

Immigrant Integration and Gateways for Growth: Comparative Perspectives



Conclusions from a Conference

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Cities and regions across the globe are facing new realities of mass immigration. This movement of peoples, and the consequent mixing of cultures and traditions, present both opportunities and challenges, and cities and regions are still struggling with the new realities. There is widespread consensus that *integrating* immigrants into the mainstream of life is the best course of action, rather than allowing or encouraging unequal societies to develop—but how should this be done?

Successful integration on the city or regional level requires understanding the nature of the immigrant population--especially immigrant national origins and skill levels. But it also requires careful attention to public perceptions of the impacts of immigration and the dissemination of facts, and the understanding that all major sectors of society—including government, business and schools-- can and should play a role.

These are the main conclusions held at a conference at the University of California-San Diego on November 13. The conference, organized by the Yankelovich Center for Social Science Research and the Center for Comparative Immigration Studies, assembled international, national and local experts from academia, business and the advocacy world to advance our understanding of immigrant integration on the local level. The occasion was an informal kick-off to the City of San Diego’s successful application for the “Gateways for Growth” grant from New American Economy and Welcoming America. The grant is to enable the collection of data on immigrant contributions to the economy and to also craft a strategic plan on immigrant integration. Though the event focused on San Diego, the insights could benefit any city or region (a full list of speakers is at the end of this report).

San Diego presents unique challenges and opportunities. It hosts a vibrant tech economy that greatly utilizes international talent, the region welcomes the largest refugee settlement in the nation (about 85,000 since the Viet Nam War), and shares a dynamic, interconnected border economy with Mexico.

A fuller exploration of the conclusions from the conference presenters and audience members follows. A list of conference presenters and suggested readings can be found at the end of this report.





Successful integration means that natives and immigrants have equal opportunities

Framing the issue: immigrant integration

Several experts laid out some of the most important factors to frame the issue of immigrant integration. First, the primary goal of immigrant integration is not to reduce difference or spur cultural homogenization, but to reduce differences in opportunity--the chances of individuals to get ahead in life. In any society with a capitalist economy, there will be inequality, but cities succeed at immigrant integration when there are few differences between immigrant opportunities and opportunities for natives, and when all are embraced as potential contributors. Put another way, cities succeed when they grow inclusively.

Why is integration more successful in some places than others?

Not all places are equally successful at this. International rankings based on a variety of integration measures put the U.S. below Canada--and both below Sweden. Why the variation in success? Though cities and regions around the world are facing similar issues of often rapid increases in their immigrant populations, every city has a different profile. Between countries and within them, and even within the same state or geographic area of a country, immigrant profiles vary. One recurring issue is that origins matter—and places that receive immigrants from only one or two origins, rather than a wide diversity of places, face particular challenges in avoiding parallel societies from developing. Skill levels also matter, with highly-skilled immigrants typically more easy to integrate than the lower-skilled—though the highly skilled, just like American citizens, face threats from their skills falling out of date, particularly in technology.



The importance of perceptions

In addition, perceptions are also important, and in particular, perceptions of immigrants as valuable additions to communities. Studies show that immigration is a net positive for economies, though the effect is small, and there may be variation between short-run and long-run impacts. In many places in the U.S., such as Louisville, KY, population growth is coming solely from immigrants. Where immigrants are adding value, this must be acknowledged, and if they are not, the problems need to be honestly addressed and the big picture kept in view.

Getting multiple sectors involved

Another reason for the variation is that integration is sensitive to—and depends on—how communities respond to the demographic changes. The mainstream institutions of a society matter greatly: School districts, universities, and the government’s social safety nets vary considerably in their functioning to integrate immigrants. But there are key roles for non-governmental actors to play as well. As one speaker put it, “a total system response” is best for integration—an effort that involves pillars of civil society, such as businesses, faith-based organizations, and labor unions. In our discussion, however, two sectors stood out more than others: business and education.

A “total system response” is best for integration, involving government and civil society



The role of businesses

Like many metro areas, San Diego's innovation economy is growing faster than other business sectors, and like many other cities, San Diego benefits from major research universities in the region. Universities supply highly skilled workers and create spin-off companies. But the innovation economy in San Diego shares problems with others such as Silicon Valley's: it tends to create jobs at the high and low ends of the labor market, contributing to a shrinking middle-class. In San Diego, for example, about 70 percent of new jobs were below average wages. Given that the city has second highest cost of living in the country—a problem exacerbated by the scarcity of affordable housing-- it is not surprising that local studies show that 1 million San Diegans cannot make ends meet.

Businesses are recognizing the economic value of immigrants in regional economies



Businesses focus on the bottom line— and can also build stronger communities

This, of course, creates special challenges for immigrants—but some businesses have risen to the challenge. They recognize the importance of immigration in dollars and cents: In San Diego alone, immigrants contribute about \$17 billion in spending power. In 2016, they paid about \$7.5 billion in federal taxes and \$2.1 billion in state and local taxes. They constitute more than 65,000 entrepreneurs in a thriving economy. Organizations such as Business for Good San Diego push for policies that help their bottom lines, but also promote good for workers and the wider community. Immigration is a key issue, and these and other firms are worried about federal policies making it harder for immigrants to integrate. Their efforts range from the small (as simple as creating “All are welcome” posters in ten languages) to large, such as organizing for the successful push for the Gateways for Growth grant.

Both big and small integration efforts matter in a thriving innovation economy

An innovative program for refugees helped integrate them into the local economy in a small but significant way—as growers and sellers of produce. In so doing, the effort helped create a functioning “lifeworld” and some independence among this new and especially vulnerable population.

But gardens are not just a business opportunity for refugees—the garden is a good metaphor for an economy, much better than a pie. This is because growing economies need fertilizer and care, and all of the eco-system’s parts must work together. Immigrants can play a role in this growth. Silicon Valley’s challenges in creating inclusive growth can offer lessons for any cities with growing innovation economies. In Silicon Valley as in San Diego and any American region with a tech sector, Latinos and African Americans remain underrepresented, which is a problem both for businesses and for the education sector.



The best metaphor for regional economies is the garden or eco-system, which needs attention and care

The role of education

Education also plays a key role in the integration process. This is hardly surprising given the importance of education in the socialization of all young people. Some cities, however, can present unique challenges to the integration process of immigrants. The education of San Diego’s large refugee population highlights some do’s and don’t’s regarding education and immigrants. For example, some refugees come to America from places with extreme poverty, and students, who may be anxious to fit in like most young people, lack familiarity not just with American culture, but even contemporary technology, such as smartphones and washing machines.

When refugee families are experiencing a culture shock that is near total, it is important for them to assume roles beyond passive recipients of information. It is beneficial if they can be experts on *something*. Educational practices geared toward immigrant empowerment and involvement can pay great dividends, including the valuing of perspectives of both the students and their parents.

Education that values immigrant and refugee perspectives can play great dividends



Education for unstable immigrant households

Another challenge is the unstable or transient nature of some immigrant households, particularly those with parents in low-skill jobs. In San Diego, this problem is especially pronounced due to the tightly integrated border region where over half of San Diego K-12 students are Latinos and families frequently move back and forth between Mexico and the U.S. In Tijuana, 11 percent of 9th and 10th grade students have lived and studied in the U.S. at some point, and 21 percent of 9th and 10th grade students in the San Diego Unified and border-straddling Sweetwater school districts have lived and studied in Mexico. Large percentages of these kids have trouble integrating into schools when moving between the two countries. About half of these students in San Diego struggle with instruction in English and 35 percent of these students in Tijuana struggle with instruction in Spanish. But private and public sector leaders on both sides of the border have realized that these students, having familiarity with American and Mexican cultures, can be great assets to the binational, regional economy. A network of practitioners and organizations has emerged to identify solutions for these students, including creating a STEM pipeline where Tijuana can be a low-cost site for R&D that powers the San Diego tech economy.



Border economies present educational challenges and opportunities

What can cities and regions do to help immigrants integrate?

The Gateways for Growth grant is typically a spur to cities and regions to establish offices for immigrant integration. Such offices have emerged in different places around the country, typically for three different reasons. First, they emerge to defuse social tension, such as in Atlanta, Nashville and other places in the South. Second, they emerge to attract immigrants. This has occurred in Pittsburgh and Dayton. A third reason they develop is to integrate, such as in cities that have long attracted immigrants: New York, Los Angeles and Chicago. These offices can—and perhaps must—play key roles because the U.S. has no national immigrant integration policies.

Creating successful immigrant integration offices

What makes these offices successful? As discussed at our conference, scholars have identified a variety of factors. For instance, a mayoral champion helps, as does a strong, public message on both the economic and moral value of being a welcoming place. Getting law enforcement involved in the integration effort pays dividends, as does promoting the civic engagement of immigrants, among other practices.



*Cities promoting
immigrant
integration can
learn from each
other*

Political integration: naturalizing and voting

Some of the onus, of course, is on the immigrants themselves, and their advocates. Immigrants and those interested in amplifying their political voice must start the long, complex, and sometimes expensive process of gaining citizenship. Immigrant advocacy organizations in some cities have successfully helped eligible immigrants file for citizenship, registered them to vote, and carried out effective get-out-the-vote campaigns. Enlarging the immigrant-origin electorate--including the second generation who were born in the U.S.-- is a key to greater responsiveness from the political system.

A model from the United Kingdom: The Migration Observatory

Related to some of these efforts is the model provided by the University of Oxford's Migration Observatory . The purpose of this organization is to bring together immigration facts in a non-partisan manner to inform policy debates and be a trusted source for anyone wishing to understand immigration. Cities can benefit from similar--if smaller-scale--efforts, providing data and information to residents who are concerned about the effects of immigration or just curious about trends and developments.



A clear message from the speakers and participants in the workshop was the importance of communication—clarity and honesty in dealing with the opportunities and challenges of large-scale immigration. Immigration can yield tremendous benefits to host cities and regions, and immigrants may receive the rights and opportunities that are part of the American Promise, but achieving these goals requires awareness, effort, and informed policies.

FOR FURTHER READING

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Business for Good San Diego

<https://businessforgoodsd.com>

Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies, “Education and Migration”

<http://usmex.ucsd.edu/research/education.html>

Critical Refugee Studies Collective

<http://criticalrefugeestudies.com>

Gateways for Growth

<http://gatewaysforgrowth.org>

The Migration Observatory at the University of Oxford

<http://www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk>

Welcoming San Diego

<http://welcomingsd.org>



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