



All Immigration Is Local

Receiving Communities and Their Role in Successful Immigrant Integration

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Introduction and summary

Historically, immigrant integration has focused on immigrants—on changing immigrant behavior to facilitate their incorporation into the host society by encouraging language learning or naturalization, for example. Accordingly, service providers working with immigrants typically emphasize programs for English language acquisition, citizenship preparation, or integration of immigrants into the workplace.

But positive community relations require the concerted action of both immigrant and native-born residents. How can we expect immigrants to integrate successfully if they feel unwelcome or if their neighbors are not prepared to accept them? And how can we expect their neighbors to welcome them if no effort is made to manage the confusion, fear, and anxiety these neighbors feel about the changing nature of community life? Receiving communities—the places, along with their residents, in which newcomers settle—must be engaged before we can expect them to embrace immigrants.

This report is a call to action for such engagement—for reorienting discussions around immigration to local integration challenges and for proactively bridging the gaps between native and newcomer. It builds on the first meeting of the Receiving Communities Initiative, a gathering of leading academics, practitioners, advocates, and local, state, and national officials in Washington D.C. in December 2010, to examine the role of receiving communities in immigrant integration and reinvigorate immigrant integration in America.

The goal of this report is to help local communities wrestling with the challenges of immigrant settlement. It focuses on helping them identify programs they can emulate and build on, and encouraging national, state, and local policymakers, as well as philanthropic and civic actors, to focus more attention and resources on immigrant-receiving communities as well as immigrants.

The challenge for communities is to acknowledge the very real changes that are occurring within them and their potentially destabilizing nature, and to develop the right kinds of intervention to foster interaction and positive relations between native and foreign-born residents and their children.

Our report is drawn from the experiences of a diverse group of people keenly engaged with immigrant integration. It identifies four key strategies for receiving communities:

1. **Encouraging leadership** to address the changes that take place locally and to manage them effectively. When mainstream leaders who are respected in their communities support immigrant integration efforts it sends powerful signals to the broader community. The support of such leaders strengthens the credibility and likelihood of success of integration efforts. Identifying and mobilizing local-level leaders is a critical part of engaging local communities in reaching out to new immigrant residents and integrating them into the larger receiving community. These leaders do not need any particular background or profession, but they have to be optimistic, passionate about their communities, embedded in their communities' social networks, and willing to reach out to people with sometimes very different points of view.
2. **Fostering contact** between immigrants and the native born. A major step in reinforcing a sense of commonality and community between foreign-born and native-born residents is to create opportunities for contact and communication. Evidence shows that having direct contact with immigrants changes people's perceptions of immigrants and immigration. Immigrants themselves also look to their native-born neighbors for cues on how to fit in and how to behave in American society. Creating spaces for immigrants and native born to interact, and to recognize their common goals for the community and future, is critical to the success of receiving communities.
3. **Building partnerships** between state and local governments and new residents. The most successful local initiatives bring together nonprofits and private-sector actors with people from the public sector. Having local government representatives at the table is important because they have responsibilities that touch the lives of all residents, including immigrants, in areas such as health, schooling, and policing. They also have a set of resources—existing programming, professionals that staff their agencies, and venues to communicate with the public through websites, newsletters, and public offices—that help shape immigrant integration.

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4. **Reframing the issues** to counter misconceptions about immigrants. Native-born residents' misunderstandings of immigrants greatly affect how receiving communities deal with immigrants, and they must be addressed. Most people, in fact, are persuadable. In conversations about immigration it may seem that the loudest voices are often those advocating for the restriction of immigration or the passage of state and local laws that make life for all immigrants, documented or undocumented, more difficult. Still, local coalitions of native-born and immigrant residents can work to reframe the issues both by personalizing immigrants to allow them to be seen as "one of us" so that the focus of the debate shifts from immigration restriction to immigrant integration.

These strategies will not work the same way in all cases and in all communities. Indeed, community-based programs that develop organically are by definition tailored to local circumstances and tend to respond to the unique needs of that community. A companion toolkit for receiving communities with more detailed discussion of local practices and more practical guidance will be released in October of 2011.

This report also focuses on two main challenges to developing and continuing receiving communities work: *program assessment* (or "How do we know programs work as advertised?") and *scaling up* (or "How do we implement successful programs more widely?") We argue that groups active in receiving communities work must develop what researchers call a "culture of evaluation," in which program evaluation is the norm rather than the exception. Doing so will allow local and national actors to be able to accurately gauge how effective their programs are, and what strategies might be transferable elsewhere.

While localities around the country struggle with similar anxieties about how to integrate immigrants, solutions tend to be arrived at community by community. This is why programs for immigrant integration have until recently almost all been local. The shift from a single local arena across various localities and states is still largely uncharted territory. The question is how these local experiences can lead to broader solutions for communities across the country.

Our report considers a number of potential models for replicating results, including a networked affiliate model, with a central organization overseeing local and state affiliates; a federated organizational style, with multiple chapters of a single national organization; or even national coordinating conferences, that bring together disparate groups in a loose confederation.

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Finally, we include a series of policy recommendations for influencers at multiple levels of government and civil society:

1. Even in the absence of comprehensive immigration reform, the **federal government** plays a central role in facilitating immigrant integration. We believe that all federal integration programs and policy should take receiving communities into account. Many federal programs—funding adult literacy, educating children, providing information on naturalization, and easing refugees into the job market—help integrate immigrants into American society. But few of these programs address integration directly, and almost none address the anxieties of receiving communities or try to engage residents in the longer-term process of immigrant integration. We support the allocation of greater resources for immigrant integration and refugee resettlement that are specifically directed to groups working with receiving communities, to encourage positive interactions between natives and newcomers.
2. **State and local governments** are often on the front lines of integration. A number of states and cities have active offices for immigrant affairs, but the economic downturn has severely harmed the efforts of these facilities. The demographic changes taking place, and the need to focus efforts on relations between immigrant and native-born residents, mean that states and localities should expand funding efforts at immigrant integration—including support for nongovernmental community-building efforts, publicly subsidized English language classes, and in-state tuition—even with state and local resources stretched thin. They should treat these as investments in their states' longer-term social and economic well-being. As on the federal level, state and local governments can insist that providers operating under their aegis write receiving communities programs into their service agreements.
3. **Nongovernmental actors** have long been significant players in providing services and aid to immigrant communities. The receiving communities' perspective on immigrant integration is still new, though, and often the organizational infrastructure that localities have built—both for addressing the needs of the native born as well as the requirements of immigrant newcomers—needs to reorient itself to the challenge. NGOs must realize that they need the support of the native community for integration to be successful instead of simply reaching out to their base of immigrants and immigrant supporters. This cultural shift can seem counterintuitive, and it may run counter to funding and constitutional mandates. Nevertheless, a focus on receiving communities will lay the groundwork for success, and it ultimately will make all other parts of the resettlement and integration efforts easier.

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4. Like NGOs, **funders and foundations** have been at the forefront of immigrant integration work. Still, many tend to overlook addressing native-born anxieties about immigration. Funders can help provide the resources to bring newcomers and older residents together, evaluate which programs are most promising, and support the organizational models needed to implement successful local innovations on a broader scale. Corporate sponsors should also recognize the value that a focus on immigrant integration through receiving communities can have. Governmental and nongovernmental organizations can only do so much, and business owners are often leaders in their community, which gives them significant leverage over jumpstarting receiving communities work. These sponsors also have a strong financial incentive to create harmony between immigrant and newcomer, and to make sure that all residents are benefiting economically and consuming local goods and services.

Taking the broader historical view, immigrants are an essential part of the fabric of our nation and have shaped the American national identity. Our society has not only survived the influx of new and different peoples but has thrived as a result. The process of immigrant integration and acceptance is often bumpy and messy, but we believe that a focus on receiving communities will smooth out that process, and help to make sure that immigrants and the native born can together fully take part in the American Dream.

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