developer building housing in this predominately minority community. He has already completed eight projects and has two more under development. Numerous locals are celebrating the community, with at least 10 restaurants<sup>xix</sup> serving varieties of “fu fu,” a popular West African dish.

“Places like Houston are now very welcoming. They have robust population growth, and it’s a place that is very welcoming to someone who needs to get that first apartment or job,” Davies-Yemitan notes, who has 10 different projects going on in the metro and a family network that has grown to 35 people. “Houston is now an immigrant city, and we are part of it. We are the cool kids now.”



**“IN THE PAST, YOU WOULD GO TO NEW YORK, BUT PEOPLE HAVE FOUND LIFE WAS VERY CHALLENGING THERE,” DAVIES RECALLS. “IT’S HARD TO FIND A PLACE TO LIVE. BY THE 1990S, PEOPLE STARTED GOING TO PLACES LIKE HOUSTON, WHICH HAVE LOWER ENTRY COSTS FOR HOUSING AND BETTER BUSINESS ENVIRONMENTS. GETTING THAT FIRST APARTMENT, OR A LEASE FOR A BUSINESS IS SO MUCH EASIER.”**



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## THE GREAT RETURN

# The movement of immigrants into Houston has been impressive and transformative for that metro.

**Still, it also reflects a much greater, more extensive movement of the foreign-born to the South, the Midwest and the Great Plains. Each metro in these regions has experienced an enormous uptick in foreign migration—one that will transform both the Heartland and the nation as a whole.**

The trends are unmistakable. Although the Heartland overall still lags the national average in terms of share in foreign-born, it has been catching up dramatically. In 2010 the Heartland had 23.5 percent of the non-native-born population; today, that number reaches 31.1 percent. This rise has been more marked in certain areas, like Houston, but is spreading across the vast region.

The main hotspots, not surprisingly, are parts of the Heartland that have experienced the most robust economic growth. This is somewhat different than the long-standing migration of wealthy people<sup>xx</sup> to an “amenity region;” the key driver here is not the scenery, although it helps, but economics. Over the past decade, some of the nation’s fastest job growth has taken place in Heartland metros like Nashville, Cincinnati and Dallas-Fort Worth. The wide range of job fields include business services and manufacturing. The current movement, particularly in the Middle West and the Plains, reprises history. Throughout the nineteenth century, many immigrants chose Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit, and Cincinnati for industrial jobs. But many others moved to smaller towns, sometimes as merchants and often as farmers. According to the 1890 census, for example, North Dakota’s foreign-born constituted 45 percent of the population—the highest foreign-born percentage<sup>xxi</sup> among the states in the Union at that time.

In the early twentieth century, as the nation industrialized, more immigrants went to big cities, including Midwest centers like Cleveland, Chicago, St. Louis and Detroit. When the immigration spigot essentially shut down

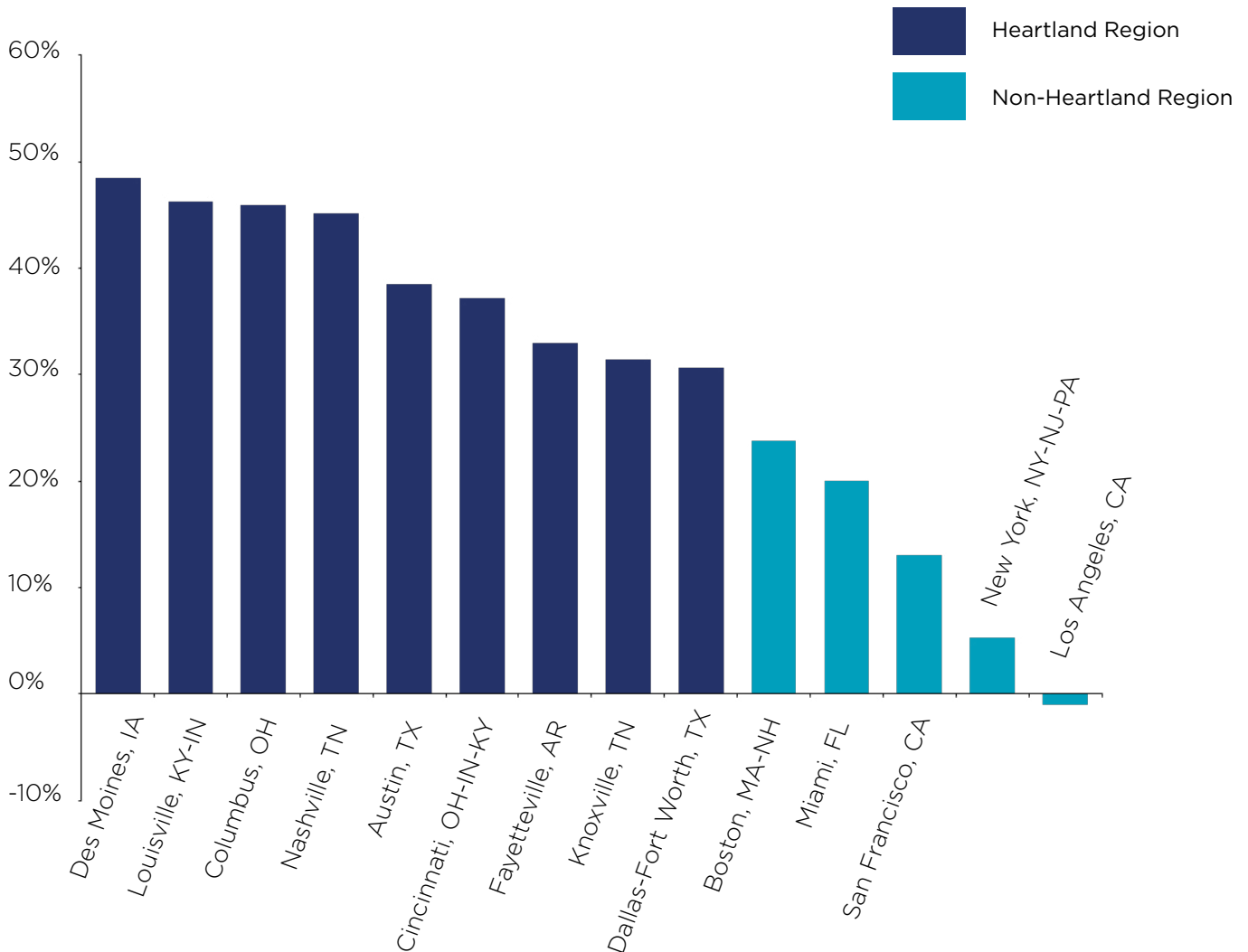


during the half-century after the First World War, then reopened, most newcomers chose to settle in the big metros, most notably the great coastal metropolises of New York, Philadelphia, Boston, San Francisco and, more recently, Miami and Los Angeles.

This preeminence has now passed. By 2010, these coastal metros accounted for 44 percent of the foreign-born population, but that share dropped to barely 35 percent by the decade's end in just nine years (2019.)<sup>xxii</sup> Sunbelt boomtowns like Houston, Dallas-Fort Worth and Nashville may be most conspicuous in their appeal to immigrants. Still, the surge also includes thriving Heartland metropolises like Columbus, Louisville, Indianapolis, Kansas City, Cincinnati and Des Moines. In the past decade, these places have expanded their foreign-born population far more than traditional immigrant hubs such as New York City,<sup>xxiii</sup> Los Angeles, San Francisco and Boston.<sup>xxiv</sup>

## Foreign Born Population Growth Compared

Selected Metropolitan Areas, 2010-2019



Increasingly the globalization of the Heartland is beginning to extend into smaller metros such as Fayetteville, Ark.; Knoxville, Tenn.; Cedar Rapids, Iowa; Springfield, Mo.; and Fargo, N.D. The fastest growth in foreign-born, notes Brookings,<sup>xxv</sup> has taken place in these cities—ironically, many of them strongly pro-Trump—that have had traditionally low immigrant concentrations. Whereas the growth was 10 percent nationally, the growth in states like Georgia, Kentucky, South Carolina and the Dakotas during the decade expanded by 30 percent.

The immigrant wave is transforming these communities. Springfield, Mo., was never much of an immigrant lure, but it has enjoyed a 25 percent growth in its foreign-born population over the past decade. Missouri State University's China program specialist, Sean Gong, says smaller metropolitan areas have become more attractive to immigrants, both for business and lifestyle reasons.

When he arrived, there was only one Chinese church in the area; now, there are three. "People here are friendly and have become more open. People come here to live their lives, and they like the country atmosphere," says Gong, who came to study there in 2004. This is particularly true for people from crowded metros of the developing world, he explains. "In comparison, this is a very relaxing place to be. People are looking for less stress."

"I can't say I experience racism here as an immigrant," notes Architect Angela Shyaka, 24, who is of mixed Polish and Rwandan ancestry. "It's a great place to settle because it is very welcoming, and people are supportive. The dynamic I see here is very encouraging. I would rate it high."



**“I CAN’T SAY I EXPERIENCE RACISM HERE AS AN IMMIGRANT,” NOTES ARCHITECT ANGELA SHYAKA, 24, WHO IS OF MIXED POLISH AND RWANDAN ANCESTRY. “IT’S A GREAT PLACE TO SETTLE BECAUSE IT IS VERY WELCOMING, AND PEOPLE ARE SUPPORTIVE. THE DYNAMIC I SEE HERE IS VERY ENCOURAGING. I WOULD RATE IT HIGH.”**





## THE DEMOGRAPHIC & ECONOMIC IMPERATIVE

According to the World Bank, our primary competitors in East Asia, such as Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, China and South Korea (which has the lowest birthrate of any nation on earth,) face looming demographic challenges due to declining birthrates.

**Declining birthrates jeopardize overall population growth, and nations with declining populations face workforce and fiscal challenges; however, immigration can offset these trends. The United Nations<sup>xxvi</sup> projects population losses of one-third in Southern Europe, and one-quarter in Eastern Europe and just a few percentage points in Western Europe, mostly due to immigration, between now and 2050.**

Until recently, the United States and Canada faced a healthier demographic outlook, posed by both a less dense population (almost everywhere, high-density areas have low birthrates) and rising immigration. Yet, American birthrates have been dropping dramatically in recent years, a pattern accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. A recent study by Brookings<sup>xxvii</sup> suggests the pandemic has driven marriage<sup>xxviii</sup> and fertility rates<sup>xxix</sup> to 50- and 35-year lows.<sup>xxx</sup> Brookings predicts that COVID will result in 300,000 to 500,000 fewer U.S. births in 2021. The lower birth rate is likely to weaken the national economy<sup>xxxi</sup> as workforce growth diminishes.

A declining workforce is not unfamiliar to the Heartland. Currently, unemployment rates are low in most Heartland states. Labor shortages remain all too common, particularly in key industries like agriculture, food processing and manufacturing. Wisconsin Manufacturing & Commerce President and CEO, Kurt Bauer said the U.S. had a shortage of over 600,000 skilled manufacturing workers and a projected shortage of 2.4 million by 2028.<sup>xxxii</sup>

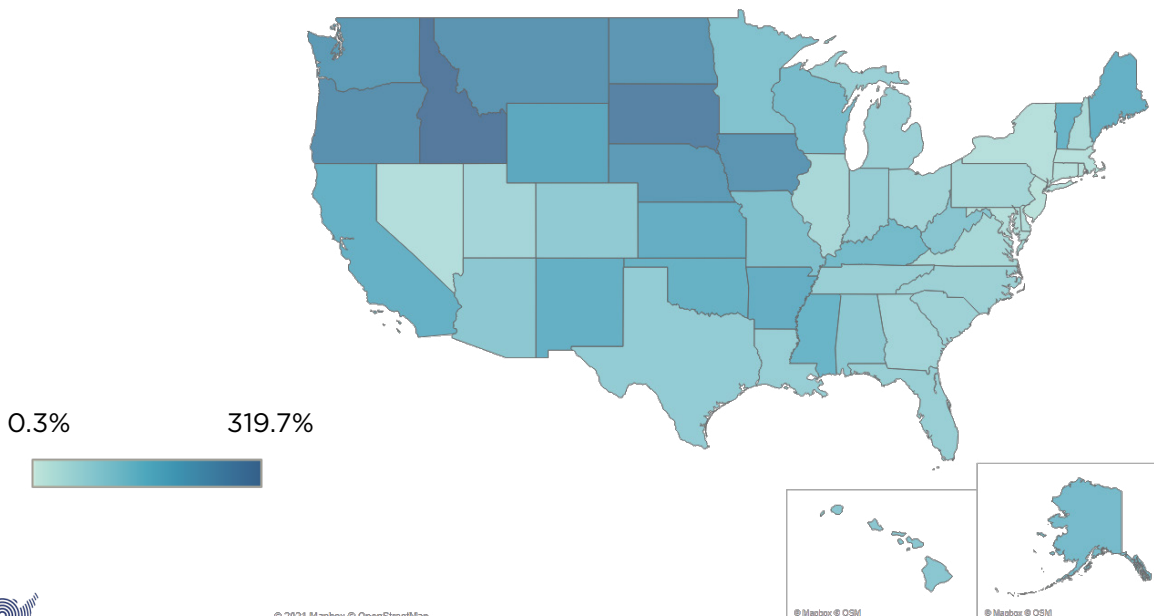
“That is staggering to me,” said CEO Robert Wahlin of Wisconsin-based Stoughton Trailers. “We talk about our challenges of manufacturing self-sufficiency for the U.S., onshoring and all that, and all the national security benefits that come along with that. Without good people... it’s just not going to happen. It’s absolutely critical that we build that workforce, we build that skillset and, after all, it is the heart of manufacturing, and that’s the people.”

It is increasingly the foreign-born and their offspring who can fill these gaps across the Heartland. In Texas, according to a recent study by the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis,<sup>xxxiii</sup> as many as half of all manufacturing workers are foreign-born and constitute over 20 percent in Illinois and Nebraska. In some parts of the Heartland, particularly in old industrial metros like Toledo,<sup>xxxiv</sup> immigrant workers are the only source of labor market growth in an area that is still losing population. The American working class—the people who have sustained us through the pandemic—is increasingly multi-racial, mainly due to immigration. Today, barely 58 percent of all working-class Americans are white-non-Hispanic; according to a 2016 Economic Policy Institute<sup>xxxv</sup> study, people of color will constitute the majority of the working class by 2032.

Foreign labor is critical to a host of essential industries in the Heartland, which is far more dependent on these core industries. The Heartland, according to Chmura estimates for the first quarter of 2020, are 11 percent more dependent on agriculture and 49 percent more dependent on manufacturing than the rest of the country. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, immigrants are already over-represented in these fields relative to native-born whites.

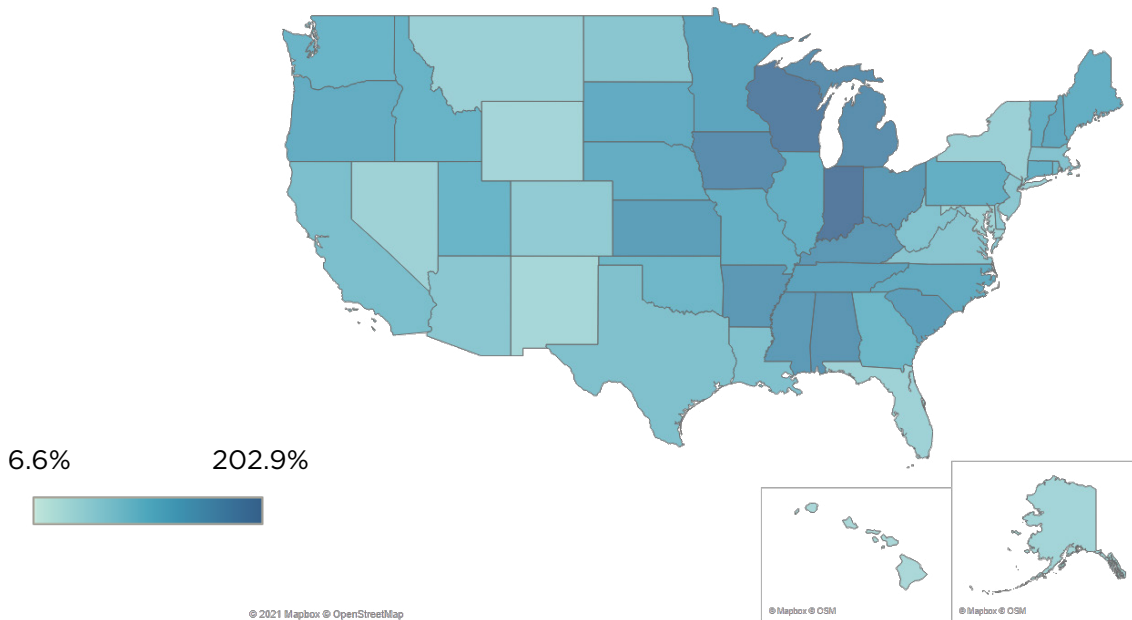
## Concentration of Agricultural Employment Relative to the U.S.

1st Quarter 2020



# Concentration of Manufacturing Employment Relative to the U.S.

1st Quarter 2020



“We have empty jobs everywhere,” suggests Steve Clark, President and CEO of the Fayetteville, Arkansas Chamber of Commerce. “So, we just find somebody with a pulse. Statistically, today there are probably 9,000 open positions in Northwest Arkansas..... Now, they are not the world’s greatest jobs. That is why they’re open. You know? If you are an eviscerator at a chicken plant, for example, you’re sucking the guts out of that chicken. That is not a real fun job to do for eight hours, but there’s a job that pays about \$11 - \$19 per hour.”

The need for foreign-born labor is evident even in remote places that, until recently, had few immigrants. WCCO Belting, based in rural Wahpeton, North Dakota, has seen a surge of orders from industrial and agricultural clients, in part due to COVID concerns. It has added jobs to his 200-employee plant, half of whom are female and where 14 languages are spoken, notes company President Thomas Shorma. “It’s not about diversity but productivity,” he suggests. “We just need to get the best people and a lot of them are from somewhere else.”



**WE HAVE EMPTY JOBS EVERYWHERE,” SUGGESTS**

**STEVE CLARK, PRESIDENT AND CEO, FAYETTEVILLE, AR  
CHAMBER OF COMMERCE.**



## BEYOND MEAT PLANTS, OIL FIELDS & FACTORIES

# The newcomers are bringing more than just a sturdy work ethic and blue-collar skills.

Immigrants make up an increasing share of people working in professions that require a college degree in much of the Heartland. For example, in Cedar Rapids, Iowa,<sup>xxxvi</sup> immigrants account for 47 percent of all population growth between 2012 and 2017, according to new research from New American Economy (NAE.)<sup>xxxvii</sup> Still, only 4.4 percent of the population maintained an outsized share in manufacturing and hospitality, where they were 8 percent of the workforce, but over 15 percent of STEM workers. They also accounted for 7 percent of all business owners.

Immigrants may be more likely not to have attended high school, but they are also over-represented among those with college degrees. Almost half of the immigrants<sup>xxxviii</sup> entering the United States between 2011 and 2015 held at least a bachelor's degree, compared to 33 percent before the 2007-2009 recession. This is even more the case in some Heartland communities; according to a recent study by the St. Louis Federal Reserve Bank,<sup>xxxix</sup> 15 percent of Little Rock's immigrants held graduate degrees compared to 11 percent of native-born residents. In St. Louis, Memphis and Louisville, immigrants were almost twice as likely as native-born residents to have a graduate degree.

This trend towards more skilled immigrants has been growing over the past decade, even amidst a slowdown in new immigration and the trend predates the Trump Administration, notes Brookings.<sup>xl</sup> Over the past decade, the foreign-born population's share with a college degree grew 37 percent, and those with graduate degrees expanded by over 50 percent. In contrast, those with high school degrees grew by only 17 percent and those without a diploma actually dropped.

Highly skilled immigrants still face a range of barriers to employment at their skill levels, among them: difficulty getting foreign credentials recognized, unfamiliarity with the U.S. labor market, employers' negative perceptions of the quality of foreign education and work experience, limited English language skills, and a shortage of education programs



to bridge skill deficits. But the critical role of immigrants in high-value industries has been well-documented.<sup>xi</sup> Similarly, about one-fourth of all technology and engineering companies started in the U.S. between 2006 and 2012 had at least one immigrant co-founder<sup>xiii</sup> and more than half<sup>xiii</sup> of the American startups that became companies valued at \$1 billion or more—a category that includes Google, Tesla, Stripe, and Uber. By some estimates, immigrants account for a quarter<sup>xiv</sup> of U.S. inventions and entrepreneurship. According to research by the National Foundation for American Policy,<sup>xiv</sup> citizens of other countries make up the vast majority of graduate students at U.S. universities in electrical engineering at 81 percent, computer science at 79 percent and industrial engineering at 75 percent.

In the past, this largely helped those places that have been the biggest immigrant hubs, such as New York, Los Angeles, and the San Francisco Bay Area, maintain and even expand their populations, and provide a tremendous boost to their economies. “The ten most innovative metros in the United States,” a recent research paper<sup>xvi</sup> points out, “account for 23 percent of the national population, but 48 percent of its patents and 33 percent of its gross domestic product.”

But even before the pandemic, the tech workforce was beginning to disperse. Housing shortages in the San Francisco Bay Area and other high-demand locations become a significant barrier<sup>xvii</sup> to innovation and economic growth and spurred greater inequality levels. In 2019, according to one survey,<sup>xviii</sup> two in five tech workers in the Bay Area were considering a move elsewhere. Between 2010 and 2019, many Heartland metros—Nashville, Louisville, Austin, and Dallas-Fort Worth—were already growing faster than the national average and were outpacing “hubs” like New York, Chicago, or Los Angeles.

COVID-19 has accelerated<sup>xix</sup> this trend as major tech firms, such as Oracle, Hewlett Packard Enterprise, McAfee,<sup>i</sup> Tesla and Dropbox<sup>ii</sup> have moved all or part of their key operations from the Bay Area to sprawling sunbelt suburbs. Perhaps more revealing, notes one recent survey,<sup>iii</sup> is that three-quarters of venture capitalists and tech firm founders expect their ventures to be totally, or mostly, operating online. The largest gains in tech workers last year, according to a study by Big Technology,<sup>iiii</sup> went to places like Madison, Wisc. while leaving the Bay Area. As this transition takes place, Heartland immigrants will play a critical role.

This has been critical to developing new companies like Arcade.com, which provides software services for managers of large companies. Native Australian Dave Cherie,<sup>liv</sup> who came to Dallas from the Bay Area in 2017, never intended to move to Dallas, but he finds it a far easier place to live and attract talent for Arcade. “Before coming here, I didn’t know much,

but that it was in Texas and on the famous TV show,” suggests Cherie.<sup>lv</sup> “San Francisco is beautiful,” the native of Melbourne notes, “but it’s not so hospitable. Texas is more open, and it really welcomes the entrepreneurial spirit. It’s a friendly place for a foreigner; it’s a small, big city.”

But perhaps no sector has been more impacted by immigration than medical services, the importance of which has been greatly evident in the current pandemic.<sup>lvi</sup> The Cleveland Clinic Lerner College of Medicine,<sup>lvii</sup> and elsewhere, projected a shortage of 510,394 registered nurses<sup>lviii</sup> nationwide by 2030. In many communities, immigrants are the most reasonable solution. Immigrant healthcare workers<sup>lix</sup> represent 17 percent of the overall U.S. civilian workforce. They are 28 percent of physicians and 24 percent of dentists, and 38 percent of home health aides. While immigrants accounted for just 8 percent of all workers and 9 percent of healthcare workers in Michigan, their share was three times as high at 28 percent among physicians and surgeons.

In many Heartland communities, the historical lack of new migrants, mainly foreign-born, has exacerbated severe shortages of medical personnel. This is particularly true of rural communities.<sup>lx</sup> Some communities like Springfield, Missouri,<sup>lxi</sup> have taken direct action, offering upwards of \$20,000<sup>lxii</sup> for bonuses. The two leading hospitals alone have 400 nursing vacancies and have been looking abroad<sup>lxiii</sup> for years to fill positions. The Philippines is a prime example of abroad worker outreach.

“We had an aging population on our staff and were struggling to fill the slots,” notes Celeste Kramer, director for Retention and Recruitment for Springfield-based Cox Health. “The immigrants helped us fill them.”



**BEFORE COMING HERE, I DIDN'T EVEN KNOW MUCH BUT THAT IT WAS IN TEXAS AND ON THE FAMOUS TV SHOW,” SUGGESTS CHERIE. “SAN FRANCISCO IS BEAUTIFUL,” THE NATIVE OF MELBOURNE, AUSTRALIA NOTES, “BUT IT'S NOT SO HOSPITABLE. TEXAS IS MORE OPEN, AND IT REALLY WELCOMES THE ENTREPRENEURIAL SPIRIT. IT'S A FRIENDLY PLACE FOR A FOREIGNER, A SMALL BIG CITY.”**





## THE NEW GATEWAYS

# The primary beneficiaries of globalization of the Heartland are its largest metropolitan areas.

**These are often the same places—Dallas-Fort Worth, Nashville, Houston, Des Moines, Indianapolis, and Columbus—that also attract migrants from other parts of the country. They have also experienced more robust economic growth and have recovered jobs faster<sup>lxiv</sup> than their counterparts in the Northeast or West coast. Over the past ten years, these metros have excelled in creating new jobs, and they have recovered better from the pandemic.**

In the past, immigrants are the “canaries in the coal mine” when it comes to recognizing opportunity. In an analysis of metro area foreign-born population, written for Heartland Forward by demographer Wendell Cox, the fastest growth in foreign-born among our largest metropolitan areas over the past decade was over 40 percent, in Louisville, Columbus and Nashville—all in the Heartland. In addition, foreign-born increases exceeded 25 percent in five other Heartland metros, Dallas-Fort Worth, Houston, Austin, Cincinnati, and Indianapolis. These cities are rapidly becoming new critical hubs for new Americans.

Much of this results from superior housing affordability compared to California, the Northeast Corridor, and the Pacific Northwest. More than 85 percent of the difference<sup>lxv</sup> in the cost of living between the more expensive metropolitan areas and the national average is attributable to higher housing costs. Before the pandemic in 2019, the median multiple<sup>lxvi</sup> (median house price divided by median household income) in Oklahoma City was 2.7, Cincinnati 2.8, Indianapolis 2.9, Detroit, Grand Rapids and Columbus 3.1. In Houston, the median multiple was 3.6 and in Dallas-Fort Worth 3.8. The most affordable Heartland metros are roughly triple those in San Diego, Los Angeles, San Francisco and San Jose, and up to double those in Sacramento, Riverside-San Bernardino, Denver, Miami and Seattle.

Lower costs and a rapidly expanding economy with a large, fast-growing corporate footprint<sup>lxvii</sup> create opportunities for small entrepreneurial ventures, suggests Roberto Inetti, a software engineer from Uruguay who

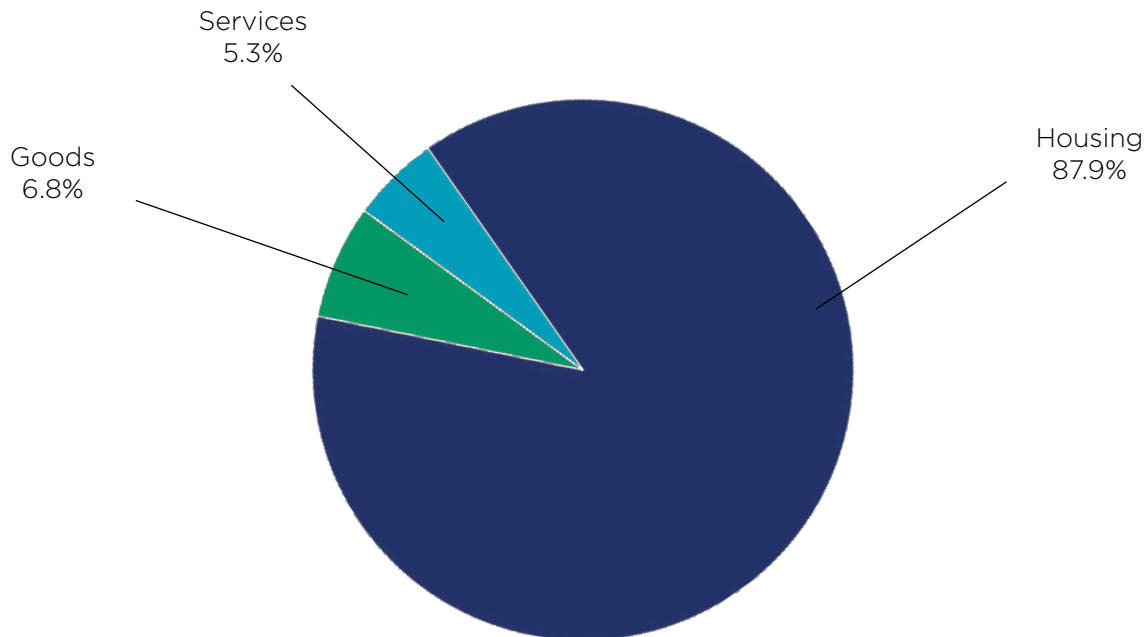
came to the Dallas-Fort Worth metro twelve years ago. His six-person software firm Roboamp, fits in well in the region. “Maybe if I were running a big company, I would go to the Valley,” he suggests. “But with all the firms now here, there’s lots of ways to make connections.”

Like other new Texans, Inetti also is attracted to the local culture, not just the presence of other Uruguayans but also the openness of people and their embrace of growth, critical for the survival of a small business. “I like the people and the food. In fact, I like to drive around and see all the construction; it is exciting—it’s far from boring.”

As we have already seen, this sense of opportunity extends to other key Texas metros, notably Houston and Austin, which are now among the nation’s leading destinations for newcomers. In the past decade, notes Patrick Jankowski,<sup>lxviii</sup> Chief economist for the Greater Houston Economic Partnership, the area added over one million people over the past decade, the majority of them Hispanic and barely one-tenth Anglo. Most Houstonians seem fine with the changes: a 2019 Kinder Houston Area Survey<sup>lxix</sup> shows that diversity is being welcomed into area residents’ homes. “This has become a very different place,” suggests Houston developer Jamal Hourani, who arrived from Lebanon in 1989. “People have always been friendly here, but now people come from everywhere—China, India, Arab nations. Everyone is here for the same opportunity.”

## Source of Excess Costs of Living

(Average of all Metropolitan areas with Cost of Living > 110% of National Average)



## HEARTLAND HOTSPOTS

Perhaps the most dramatic shift has been in the Midwest, including what is widely called the rustbelt.

**An analysis from Reuters estimates<sup>lxx</sup> that without the immigration growth, the city of St. Louis' decade population loss would have been twice as large. But the real stars here are the Heartland metros that are growing, like Columbus, Indianapolis, Kansas City, Cincinnati and Des Moines.**

This growth has attracted foreign-born newcomers, suggests Christine Garcia, who works on refugee issues for US Together, a Columbus organization seeking to help integrate refugees into the community. “A lot of people are headed here now because jobs have been plentiful, and housing costs are low. We have become a prime attraction for immigrants and newcomers.”

According to a refugee household survey, they have become a critical economic resource, indicating refugees are more than twice as likely to start a business as the county population in general. Throughout Columbus,<sup>lxxi</sup> the number of immigrant-run startups grew by more than 41 percent between 2007 and 2012, even as American-born entrepreneurship declined by about 1 percent.

This is particularly evident in the heavily immigrant Northland section of Columbus. When the local mall went out of business, many thought the area was finished, but immigrant businesses popped up to fill the empty storefronts. “When you look at the Somali mall, that was the perfect example of creating an incubator but not having to put a lot of cash up front,” says Guadalupe Velasquez, assistant director for the city’s Department of Neighborhoods. “I would say it is informal; it’s just organic.”

Des Moines, another growing Heartland metro, has also benefited from decades as a major refugee hub. Now it can see some real returns in terms of entrepreneurship and new businesses. Refugee and immigrant-owned businesses throughout Central Iowa contribute \$4.1 billion to the state economy each year, paying \$349 million in local and state taxes. In addition, newcomers are now leaving coastal states, essentially making a



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second migration, to find a better quality of life and better opportunities in the Hawkeye State. “There has been an influx of secondary migrants who have moved to Iowa due to jobs, primarily in meatpacking plants, and to be with their ethnic tribe,” suggests Henny Ohr<sup>lxxiii</sup> executive director of EMBARC, a local nonprofit that provides resources for refugees. “Meatpacking plants aggressively recruit Burma workers.”

As we have seen earlier, the new influx also includes workers in high-tech and other high-value-added industries. Des Moines economic developers focus on the 5,000 foreign students who work in local industries. Although many end up elsewhere, a considerable portion stays in the area while others come from the coasts. Despite making up 5 percent of Iowa’s population, immigrants<sup>lxxiii</sup> represented 10.1 percent of all STEM workers in 2014, including a third of all software developers.

Much the same pattern can be seen in the emerging Heartland boomtown of Indianapolis. The region is home to the largest concentration<sup>lxxiv</sup> of immigrants in the state, and they are rapidly integrating into its burgeoning economy. A full third hold a college degree, and many own their businesses.<sup>lxxv</sup> Like Columbus, Indianapolis has performed very well economically.<sup>lxxvi</sup> It has grown the critical professional and business service jobs more than twice the rate of such traditional power centers like Los Angeles and New York.



Ersal Ozdemir came from Turkey to attend college at Purdue. He did not think, at first, he'd stay in Indiana. "When I lived in Turkey, let's just say I never thought I would end up in Indianapolis," the 46-year-old developer, whose Keystone Corporation has built condos, shops, and offices, particularly in the revitalized downtown area. "But people here took an interest in me—people were really nice and welcoming. A lot of people want to come to New York, but this is a much easier place to live and get around. And it is easy to meet people. And it is very pro-business." Deciding to stay in the Midwestern metropolis, Ozdemir found costs relatively low and opportunities consistently higher. He now employs 110 people full-time, with contractors accounting for 1,000 more workers. "There's so much to do in this city," Ozdemir, who serves on numerous boards, remarks about the place once lampooned as "India-no place." "And it's just going to get better. I don't see myself as an outsider but feel this city is my home."

In much the same way, Nashville, known as the country's music capital, is becoming a major center for immigration. Since 2010, the southern metropolis has soared towards the top in terms<sup>lxxvii</sup> of both overall jobs and the high-end business and professional service category. The foreign-born population has soared by 45 percent. As recently as 1990, barely two percent of the Nashville<sup>lxxviii</sup> population was immigrant, a percentage that increased six-fold in the next 15 years. Their influence was particularly strong in terms of new businesses, as almost one-third of companies in the city's downtown are immigrant-owned.



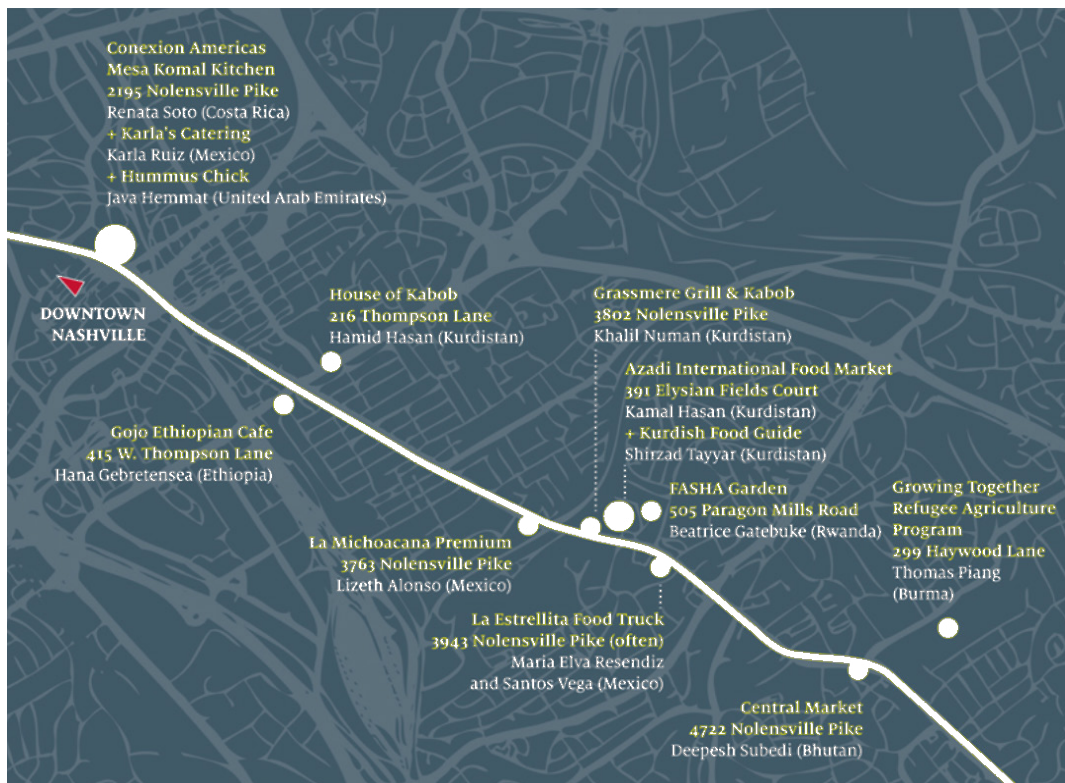
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Nashville may be the country music capital—the epitome of native white-non-Hispanic American culture, but it has become very diverse. The largest presence is Latino,<sup>lxxxix</sup> an estimated 65,000 persons, over 10 percent of the population of the city proper, and Hispanic students already constitute 20 percent of the enrollment in Metro Nashville Public Schools. By the year 2040, 1 in 3 Nashville residents will be Latino.

But Nashville’s diversity is itself ever more diverse. During the 1990s, Kurdish, Somali, and Sudanese<sup>lxxx</sup> refugees began settling in Nashville and finding their way to Nolensville Pike. Violence drove many from their home countries. It has become home to both a sizeable Somali community<sup>lxxxi</sup> and a Little Kurdistan.<sup>lxxxii</sup> Today, the largest Kurdish population outside the Middle East—about 13,000 people—calls Music City home. In the process, Nolensville Road<sup>lxxxiii</sup> became Nashville’s Lane of Nations. A three-block stretch with 42 storefronts of Nolensville, south of the city, went from no businesses owned by immigrants to 22 between 1985 and 2005.

## Nolensville Road: Immigrant Business Ownership in Nashville’s International District



Credit: Southern Foodways Alliance



## THE SOUTH RISES IN MANY COLORS

Perhaps the most surprising shift is taking place in smaller southern metros, many of which have not been major destinations for immigrants for much of the past century.

**Knoxville, 180 miles from Nashville, has been radically transformed from being almost exclusively white-non-Hispanic and African American to a more cosmopolitan population. Knoxville’s foreign-born population grew at more than double the national rate from 2010 to 2019.**

The welcome that immigrants have received in southern metros belies the often-jaundiced view of race relations in the South. Justice Steve Breyer<sup>lxxxiv</sup> compared the region’s past as “a plant disease” that has not disappeared with time. Yet, Liliana Burbano, a Public Health Planner at the Knox County Health Department and an immigrant from Colombia, says the region has been very welcoming and eager to add new cultures to the existing one. “You see a lot of Latinos in East Tennessee, where you see a lot of events, like rodeos, and parties and concerts for Hispanics,” she observes.

This migration is no coincidence. As a recent Urban Reform Institute<sup>lxxxv</sup> study shows, southern metros—Fayetteville, Arkansas; Raleigh, Virginia Beach and Richmond—generally provide higher real incomes for such heavily immigrant groups as Latinos and Asians than more allegedly racially “enlightened” places like New York, Los Angeles or San Francisco. The divergence is particularly marked in terms of homeownership, especially when compared with major metros in California. Home equity accounts for roughly two-thirds of the wealth<sup>lxxxvi</sup> of middle-income Americans, according to the Census Bureau.

But it is not only economics that is driving this shift. Mariana Macedo, the owner of Don Gallo<sup>lxxxvii</sup> restaurants in Knoxville, arrived thirteen years ago from Guadalajara, Mexico. She considered the San Francisco area, but she

decided to invest and start her business in Knoxville. “It was very, very difficult to start here, particularly the first six months. We had a lot of debts with vendors trying to get the business started, plus cultural barriers. Our understanding of the system was so little, and the language was also very difficult,” she recalls. But after about six months, it started to feel a little better. “If I were to advise any investor or new migrant about anything, it is to not give in during the first six months. Stay strong; those are the hardest.”<sup>lxxxviii</sup>

Today her restaurant is thriving and has expansion plans. Although struggling at first, she found businesspeople and customers to be very forgiving and willing to give the newcomers a chance. She credits a lot of that to the positive aspect of traditional southern values, which puts a premium on hospitality. “We have to remember that people in the South are very nice to you. They wave hello when you pass by; they have that style. A lot has to do with the fact that we live in the Bible belt, so that’s why people are very polite and very family-oriented.”

Although she has many Anglo customers, Macedo also sees burgeoning business from her fellow Hispanics, many of whom are coming to work not only in factories and construction but also increasingly in the professions as well. Many come not only from Mexico, but Venezuela, Honduras, and other Latin countries. As we have seen in other communities, the existence of ethnic institutions, such as restaurants and churches, plays a critical role in making it easier for other immigrants to come.



Macedo and others we interviewed for this report see the same basic drivers of the southward migration: lower housing costs, less regulation and a more welcoming environment. It represents an alternative to the realities of coastal metros, where upward mobility is stifled by slow growth and high living costs. Low housing prices, suggests Margarita Solorzano, Executive Director, Hispanic Women's Organization of Arkansas, allows factory workers to afford homes, and a thriving economy provides opportunity for advancement for new companies. Simultaneously, access to education is creating a new leadership class in the area; Springdale, Arkansas, now has its first Latino elected official. "This was a little boy that came from El Salvador," Solorzano marvels.

Once a multi-ethnic laggard, many leaders in southern metros now embrace diversity and look forward to a far more diverse future—not so much out of a surfeit of goodwill. While goodwill exists, diversity is crucial to their future prosperity. "We are a resettlement city," suggests Steve Clark of Fayetteville's Arkansas Chamber of Commerce. "The chamber has a Hispanic heritage festival each year; it's held downtown on the square. We teach five languages in our school here. The metro vision dispels the racial past and seeks a different future. We really want to be a majority minority metro. That is what we want to be. That's from where our full success will come. And we are a couple of decades from that. I think 2030, 2040 probably; I hope not as late as 2050."



**“WE HAVE TO REMEMBER THAT PEOPLE IN THE SOUTH ARE VERY NICE TO YOU. THEY WAVE HELLO WHEN YOU PASS BY; THEY HAVE THAT STYLE. A LOT HAS TO DO WITH THE FACT THAT WE LIVE IN THE BIBLE BELT, SO THAT’S WHY PEOPLE ARE VERY POLITE AND VERY FAMILY-ORIENTED.”**

## RESETTLING THE PLAINS

In many places, the initial changes came through resettling refugees, with Nebraska, North Dakota, Kentucky, South Dakota and Minnesota among the top ten states in per capita refugees resettled.

**Refugee resettlement in Nebraska and North Dakota is about triple the national rate. Of course, the largest states led the way in 2016 for pure resettlement volume, with Texas resettling 7,803 refugees, second behind California. Michigan and Ohio were fourth and fifth, both with roughly 4,200 resettlements.<sup>lxxxix</sup>**

Today these communities have begun to grow again, largely due to the positive disruption brought on by newcomers lured by lower costs and taxes and often better business opportunities. In the Great Plains, much of this stems from an influx of refugees in recent years and partly made North Dakota the fastest-growing state for foreign-born residents since 2010. South Dakota – also among the top ten states for per capita refugee resettlement – ranks second overall in foreign-born growth.

Another factor of the rapid growth in these states is the relative shares of foreign-born remain small; states like North and South Dakota individually have among the lowest percentages of foreign-born among the states, with barely four percent. Yet, the shift could prove particularly critical in coming years and is already making its impact felt in certain communities.

These newcomers have relieved places where, even in bad times, unemployment has been persistently low in recent decades. The newcomers are critical to companies that need to staff up, particularly in fields like manufacturing. A recent study by the Fiscal Policy Institute and Tent Partnership for Refugees found that manufacturing turnover among refugee employees was just 4 percent, much lower than the overall turnover rate of 11 percent.<sup>xc</sup>







“BUT AT THE SAME TIME, I THINK THAT THE CONSERVATIVE RHETORIC, ESPECIALLY OF THE LAST FOUR YEARS, HAS DERAILED THAT SPACE OF WELCOME AND WHO IT’S EXTENDED TO. FOLKS MIGHT ACTUALLY RECEIVE NEGATIVE MESSAGES NOW IN A WAY THAT THEY MIGHT NOT HAVE BEFORE. I THINK THAT THE CONSERVATIVE POLITICS HAVE BECOME WORSE AND STRONGER AND MORE VOCAL IN THE LAST FOUR YEARS THAN THEY WERE BEFORE IN TERMS OF STOPPING AND LIMITING OUR WORK OF BEING WELCOMING AND INCLUSIVE.”

At Retrax, a North Dakota manufacturer, about 12 percent of the company’s workforce are refugees and that share continues to rise. The company made small changes, such as installing foot-washing stations and adjusting shifts to accommodate the Muslim holiday Ramadan. “In my opinion, it’s simple, easy changes,” says the company’s human resource manager Larissa Campbell. She attributes the addition of refugees to the community as a key factor in helping the company grow.<sup>xci</sup> To be sure, newcomers to these small towns do sometimes face some resistance to demographic changes. “I think Nebraskans are proud to offer hospitality to folks,” suggests Deborah McKnight,<sup>xcii</sup> the founding Pastor and Abbot of the Urban Abbey, an Omaha church that works with newcomers. “But at the same time, I think that the conservative rhetoric, especially of the last four years, has derailed that space of welcome and who it’s extended to. Folks might actually receive negative messages now in a way that they might not have before. I think that the conservative politics have become worse and stronger and more vocal in the last four years than they were before in terms of stopping and limiting our work of being welcoming and inclusive.”

Despite the cultural challenges, many in the business community, as elsewhere in the Heartland, have embraced immigration as critical to their long-term success. The reduction in immigration caused by policy changes and the pandemic hit many Heartland industries<sup>xciii</sup> with severe labor

shortages, from restaurants to farms, factories and hospitals. “As we go forward, diversity and inclusion is not an option; it’s not something nice—it’s fundamental to the economic development of our state,” said Bryan Slone, president of the Nebraska Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

The transformative change is evident even in smaller communities like Grand Island, Nebraska, where Hispanic workers now staff much of the meatpacking business. Salvadorans and Cambodians who spent years scratching for work in California heard that jobs in Nebraska were plentiful and the cost of living low. In the city of Grand Island, Nebraska, more than 60 percent of public school students are nonwhite. Their families collectively speak 55 languages in this central Nebraska city of 51,000; in 1992, 50 Hispanics were enrolled in Grand Island’s schools. By 2001, there were 1,600 out of about 7,600 students. Now, Latinos account for more than half of the 10,000 students in the district.

“You wouldn’t expect to see so many languages spoken in a school district of 10,000,” Tawana Grover, the school superintendent who arrived from Dallas four years ago, told the *New York Times*.<sup>xciv</sup> “When you hear Nebraska, you don’t think diversity. We’ve got the world right here in rural America.”

This influx has helped Grand Island<sup>xcv</sup> keep growing its population—up from 30,000 in 1970 to over 50,000 today—a critical factor in a state that has faced a long-term demographic stagnation. Census data shows that Nebraska added only 22 percent to its population from 1970 to 2010, less than one-half the nation’s rate of 51 percent. According to recent projections from the University of Nebraska at Omaha,<sup>xcvi</sup> Hispanic immigrants are particularly important here; their numbers are projected<sup>xcvii</sup> to triple from 2010 and rise from just under 10 percent of the state’s population to close to a quarter by 2050.

Yet, as for the Heartland, the most apparent immigrant hub is Nebraska’s largest metro, Omaha (part of which is in Iowa.) It has experienced rapid business growth<sup>xcviii</sup> over the past few years, and, in 2019, it was the fastest-growing construction market in the country. According to Census Bureau data, it has also experienced rapid foreign-born growth, 28.4 percent from 2010 to 2019, more than double the 12.9 percent national rate. Although only 7 percent of Nebraskans are foreign-born,<sup>xcix</sup> there are wide swaths in the Omaha area that reach over 20 percent foreign-born, with large numbers of households speaking languages other than English. It may not be the turn of the century, Lower Eastside redux, but it is a sign of ethnic change that few would have anticipated.





Some business leaders suggest that migrants also help attract another critical talent group: millennials. Born between 1981 and 1996, millennials<sup>c</sup> tend to have more friends outside their race and often seek out diverse settings in their neighborhoods or their workplaces. A study two years ago by the Institute for Public Relations<sup>ci</sup> found that 47 percent of millennials consider the diversity and inclusiveness of a workplace as important criteria in their job search, compared with 37 percent for boomers and 33 percent for Gen Xers.

Kirk Kellner,<sup>cii</sup> an Omahan who heads Wells Fargo's Nebraska, Kansas, and Missouri region, agreed there are many signs that attitudes in the state are changing. Initiatives like Blueprint<sup>ciii</sup> and the ongoing philanthropic efforts to support school success for children in poverty make him optimistic about the future. "If we can give an equal opportunity to everyone in our community, we will see a diverse workforce," he said. "I do feel the community understands the power of diversity and inclusion."

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## A MORE DIVERSE, & INTRIGUING, FUTURE—IF WE CAN MAKE IT HAPPEN

Ultimately, the new global wave washing over the Heartland represents a great opportunity for the region to regain its place in an ever more diverse America.

**But this cannot be seen merely as an exercise in demographic desperation or economic boosterism; it is reframing an experience, a way to gain back the openness and sense of opportunity that characterized the Heartland in the 19th and early 20th Centuries. This is a natural process observed in Europe,<sup>civ</sup> where newcomers head for opportunities, lower costs, and better living conditions in smaller communities.**

Critical to this process will be action at the local level. In recent years, numerous metros across the Heartland, such as Chicago, Omaha,<sup>cv</sup> Madison, Detroit and Lincoln,<sup>cvi</sup> have initiated programs that focus on integrating immigrants through better access to municipal services, English language training<sup>cvi</sup> and entrepreneurship. A strong response from communities has also been launched in some metros, such as Fayetteville, Arkansas,<sup>cvi</sup> to deal with the surge of COVID-19 cases among refugee and immigrant communities.

Critically, business leads this drive and one possible way to transcend the political divisions that have accompanied immigration discussion. The Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce<sup>cix</sup> economic development plan called for embracing Omaha's increasing diversity as "a community treasure." The chamber also established a new program that seeks to educate Omaha employers on the importance of diversity, setting a goal of helping 100 local firms adopt "best-in-the-nation" inclusive hiring and promotion practices. "As we go forward, diversity and inclusion are not optional; it's not something nice—it's fundamental to the economic development of our state," said Bryan Slone, president of the Nebraska Chamber of Commerce and Industry.



To be effective, more steps need to be taken by companies who have a keen interest in enhancing their increasingly diverse workforce skills. Companies like Tyson Foods<sup>cx</sup>—in an industry where 40 percent of workers are foreign-born<sup>cx</sup>—have worked to help newcomers gain new skills and move up in their companies. This kind of effort across Heartland communities is required to take advantage of the diversifying workforce.

Perhaps most important of all are the actions of immigrants themselves. Darlene Malins, a Haitian native who came to Springfield, Missouri, to go to school in 2000, suggests that the openness of smaller metros and the ability to effect change is more palpable and practical than trying to make changes in a place like New York or Los Angeles. Malins, a bank manager, has been very active in local affairs and the Greater Missouri Women’s Leadership Foundation.

“I have sat on every committee to make the city more inviting to immigrants,” the 42-year-old mother of four suggests. “Here, you can make a difference and move up and change things. I am excited about where we are headed.”

Over time this return to the Heartland may become the unifying force the country needs. Rather than a stagnant and backward-looking region, the Heartland is poised to reinvent and revive itself and, at the same time, expose people to the profoundly traditional American sense of values, community and work that have long been nurtured in these communities.

The Heartland has an opportunity to meld new energy and a spirit of enterprise among the newcomers with the Heartland’s fundamental values. Like the mostly European immigrants who created many of the region’s communities, the newcomers seem ready to add their uniqueness to communities that, in some cases, only now are emerging from decades of demographic and economic decline. It is a new future that beckons one possessing great potential for the middle of our country.



**“AS WE GO FORWARD, DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION ARE NOT OPTIONAL; IT’S NOT SOMETHING NICE—IT’S FUNDAMENTAL TO THE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT OF OUR STATE,” SAID BRYAN SLONE, PRESIDENT OF THE NEBRASKA CHAMBER OF COMMERCE AND INDUSTRY.**



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