

OKLAHOMA:

Immigrant Entrepreneurs, Innovation, and Welcoming Initiatives in the Sooner State

In Oklahoma, there is no doubt that immigrant entrepreneurs and innovators play an important role. Immigrant entrepreneurs bring in additional revenue, create jobs, and contribute significantly to the state's economy. Highly skilled immigrants are vital to the state's innovation industries and to the metropolitan areas within the state, helping to boost local economies. Furthermore, local government, business, and non-profit leaders recognize the importance of immigrants in their communities and support immigration through local "welcoming" and integration initiatives.

Immigrant entrepreneurs contribute to Oklahoma's economy.

- From 2006 to 2010, there were 11,983 new immigrant business [owners](#) in Oklahoma,¹ and in 2010, [7 percent](#) of all business owners in Oklahoma were foreign-born.²
- In 2010, new immigrant business owners³ had total net business [income](#) of \$477 million, which is 5.3 percent of all net business income in the state.⁴

Highly skilled immigrants are vital to Oklahoma's innovation industries, which in turn helps lead American innovation and creates jobs.

- Immigrants contribute to Oklahoma's economic growth and competitiveness by earning degrees in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields from the state's research universities. In 2009, over [55 percent](#) of STEM graduates from the state's research-intensive universities were foreign-born, and more than 70 percent of graduates earning PhDs in engineering in Oklahoma were not born in the U.S.⁵
- In 2011, the U.S. Department of Labor certified 1,267 H-1B high-skilled visa labor certification [applications](#) in Oklahoma, with an average annual wage of \$57,182,⁶ which is higher than Oklahoma's median household [income](#) of \$44,287 or per capita income of \$23,770.⁷
- An [expansion](#) of the high-skilled visa program would create an estimated 3,000 new jobs in Oklahoma by 2020.⁸ By 2045, this expansion would [add](#) around \$1.1 billion to Gross State Product and increase personal income by more than \$1 billion.⁹ The following are [examples](#) of metropolitan area demand for high-skilled foreign-born workers.
 - The Oklahoma City metropolitan area had 585 H-1B [requests](#) in 2010-2011, with 51.3 percent of visa-holders working in STEM occupations.¹⁰ A major employer

includes the University of Oklahoma.

- o The Tulsa metropolitan area had 483 H-1B [requests](#) in 2010-2011, with 70.6 percent of visa-holders working in STEM occupations.¹¹ Major employers include Alindus Inc., and Guru IT Solutions Inc.

While the numbers are compelling, they don't tell the whole story.

- Immigrant entrepreneurs not only contribute to large innovative companies, but to small business formation in local communities. In Oklahoma towns, immigrant family-owned small businesses contribute to the vitality of their local communities. Although initially aimed at other immigrant customers, many businesses quickly see an expansion of their clientele to include a diverse array of immigrant and native-born customers alike.
- Oklahoma City, as the state's capital and largest city, contains a variety of immigrant-owned business examples. The city hosts restaurants, markets, and other [businesses](#) owned and operated by immigrants, including eateries representing cuisines from Mexico, El Salvador, Morocco, Guatemala, and Bangladesh.¹²
 - o Along SW 29th Street and other main business corridors on the southside of the city, a variety of Hispanic [small businesses](#) are thriving. Such establishments include restaurants, auto repair, markets, shops, and beauty salons.¹³ Additionally, [food trucks](#) selling Mexican food are seen in many neighborhoods around the city.¹⁴
 - o The Realzola family, from Mexico, owns [several small businesses](#) including a used car dealership, an auto repair shop, and a Mexican restaurant.¹⁵ Also in the state's capital city, Henryk and Elizabeth Orlowski, from Poland, own and operate a real estate office.¹⁶
 - o Wes Salous, a Palestinian immigrant, moved to Oklahoma City from Dallas several years ago to purchase an IHOP restaurant. Today, he [owns several](#) of those restaurants around the Oklahoma City area, including a location in Bricktown.¹⁷ Salous' two brothers, Salim and Sammy, operate a car lot and auto repair shop in the Mid-City area.¹⁸

In Oklahoma, local leaders have begun recognizing and supporting immigration through “welcoming” and integration initiatives.

- The **YWCA Tulsa Immigrant and Refugee [program](#)** provides services that promote self-sufficiency for the area's immigrant and refugee population.¹⁹
 - o Examples of [services](#) the program provides are English as a second language (ESL) classes, legal permanent residency application, civics and citizenship classes, interpretation and translation, job search and employment assistance, and other immigration assistance.²⁰

- In the spring of 2013, the **Oklahoma House of Representatives** introduced [HR 1014](#), “a resolution recognizing the many social and economic contributions immigrants make to the State of Oklahoma; urging Congress to enact comprehensive immigration reform; and directing distribution.”²¹
 - This resolution is an example of the state Legislature recognizing the contributions immigrants make to Oklahoma and the need for national policymakers to bring the immigration system up to date so that immigrants can more efficiently contribute and effectively integrate into the places in which they live and work.

Endnotes

¹ Robert W. Fairlie, [Open for Business: How Immigrants are Driving Small Business Success in the United States](#) (New York: Partnership for a New American Economy, 2012).

² Ibid.

³ The sample of new immigrant business owners during this time period includes individuals who do not own a business in the first survey month and report starting a business in the second survey month with 15 or more hours worked per week.

⁴ Robert W. Fairlie, [Open for Business: How Immigrants are Driving Small Business Success in the United States](#) (New York: Partnership for a New American Economy, 2012).

⁵ Partnership for a New American Economy, [“Map the Impact of Immigrants Across America: Oklahoma”](#) (New York: Partnership for a New American Economy, 2013).

⁶ Office of Foreign Labor Certification, [Annual Report: October 1, 2010 – September 30, 2011](#) (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Labor, 2012).

⁷ U.S. Census Bureau, “State & County Quick Facts: Oklahoma” (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Commerce, 2011).

⁸ Frederick R. Treyz, Corey Stottlemeyer, and Rod Motamedi, [“Key Components of Immigration Reform: An Analysis of the Economic Effects of Creating a Pathway to Legal Status, Expanding High-Skilled Visas, and Reforming Lesser-Skilled Visas”](#) (Amherst, MA: Regional Economic Models, Inc., 2013).

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Neil G. Ruiz, Jill H. Wilson, and Shyamali Choudhury, [The Search for Skills: Demand for H-1B Immigrant Workers in U.S. Metropolitan Areas](#) (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 2012).

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² William F. O’Brien, [“Immigrant-owned businesses find success in Oklahoma”](#) (Oklahoma City: *The City Sentinel*, March 5, 2010).

¹³ Vallery Brown, “Hispanic population increases in the Oklahoma City area” (Oklahoma City:

¹⁴ William F. O’Brien, [“Immigrant-owned businesses find success in Oklahoma”](#) (Oklahoma City: *The City Sentinel*, March 5, 2010).

¹⁵ Devona Walker, [“Immigration: Diverse entrepreneurs change face of small business”](#) (Oklahoma City: *The Oklahoman*, July 13, 2008).

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ William F. O’Brien, [“Immigrant-owned businesses find success in Oklahoma”](#) (Oklahoma City: *The City Sentinel*, March 5, 2010).

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ YWCA Tulsa, [“Immigrant and Refugee Services”](#) (Tulsa, OK: YWCA Tulsa, 2013).

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ State of Oklahoma, [“House Resolution 1014”](#) (Oklahoma City: State of Oklahoma, 2013).

Immigrant Entrepreneurs in:

Oklahoma

*In 2010, new immigrant
business owners generated*

**\$477
million**

*in total net
business income*



7%

*of business owners in
Oklahoma are immigrants*

Read more at ImmigrationPolicy.org

11,983

*immigrants became new business
owners in Oklahoma between
2006-2010*

 **IMMIGRATION
POLICY
CENTER**

AMERICAN IMMIGRATION COUNCIL