

# The CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR®

## Can refugees save a town?

*Refugees have infused a new sense of energy into Akron, Ohio, as it battles population decline. President Trump's temporary refugee ban is a concern.*

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With its imported prosciutto and branded pasta sauces, Devitis Fine Italian Foods is an enduring symbol of the migratory patterns on which this city's fortunes were built. A century ago, Italians jostled with Irish and Polish families pouring into North Hill, not far from the hulking tire plants that fed Detroit's automakers.

A mile away, Naresh Subba is the new face of immigration in Akron. He opened his grocery store in 2011, catering to refugees from his native Bhutan and elsewhere whose recent influx has restocked a fading neighborhood. The store has expanded, adding a snack counter and more space for pulses, rice snacks, and the flower garlands that brighten Bhutanese festivities.

"We like this place. It's very, very welcoming," says Mr. Subba.

Since 2007, Akron has welcomed about 3,500 refugees, mostly from Bhutan, along with thousands of other foreign-born migrants. That's a modest slice of total United States immigration, which exceeds 1 million a year. But the resettlement of working-age refugees has become a lifeline for cities like Akron that are struggling to hang onto their workforce and revive urban districts. That pits them against President Trump's controversial effort to cap refugee flows and suspend all resettlement from Syria.

While Trump's temporary ban on visa holders from seven Muslim-majority countries got the most political pushback, his clampdown on refugees could prove more lasting. His executive order – stayed by a federal court on Feb. 9 – set a limit of 50,000 refugees to be admitted in the year to Sept. 30, down from President Obama's target of 110,000, the highest target set since 1995. Obama had raised the ceiling in response to the growing number of people worldwide displaced by conflict.

For Dan Horrigan, the mayor of Akron, the timing of Trump's order was awkward. On Feb. 6, he launched an initiative to expand the city's population of 200,000 by giving tax breaks to developers to build downtown and in neighborhoods blighted by foreclosures and demolitions. The city was built for a larger population, but instead of shrinking its footprint – as cities like

Detroit have been forced to do – Mr. Horrigan, a Democrat, wants to hit 250,000 by mid-century.

New arrivals, including refugees and immigrants, who skew younger and have more kids, are essential to this vision.

“We’ve been that land of opportunity, and that’s one of the ways we can grow our population by being attractive to immigrants and refugees. They’ve started businesses. They’re going to our schools. There’s a definite economic impact,” says Horrigan.

The economic impact

Other cities are even more reliant on refugees to support their economies. In the city of Erie, Pa., refugees make up around 18 percent of the population of nearly 100,000, one of the nation's highest concentrations of refugees, reports The Wall Street Journal. Other small and medium-size metro areas that have resettled significant numbers of refugees in recent years include Utica, N.Y.; Amarillo, Texas; and Bowling Green, Ky.

In Akron, the impact is positive, according to The Partnership for a New American Economy, a pro-immigration advocacy group. It calculates that Akron’s foreign-born population, including refugees, had a combined annual spending power in 2013 of \$137 million and paid more than \$17 million in state and local taxes.

It found that their presence had stabilized Akron’s housing market and helped keep manufacturers in the area since refugees are more likely to take these jobs. At the other end of the income scale, foreign-born workers are disproportionately likely to work in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics jobs.

That was the path that Subba was on, before he found himself in the grocery business. Born in Bhutan, he was among hundreds of thousands who fled to camps across the border in Nepal in the early 1990s. In 2002, he came to the US to study and earned a doctorate in nuclear physics at Kent State University. A long illness forced him to leave a post-doctoral program, but he remained in the US, which under President George W. Bush began resettling Bhutanese refugees.

Subba’s family eventually resettled in Akron, so together with his brother and a nephew he invested \$60,000 to start Family Groceries in 2011. “The Bhutanese population kept growing and they had a need for this food,” he says, gesturing at the shelves of Asian dried goods and fresh produce.

The store now has six full-time employees and serves hundreds of customers daily. Most are immigrants from Asia and Africa, but young urbanites also poke around the store, says Subba. Another local draw is a Nepali restaurant opened by a Bhutanese transplant.

Admittedly, they are a trickle compared with the waves of immigrants that built Akron. Today, less than 5 percent of Akron’s population is foreign-born, well below the national average of 13 percent. But their influx has staunched the city’s population decline, which fell by 1 percent between 2007 and 2013.

## Why Akron?

North Hill is a draw largely due to the presence of the International Institute of Akron, a nonprofit that helps new arrivals to find housing and jobs. Many adult refugees end up working for immigrant-owned businesses or local manufacturers, including a chicken processing plant, says Liz Walters, the institute's director of community outreach.

Their children attend local schools, which have seen rising enrollment among foreign-born students, in some cases averting planned closures. More than half of the 900 students at North High School are non-native English speakers.

The school is now piloting a districtwide plan to convert high schools into college and career academies, including a health-care program that has received funding from Akron Children's Hospital.

Hospitals are major employers in Akron, and immigrant labor is essential to meet demands across the service economy, says Ms. Walters. "We live in a state that's getting older. So where is the workforce going to come from?" she asks.

National studies of immigration have found a positive impact on economic growth and limited evidence that the influx of new workers causes lower wages or employment rates for native-born workers.

The fiscal picture is more nuanced: First-generation migrants may cost more in terms of public services, as their children are educated and their incomes are lower, but subsequent generations tend to contribute more in taxes than they get back. The Cato Institute, a free-market think tank, found that poor immigrants receive fewer welfare dollars than native-born citizens.

"People are here for the sake of their children," says Subba, whose eldest son is serving in the Marines. "They want to settle down and build a foundation for the kids."

Not everyone is happy to see new faces in Akron. At public meetings, Walters hears criticism that refugees are a drain on the public purse and could pose a security threat. But she says the reaction in North Hill, where the newcomers are most visible, is positive. "Most of the neighborhood is happy to see the houses fill up and businesses come in," she says.

Nicholas Devitis is the fourth generation working in the family-owned deli, which for decades has stood on a main road near North High School. He has nothing but praise for the refugee families who are moving into the neighborhood. They tend not to shop for fancy dried goods at Devitis, he says, but their spending power is rippling outward in other ways.

Take the small street of weathered single-family homes that runs adjacent to the store's parking lot. Between them, Mr. Devitis and his relatives owned five houses on the street. Now that's just one: the other four were sold to immigrants; the other is being rented to another family.

This is how you grow the city's population, he says. "If it means more foreigners and refugees, so be it. Someone needs to live in Akron."

