

Building Community and Fueling Growth

The Role of Immigrants in Reviving the Great Lakes Region



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About Upwardly Global

Upwardly Global promotes workforce inclusion for work-authorized immigrants, refugees, and asylees with professional experience and international degrees. We support these individuals through industry-specific coaching, digital training, and employer engagement in inclusive hiring practices. By opening opportunities and advancing policies that create shared prosperity, we help build thriving communities and foster robust economic growth.

UpwardlyGlobal.org

About the American Immigration Council

The Council strives to strengthen the United States by shaping immigration policies and practices through innovative programs, cutting-edge research, and strategic legal and advocacy efforts grounded in evidence, compassion, justice and fairness. We collaborate with diverse stakeholders, including policymakers, grassroots organizations, and immigrant communities, to advance results-driven solutions to the challenges facing immigrants and communities throughout the United States.

www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org

Acknowledgements

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We would also like to thank Sameh Elhady, Jalal Maqsood, Ayo Oduwole, and Natalia Pysko who shared their experiences in this report. Their stories of determination and success showcase the profound impact immigrants and refugees have on their communities.

Foreword

The Great Lakes region is showing signs of revival. Factories are adding workers. Main Streets are bustling with mom-and-pop stores. Families are moving into once-blighted neighborhoods.

But what does it take to rebuild a community?

It takes the power and resilience of people who want to contribute, to invest in these places, to call them home. Immigrants and refugees who have put down roots in the Great Lakes region bring workforce diversity, stimulate the economy, and pay taxes. But more than that, they are homeowners, helping to revitalize neighborhoods. They are K-12 teachers, staff members of local governments, and creators of small businesses. They make this region stronger.

Yet newcomers face unique barriers that can prevent them from thriving and achieving their dreams. These challenges often go unnoticed; for instance, about 2 million immigrants and refugees with college degrees remain unemployed or underemployed in the United States.¹

Even so, immigrants at every skill level make outsized contributions for their numbers and help rejuvenate the Great Lakes region and the country.

Workforce development organizations like Upwardly Global help newcomers secure skill-aligned careers so they can contribute their full potential to the region. We have partnered with the American Immigration Council, an organization that shares our vision of a nation where communities, employers, and local governments embrace immigrants and recognize their talents. When this vision becomes reality, America becomes the best version of itself—a place that fosters groundbreaking ideas, develops advances in technology, and achieves economic growth for all.

Community renewal is integral to the story of America. Just as immigrants drove major innovations and community growth at the turn of the 20th century, immigrants and refugees use their skills and talents to help the nation adapt to change today.

For all these reasons, we should recognize the significant contributions that immigrants—and welcoming immigration policies—can make to our local and state economies, as well as to our communities. It's also important to remember that naturalized immigrants are becoming an increasingly powerful force at the ballot box, especially in key battleground states across the Great Lakes.

The data and success stories shared in this report counter harmful and false narratives about newcomers and demonstrate the tremendous value they bring. They show that when immigrants and refugees are given the tools to succeed, prosperity follows for all of us. We see revitalized housing markets, energized economies, bolstered civic engagement.

The revival of the Great Lakes region proves that when we choose to recognize individuals as assets—regardless of where they were born—the benefits ripple across generations, creating more resilient communities for everyone.

Jina Krause-Vilmar
President & CEO, Upwardly Global

Executive Summary

The Great Lakes region has long been an emblem of America’s industrial strength, anchoring the nation’s steel, auto, rubber, and other factories and at one point employing more than half of the country’s industrial workforce.² As labor-intensive factory work moved south and overseas, however, then diminished due to automation, the “Rust Belt” became a symbol of America’s waning industrial dominance.

After decades of decline, the Great Lakes region is now showing signs of a revival. Population numbers are ticking upward. Home values in once-forlorn neighborhoods are rising. The manufacturing industry has been adding a considerable number of new jobs—including 412,800 jobs between 2010 and 2022. The healthcare industry—one of the region’s fastest-growing industries—added nearly a half million workers during this period. By 2022, the industry had 14 job postings for every one unemployed worker.

Immigrants are playing a pivotal—and growing—role in this revival. While many industries struggle with labor shortages, immigrants have taken on the hard-to-fill jobs, reinvigorating the regional workforce and supporting the economic growth in America’s former industrial heartland. By bolstering fast-growing industries like advanced manufacturing and healthcare, they are helping create more opportunities for communities and families that have lived in the area for generations.

As immigrants continue to play a vital role in labor-intensive jobs like farmworker and meatpacker—jobs that many U.S.-born residents are unwilling to take—they are also playing an outsized role in jobs critical to the needs of the 21st century, including but not limited

to occupations in advanced manufacturing systems and science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) fields. The Great Lakes region is still home to the big three automakers, GE Aerospace, and other companies that collectively employ nearly 4.7 million workers in the manufacturing industry. And today these manufacturers increasingly need workers with advanced skills and education, areas where immigrants in the Great Lakes region equally excel.

On average, immigrants who live in the region are more likely than their U.S.-born neighbors to be of working age, have an advanced degree, and work in fields experiencing worker shortages, such as STEM fields or healthcare. For instance, immigrants serve in relatively large numbers as doctors, nurses, home healthcare aides, and in other healthcare roles. This is particularly critical because the healthcare industry is facing dire labor shortages as baby boomers exit the workforce and the overall population ages, bringing increasing healthcare needs.

Immigrants also punch above their weight when it comes to founding mom-and-pop shops, as well as Fortune 500 companies. Main street businesses—grocery stores, restaurants, hotels, and other local stores and businesses—are instrumental in revitalizing neighborhoods. At the same time, immigrants are putting down roots, becoming homeowners in once-distressed neighborhoods, and regenerating economic activity and community engagement.

KEY FINDINGS

▶ **Immigration fuels population growth in the Great Lakes region.**

The immigrant population of the region increased by 15.9 percent between 2010 to 2022, while the U.S.-born population increased by just 0.3 percent. As a result, immigrants were responsible for 78.5 percent of the region’s population growth during that time.

▶ **Immigrants are offsetting population decline in rural areas.**

In rural areas, the immigrant population grew by 5.5 percent between 2010 and 2022, while the U.S.-born population shrank by 3.1 percent. While immigrants comprised just 2.4 percent of the rural population in 2022, without them the entire population of the rural Great Lakes region would have decreased by 3 percent, or 361,300 people.

▶ **Immigrants are keeping the workforce viable.**

Just 61.7 percent of U.S.-born residents in the region were of working age in 2022, a share that has continued to drop as the population ages. By contrast, 78.2 percent of the area’s foreign-born residents were of working age, making them vital to the region’s economic vitality.

▶ **Immigrants are bringing talent to the region.**

The share of foreign-born residents in the Great Lakes region with at least a bachelor’s degree rose 6.2 percentage points between 2010 and 2022, to 39 percent. About 19.3 percent of foreign-born residents held an advanced degree.

▶ **Immigrant workers are critical to the manufacturing industry.**

Immigrants continued to work in large numbers at hard-to-fill factory jobs, occupying 42.5 percent of meat processing jobs and 30.8 percent of hand-packer jobs. Immigrants also comprised 16.4 percent of the STEM workforce at a time when manufacturing industries—including aircraft and pharmaceutical manufacturing—are in need of high-skill workers like physical scientists, logisticians, and software developers.

▶ **Immigrants serve critical and outsize roles in healthcare.**

In 2022, immigrants made up 27.8 percent of the region’s physicians, 20.6 percent of its surgeons, and nearly 17 percent of both its dentists and personal care aides, despite comprising just 7.8 percent of the population. As the Great Lakes region population ages, healthcare has become its fastest-growing field. And with a growing shortage of healthcare professionals, immigrants will continue to play a vital role in the well-being of people in the region.

KEY FINDINGS

▶ **Immigrants play a large and growing role as entrepreneurs.**

The number of self-employed immigrants rose by 45.8 percent between 2010 and 2022, more than six times the rate of their U.S.-born counterparts. Meanwhile, the number of immigrant entrepreneurs in Main Street businesses rose by 20.7 percent, two and a half times that of the U.S.-born entrepreneurs. By 2022, immigrants made up 13 percent of the region’s self-employed and 16.4 percent of its Main Street business owners, despite comprising just 7.8 percent of the population.

▶ **Immigrants contribute billions of dollars to governments and businesses in the region.**

Immigrant households generated \$236.6 billion in income in 2022 and paid \$65.7 billion in taxes, \$23.9 billion of which went to state and local governments—money that helps fund schools, roads, and other public services. They held \$170.9 billion in spending power—much of it circulated within the regional economy for groceries, transportation, housing, and other consumer goods.

▶ **Immigrants represent a powerful voice at the ballot box.**

A majority of immigrants in the Great Lakes region are naturalized citizens, and more than 2.6 million were eligible to vote in 2022. In the swing states of Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin, the number of immigrants who were eligible to vote exceeded their state’s margin of victory in the 2020 presidential election.

FIGURE 1: THE GREAT LAKES REGION

Wisconsin
Illinois
Indiana
Michigan
Ohio
Pennsylvania
Upstate New York



The Great Lakes region, as we define it, encompasses the historically manufacturing-heavy area largely in the Midwest and Upper Midwest, including six states—Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin—and upstate New York.³

Population and Demographics

The Great Lakes region is not immigrant dense. Roughly one in every thirteen residents was born in another country—about half as many as in the United States overall, where about one in every seven residents⁴ is foreign-born.⁵ But the region is proving to be an attractive draw for immigrants, who are moving to the region at an above-average clip. They have offset population stagnation and decline in both urban and rural areas—a problem the region has battled for decades. It is a crucial shift, with the potential to boost economic investment and expand consumer and tax bases for years to come.

This higher share of workers—and individuals soon to enter the workforce—helps fill critical labor gaps as the U.S.-born population ages, while also paying into the Social Security and Medicare programs elders need. Immigrants in the Great Lakes region are also more likely to have an advanced degree, allowing them to fill open positions, particularly in STEM fields that are vital to 21st century manufacturing needs.

Immigrant Population and Growth

Between 2010 and 2022, the total population of the Great Lakes region increased by just 1.4 percent, or 914,600 people—well behind the 7.7 percent population increase experienced by the nation as a whole. Without immigrants, that growth would have been much slower.

While the U.S.-born population increased by just 0.3 percent, the immigrant population grew by 15.9 percent, or 718,000 people. As a result, despite comprising less than one-tenth of the population, immigrants in the Great Lakes region accounted for 78.5 percent of the region’s growth between 2010 and 2022. To put that in perspective, nationally immigrants accounted for 25.9 percent of population growth during that period.

FOREIGN-BORN AND U.S.-BORN POPULATION SHARE IN GREAT LAKES REGION AND THE UNITED STATES, 2010 AND 2022

	Great Lakes Region	United States
U.S.-Born Population, 2010	61.6M	269.4M
U.S.-Born Population, 2022	61.8M	287.2M
U.S.-Born Population Growth, 2010-2022	0.3%	6.6%
Foreign-Born Population, 2010	4.5M	39.9M
Foreign-Born Population, 2022	5.2M	46.1M
Foreign-Born Population Growth, 2010-2022	15.9%	15.5%
Share of Population Growth Attributable to Foreign-Born, 2010-2022	78.5%	25.9%

FOREIGN-BORN SHARE OF POPULATION IN GREAT LAKES REGION AND THE UNITED STATES, 2010 AND 2022

	Great Lakes Region	United States
Foreign-Born Share, 2010	6.8%	12.9%
Foreign-Born Share, 2022	7.8%	13.8%

New arrivals to the country provide an indicator of how quickly an immigrant population is growing. In the Great Lakes region, that share was about one in five in 2010.

This has dipped in recent years due to decreasing immigration rates nationally. But the region’s share of new arrivals continues to outpace that of the country.

NUMBER AND SHARE OF FOREIGN-BORN RESIDENTS WHO ARRIVED WITHIN LAST FIVE YEARS IN GREAT LAKES REGION AND THE UNITED STATES, 2010 AND 2022

	2010		2022	
Great Lakes Region	880,700	19.5%	899,000	17.2%
United States	6.9M	17.4%	7M	15.2%

Urban and Rural

Immigrants in the Great Lakes region are heavily concentrated in urban areas, where they comprised 7.9 percent of the population in 2010 and 9.8 percent of the population in 2022. In rural areas, foreign-born individuals made up 2.2 percent and 2.4 percent of the population in 2010 and 2022, respectively.

FOREIGN-BORN SHARE OF POPULATION IN RURAL AND URBAN REGIONS OF GREAT LAKES REGION, 2010 AND 2022

Urban 2010	Urban 2022	Rural 2010	Rural 2022
7.9%	9.8%	2.2%	2.4%

Still, immigrants have had an outsize impact on population growth in both urban and rural areas.

Urban Population

Urban areas of the Great Lakes region, defined as belonging to a metropolitan statistical area,⁶ experienced a modest growth in combined population in the years analyzed, from 54.3 million in 2010 to 55.6 million in 2022—a 2.3 percent gain in residents.

What’s notable, however, is the outsized role immigrants played in that population growth. Between 2010 and 2022, the immigrant population of urban areas in the Great Lakes region rose from 4.3 million to 5 million, a 16.5 percent increase. By contrast, the U.S.-born population increased by a smaller amount—only 558,000, versus 703,500 foreign-born—despite being ten times larger, resulting in a mere 1.1 percent increase.

U.S.-BORN AND FOREIGN-BORN POPULATION IN URBAN AREAS OF GREAT LAKES REGION, 2010 AND 2022

	2010	2022	Percent Change
U.S.-Born	50M	50.6M	1.1%
Foreign-Born	4.3M	5M	16.5%
Total	54.3M	55.6M	2.3%

Rural Population

Immigrants make up a smaller share of the rural population, but that share is rising.⁷ As U.S.-born residents move away, immigrants appear to be arriving—and staying.

In 2010, immigrants in the Great Lakes region comprised just 2.2 percent of the rural population, or 261,400 of the 11.9 million people living in rural areas. By 2022, the immigrant population had grown by 5.5 percent, to 275,800, while the U.S.-born population had shrunk by 3.1 percent. While immigrants comprised only 2.4 percent of the rural population in 2022, these figures suggest they are nonetheless playing a valuable role in stabilizing the region’s economic health. Without immigrants, the total population of the rural Great Lakes region would have dropped by 3 percent, or 361,300 people, during this 12-year period.

U.S.-BORN AND FOREIGN-BORN POPULATION IN RURAL AREAS OF GREAT LAKES REGION, 2010 AND 2022

	2010	2022	Percent Change
U.S.-Born	11.6M	11.2M	-3.1%
Foreign-Born	261,400	275,800	5.5%
Total	11.9M	11.5M	-2.9%

When rural populations decline, local industries lose workers and customers, decreasing the quality of life for remaining residents. This is especially apparent in healthcare, where hospitals and clinics are forced to close down or cut critical services.

Population by States

State population data shows the extent to which immigrants have contributed to recent population growth—growth vital to a state’s ability to maintain a workforce, attract businesses, and sustain tax revenues. While the foreign-born population increased in every state in the Great Lakes region between 2010 and 2022,

the U.S.-born population increased in only four—Ohio, Indiana, Wisconsin, and Michigan—while it decreased in Illinois, Upstate New York, and Pennsylvania.

And where the U.S. population did rise, it did so at a slower rate than that of the foreign-born population. In every state, immigrants comprised a larger share of the population in 2022 than they did in 2010. The immigrant share of the population rose 35.1 percent in Pennsylvania; 34.8 percent in Indiana; 19.5 percent in Ohio; 16.9 percent in Michigan; 11.4 percent in Wisconsin; and 9.7 percent and 4.4 percent in Upstate New York and Illinois, respectively.

U.S.-BORN AND FOREIGN-BORN POPULATION AND FOREIGN-BORN SHARES IN GREAT LAKES REGION, 2010 AND 2022

	U.S. Born Population, 2010	Foreign-Born Population, 2010	Foreign-Born Share of Population, 2010	U.S.-Born Population, 2022	Foreign Born Population, 2022	Foreign Born Share of Population, 2022	Growth of Population Attributable to Foreign-Born, 2010-2022
Pennsylvania	12M	727,000	5.7%	12M	995,800	7.7%	*
Ohio	11.1M	469,100	4.1%	11.2M	581,000	4.9%	50.9%
Illinois	11.1M	1.8M	13.7%	10.8M	1.8M	14.3%	**
Michigan	9.3M	582,500	5.9%	9.3M	687,700	6.9%	67.2%
Upstate New York	6.6M	433,600	6.2%	6.5M	472,800	6.8%	***
Indiana	6.2M	300,100	4.6%	6.4M	422,600	6.2%	35.8%
Wisconsin	5.4M	251,800	4.4%	5.6M	287,900	4.9%	17.9%

*The state’s overall population grew by 2.1 percent, while its U.S.-born population slightly declined. Without the growth in the foreign-born population, the overall population would have declined by 0.1 percent.

**The state’s total population declined by 2 percent. Without the growth in the immigrant population, the state would have experienced a 2.3 percent decrease in its total population.

***The state’s total population decreased by 0.1 percent. Without the growth of the immigrant population, the state would have experienced a 0.7 percent decrease in its total population.

Demographic Trends

Demographic trends in the Great Lakes region broadly mirror those of the United States as a whole, with the foreign-born more likely to be of working age than the U.S.-born; more likely to share a household with a greater number of people; and more likely to sit at both ends of the education scale—that is, to either lack a high school education or to hold a master’s or doctoral degree. But notable differences arise within those demographics, pointing to the special role that immigrants play in the vitality of the Great Lakes region.

Countries of Origin

Like the nation as a whole, more immigrants in the Great Lakes region hail from Mexico than from any other country. But their share is smaller in the region—18.8 percent compared with 23.1 percent nationwide. At the same time, a higher share of immigrants from India and China have settled in the region: 9.5 percent of immigrants are from India and 5.2 percent are from China, compared with national rates of 6.1 percent and 4.8 percent, respectively. Nationally, immigrants from India and China are overrepresented as holders of H-1B visas, a guest visa program designed to address worker shortages in specialized fields such as research, engineering, and computer programming.⁸ The addition of foreign-born workers with these advanced skills helps fuel the fast-growing healthcare and advanced manufacturing industries in the Great Lakes region.

AVERAGE HOUSEHOLD SIZE OF U.S.-BORN AND FOREIGN-BORN IN GREAT LAKES REGION AND THE UNITED STATES, 2022

	Great Lakes Region	United States
U.S.-Born	2.2	2.3
Foreign-Born	2.8	3

COUNTRIES OF ORIGIN OF FOREIGN-BORN POPULATION IN GREAT LAKES REGION AND U.S., 2022

		Great Lakes Region	United States
1	Mexico	18.8%	23.1%
2	India	9.5%	6.1%
3	China	5.2%	4.8%
4	Philippines	3.6%	4.4%
5	Dominican Republic	3.1%	2.8%
6	El Salvador	1%	3.1%



Education Levels

In the United States, immigrants are both more likely to have less than a high school diploma than the U.S.-born population and more likely to have an advanced degree, with a greater share of the U.S.-born falling in the middle with high school diplomas and bachelor’s degrees.

This is also the case in the Great Lakes region, although immigrants are more likely to have finished high school than immigrants nationwide and more likely to have an advanced degree than immigrants nationwide.

In 2022, more than 21 percent of adult immigrants aged 25 or above in the Great Lakes region lacked a high school degree. That’s well more than the 7 percent of U.S.-born adults who didn’t have such a degree, but less than the 24.8 percent of immigrants nationally who were without one. On the other end of the education spectrum, 19.3 percent of immigrants in the Great Lakes region held an advanced degree compared with 15.6 percent of immigrants who did nationally, suggesting the Great Lakes region is succeeding at adding the kind of high-skilled jobs critical to fueling the 21st century economy.

*In the Great Lakes region, immigrants are **more likely** to have finished high school than immigrants nationwide.*

EDUCATIONAL LEVEL OF FOREIGN-BORN AND U.S.-BORN IN GREAT LAKES REGION AND U.S., 2022

	Great Lakes Region		United States	
	Foreign-Born	U.S.-Born	Foreign-Born	U.S.-Born
Less Than High School	21.1%	7%	24.8%	7.2%
High School and Some College	39.9%	59.7%	40.4%	56.9%
Bachelor's Degree	19.7%	20.4%	19.1%	22.1%
Advanced Degree (Master's or Doctorate)	19.3%	12.9%	15.6%	13.8%

At the same time, U.S.-born residents of the Great Lakes region are less likely to hold a college degree than the U.S.-born nationwide, further widening educational differences within the region. And while a greater number of U.S.-born residents in the Great Lakes region are finishing college, they have failed to close the gap.

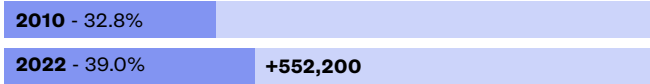
Between 2010 and 2022, the share of U.S.-born adults over the age of 25 who were college educated—defined as having at least a bachelor’s degree—rose from 26.2 percent to 33.3 percent in the Great Lakes region and from 28.5 percent to 35.9 percent nationwide. And while in the United States the share of U.S.-born residents with a college education slightly eclipsed the share of college-educated immigrants, in the Great Lakes region the college-educated share of U.S.-born residents continued to trail that of immigrants.

In 2022, 33.3 percent of U.S.-born adults over the age of 25 in the Great Lakes region were college-educated, compared with 39 percent of their foreign-born equivalents.

In the 2022-2023 school year, 227,200 international students, or 5.8 percent of the college student population, were enrolled in universities in the Great Lakes region. That’s a 40 percent increase from the 161,000 international students who were enrolled in the 2010-2011 school year, when they made up 3.8 percent of the college student population.

COLLEGE-EDUCATED FOREIGN-BORN AND U.S.-BORN RESIDENTS IN GREAT LAKES REGION, 2010 AND 2022

Foreign-Born



U.S.-Born



COLLEGE-EDUCATED FOREIGN-BORN AND U.S.-BORN RESIDENTS IN THE UNITED STATES, 2010 AND 2022

Foreign-Born



U.S.-Born





Jalal Maqsood said he saw “the writing on the wall” when the Taliban invaded Kabul in August 2021. His career working with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and Afghanistan’s Ministry of Public Health made him a target. Reluctantly, he decided to leave his job: bringing medicine to remote villages. “I loved my country, but I knew we had to leave,” he says. He was especially worried about his daughter. “There was no longer a future for her there.”

On August 27, 2021, Jalal, his wife, and their children—then 11, 7, and 3—boarded a cargo plane to Germany. After 50 days at a processing site, they landed in Washington, D.C., with nothing but their passports and the clothes on their backs. They were among the 83,000 Afghan evacuees potentially eligible for Temporary Protected Status (TPS), an immigration status granted to foreign nationals in the United States when the designated country is too unsafe to return to.⁹

When Jalal learned that resettlement resources were scarce in popular Afghan destinations like Virginia and California, he decided to try Pittsburgh, on the recommendation of his former American colleagues.

A resettlement agency helped his family find housing, enroll their older daughters in school, and secure food assistance, insurance, and driver’s licenses. Still, walking into their new, empty apartment was a shock. “It hit me, you have to start from scratch here,” says Jalal. “It was a wake-up call to focus and figure out how I could support my family. It was overwhelming for them too.”

Many people told Jalal that he should take any low-skilled job and “worry about a career later.” But he wanted more, especially since he has a master’s degree, is fluent in English, and has experience working with U.S. government agencies.

He also knew there was a need for workers like him. In his new home state of Pennsylvania, nearly 50 percent of counties have a healthcare worker shortage.¹⁰ And it has been an ongoing problem for the whole Great Lakes region, where there were 14 job postings in healthcare for every one unemployed worker.¹¹

An Upwardly Global career coach helped Jalal revamp his resume in the American style: short, concise, and tailored to the job instead of documenting every professional, educational, and personal accomplishment. In May 2022, Jalal was hired as a monitoring and evaluation analyst at the Allegheny County Department of Human Services. Today, he manages Medicaid funding for behavioral health patients, helping them obtain treatment for mental health issues.

It’s a perfect fit given his professional experience. And it lets him give back to his new community. As in Afghanistan, low-income Americans are disproportionately impacted by the lack of resources. “It’s similar to my past jobs helping people who wouldn’t have access to healthcare otherwise,” he says. “So it feels good.”

Gender and Age

The gender and age breakdowns in the Great Lakes largely mirror that of the country, with immigrants slightly more likely to be female and significantly more likely to be of working age (16-64). The latter is particularly important given the looming workforce shortages as the country’s population ages.

In the Great Lakes region, immigrants are even more likely to be of working age and less likely to be over 65 than immigrants nationally. Furthermore, the working-age immigrant population in the Great Lakes region is increasing at a faster rate than it is nationally—by 12.4 percent versus 9.5 percent over 12 years. Both these points suggest that the Great Lakes region is attracting young, new immigrants at a faster rate than many other regions.

In the Great Lakes region, males comprised 49.5 percent of the foreign-born population in 2022, compared with 48.8 percent nationally.

AGE OF FOREIGN-BORN AND U.S.-BORN IN GREAT LAKES REGION, 2010 AND 2022

	2010		2022	
	Foreign-Born	U.S.-Born	Foreign-Born	U.S.-Born
16-64	80.5%	64.5%	78.2%	61.7%
65+	12.7%	14%	16.8%	18.6%

AGE OF FOREIGN-BORN AND U.S.-BORN IN THE UNITED STATES, 2010 AND 2022

	2010		2022	
	Foreign-Born	U.S.-Born	Foreign-Born	U.S.-Born
16-64	82%	63.3%	77.7%	61.3%
65+	12.4%	13.2%	17.7%	17.3%

Community Investment

When immigrants settle in shrinking communities, they help stabilize local property markets. For example, in Detroit, immigrants often buy in affordable, low-income neighborhoods. When the city’s housing value increased by 94 percent in the nine years following its bankruptcy, neighborhoods with at least a 45-percent Hispanic population in 2014 saw home values grow by 364 percent, an analysis of the city’s housing wealth found.¹² This increase in housing wealth is now attracting new residents to the city. In 2023, Detroit experienced population growth for the first time in over 60 years.¹³

Income and Tax Contributions

In 2022 alone, immigrant households in the Great Lakes region generated nearly \$236.6 billion in income and paid \$23.9 billion in state and local taxes, crucial for supporting public services like schools, hospitals, and police forces. Additionally, immigrants paid \$41.8 billion in federal taxes, bolstering essential social programs such as Medicare and Social Security. That left immigrant households with \$170.9 billion in spending power, allowing them to reinvest in their communities and further stimulate local economies.

	Total Taxes Paid by Immigrant Households (Billion \$)	State and Local Tax Contributions (Billion \$)	Federal Tax Contributions (Billion \$)	Spending Power (Billion \$)
Illinois	\$24.3	\$9.5	\$14.8	\$60.7
Indiana	\$4.3	\$1.5	\$2.8	\$12.3
Michigan	\$8.1	\$2.6	\$5.5	\$23.1
Ohio	\$7	\$2.4	\$4.6	\$18.6
Pennsylvania	\$13.1	\$4.4	\$8.7	\$34.2
Wisconsin	\$3	\$1.1	\$1.9	\$8.3
Upstate New York	\$5.8	\$2.4	\$3.4	\$13.7

SPOTLIGHT ON

Natalia Pysko

In 2014, Ukrainian-born Natalia Pysko's family was selected for America's Diversity Visa program. She worked as a project manager in Poland's finance industry for five years before settling in Chicago, where Natalia's husband found work as a cable and internet service provider—the same job he'd done in Poland. But the family couldn't afford daycare for their toddler and newborn, so Natalya couldn't pursue her own career. "My fear was that I'd been a stay-at-home mom for too long, and I didn't want to cut ties with my professional life," she says.

Things turned around when Natalia connected with Upwardly Global, where her career coach suggested she register for a tech bootcamp. She spent six months learning coding and web development, studying at night while her kids were asleep. Afterward, a financial tech company hired her as a project manager and junior product developer.

"Immigrants like me are important to the company," she says. "I have colleagues from both Syria and Pakistan." Chicago has made a serious push in recent years to attract immigrant talent to fill hundreds of thousands of job vacancies in technology fields.²¹ The city is actively billing itself as "the most immigrant friendly out of 100 U.S. cities."²²

For the first four years, Natalia and her family lived in a largely Ukrainian neighborhood in north Chicago. She saw many Ukrainian families work hard to be able to buy and refurbish homes there, including her parents, who, after three years of saving, realized their dream of purchasing a townhome to fix up. Eventually, she and her husband bought their own home in Frankfort, a south Chicago suburb known for its affordability and excellent school district. "I'm grateful for all the U.S. has given us and to live in such a safe and supportive community," she says.

Natalia gives back to her new city by volunteering with her church and helping new arrivals from Ukraine adjust to life in America. When the war broke out, it was devastating to watch the fighting from afar and to know that much of her family was still there. Eventually, her uncle and grandmother were able to relocate to the United States. Chicago in particular has resettled more than 30,000 Ukrainian refugees since the beginning of the war.²³

"I see myself in them, trying to navigate a new place and integrate into a different culture," Natalia says. "Even the mentality here is different, so in addition to the logistics, it's an emotional, religious, and spiritual adjustment. I try to provide comfort and help however I can."

Homeownership and Investments

Immigrants are increasingly investing as homeowners. In 2022, nearly 10 percent of residents who had purchased a home in the Great Lakes region within the previous three years were immigrants. That same year, immigrants accounted for 7.5 percent of the region's homeowners, nearly matching their 7.8 percent share of the population. And in select cities—Cincinnati, Detroit, Minneapolis, St. Paul, and Syracuse—immigrants were more likely than residents, on average, to be financially eligible to buy distressed properties.¹⁴

Regional homeownership rates by Asian and Hispanic immigrants and their children have also risen substantially in recent years.¹⁵ In Michigan, Illinois, Ohio, and Pennsylvania, Asian Americans owned homes in 2022 at rates that were close to or above the national average of 63 percent. Hispanic Americans owned homes at rates of nearly 60 percent in Illinois, Indiana, and Michigan.¹⁶

Immigrant homeowners, as well as immigrant renters, help revitalize local housing markets that were once in decline. A 2021 study from the economic and community development nonprofit Global Detroit found that rapid immigration growth in two Detroit neighborhoods substantially lowered housing vacancies, eviction rates, property tax delinquencies, and foreclosures.¹⁷ This bodes well for other cities experiencing immigration growth, like Youngstown,¹⁸ Milwaukee,¹⁹ and Pittsburgh,²⁰ which also face high vacancy rates.

Economic and Civic Impact

Marc Zimmerman, a health behavior and health education professor at the University of Michigan School of Public Health, said revitalizing neighborhoods does more than signal stability and generate income. It also enhances public health. “The more people feel safe, the more they’ll exercise, the more they walk around, the more they’ll talk to people,” Zimmerman explains.²⁴ Improved social capital—when neighbors feel more connected—is beneficial for overall health, reducing stress, improving disease management, and combating hopelessness and isolation.²⁵ In fact, residents in Detroit neighborhoods that are experiencing rapid immigration growth reported both increased neighborhood safety and an improved quality of life.

Such social cohesion is also good for business stimulation and neighborhood revitalization. Immigrants are known to found businesses at high rates and this holds true in the Great Lakes region as well, where more than 16 percent of Main Street businesses in 2022 were owned by immigrants, a rate that is more than double the immigrant share of the population. Those immigrant entrepreneurs generated more than \$1.5 billion in business income. Furthermore, Main Street businesses help create neighborhoods and the safekeeping of those neighborhoods.

William Towns, a professor of social impact and the national market president for community revitalization and public housing at Gorman & Company, has witnessed this repeatedly in Chicago’s South and West sides. “Crime goes down, reporting goes up, people get more engaged in local democracy, they vote and show up to meetings,” says Townes.²⁶

*Residents in Detroit neighborhoods that are experiencing rapid immigration growth reported both **increased neighborhood safety** and improved quality of life.*

Public Service and Electoral Influence

Another vital area of community investment that immigrants contribute to is public service. More than 58,000 foreign-born residents in the Great Lakes region work in government, serving as police officers, court clerks, members of the U.S. military, and more.

In 2022, over half of immigrants in the Great Lakes region were naturalized citizens, and more than 2.6 million were eligible voters. In some pivotal swing states, immigrants have the potential to sway elections. In Michigan, the number of foreign-born, eligible voters was more than twice the margin of victory in the 2020 presidential election. In Pennsylvania and Wisconsin, the number of immigrant eligible voters was six times or more than that state’s margin of victory.

SPOTLIGHT ON

SAMEH ELHADY

In 2006, Egyptian native Sameh Elhady was hired for a prestigious job. As international relations director for the Arab Tourism Organization, he coordinated meetings and travel for high-level dignitaries at the United Nations and the World Trade Organization. Yet the position meant that Sameh had to live on a different continent than his American wife, an educator from Detroit. In 2008, Sameh gave up his career to be with her.

Despite his work experience, however, Sameh struggled to find employment in Michigan and was even passed over for entry-level jobs in hospitality and retail. Feeling hopeless, he visited one of the many mosques in the region. A stranger asked what was wrong and pointed Sameh to Michigan Works, a job training and workforce development agency. There, staff suggested he sign up for ESL (English as a second language) classes to become more fluent in American terminology and to shift his job search to Dearborn, where 54.5 percent of the city's nearly 110,000 residents claim Middle Eastern or North African ancestry.²⁷ Within a few weeks, Sameh was hired as a travel agent.

Then, 10 days later, Michigan Works called Sameh to offer him a job helping to place job seekers with the employers who needed them. Sameh was shocked. "Why me?" he asked. The staff praised Sameh's sales and marketing background, his great communication and problem-solving skills, and the fact that he didn't shy away from challenges.

Employers often underestimate newcomers since their English might not be perfect or they have different skills," he says. "But in reality, my training abroad uniquely prepared me for this type of work."

At Michigan Works, Sameh developed employment opportunities across Wayne County for veterans, former inmates, single mothers, and more. He also worked with refugees, who comprised about 15 percent of the organization's client base. He helped place hundreds of people on the production line at Ford Motor Company,



which constantly needed to fill entry-level positions.

"My mailbox was full of messages from people all over Michigan, Ohio, and Pennsylvania thanking me for their position with Ford," Sameh says. "Sometimes they said it saved their family from collapsing or kept a roof over their head."

In 2018, Sameh became a refugee navigator for Southeast Michigan Community Alliance (SEMCA), guiding newcomers to resources when they arrive in the United States.²⁸ It's vital work because immigrants have accounted for 60 percent of Michigan's population growth over the last decade. Among them, nearly 2,500 refugees were resettled in Michigan in 2023, and they have filled important, high-demand positions in warehouses, logistics and cybersecurity, education, and medicine.²⁹

Sameh also works with state representatives, the governor's office, and business leaders to create effective refugee integration strategies. "Refugees are key to filling gaps in the job market and improving our tax revenue," he says. "They also grow our population, revitalize neighborhoods, and enhance the fabric of society in Detroit."

Labor Market

After decades of decline, the Great Lakes region has seen significant labor force recovery. A strong labor force is vital to a region’s economic success. It generates tax revenues, offsetting the rising government costs of an aging population; allows companies to expand; tamps down inflation; and more. Between 2010 and 2022, the region added 3 million workers, a 10.2 percent increase.

Immigrants accounted for over one-fifth of this growth. In fact, immigrants have been crucial to the region’s labor force in a variety of ways. They are more likely to be of working age than the U.S.-born and to hold an advanced degree, an increasingly valuable asset in the global, high-tech economy.

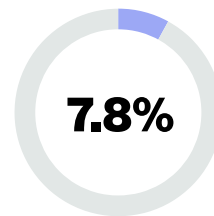
Immigrants also play a valuable role in helping to create jobs for everyone, particularly in rural areas. One analysis found that between 2010 and 2018, each foreign-born resident was associated with an additional 1.2 jobs in rural counties, likely because foreign-born workers take jobs that are hard to fill with U.S.-born workers, allowing businesses to stay—and create jobs—in the region.³⁰

“Immigrants aren’t coming to the U.S. because they see a particular job,” explains John Austin, director of the Michigan Economic Center. “They’re coming because this is still the land of opportunity, so they’ve been wildly beneficial to all industry sectors, from the tech community and healthcare industry to the roofers, farmers, and the hospitality industry that struggle to find enough domestic workers.”³¹

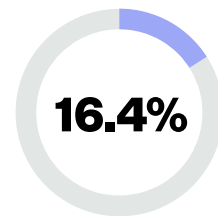
STEM and Manufacturing

Increasingly, the Great Lakes region is becoming a hub for technical and scientific innovation, and immigrants are an important part of that trend. In 2022, immigrants comprised 16.4 percent of the STEM workforce, including 26.8 percent of software developers and 36.0 percent of physical scientists. These jobs are in fields that saw significant growth between 2010 and 2022, such as advanced manufacturing.

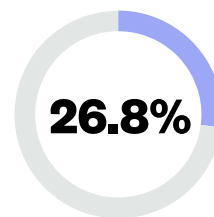
In 2022, immigrants in the Great Lakes region comprised...



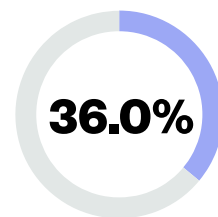
Population



STEM Workforce



Software Developers



Physical Scientists

Manufacturing in the Great Lakes region is seeing an upswing, but the 4.7 million jobs in this sector look very different than they once did. “The growth and need are at the high end in advanced manufacturing, requiring sophisticated technical skills to run automated production and warehousing systems,” says Austin, and those skills are acquired at universities or technical schools.³² As he explains, a factory that once employed 1,000 people without any post-secondary education now employs 400 people who have programming skills and can operate robotics machinery.

In fact, the Great Lakes region’s manufacturing industry saw a 37 percent increase in its college-educated workforce between 2010 and 2022. During that same period, sectors like aircraft and parts manufacturing, and pharmaceutical and medicine manufacturing, grew 129 percent and 56 percent, respectively.

But with nearly six job openings for every unemployed worker in 2022, manufacturing businesses have struggled to hire qualified people. Immigrants have played a key role in filling these gaps. Between 2010 and 2022, the number of foreign-born workers in manufacturing grew by 16.8 percent. Two out of every five physical scientists in manufacturing, for instance, were born abroad, as well as 18 percent of workers in pharmaceutical and medicine manufacturing.

Between 2010 and 2022, the number of foreign-born workers in manufacturing grew by

16.8%



In Buffalo, one lighting manufacturer that had struggled to find enough employees was able to fill one-third of its positions with immigrant workers, including recently arrived refugees.³³ At Confer Plastics, a company in a suburb north of Buffalo, immigrants and refugees make up nearly one-quarter of the workforce.³⁴

Manufacturing still needs workers who aren’t required to hold a college degree. The U.S.-born workforce in those occupations increased 1.3 percent between 2010 and 2022. But employers have trouble retaining domestic workers in some roles. “With manufacturing jobs like meatpacking or on assembly lines, domestic workers have largely quit those jobs and have not returned,” explains Austin.³⁵ Meatpacking, in particular, has struggled to find enough domestic workers. Immigrants comprise 42.5 percent of the region’s meat processing workers, the highest portion of any manufacturing occupation.

In manufacturing, refugees have an extraordinarily low turnover rate—just 4 percent, compared with 11 percent for all workers.³⁶ Meatpacking, a laborious, cold, and dangerous job with a very high turnover rate, has refugee turnover of 25 percent compared with 40 percent overall—a difference that saves companies the substantial costs of recruitment and training. Domestic workers still make up the majority of the manufacturing industry—immigrants comprised 11.8 percent of the region’s manufacturing workforce in 2022—but immigrants’ ability to fill gaps in the workforce has surely preserved thousands of jobs. In fact, one analysis found that for every 1,000 immigrants living in a county, 46 manufacturing jobs are created or preserved that would have not existed or would have moved elsewhere. Using this calculation, we can estimate that immigrants helped create or preserve approximately 241,000 manufacturing jobs in the Great Lakes region.³⁷

Agriculture

About one-quarter of the land in the Great Lakes region is used for agriculture,³⁸ a \$57 billion industry that produces a significant portion of the nation’s fruits and vegetables, corn, soybean, livestock, and dairy products.³⁹ Yet the industry has struggled to find enough workers. Between 2010 and 2022, the agricultural workforce grew by only 1.6 percent.

“The agricultural workforce is very reliant on seasonal workers,” says Austin. “It’s been a challenge to find enough of these workers without approving more seasonal employee permits that allow immigrants to come pick the fruits and vegetables in America.”⁴⁰

Immigrants comprise 9 percent of all workers in the agriculture industry in the Great Lakes region, but make up 21 percent of farm workers, such as field crop workers and livestock workers. However, between 2010 and 2022, the number of immigrant workers in the agriculture industry decreased by 12 percent.

This dearth of workers, which worsened during the pandemic, has greatly impacted employers, food prices, and the agricultural economy.⁴¹ In 2021, 66 percent of agricultural employers nationwide experienced “some” or “a lot of difficulty” hiring adequate labor, more than double than the year prior.⁴² As a result, some farmers have left the industry and abandoned their farms altogether. In Ohio and Pennsylvania specifically, 313,000 acres and 220,000 acres, respectively, of farmland was lost between 2017 and 2022.⁴³

A shortage of farm workers affects everyone. Between 2010 and 2022, a competitive hiring market drove wages up 20.7 percent for agricultural workers without a college degree, a larger jump than in any other industry in the region. Higher wages inevitably lead to higher costs for consumers at restaurants and grocery stores. In September 2022, food inflation experienced its highest one-year growth since 1979.⁴⁴

However, higher wages have not attracted a lot of interest from U.S.-born workers. Many studies have shown that even during times of high unemployment, U.S.-born workers don’t tend to apply for manual labor

farm jobs, which are often physically demanding, outdoor jobs in hot conditions. In 2019, one analysis of state workforce data in Idaho found that only five U.S.-born workers applied for 1,000 open positions offering almost double the minimum wage.⁴⁵

Labor shortages can force farmers to delay harvests, leaving crops to rot. A previous nationwide shortage of farmworkers was estimated to have cost the United States 41,000 jobs and \$3.1 billion in lost agriculture revenues over a four-year period.⁴⁶

Immigrants comprise 9% of all workers in the Great Lakes region, but make up 21% of farm workers.

Child Care and Education

Nationwide, K-12 public schools are struggling to find teachers. At the beginning of the 2022-23 school year, 53 percent of public schools surveyed said they were understaffed.⁴⁷ The Great Lakes region is no different. In 2022, Wisconsin had 2,565 vacancies.⁴⁸ In Illinois, 90 percent of schools reported having a “serious” or “very serious” teacher shortage problem.⁴⁹ And in Michigan, 65 percent of district leaders reported staff challenges, the second highest in the nation.⁵⁰ Regionally, there were 6.1 job postings for every unemployed worker in the child care and education field.

Between 2010 and 2022, the education and child care workforce in the Great Lakes region grew just 2.7 percent, clearly not enough to fill the need. And the number of educators and child care workers would have grown even more slowly without the addition of

immigrants. The U.S.-born workforce in education and child care grew only 0.6 percent during this period. The number of foreign-born workers, however, increased by 33 percent. By 2022, foreign-born workers made up 8.5 percent of the sector’s workforce. Specifically, immigrants comprised 10 percent of childcare workers, and 4 percent of K-12 teachers—a profession where the number of immigrants rose by 42 percent since 2010.

Immigrants also made up 22.3 percent of postsecondary teachers in 2022—a 9.8 percent increase from 2010. In Michigan, where the University of Michigan is a major employer, 25.5 percent of postsecondary teachers are immigrants.⁵¹ These foreign-born professors bring groundbreaking research and innovation, and allow universities to expand their offerings and create additional jobs for support staff. They also draw international students, who make it possible for universities to expand research—and win grants—in STEM fields. One study found that for every 10 bachelor’s degrees awarded to international students, an additional 15 bachelor’s degrees in STEM majors are awarded to U.S. students.⁵² International students also benefit the Great Lakes region’s economy: in Pennsylvania, they contributed \$2 billion to the state’s economy and supported 21,956 jobs during the 2022-2023 academic year.⁵³ In Ohio, they contributed \$1.2 billion to the economy and supported 10,683 jobs.⁵⁴

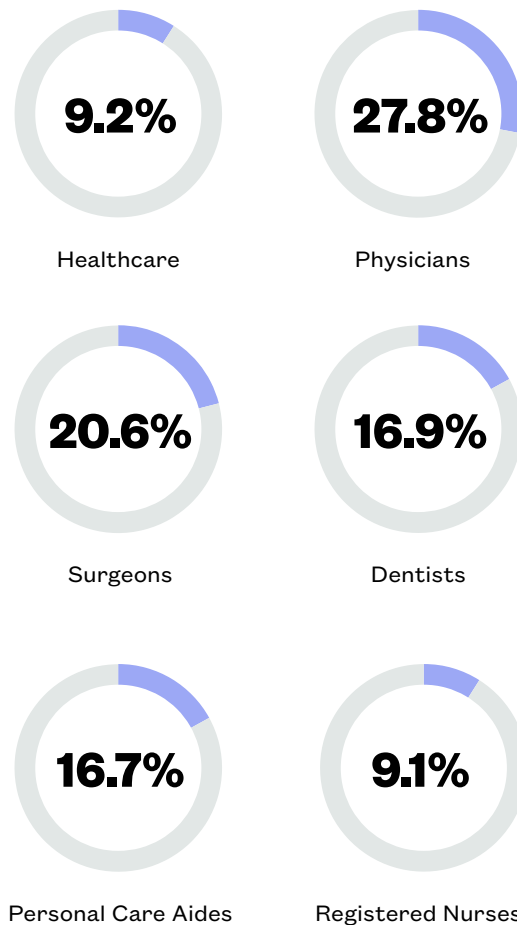
Healthcare

Healthcare is one of the most vital industries in the Great Lakes Region—fueling economic vitality and protecting the health of everyone who lives here. In both, immigrants are playing a critical role.

Between 2010 and 2022, the workforce in the \$394 billion healthcare sector grew by 12.6 percent, outpacing the region’s overall workforce growth.⁵⁵ This growth is crucial to the success of world-renowned hospitals like Cleveland Clinic, Northwestern Memorial Hospital, University of Wisconsin Hospitals, and University of Michigan Hospitals, which provide patient care across their states, employ tens of thousands of people, and generate cutting-edge research that saves lives.

Immigrants did more than their share in helping to sustain hospitals like these. Despite comprising just 7.8 percent of the population in 2022, immigrants in the Great Lakes region comprised 9.2 percent of the healthcare workforce, or 384,000 of the sector’s 4.2 million workers. In addition, immigrants punched well above their weight in many critical jobs, comprising 27.8 percent of all physicians, 20.6 percent of surgeons, 16.9 percent of dentists, 16.7 percent of personal care aides, and 9.1 percent of registered nurses.

In 2022, immigrants in the Great Lakes region comprised...



All are jobs that face an increasing and troubling shortage of qualified workers in coming years. Nationally, the shortage of doctors is expected to reach 86,000 by 2036.⁵⁶ Baby boomers, America’s largest generation, are retiring at a rate of 10,000 people a day⁵⁷ and the population of Americans age 65 and older is projected to increase 47 percent by 2050, to 82 million.⁵⁸ All will need healthcare.

“There are shortages across the board,” says Tamar Frolichstein-Appel, a senior employment services advisor with Upwardly Global in Chicago. “But there is particularly high demand for doctors and nurses at Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHC).”⁵⁹ FQHCs are community-based health centers that treat underserved patients and are crucial to keeping low-income communities healthy. Their importance has grown considerably since the Affordable Care Act expanded the number of patients insured under Medicaid.

In the Great Lakes region, there were 14 job postings in healthcare for every unemployed worker in 2022. Meanwhile, nearly one in five U.S.-born residents in the Great Lakes were 65 or older in 2022, a 33 percent increase over 2010. With more people living longer, and more choosing to age in place, the need for home health aides will continue to spike.

Immigrants are increasingly stepping in, again doing well above their share to ease shortages. Between 2010 and 2022, for example, the number of immigrants working as registered nurses in the Great Lakes region increased by 49.1 percent. And in 2022, immigrants comprised 12.7 percent of home health aides and 16.7 percent of personal care aides in the Great Lakes region.

The need for workers is particularly acute in rural areas, where many hospitals and clinics are already strained to the breaking point. In New York, 56 percent of rural hospitals are at risk of closing; the shares are 30 percent in Pennsylvania and 23 percent in Michigan.⁶⁰

While hospital leaders and policymakers look for creative solutions to attract more talent, a strong immigrant workforce in the region is again helping to soften the blow. Immigrant physicians are more likely than U.S.-born physicians to serve in rural areas, which are often underserved and may otherwise have no access to doctors.⁶¹ Immigrant physicians also possess culturally specific knowledge, including foreign language skills, which has been shown to both lower the cost of healthcare and improve the quality of care.⁶²

All of this suggests the need for more immigrant healthcare providers. Yet states across the country have erected licensing and educational barriers that keep many internationally trained healthcare providers from re-credentialing and working in the fields in which they have been educated and trained. More than 260,000 immigrants and refugees with international healthcare degrees are unemployed or underemployed in the United States.⁶³ In Illinois alone, 11,000 internationally trained health professionals are not able to serve to their potential.⁶⁴ Michigan, Indiana, Pennsylvania, and Ohio all have thousands of immigrants whose healthcare degrees are underutilized.⁶⁵

One physician from Latin America told Frolichstein-Appel, “I would do my residency on Mars if it meant getting my license.”⁶⁶ Unable to re-credential as a physician, he later found work as a nurse in Illinois. In an effort to alleviate healthcare-worker shortages, some states are trying to help qualified immigrants get licensed so they can practice in the state. Illinois, for example, recently passed legislation that creates an alternative pathway to licensure for international medical graduates and establishes a state coordinator to help internationally trained health professionals navigate the relicensing process.⁶⁷

Between 2022 and 2032, the U.S. healthcare sector is expected to be the fastest-expanding industry in the country, with approximately 1.8 million openings each year.⁶⁸ This level of expansion simply cannot happen without a sufficient workforce. In the Great Lakes region, immigrants are already filling positions, but with better access and reduced barriers to licensing, they could have an even greater impact on the demands of the industry.

SPOTLIGHT ON

AYO ODUWOLE

Ayo Oduwole grew up in a rural community in Nigeria without local healthcare. Every few weeks, a traveling doctor treated villagers, providing wound care, administering vaccines, and even delivering babies. “It was basic stuff we take for granted in the U.S., but to the local people, he was a hero,” Ayo says.

Inspired by this doctor, Ayo became a traveling doctor herself. She attended medical school in the Caribbean and completed clinical rotations in Chicago. After returning to Nigeria and passing her licensing exam there, she moved to the United States when her Nigerian-American boyfriend proposed.

Of Illinois' 102 counties, 82 lack sufficient healthcare professionals, and the state faces a projected deficit of 6,200 physicians by 2030.^{69,70} Ayo had seen some of this during her clinical rotations, with rural Illinoisians driving hours for care. But as an international medical graduate (IMG), she couldn't practice until she passed a three-part U.S. medical exam and completed residency. “Even though I was fully licensed back home,” she says, “it was irrelevant here. I had to start from scratch.”

Ayo is among 12,000 Illinois residents with international healthcare degrees.⁷¹ Like many, Ayo persevered because she cared about her adopted community. It took her all of 2017 to pass the first two parts of the exam. After she failed her first attempt at the final part, she decided to take a break to start a family. She and her husband welcomed their first daughter in 2018 and a second in 2020.

Still, Ayo never stopped working toward her dream of practicing medicine. Upwardly Global's free job coaching program helped her secure a position as a medical assistant. She also took advantage of a new policy in Missouri, allowing qualified IMGs to become licensed assistant physicians working under fully licensed doctors.

“It was a bunch of IMGs like me providing free healthcare services to the uninsured population across Missouri,” she says. “That experience solidified my dream to work in mobile clinics. I think it's wonderful we can take medicine to these rural places so the people who live there don't have to travel for hours and hundreds of miles to get the help they need.”

In 2022, Ayo returned to Chicago and passed the third part of the medical exam. She was recently accepted into a residency program at Cook County Health and started there in July. In the future, she hopes to start her own mobile health and preventative care clinic to continue improving healthcare access across Illinois.

“This was seven years of my life that I kept trying, kept going back,” she says now. “It just goes to show, nothing is impossible.”



Entrepreneurship

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, immigrant entrepreneurs helped turn the Great Lakes region into a mecca of industry. In Pittsburgh, Scottish immigrant Andrew Carnegie established Carnegie Steel Company and revolutionized steel production. In Detroit, Irish immigrant Henry Ford solidified the city's reputation as the Motor City by enabling mass automobile production. But while these industries propelled the region into economic prominence, they also minimized incentives for workers to leave their secure jobs and venture into entrepreneurship. So when deindustrialization hit the region in the mid-1950s, cities like Detroit, Buffalo, and Cleveland were crippled by economic decline, population exodus, and urban deterioration.⁷² Eventually, these communities turned to entrepreneurship.

Small- and medium-size enterprises (SMEs) are crucial economic engines, creating jobs and services that bolster community engagement and inspire further investment. Corporations and private investors that had previously overlooked once-declining cities see high-growth potential. Local governments offer tax incentives and make infrastructure improvements, like roads, utilities, and public spaces, to encourage entrepreneurship. And the cycle of growth and development continues.

U.S.-born Americans in the region do have high rates of entrepreneurship. In 2022, more than 2.4 million were entrepreneurs, and 406,400 owned Main Street businesses, defined as accommodation, food, and other service businesses. But their growth has been slow, with only a 7 percent rise in the number of U.S.-born entrepreneurs since 2010 and an 8.6 percent rise in the number of U.S.-born Main Street business owners.

By contrast, the number of self-employed foreign-born residents grew by nearly 46 percent during the same period—more than six times the growth rate of

their U.S.-born counterparts. Similarly, the number of immigrant entrepreneurs in Main Street businesses grew by almost 21 percent, nearly two and a half times the rate of U.S.-born entrepreneurs. This trend is partly driven by an increasing number of immigrants settling in the Great Lakes region.

In 2022, immigrants made up 13 percent of the region's self-employed and 16.4 percent of its Main Street business owners, despite comprising just 7.8 percent of the population. Immigrant entrepreneurs generated \$9.7 billion for the region's economy, including billions of dollars of income for Illinois, Pennsylvania and Michigan, and hundreds of millions for Ohio, upstate New York, Indiana, and Wisconsin.⁷³

*Immigrant entrepreneurs generated **\$9.7B** for the region's economy, including billions of dollars of income for Illinois, Pennsylvania and Michigan.*

Immigrant entrepreneurs in the Great Lakes region gravitate toward professional services, a broad field that employs over 3.5 million people and includes roles like lawyers, accountants, and IT consultants. Between 2010 and 2022, the professional services sector added nearly 800,000 jobs, a 29 percent increase. Transportation and warehousing, along with construction—two industries that also have relatively high shares of immigrant entrepreneurs—grew by nearly 42 percent and 22 percent, respectively. Additionally, nearly 32,700 foreign-born entrepreneurs were in the hospitality industry in 2022. Many have opened restaurants in long-dormant downtown areas, increasing foot traffic and kicking off a cycle of economic revitalization and urban renewal.

Between 2010 and 2022, the professional services sector added nearly 800,000 jobs, a 29% increase.

Steve Tobocman, the director of Global Detroit, has seen immigrant-owned businesses draw folks to emerging neighborhoods, like Detroit's Mexicantown. "La Colmena Honey Bee Market really catered to the Latinx community there," he explains. "But it also drew part of the resurgence of professionals interested in coming into the city who were eager to get fresh-made tortilla chips, homemade salsas, and guacamole, in addition to other products that they might have that you couldn't find in other places."⁷⁴

Similarly, Detroit's New Center neighborhood, historically a business district, has become a popular foodie destination thanks to two immigrant-owned restaurants: the quick-casual Afro-Caribbean Yum Village and the James Beard Award-finalist, East African eatery Baobab Fare. "Immigrant entrepreneurs are often the anchors of some of the destination neighborhoods," Tobocman says. "Their businesses really end up being a community-building endeavor."⁷⁵

Beyond small-scale entrepreneurship, immigrants and their children have also founded some of the region's largest and most recognizable American companies, including Kohl's, Procter & Gamble, and Kroger. Being home to a Fortune 500 company is a reputational boon, signaling stability, access to skilled labor, and a favorable business environment (one 2019 study found a correlation between the presence of Fortune 500 companies and increased business investment and development within those states).⁷⁶ Illinois alone was home to 19 of these businesses in 2024, ranking fourth in the nation for the number of Fortune 500 companies started by immigrants or the children of immigrants.⁷⁷ Among them are Walgreens, State Farm, John Deere, McDonald's, The Kraft Heinz Company, and United Airlines. In all, the 19 immigrant-founded Fortune 500 companies in Illinois generated a combined \$629.6 billion in revenue and employed 1.2 million people worldwide.⁷⁸

Conclusion

Immigrants have long been a vital part of the Great Lakes region, serving as a mainstay of industrial employment. But their presence today is crucial in new ways. As industries innovate and the share of jobs shift toward advanced manufacturing technologies, the region increasingly requires workers with specific skill sets. The data is clear on this: Immigrants are acquiring these skills and applying them in the workforce at rates that outpace their share of the population.

Immigrants' contributions also reach beyond manufacturing. Immigrants are currently filling significant workforce shortages in the region's burgeoning healthcare industry. This is true of positions that require college degrees and advanced specialized training, such as physicians and nurses. But it's equally true of nursing assistants and home health and personal care aide—jobs that are in higher demand as the U.S.-born population ages and, increasingly, ages at home.

It's true that both immigrant and U.S.-born populations are aging, but immigrants in the region are more likely to be of working age than their U.S.-born neighbors. These workers pay into Social Security and Medicare, helping to keep solvent the programs that serve as a lifeline to older residents and Americans with disabilities. Immigrants also keep the economy vibrant, spurring the very growth and innovation that is catapulting the region into the 21st century.

Finally, data shows that immigrants are making important community investments in the Great Lakes region, from neighborhood revitalization to public service to voting power. Across the region, once neglected communities are rebounding through a combination of revived housing stock, entrepreneurial spirit, and those ineffable but vital qualities of civic

attention and care. In these places, newcomers are often a driving force. Resettled refugees are rebuilding their lives. Immigrant employees of large American firms are putting their salaries to work. And immigrant entrepreneurs recognize that their diverse talents and perspectives, whether in food, retail, personal care, or business services, are attractive to their neighbors of all backgrounds.

Admittedly, immigrants face distinct challenges that can prevent them from fully participating in the region's economic and civic life, from language barriers to international degrees and certifications that aren't recognized by U.S. employers and institutions. It's why states across the Great Lakes region are investing in immigrant and refugee inclusion and economic development by establishing Offices of New Americans.⁷⁹ The Office of Global Michigan has developed over 40 occupational licensing guides to help foreign-trained doctors, nurses, accountants, and even barbers navigate their industry's state-licensing process.⁸⁰ The New York State Office for New Americans offers a Professional Pathways Program that provides immigrants with job coaches and career training services.⁸¹ And the Illinois Department of Human Services partners with the Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights and 43 community-based organizations to help immigrants access state programs and provide linguistically and culturally competent case management, among other services.

These states, as well as Ohio, Wisconsin, and Pennsylvania, are investing in immigrants because they are thinking about the future as much as the present. To continue growing and innovating, the Great Lakes region needs the energy and talents of these newcomers.

Endnotes

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