Baltimore's hope: Immigrants

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Body

The fate of Baltimore may rest with ***immigrants*** like Alexandra Gonzalez.

A native of Puebla, Mexico, Gonzalez feels more at home in Baltimore with every passing year. She attends city-run nutrition and exercise classes in Spanish and takes her two young children to a Spanish-language storytelling hour at her neighborhood library. She plans to earn a GED and become a teacher.

"I like living here," said Gonzalez, 24, as she pushed a stroller holding her sleeping 1-year-old daughter and bags of purchases from a dollar store in the blue-collar Highlandtown neighborhood. "They don't look at you weird because you don't speak English."

The degree to which Gonzalez feels welcome is no accident.

After decades of seeing the city's population slide with every census count, Baltimore officials are trying to turn things around. One key strategy is embracing ***immigrants***, in the ***hope*** they will encourage friends and family to join them.

Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake (D) has told Latinos, in particular, that she is counting on them to help Baltimore gain 10,000 families within a decade. As a first step, she signed an order in March prohibiting police and social agencies from asking anyone about immigration status - and in the order, she explicitly asked federal immigration authorities to tell anyone they arrest that they are not agents of the city. Baltimore joins an increasing number of U.S. cities, most of them manufacturing behemoths fallen on hard times, that are courting ***immigrants*** to reverse half a century of population loss.

The Global Detroit effort includes programs that help ***immigrants*** start small businesses, get driver's licenses and learn English. As part of the Welcome Dayton Plan adopted last year, the Ohio city sponsors a soccer tournament for ***immigrant*** teams. Not to be outdone, Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel (D) says he wants his home town to be known as the most "***immigrant***-friendly city in the country." The welcome mats thrown out by struggling cities and states stand in stark contrast to the reception ***immigrants*** have faced in places such as Arizona and Alabama. There, laws requiring police to ask a person's immigration status have raised concerns about racial profiling among many ***immigrants***, whether or not they are in the country legally, and many have left because of the stricter laws, as well as the recession.

In the Washington region, Prince William County saw a drop in its ***immigrant*** population, both legal and illegal, after it mandated that police make immigration checks.

Baltimore has undergone a shift in attitude. In 2004, then-Maryland Comptroller William Donald Schaefer (D), a former mayor and governor, chastised ***immigrants*** who don't speak English well after a Spanish-speaking cashier at a McDonald's had trouble understanding his order.

"I don't want to adjust to another language," Schaefer said. "This is the United States. I think they ought to adjust to us."

Eight years later, Baltimore and many other cities are adjusting.

The 2010 census was a tipping point. Most cities that grew had Hispanics and, to a lesser degree, Asians to thank. Cities with few ***immigrants*** lost political power and federal money as district lines and funding formulas changed to reflect new census numbers.

"The census has shown cities definitively what the population trend is," said Margie McHugh, an immigration expert with the nonpartisan Migration Policy Institute. "It got a lot of smart people in city and state governments looking 10 years ahead and thinking hard about what the economic future for cities could be."

In Michigan, former state House majority leader Steve Tobocman (D) heads Global Detroit, built around the idea that immigration can drive an economic rebound. The group plans to provide training in how to start "micro enterprises" and has created a "welcome mat" network of social service agencies that offer English and citizenship classes. It ***hopes*** to draw both entrepreneurial engineers who graduate from the state's universities and working-class ***immigrants*** who can start small neighborhood businesses.

"***Immigrants*** have a lot to contribute to job creation and economic growth," Tobocman said.

Most of the ***immigrant***-friendly measures around the country are in their infancy, so it is difficult to assess how effective they are. Philadelphia, for example, saw its population grow for the first time in 60 years after the mayor ordered police in 2009 not to ask about immigration status, but the rise in Hispanic and Asian residents that was responsible for the increase might have happened anyway. Hispanics and Asians are the two fastest-growing groups in the country, more because of their higher birth rates than to immigration.

Critics of 'sanctuary cities'

Critics say cities that lure ***immigrants*** end up with high numbers of undocumented migrants. That also is difficult to measure, particularly now that immigration from Mexico, the largest source of illegal immigration, has dwindled to essentially zero.

The census does not ask immigration status, so it is not possible to say how many of ***Baltimore's*** 45,000 foreign-born residents are here legally. But the Pew Hispanic Center estimated that in 2010, Maryland had the nation's 10th-largest population of unauthorized ***immigrants***.Del. Patrick L. McDonough (R-Baltimore County) said he is consulting with Judicial Watch, a conservative think tank, about whether Rawlings-Blake is "aiding and abetting" people who are in the country illegally.

McDonough said the mayor's order in effect creates a "sanctuary city" that will draw undocumented ***immigrants*** who will compete for jobs with current residents. ***Baltimore's*** unemployment rate tops 10 percent; for African American men, it is at least double that.

"For the mayor to want to increase the population of Baltimore City in principle is an admirable thing," McDonough said. "But by going after people who don't have a lawful presence, and all of the accompanying cultural and criminal issues associated with that policy, you are counterproductive. You're going to discourage people who live in the city from continuing to be there."

Immigrant outreach - such as the city-run classes in Spanish - is just one part of the mayor's agenda for growing Baltimore. She has programs that aim to improve public schools, reduce crime, cut property taxes and create jobs, increasing the city's appeal to all residents. The mayor's order has been her only action aimed at ***immigrants***, though other initiatives are being considered.

"What we want to do is attract ***immigrants*** who call home and say: 'Maybe you should think about coming to Baltimore. I'm having a great time here,' " said Ian Brennan, a mayoral spokesman.

Widespread support

Support for the policy appears to be broad.

"I agree with her policy in terms of trying to increase the city's numbers," said Del. Curtis S. Anderson (D), chairman of the city's House delegation in Annapolis. "Her idea now to reach out to the non-documented population is one way. But I don't think it's the most important thing she's doing."

More important, he said, is reducing the property tax rate and creating jobs.

Ryan O'Doherty, another mayoral spokesman, said the city has several pillars of economic strength offering jobs at all skill levels: Johns Hopkins University, the port and tourism.

As if to underscore the urgency of stemming the city's population dive, new census estimates show that Baltimore lost an additional 1,500 residents in the 15 months after the census, bringing it below 620,000. The figures, which are being contested by the city, show a continued exodus of black residents, while the numbers of Hispanics, Asians and non-Hispanic whites were on the upswing.

Only Cleveland and Detroit lost more residents than Baltimore. During the same period, the District gained 16,000 residents and is closing in on its northern neighbor in the rankings of big cities. Baltimore is now the nation's 24th largest city. In 1980, it ranked 10th.

Hispanics in particular have helped slow the decline in the city's population, which peaked at 950,000 in 1950. Their numbers more than doubled over the past decade, from 11,000 in 2000 to 26,000 in 2010. They now make up 4 percent of Baltimore residents, a fraction of their share of the state and national population.

Hispanics born in Mexico, Central America and South America make up more than a third of all foreign-born residents of Baltimore, according to census figures. The city also draws many ***immigrants*** from Africa, China and the Middle East.

Reviving Highlandtown

One place where the influx of ***immigrants*** is most evident is Highlandtown, a neighborhood of narrow rowhouses, corner bars and grocery stores on ***Baltimore's*** east side. It was settled by European ***immigrants***, mostly Greeks, Italians and Poles who never moved to the suburbs and left their homes to their children. Merchants say that by the early 1990s, the neighborhood was dying.

But today, it is a bustling crossroads. Convenience stores advertise Corona and Modelo beers. Restaurants featuring Mexican and Honduran fare stand beside diners serving up Coney dogs. A storefront church, Jesus de Vida, occupies a building next to the Madina Grocery and Halal Meats, which is run by a Chinese couple. A refugee resettlement center guides newcomers from Nepal and French-speaking Africa on orientation tours, including a stop at the Southeast Anchor Library.

"One of the first things they do is get a library card," said branch manager Cindy Kleback. "Then they can use the computers for free to communicate with people back home. I walk past the computers and see people watching TV from Eritrea."

Every Thursday, the library hosts a children's storytelling hour in Spanish. Non-Hispanic parents also bring their children to expose them to another language and culture, fostering friendships that have led to baby showers in the library and a potluck Thanksgiving dinner.

The spreading Latin influence has been a welcome change to Fidelita Portillo, who found few familiar products at the corner grocery when she moved to Baltimore eight years ago to join her sister. Today, several grocers carry the chiles, sweet breads and Goya products that remind her of her native El Salvador.

This year, Portillo enrolled her 4-year-old in preschool and readily found information in Spanish. The school has an interpreter available as well.

When the mayor held a small town hall meeting at the library this spring to explain her new, ***immigrant***-friendly policy, Portillo attended. She acknowledges not having the proper documents to be in the country.

"I feel better knowing the mayor has assured us that the police are not going to be going after the ***immigrants***," she said, adding that she wants her children to grow up without worrying that their parents will be deported. "People feel free. We don't have to live in hiding and in fear."

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