



How immigrants helped save the economy of Akron, Ohio

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Walk down Main Street in Akron, Ohio's North Hill neighborhood and you can buy jewelry from Nepal, a shirt from Bhutan, and a latte at a hipster cafe.

Over the past several years, the city has become a virtual melting pot as a steady influx of immigrants and refugees from countries like Bhutan, Uzbekistan, Syria and Iraq have started calling Akron home.

And they couldn't have come soon enough.

Like many Rust Belt cities, Akron was hit hard when the manufacturing jobs -- especially in the auto and tire making industries -- started disappearing in the early 2000s. Once the jobs were gone, the population started shrinking.

But in recent years a growing number of immigrants have started moving in. Between 2007 and 2013, Akron's foreign born population increased by 30.8% from 7,208 to 9,426, helping to stem what could have been a devastating population decline, according to a study by a bipartisan group of 500 mayors and business leaders called the Partnership for a New American Economy.

"We were losing people like most Midwestern cities," said Akron's mayor Daniel Horrigan. "The foreign-born people are helping us. They want to send their kids to school, they buy houses and they pay taxes."

President Trump campaigned hard on the idea that immigrants threaten American communities, take away jobs and abuse government benefits like housing assistance and food stamps. And he promised to crack down on immigrants who rely on these benefits.

"Those who abuse our welfare system will be priorities for removal," Trump said in a speech in August.

But Horrigan believes Trump's stance is all wrong. In fact, he says, immigrants have bolstered Akron's community.

In 2013, Akron's immigrant population held close to \$137 million in disposable income and paid about \$17 million in state and local taxes, representing close to 5% of the total tax contributions, the Partnership for a New American Economy study found. About 35% of Akron's foreign born residents are homeowners, compared to 53% of the area's American-born population.

"When I see a group that thrives, I have to be supportive of that," Horrigan said. He noted that his own grandfather immigrated to the area from Bari, Italy, in 1918.

Akron's North Hill neighborhood, where many refugees and immigrants come to live and open businesses, is near the International Institute of Akron, which operates a refugee resettlement program that provides English classes, job placement help, immigration counseling and refugee resettlement assistance to immigrants.

The program, which officially began operating in 1979, has been responsible for many of the area's new residents. Refugees now represent more than a quarter of the area's foreign born residents.

The new arrivals have kept Akron's working population young as the city's aging baby boomers retire. Many of them are working in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) jobs or they are opening businesses -- and creating jobs.

Muhammad Hammad, a Palestinian immigrant who has been living in Akron since 1996, is a naturalized citizen and owns a car dealership called Cedar Auto Group that employs five people.

He said the immigrants he knows may have required some assistance when they first arrived, but they typically get jobs after a few months and don't have to rely on the benefits for long.

"I see more people losing their lives from gun and drug problems," said Hammad. "These are the real problems that the president should be focusing on."

According to research by the libertarian Cato Institute, low-income immigrants use public benefits like Medicaid or food stamps at a much lower rate than low-income native born citizens. And one high-level employee with Summit County's public assistance program, which administers federal benefits in Akron, said refugees tend to find employment and get off assistance much faster than other clients.

Another Akron resident, Khaldon Al-Falih, immigrated to Ohio from Syria in 1982.

Al-Falih graduated from Youngstown State University with a degree in civil engineering. After working in Florida for about ten years, he returned to Ohio to be close to his family. He's lived in Akron since 1995 and is married with five children.

Al-Falih, who is now 55, said that he and his wife have worked hard to achieve the American Dream. He now owns a graphic design firm that prints banners, signs and other advertisements. Besides he and his wife, the firm employs one installer. "Our goal is to give our kids a better life than we had."

A naturalized American citizen, Al-Falih said he is disappointed with Trump's anti-immigration rhetoric and executive orders and says Muslims, in particular, are being unfairly profiled.

"We need to prevent bad people from coming here, but it doesn't matter where they're from and the way it was handled was wrong," he said.

Twice a month, Hammad and his mosque organize dinners with the local interfaith community. "We invite them here and we talk together and it's going beautiful," he said. "We came here and we're staying here forever."