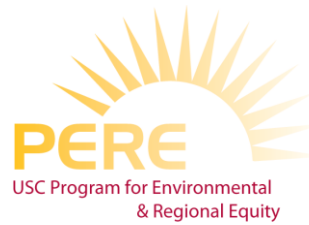


# The Sustainable Communities Initiative



## EQUITY IN SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES ISSUE BRIEFS



### EQUITY ISSUE BRIEF Executive Summary

## Immigrant Integration: Integrating New Americans and Building Sustainable Communities

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# Executive Summary

*This brief is one in a series that PolicyLink and the USC Program for Environmental and Regional Equity (PERE)/Center for the Study of Immigrant Integration (CSII) are assembling for the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development’s Sustainable Communities Initiative (SCI). The series is intended to support a learning community of regional and local governments focused on integrating equity (economic, social, and environmental) into their plans, policies, and projects. In this brief, we cover how planners and policymakers can help foster mobility, participation, and openness by convening conversations around immigrant integration and mapping the landscapes of labor, housing, and transportation in ways that are inclusive of immigrant concerns and aspirations. A full-length version of the brief can be found [here](#).*

## What Is Immigrant Integration?

Immigrant integration is defined as **improved economic mobility** for, **enhanced civic participation** by, and **receiving society openness** to immigrants, their families, and their communities, and requires the participation and transformation of immigrant newcomers and the host communities in which they settle.

## Current Landscape of United States Immigration: Who Are the Immigrants?

Immigrants have long played a role – an ever-changing one – in the culture and economy of the United States. During the past 150 years, the flows of immigrants have shifted as have the countries from which they come, and the places in which they settle.

- **Immigrants come from geographically, culturally, and linguistically diverse regions.** Our neighbors, Mexico and Canada, continue to be among the top senders, as well as Asian countries like the Philippines, India, and China; a growing number come from the African countries of Ghana and Ethiopia.
- During the past decade, **the immigrant share of the population has remained steady** at around 12 percent of the population. The slowdown in the immigrant growth rate means that in many communities, immigrants are not so much newcomers, but are more often the well-settled.
- Major urban centers, like New York and Los Angeles, are still significant entry points for immigrants, but **new immigrant hubs have developed** in other U.S. cities like Baltimore, Atlanta, Las Vegas, and Orlando, as well as in unlikely states, including Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, South Dakota, and the Carolinas.
- **Homeownership rates** – one indicator of a burgeoning middle class – among immigrants **surpass those of the U.S.-born** as their years of tenure in the U.S. increase. However, newly arrived immigrants are more likely to be poor and/or working poor than the U.S.-born.

### Immigrant Integration and Sustainability

**Integrating immigrants and building sustainable communities go hand-in-hand** – from their positive impact on the economy and the environment to their use of public transit, immigrants are key to building a sustainable future.

**Economy:** PERE’s analysis of the Urban Institute’s MetroTrends database reveals a positive correlation between immigrants and job creation; more immigrants equal more jobs. With their high rates of labor force attachment and disposition towards entrepreneurship, immigrants are likely to prompt employment and production and attract others to the economy.

**Environment:** Immigrants’ concern for global warming, air pollution, and water and soil contamination and willingness to push for environmental action in their neighborhoods provides insight into how immigrant communities might become new leaders in environmental sustainability.

**Transportation and housing:** Many immigrants are bringing to fruition dreams of more sustainable development by living in the urban core and using public transit. Their “greener” lifestyles should be encouraged and used as a model for others.

## *Regional Goals and Objectives: So How Do I Achieve Immigrant Integration?*

### **1. Increase economic mobility for immigrants, their families, and their communities**

Socio-economic mobility is a cherished aspiration of American society. Research shows that immigrants are a major part of a diversifying America, and many are highly educated. However, many are often relegated to low-skill and low-wage occupations with limited opportunities to move up the economic ladder – and even the most highly educated often find challenges in translating degrees earned in their home country into credentials accepted in the U.S. labor market. In order to change this:

- Create partnerships with community-based organizations, higher education institutions, and professional associations to increase access to employment and professional development opportunities.
- Encourage and develop mechanisms that allow immigrants – citizen and otherwise – to start small businesses that serve your region’s market needs.
- Partner with financial institutions to facilitate homeownership and fixed-loan qualifications among immigrants and U.S.-born residents most impacted by the recession.
- Incorporate other minority communities, particularly African Americans, in microfinance and other economic kick-start strategies. Immigrant integration efforts will be less effective (or even fail) unless existing, struggling communities’ needs are addressed.
- Example: [Building Skills Partnership](#) – an organization enhancing mobility for low-wage workers in California.

### **2. Increase opportunities for civic participation by immigrants**

Immigrants, as residents of our communities, need to participate in America’s civic life – and there are ample opportunities for civic organizations, businesses, and government to encourage participation. To increase civic engagement:

- Recognize and address the potential barriers for members of immigrant communities, such as limited language proficiency.
- Invest in programs that help immigrants complete the naturalization process by providing English as a second language (ESL) and civic classes, assistance with the application process, and fee waivers.
- Engage immigrants – even before they naturalize – in Get-Out-the-Vote (GOTV) efforts in order to develop the practice of democracy and electoral engagement.
- Highlight churches, community groups, and schools as effective sites for immigrant integration regardless of citizenship status. These institutions are often centers for local civic participation and should be equipped to encourage immigrant civic engagement.
- Involve immigrants and their neighbors in city planning, K-12 education improvement efforts, and decisions that impact their communities.
- Example: [New Americans Citizenship Project](#) – a cross-sectoral coalition promoting naturalization in Maryland.

### **3. Increase warmth of welcome to immigrants and their families**

America prides itself on its openness to people and ideas. It is this sort of openness that will allow us to accommodate change and build a framework that can make the most of what immigrants and their families can offer to our broader regional, social, and economic health. To set or change the tone:

- Address and dispel public misunderstandings and stereotypes about immigrants. Local, state, and regional leaders should work with the media and other opinion leaders to reframe images and conversations about immigrant newcomers.
- Collaborate with academic and research institutions to generate reports highlighting immigrants’ economic and social contributions.
- Convene a coalition across regional and local agencies to address the importance of government’s responsibility for immigrant integration, and reach out to those (such as faith-based organizations) already engaged with community groups at the local level.
- Support cultural events and welcoming initiatives which help introduce neighbors and educate non-immigrants on the benefits and diversity of immigrants.
- Example: [Welcoming America](#) – a national collaborative creating open, receiving communities across the U.S.

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