

Twenty-First Century Gateways: Immigrants In Suburban America

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New trends in immigrant settlement patterns are changing communities across the United States. The traditional American story of immigrant enclaves in the heart of major cities has been fundamentally altered with the restructuring of the US economy, the decentralization of cities, and the growth of the suburbs as major employment centers.

Prior to the 1990s, immigrant settlement had a predictable pattern and was limited to mostly Southwestern and coastal states and metropolitan New York, Los Angeles, Miami, and Chicago.

By century's end, due to shifts in labor markets, immigrants, both legal and illegal, were increasingly settling outside well-established immigrant gateways in a new group of cities and suburbs.

The swiftness of the influx has often been accompanied by social and economic stress. In many rural areas, small towns, and suburban areas, the institutional structures that could assist in integrating immigrants — both community and governmental — are insufficient or nonexistent.

Many of the newest, largest destinations, such as Atlanta, Las Vegas, and Charlotte, are places with no history of or identity with immigration. Other metropolitan areas, such as Sacramento, Minneapolis-St. Paul, and Seattle, once important gateways in the early part of the 20th century, have recently re-emerged as major new destinations.

Taken together, the fastest growing "second-tier" metropolitan areas, including Atlanta, Austin, Charlotte, Dallas, Minneapolis-St. Paul, Phoenix, Portland, Sacramento, and Washington, DC, along with 11 other metropolitan areas, house one-fifth of all immigrants in the United States today. We have named this class of metropolitan areas the 21st-century gateways (see Table 1).

These 20 metropolitan areas are largely characterized by post-World War II urban development, very recent growth of their immigrant populations, and predominantly suburban settlement.

In contrast to more established central-city destinations and patterns of settlement, trends in 21st-century gateways constitute a new context for the social, economic, and political incorporation of immigrants. All of these places are confronting fast-paced change that

has wide-reaching effects on neighborhoods, schools, workplaces, and local public coffers.

Table 1. 21st-Century Gateways: Foreign Born Growth 1980 to 2006

Identifying the 21st-Century Gateways

Our identification of 21st-century gateways is based on a historical typology of urban immigrant settlement in the United States developed by demographer Audrey Singer. Based on trends in the size and growth of the immigrant population over the course of the 20th century, this typology includes six immigrant gateway types (see Sidebar for details on methodology):

- *Former* gateways, such as Buffalo and Pittsburgh, attracted considerable numbers of immigrants in the early 1900s but no longer do.
- *Continuous* gateways, such as New York and Chicago, are long-established destinations for immigrants and continue to receive large numbers of the foreign born.
- *Post–World War II* gateways, such as Houston, Los Angeles, and Miami, began attracting immigrants in large numbers only during the past 50 years or less.

Together, the continuous and the post-World War II gateways will be referred to as established immigrant gateways here (see Map 1).

- *Emerging* gateways are those places that have had rapidly growing immigrant populations during the past 25 years alone. Atlanta, Dallas-Ft. Worth, and Washington are prime examples.
- *Re-emerging* gateways, such as Minneapolis-St. Paul and Seattle, began the 20th century with a strong attraction for immigrants, waned as destinations during the middle of the century, but are now re-emerging as immigrant gateways.
- *Pre-emerging* gateways are those places, such as Raleigh-Durham and Austin, where immigrant populations have grown very rapidly starting in the 1990s and are likely to continue to grow as immigrant destinations.

The latter three categories make up the 21st-century gateways discussed in our book *Twenty-first Century Gateways: Immigrant Incorporation in Suburban America* (Singer, Hardwick, and Brettell 2008).



Map 1. Metropolitan Immigrant Gateways
[Click here](#) for larger version of map.

The gateways used in this analysis are defined as

metropolitan areas with populations over 1 million in 2000, based on 1999 metropolitan-area definitions. The typology includes six immigrant gateway types defined by demographer Audrey Singer in previous publications.

- Former gateways had a higher proportion of their population that was foreign born between 1900 and 1930 than the national average, followed by below-average foreign-born percentages in every decade through 2000.
- Continuous gateways had above-average foreign-born percentages for every decade, 1900 to 2000.
- Post-World War II gateways had low foreign-born percentages until after 1950, followed by higher-than-national-average foreign-born percentages in every decade through 2000.
- Emerging gateways had very low foreign-born percentages until 1970, followed by higher proportions from 1980 onward.
- Re-emerging gateways had foreign-born percentages exceeding the national average from 1900 to 1930, followed by below-average percentages until 1980, after which they experienced rapid increases.
- Pre-emerging gateways had very low foreign-born population percentages for most of the 20th century but experienced rapid growth after 1990.

In addition, continuous, post-World War II, emerging, and re-emerging gateways had to meet the following criteria: foreign-born populations greater than 200,000, and either foreign-born percentages higher than the 2000 national average (11.1 percent), or foreign-born growth rates higher than the 1990-2000 national average (57.4 percent), or both.

However, since the original immigrant gateways analysis was conducted, the Office of Management and Budget has overhauled

Immigrant Gateway Growth in Comparative Perspective

Some of the fastest immigrant growth rates during the 1990s were registered in metropolitan areas with very small immigrant populations to begin with. Nonetheless, many large metropolitan areas saw a doubling or more of their foreign-born populations in the 1990s alone, including Atlanta, Dallas-Ft. Worth, Portland (OR), Minneapolis St. Paul, and Las Vegas.

metropolitan-area definitions. Under the new classification system, which started in 2003, many metropolitan areas — including some in this analysis — have changed, typically by either metropolitan areas joining or splitting or by adding or losing counties. Therefore, many of the 45 metropolitan areas in Singer's original analysis have a new metropolitan definition, bringing the total included in this analysis to 37 metropolitan areas representing 70 percent of all immigrants residing in the United States.

At the same time, in the more established immigrant gateways, growth rates registered smaller percentage change: an average of 45 percent in the continuous gateways and 39 percent in the post-World War II gateways (see Table 2).

Likewise, it is not unexpected that some of the largest established gateways have seen minor percentage growth recently. This is due in part simply to the absolute size of the immigrant populations in places such as Los Angeles, where the immigrant population grew only 3.1 percent (but exceptionally fast in nearby Riverside-San Bernardino), and New York, which had only 9 percent growth between 2000 and 2006.

Other metropolitan areas that registered strong growth in their immigrant populations in the 1990s due to the technology boom, such as San Francisco and San Jose, have seen the pace of foreign-born growth dramatically slow since 2000, when the technology bubble burst.

In contrast, during the same 2000-2006 period, the greatest percentage increases in foreign-born populations among metropolitan areas were in emerging Orlando, Atlanta, and Las Vegas, and pre-emerging Charlotte and Raleigh (all between 53 and 62 percent).

In absolute terms, Dallas-Ft. Worth, Atlanta, Washington, and Phoenix saw the largest gains among the 21st-century immigrant gateways. However, established New York topped the list with an estimated 450,000 immigrant newcomers settling since 2000. Post-World War II gateways Houston, Riverside-San Bernardino, and Miami followed, each with more than 250,000 new immigrants in the most recent period.

Table 2. Immigrant Gateways: Change in Foreign-Born Population by Decade, 1980 to 2006

Immigrants in Suburban Metropolises

Another new immigrant settlement trend — one taking place wholly within metropolitan areas — was the dramatic increase in suburban settlement of immigrants that began in the 1990s. As the urban economy has shifted from manufacturing to new-economy services, the suburbs have become the preferred location for dispersed commercial and office space.

Immigrants have followed the suburban job and housing opportunities in great numbers. By doing so, they have broken with historical patterns of immigrants moving to cities where housing and jobs were plentiful and where they found others from their own background. Now many immigrants move directly to suburban areas from abroad.

While the more established gateways have seen suburban settlement taking place over a protracted period of time, one of the most prominent — and complicating — features of 21st-century gateways is that they are, for the most part, metropolitan areas that are fairly suburban in form. They tend to be metropolitan areas that grew after World War II and feature large, lower density, sprawling, automobile-oriented areas.

Although several of them, such as Charlotte, Phoenix, and Austin, have large central cities stemming from annexation, those cities are suburban-like in the way they function, especially when contrasted with the dense cores in more established cities along the East Coast, in the Midwest, and dotting the West Coast that received earlier waves of immigrants.

This is not to say that some of the more established immigrant gateways are not suburban in form (think Los Angeles) or that immigrants are not living in suburbs in metro areas with a high proportion residing in central cities (think suburban New York, which runs through at least four states).

To explore some of the most recent trends, and the most recent challenges, we turn to a few examples of 21st-century gateways. Although these metropolitan areas share many defining characteristics, such as the sudden influx of immigrants, the lack of recent history of immigration, and heavily suburban form of development, each has distinctive features.

We focus on two case examples that do not usually top the list of typical immigrant destinations, Atlanta and Sacramento.

Atlanta typifies immigration in metropolitan areas in the South Atlantic or the "new South," a geography historically outside the trajectory of most immigrants that has become increasingly cosmopolitan, in part through immigration in the past few decades and in part through domestic in-migration.

Sacramento, although it is the capital of California and located in a traditional settlement state, had been largely bypassed by immigrants during the mid-20th century, but its foreign-born population began rising during the 1980s and 1990s due mainly to refugee resettlement.

Atlanta: Unsettled in the Suburbs

Atlanta offers an excellent example of an emerging gateway in the "New South." During the past few decades, many from within the United States and from abroad flocked to Atlanta as the metropolitan-area economy rapidly expanded with the acquisition of major national and multinational corporations. Atlanta is also home to one of the busiest airports in the world and is a major destination for conventions.

The work of historian Mary Odem shows that the racial and ethnic landscape of this traditionally black/white region began to change in the 1980s as Southeast Asian refugees were resettled in the area.

The foreign-born population comprised only 2 percent of the metro-area population in 1980, but by 1990 it had doubled to 4 percent. During the 1990s, Mexicans were drawn to the area by employment opportunities. With the exception of Dallas, another emerging gateway, Atlanta added more jobs than any other metropolitan area in the United States.

By 2000, the foreign born were 10 percent of the population of metropolitan Atlanta, and by 2006 immigrants comprised more than 11 percent of the total population; a slight majority are Latin American immigrants.

The city of Atlanta is a relatively small jurisdiction at the core of the sprawling metropolis. Thus most of the population lives outside the city where, in 2005, 96 percent of metropolitan Atlanta's immigrants lived as well.

Atlanta is a region divided by race: predominantly white residential areas are in the north, and predominantly black neighborhoods are in the south.

According to Odem's analysis, the foreign born have not moved in to areas in southwestern Atlanta and southern DeKalb County where the neighborhoods of the highest concentration of black residents are located. By contrast, however, clusters of immigrants have settled in central DeKalb County and northeastern Clayton County where African Americans comprise one-third of the population.

What has happened at the local suburban level is perhaps best represented by the recent histories of two mature suburban cities in northern DeKalb County, Chamblee and Doraville. Prior to 1970, these two places were largely white, blue-collar communities whose residents worked in nearby factories.

As the economy slowed down in the 1970s and factories closed, many residents began to leave the area, leaving vacant many commercial, industrial, and residential properties lining major highways. At the same time, Atlanta began to resettle refugees in the region, and this area became a prime location for low-cost housing for refugee newcomers with property managers eager to rent their properties.

By the 1980s, two rail stops on the regional train line made this an attractive area for other immigrants, particularly those from China, Korea, and Latin America. By 1990, the Chamblee-Doraville area had become one of the most ethnically diverse in the southeastern United States.

Non-Hispanic whites were almost 90 percent of Chamblee's population in 1980 but only 24 percent in 2000, while Latinos comprised 54 percent and Asians almost 15 percent. Numerous strip shopping malls along the major thoroughfare, the Buford Highway, are now lined with immigrant and ethnic enterprises.

Recently, Latin American and Asian immigrants, such as those from Vietnam and Korea, have been leaving the low-cost apartment complexes in Chamblee and Doraville as their economic situations have improved. They head north to more remote counties to purchase single-family homes.

The formerly all-white suburbs of Gwinnett, northern Fulton, and Cobb counties have also become increasingly diverse (home to immigrants and native-born blacks) and are equally characterized by clusters of ethnic business that have cropped up along major arteries.

Chamblee has responded to increasing diversity by embracing it as a means to attract developers, businesses, and tourists, passing new zoning to create an International Village. But Chamblee also passed an ordinance in 1996 forbidding people to "assemble on private property for the purpose of soliciting work as a day laborer without the permission of the property owner."

A host of local suburban areas have passed additional restrictive ordinances that affect everything from educational access to housing to law enforcement. For example, the County Board of Commissioners of Cherokee County, an area that has been attractive to increasing numbers of Latinos, passed legislation in 2006 that declared English the official language of the county and that will penalize landlords who rent housing to undocumented immigrants. This reflects similar legislation that has been proposed in Farmer's Branch, an inner-ring suburb of Dallas.

At the state level, Georgia legislators have rejected bilingual education, placing their emphasis instead on programs that emphasize learning English quickly. Georgia was one of the first states to pass legislation to address immigration issues in 2006 with the sweeping Georgia Security and Immigration Compliance Act.

This act instituted a range of restrictive measures related to unauthorized immigration, including denying tax-supported benefits to adults without status, requiring police to check status of anyone arrested for a felony, reporting those without status to federal authorities, and requiring proof of legal authorization to work on all state contracts. Since then, other states have passed legislation in the absence of federal immigration reform, such as Arizona and Oklahoma.

While Atlanta, Dallas, Washington, DC, and Phoenix (all cases examined in *Twenty-First Century Gateways*) offer good examples of what has been happening in emerging gateways, Portland, Oregon; Minneapolis-St Paul; and Sacramento offer case studies of what has been happening in re-emerging gateways. These metropolitan areas have something in common — a significant number of the foreign born are refugees from Southeast Asia and Eastern Europe. The suburban patterns of settlement are equally characteristic of these metropolitan areas.

Sacramento's Changing Suburban Landscape

Geographers Robin Datel and Dennis Dingemans identify a host of forces that have led to the re-emergence of Sacramento as a gateway of immigration. These include a history of immigrant settlement, the region's role as a refugee magnet, the availability of inexpensive suburban housing, and the demand for both brain and brawn migrants.

Sacramento had about 250,000 foreign-born residents in 2000, and it gained another 100,000 by 2006, making it 17.6 percent foreign born. Forty-one percent of this population is from Asia; 33 percent from Latin America; and 11 percent from Eastern Europe. Furthermore, Sacramento ranked tenth among all US metropolitan areas in the absolute number of refugees that were resettled between 1983 and 2004.

Immigrants have had an impact on the commercial and religious geography of suburban Sacramento communities as well as on schools that have become increasingly diverse. Notably, Eastern European refugees have been attracted to Sacramento northeast of downtown, as well as to West Sacramento, where a previous generation of Russian immigrants made their home and where religious institutions (Baptist as well as Orthodox) are well established.

The other large refugee population settling in Sacramento is from Southeast Asia, particularly Vietnam and Laos, including many Hmong. Churches on the south side of Sacramento played an instrumental role in sponsoring refugees. Refugee service organizations, such as Sacramento Lao Family Community Inc. and the Hmong Women's Heritage Association, sprang up in this area.

Southeast Asian refugees settled not only in the south side of the city but also in the adjacent, unincorporated, and more suburban area of Sacramento County.

Since Hmong tend to have the lowest incomes among Asian immigrants, they have moved into less expensive housing, either in the city or in the older inner suburbs.

The impact of the foreign born on the suburban commercial landscape of Sacramento is significant. A Little Saigon has emerged along Stockton Boulevard with 350 Asian businesses.

In another area of the city, along six miles of Franklin Boulevard which is located to the west and parallel to Stockton Boulevard, a Latino commercial strip has developed.

Elsewhere in the city there are Korean and Slavic entrepreneurial clusters.

In addition to commercial enterprises, the foreign born in Sacramento have made their mark on the suburban landscape through their houses of worship — Buddhist, Hindu, Sikh, and Tao temples; mosques; Korean and Vietnamese Catholic churches; and Protestant *iglesias*. Fifty-eight churches in the region, most located in the suburbs, are associated with ex-Soviet immigrants.

In Sacramento, as in many other emerging, re-emerging, and pre-emerging suburban gateways, the rapid increase in the foreign-born population is most dramatically felt in the schools. In the local media, several Sacramento radio stations sell air time to ethnic broadcasters, and newspapers in Vietnamese, Lao, and Ukrainian are readily available.

The foreign born also have an impact on the public landscape through their ethnic festivals and their sports activities. Major soccer tournaments are held in the suburbs, and cricket matches take place in the more prosperous suburban communities where South Asians have settled.

Looking Ahead to the 21st Century

Local places, whether cities, suburban communities, or states, have responded in different ways to the presence of the foreign born, particularly unauthorized immigrants. These responses have ranged from accommodating and inclusionary to hostile and exclusionary.

When these responses have been legislated through passing local or state ordinances, they reflect the frustrations that many public officials at the state and local level feel about the absence of federal movement on reforming federal immigration policy.

Many of these proposals and new laws affect access to jobs, housing, drivers' licenses, and education. Some communities are passing laws that allow local law enforcement to work with federal immigration authorities; others are forbidding this kind of action.

In the inner-ring Dallas suburb of Farmers Branch, the population voted to make it illegal for landlords to rent to unauthorized immigrants. In several suburban communities outside Washington, DC, measures regulating immigrant day labor sites as well as those denying services to unauthorized immigrants have been put into place. And several Atlanta suburbs have tightened housing occupancy codes as well as passed English-language ordinances.

But it is equally important to note that in other local communities — often within the same metropolitan areas — programs and policies have been implemented to reach out to immigrants.

Another Dallas-area community, Plano, has a number of outreach programs run by the library system, which offers popular language and literacy programs.

Austin and various municipalities, including Prince George's County in suburban Washington, have joint police-bank programs to bring immigrants into mainstream banking practices as a way of reducing street crime targeted at immigrants. Many local areas use public money for formal day labor centers.

And mayors and other local elected officials have declared their jurisdictions as places of "sanctuary" that forbid local police to work with immigration authorities. Sanctuary cities include long-standing large gateways such as Los Angeles, San Francisco, Houston, and New York. But the list also includes many 21st-century gateways, such as Austin, Minneapolis, Portland, Seattle, and Washington, DC.

Although many of the more restrictive laws may eventually be struck down, they have fostered such intense debate that immigration has become an issue of major social significance in numerous local communities nationwide.

With the national debate focused on border enforcement and legal status of immigrants, it is easy to overlook the fact that immigrants are local actors.

Immigrants work in local firms, shops, and factories; their children attend local schools; they join local religious congregations; they interact with municipal institutions. The locus of immigrant integration is the local community. This is where the social, economic, and civic integration happens.

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About The Author

Audrey Singer is a Senior Fellow at the Brookings Metropolitan Policy Program. Her areas of expertise include demography, international migration, immigration policy, and urban and metropolitan change. She has written extensively on U.S. immigration trends, including undocumented migration, U.S. immigration policy, naturalization and citizenship, and the changing racial and ethnic composition of the United States.

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Caroline B. Bretell joined the faculty of Southern Methodist University in 1988. In 2003 she was named Dedman Family Distinguished Professor. She served as Director of Women's Studies from 1989-1994 and as Chair of Anthropology from 1994-2004. She has several ongoing research projects on immigration. One, funded by the National Science Foundation, focuses on the DFW metroplex as a new city of immigration and how immigrants are incorporated into the economic, social, and political structures of a sunbelt city. Another, recently funded by the Russell Sage Foundation, will be exploring

aspects of citizenship practice and civic engagement among Asian Indian and Vietnamese immigrants in the DFW area.