

February 5, 2013 2:40 pm

US cities in decline embrace immigrants

By Anna Fifield in Baltimore, Maryland

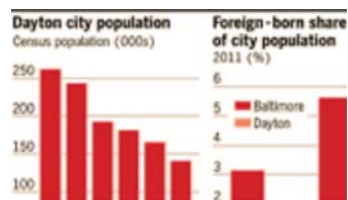


Pathway to citizenship: Hispanic residents walk by a law office specialising in immigration

Miguel Garcia wonders how Hispanic immigrants to the US manage to live in Arizona, Alabama or Georgia.

“I can’t imagine how they live in those states with all those laws, just living in fear,” says the 22-year-old, who came to the US from Mexico a decade ago.

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“Baltimore is super friendly. The Latino population has grown and it feels very comfortable here, like there is more opportunity and more freedom,” says Mr Garcia, sitting in the rumble-jumble offices of Casa de Maryland, a community group that helps Hispanic immigrants settle in.

A mural that Mr Garcia painted shows scenes of Washington and Baltimore, with signs like “let us live out dream”.

President Barack Obama has put comprehensive immigration reform, including a pathway to citizenship for the 11m illegal immigrants in the US, at the top of his legislative agenda this year.

The push faces a rocky ride through Congress. It must also contend with open hostility from some southern and western states that in recent years have introduced harsh laws aimed at driving out illegal immigrants.

But some parts of the country are mounting their own push to attract immigrants rather than repel them.

Cities blighted by decades of population decline and urban decay – from Baltimore in Maryland to Dayton, Ohio, and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania – are encouraging immigrants to move in, regardless of whether they have papers or are undocumented, as is Mr Garcia.

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“To get Baltimore growing again, it makes sense to look at what made us grow in the first place: the strength of our immigrants,” says Stephanie Rawlings-Blake, the Democratic mayor of Baltimore, who wants to attract 10,000 new families to Baltimore over the next decade.

She hopes the new families will boost income and property tax revenues and create jobs, helping to reinvigorate the economy.

“No one is giving credit to the job creators,” she says. “If you go out into the city, you will find restaurants and stores run by our foreign-born population and each of them creates jobs and enhances the cultural strength of the city.”

Baltimore certainly needs the help. Its population has declined steadily for the past five decades and the city has become notorious for its high crime rates and boarded-up houses, as featured in the gritty television drama series *The Wire*.

To show that she was not differentiating between kinds of immigrants, Ms Rawlings-Blake last year signed an executive order prohibiting any city official from asking residents if they were in the country legally.

Tim Riordan, the city manager in Dayton, whose population has almost halved since the 1960s, had a similar idea.

“My research says that immigrants are more than two times as likely to be entrepreneurs as native-born Americans,” says Mr Riordan, who has overseen the introduction of a “Welcome Dayton” programme aimed at attracting new immigrants. “I don’t think Sears is going to suddenly create 3,000 jobs here but we can have a grow-your-own economy.”

Mr Riordan said he had the idea when a hardware store owner told him about the immigrants who were coming in to buy a window at a time, gradually renovating their houses as they earned the

money to do so.

While he is hoping that immigrants will set up businesses and create jobs, Mr Riordan notes there is a limit to what the city can do to encourage that.

“We don’t have any money to incentivise people,” he said.

The business impact of immigration is one that Mr Obama highlighted last week when he launched his push for comprehensive reform, saying immigrants “helped build the greatest economic engine the world has ever known”.

The economic value of attracting new immigrants is still a heavily debated topic.

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A Brookings Institution study found that immigrants are 30 per cent more likely to establish new businesses than American-born citizens.

But Steven Camarota of the Centre for Immigration Studies, which lobbies for limits of immigrant flows, says cities are likely to bear more costs than benefits from such policies. “They’re less likely to pay taxes and more likely to use social and health services” than the American-born population, he says. “They would be better off trying to attract the middle class to return.”

David Kallick, director of the immigration research initiative at the Fiscal Policy Institute, contends that it is better to have low-wage earners living in cities such as Baltimore and Dayton than to have a ghost town with boarded-up houses.

“Immigrants are more likely to start ‘main street businesses’ like grocery stores that attract people to the area and create a local economy,” he says.

For new arrivals like Yakov Girmay, a 26-year-old refugee from Eritrea who arrived in Baltimore in 2010, the city’s approach is making his transition to life in the US smoother.

“When I first came here there was fear in northeast Baltimore because there were some bad people around,” he says. “But they tried very hard for the new people and now it feels safer than it used to be.”

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