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20 U.S. Cities with the Most Immigrants

by *Richard Florida*

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Which cities have the most immigrants and foreign born citizens in America? Richard Florida and his team crunch the numbers to come up with a surprising list—Phoenix is only 14—and explore why these cities benefit from high immigrant populations.

The country is watching as the new Arizona immigration law goes into effect today, and the debate on the debate is likely to get even more heated as Washington takes up nationwide immigration reform.

Arizona Governor Jan Brewer answers that her state is in a crisis; it is “under attack from violent Mexican drug and immigrant smuggling cartels.” But Arizona’s major metros don’t rank high up on the list of America’s immigrant or foreign-born cities.

Click Below to View our Gallery of the 20 U.S. Cities With the Most Immigrants



VIEW MEDIA

That’s according to data from the U.S. Census’ American Community Survey which my Martin Prosperity Institute team used to identify the 20 U.S. metros with the largest percentages of foreign-born people. (The census surveys include all foreign-born people in the U.S., including both legal and illegal, though some contend that illegal immigrants avoid being counted and thus are subject to an undercount).

- Brvan Curtis: Arizona’s

Arizona's largest metro area, Phoenix-Mesa-Scottsdale, does make it

Immigrant Death Spiral

onto the list but only at No. 14 and behind New York, Washington, D.C., and Chicago. According to this data, only 16.6 percent of the population in the greater Phoenix area are immigrants—which is just at or slightly under the average for the top 100 metros in the country, according to Brookings Institution calculations, and not much above the 13 percent average for the nation as a whole. Greater Miami leads the nation in the percentage of immigrants, but California's high-tech mecca of San Jose-Sunnyvale-Santa Clara—the Silicon Valley—is close behind in second. High-tech centers like Boston, Seattle, and Austin also make the list of America's top 20 large foreign-born metros (those with over one million people).

While most people see immigrants as lower-skill workers taking jobs away from Americans and pushing down wages, the reality is that a large share of foreign-born people have high levels of education, high levels of skill and the inventiveness and entrepreneurial zeal that adds much to the American economy.

The reality is that immigrants add much more to our economy than they take from it. As Vivek Wadhwa wrote in Bloomberg Businessweek last year, though they "constitute only 12 percent of the U.S. population, immigrants have started 52 percent of Silicon Valley's technology companies and contributed to more than 25 percent of our global patents. They make up 24 percent of the U.S. science and engineering work force holding bachelor's degrees and 47 percent of science and engineering workers who have Ph.D.s."

A third of all graduate students in America are immigrants—*half* of those in engineering, computer and life sciences. And between 1985 and 1999 almost a third (32 percent) of America's Nobel Prizes in chemistry were awarded to immigrants.

Immigrants also compose a key source of American entrepreneurs, from steel magnate Andrew Carnegie to Intel founder Andy Grove. Over the past two decades, between a third and half of all Silicon Valley startups had a foreign-born person on their founding team—think of Google's Sergey Brin, Hotmail's Sabeer Bhatia, Yahoo's Jerry Yang, and eBay's Pierre Omidyar. This is what venture capitalist John Doerr was talking about when he said that America should "staple a green card to the diploma" of any immigrant who gets a degree in engineering. Even more than natural resources, American ingenuity or other factors, what stands at the heart and soul of U.S. prosperity was its openness to hard-working, ambitious, and talented immigrants of all stripes.

And that includes low skill immigrants. Anti-immigration activists like ex-Congressman Tom Tancredo and pundits like ex-CNN newsman Lou Dobbs cling to the belief that immigrants take jobs and hold down wages by providing a "reserve army" that can be called in to work for next to nothing, the numbers tell a starkly different story—in fact they make Americans more productive. Careful studies by economist Giovanni Peri of the University of California at Davis find that immigrants add to American prosperity for the simple fact that: "The skill composition of immigrants is complementary to that of natives." At the low end of the spectrum, immigrants specialize in "manual intensive tasks such as cooking, driving, and building," that Americans tend not to do, specializing, in turn, "in language-intensive tasks such as dispatching, supervising and coordinating." At the high end of the spectrum, immigrants bring scientific, technical, and entrepreneurial skills that are in short supply and vital for America's innovative and entrepreneurial engine.

President Obama has urged the country to move beyond the "two poles" of the immigration debate. But a just released Gallup poll finds that a plurality of Americans both favors Arizona's new law and opposes the federal government's constitutional challenge.

The real danger for the U.S. isn't having too many immigrants—it's not having enough. Times of economic crisis like the one we are going through now are when the flow of talent shifts from old to new centers of opportunity.

It used to be that the world's most skilled and ambitious people wanted to come to the United States. But that's changing now. Since the onset of the economic crisis the flow of both high-skill and low-skill immigrants to the U.S. has slowed. Both perceive a combination of greater animosity and restrictiveness, less opportunity in the U.S., and more opportunity back home. And other places are upping their game in the competition for global talent. More than

45 percent of the population of the city where I now live, Toronto, are immigrants (including me). In Vancouver, the level is almost 40 percent—higher than any American city. And few in Canada raise any concerns and many see it as a good thing.

We can try to send our immigrants back where they came from. Some of them are already leaving under their own steam. But we do so at considerable risk to our present and future prosperity.

Charlotta Mellander crunched the numbers. Patrick Adler provided research assistance.

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