

Immigration reform crucial to Midwest, study finds

By [Georgia Pabst](#) of the Journal Sentinel
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The importance of federal immigration reform to the growth and economy of the Midwest is spelled out in a 60-page report issued by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs.

The report is the work of an independent task force made up of a diverse group of civic and business leaders, including representatives from business, law enforcement, schools, hospitals, nonprofits, foundations, advocacy groups and communities of faith from 12 Midwestern states.

The report says the Midwest needs both high-skilled immigrants and low-skilled immigrant workers to be globally competitive.

"The Midwestern economy needs high-skilled, educated workers with long-term visas to create the companies and innovations that will power it in the future," the report states.

"Midwestern businesses need low-skilled immigrants with visas to sustain their industries," it says. "Midwestern farms seek a legal way to hire the seasonal help they need."

"Midwestern schools insist that their students get the legal status that will lead to higher education and jobs," it says.

But the nation's broken immigration system "is holding back the region's economic growth and clouding its future," the report says in stressing the need for comprehensive immigration reform, including a path to citizenship.

Although educational attainment in the United States has increased, the U.S. workforce alone is not enough to sustain a globally competitive knowledge economy, the report states.

For example, it says:

- Some 60% to 70% of the students in American computer science and electrical engineering graduate programs are foreigners on temporary visas.
- Some 25% of U.S. patents are held by innovators born abroad.
- One-quarter of the high-tech firms launched in the U.S. between 1995 and 2005 were founded by immigrants.

But the country also needs immigrant workers because of the long-term demographic trends that include U.S. families having fewer children and baby boomers retiring.

The report observes that parts of the Midwest already house diverse populations that work in meatpacking and other rural industries. Some 40% of the dairy workers in Wisconsin are Mexican, as is much of the labor in meat and other food processing plants across the region, the report says.

It adds that 25% of all physicians and surgeons in the Midwest are foreign born.

The Midwest needs immigrants to work in industries, hospitals, universities and research centers, but "many of our communities would be dying if it weren't for newcomers and the youth and energy they bring," according to the report.

Most Midwestern states, including Wisconsin, are losing most of their educated people, the report says. Eight of 12 Midwestern states are producing students with a postsecondary education, defined as 22 to 29 years old with an associate degree or higher, but not retaining them as long-term residents, the report says.

By 2009 there were an estimated 1.2 million Mexican immigrants living in the 12 states of the Midwest, the report says. While that's just 2% of the population overall, it's up to one-third of the residents in some communities and 50% of the children in some elementary schools.

And in 2009, it was estimated that as many as two of three recent arrivals in the Midwest were here illegally, the report says, citing Pew Hispanic Center statistics.

Although there's been a need for immigration reform for years, the presidential election dramatized the importance of the immigrant and Latino vote and now there's a renewed push for both parties to deal with immigration reform, the report says.

The Midwest, with swing states such as Wisconsin and Ohio, can play a crucial role in driving this reform, the report says.

The immigration report was released last week at the National Press Club in Washington, and there were meetings with congressional leaders about it, said task force member Darryl D. Morin, president and CEO of Advanced Wireless Inc. and former state director of the League of United Latin American Citizens.

"It's time that business got involved again and talk about the economic impact that immigration has on the Midwest region," he said. "The report, which is well researched, calls out the pressing need for both high-skilled and low-skilled workers. Too many times we think that it's a matter of one or the other, but it's a balance of both."

Both Republicans and Democrats were on the task force, which was designed to stress the need for immigration reform now.

Task force co-chairs included Chet Culver, the former governor of Iowa; Richard Daley, the former mayor of Chicago; Carole Segal, the co-founder of Crate & Barrel; and John W. Rowe, chairman emeritus of Exelon Corp.

Wisconsin task force members included Morin; Enrique Figueroa, an associate professor and director of the Roberto Hernandez Center at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee; and John Rosenow, the CEO and co-owner of Rosenholm-Wolfe Dairy and Cowsmo Inc.

<http://www.jsonline.com/news/wisconsin/immigration-reform-crucial-to-midwest-study-finds-3k91mv3-196242261.html>