

WISCONSIN:

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

In Wisconsin, 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 significantly to Wisconsin's economy.

- From 2006 to 2010, there were 10,342 new immigrant business [owners](#) in Wisconsin¹ and in 2010, [4.3 percent](#) of all business owners in Wisconsin were foreign-born.²
- In 2010, new immigrant business owners³ had a total net business [income](#) of \$589 million, which is 4.6 percent of all net business income in the state.⁴
- Wisconsin is home to many successful companies with at least one founder who was an immigrant or child of an immigrant, [including](#) well-known businesses such as Kohl's and other Fortune 500 firms including Oshkosh, American Family Mutual Insurance, Harley-Davidson, and Manpower.⁵ Those five companies together employ over 200,000 people and bring in around \$60 billion in revenue each year.

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

- Immigrants contribute to Wisconsin'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 one in three](#) STEM graduates earning masters or PhD degrees from these universities were foreign-born, and almost 60 percent of graduates earning PhDs in engineering in Wisconsin were not born in the U.S.⁶
- Immigrants in Wisconsin also contribute to the state's innovation economy by earning patents on new research, products, and ideas. In fact, around [71 percent](#) of patents awarded to the University of Wisconsin in 2011 had at least one foreign-born inventor. These patents from 2011 amount to \$57 million in University of Wisconsin system licensing and royalty revenues.⁷

- In 2011, the U.S. Department of Labor certified 3,419 H-1B high-skilled visa labor certification [applications](#) in Wisconsin, with an average annual wage of \$62,774,⁸ which is higher than Wisconsin's median household [income](#) of \$52,374 or per capita income of \$27,192.⁹
- An [expansion](#) of the high-skilled visa program would create an estimated 5,800 new jobs in Wisconsin by 2020.¹⁰ By 2045, this expansion would [add](#) around \$2.2 billion to Gross State Product and increase personal income by more than \$2.1 billion.¹¹ The following are [examples](#) of metropolitan area demand for high-skilled foreign-born workers.
 - The Milwaukee-Waukesha-West Allis metropolitan area had 1,571 H-1B visa [requests](#) in 2010-2011, with 76.6 percent of H-1B visa-holders working in STEM occupations.¹² Major employers with a need for H-1B high-skilled workers include the Medical College of Wisconsin, GE Medical Systems, and the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee.
 - The Madison metropolitan area had 848 H-1B visa [requests](#) in 2010-2011, with 83.9 percent of visa-holders working in STEM occupations.¹³ Major employers include the University of Wisconsin, Madison, and Epic Systems Corporation.

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

- Immigrant entrepreneurs not only contribute to large innovative companies, but also to small businesses in local communities. In cities across Wisconsin, 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.
- In Madison, South Park Street and South Gammon Road are known for their assortment of immigrant-owned restaurants, specialty shops, and ethnic [grocery stores](#).¹⁴ In fact, South Park Street is locally [described](#) as “the United Nations of restaurants...a neighborhood of entrepreneurs marketing cuisines from around the world.”¹⁵
 - The mix of immigrant-owned restaurants along South Park Street [includes](#) well-established venues with a loyal following as well as “upstarts eager to lure in diners with a taste of world cuisines.” Indeed, “the street known for its ethnic eateries and grocery stores is now enjoying a new wave of expansions, interior facelifts and additions.”¹⁶
 - One such restaurant is Taqueria Guadalajara. Josefa Trejo and Francisco Vasquez, from Mexico, own and operate Taqueria Guadalajara on South Park Street. Today, the South Side [establishment](#) is one of the most popular Mexican restaurants in Wisconsin's capital city.¹⁷
 - There are at least two dozen [ethnic markets](#) in and around Madison composed of

immigrant-owned businesses, offering food items, ingredients, and snacks from around the world.¹⁸ The assortment, many of which are found in the South Park Street or South Gammon Road neighborhoods, includes immigrant-owned and operated establishments representing many Asian, African, and Latin American points of origin.

- In Milwaukee, the state's largest city, immigrant entrepreneurs and small business owners contribute to community vitality in neighborhoods around the city. A medley of Asian, Latino, and Middle Eastern restaurants, shops, and [ethnic groceries](#) are found throughout the city.¹⁹
 - The Centeno family migrated to the U.S. from El Salvador in 1998. In Milwaukee today, the [family](#) of entrepreneurs operates a child care center, a contracting firm, and a graphic design and magazine publishing business.²⁰
 - Around Milwaukee, Sikh Indians own over 300 [gas stations](#). Many of these immigrant entrepreneurs have masters and Ph.D. degrees from other countries, but because foreign advanced degrees are not always recognized in the U.S., they choose to start their own businesses.²¹
 - On Milwaukee's south side, more than 100 Mexican [restaurants](#) flourish in one of the city's communities known for a diverse array of restaurants, markets, groceries, and ethnic specialty shops.²²
 - Nelson Soler, executive director of the Hispanic Entrepreneurial Center at the University of Wisconsin [explains](#) that "fifty percent of the people who come here, in addition to having a job, are engaged in some kind of entrepreneurial activity. These individuals might work a full-time job, yet they're selling shoes, they're selling food items or they weave textiles and sell them. People who come here from other countries still want their food and services, so it creates opportunity for immigrants to start businesses and create jobs in their community."²³
- Immigrant entrepreneurs from India are found throughout Wisconsin, owning [businesses](#) ranging from chains of convenience stores and filling stations, hotels and motels, home development, a network of computer stores, and a market research firm.²⁴ Consider these [examples](#):²⁵
 - Kaushik Patel began as a computer engineer, but today owns a chain of five hotels, including three in Wisconsin: two in Plymouth and one in Eau Claire.
 - Kailas Rao, a former university professor, is one of the state's earlier Indian entrepreneurs who founded a chain of computer stores and a wireless communications business.
 - Vincent Kuttemperoor has developed more than 500 single-family homes in

Brookfield, a western suburb of Milwaukee, plus apartment complexes, condominiums, and office buildings.

- o Rupesh Agrawal, an engineer by training, owns Zeon Solutions Inc., a Milwaukee-based website and software development firm that employs 30 people at its headquarters and 200 worldwide. *Inc.* magazine listed Zeon among the nation's fastest-growing companies.

In Wisconsin, localities have begun recognizing and supporting immigration through “welcoming” and integration initiatives.

- Across Wisconsin and the broader Midwest, local places recognize the importance of immigrant entrepreneurs in their communities. According to the [Chicago Council of Global Affairs](#), “Public and private-sector groups across the region have launched business incubators for immigrant entrepreneurs, sponsored networking opportunities with local employers, and helped skilled immigrants translate their foreign credentials to maximize their economic potential in the United States.”²⁶
 - o Specifically, the Council [states](#) that “the Midwest cannot hope to keep up with other regions or international competitors without a vital entrepreneurial sector...Immigrants, risk takers by nature, are unusually successful entrepreneurs, more than twice as likely as native-born Americans to start their own firms.”²⁷
 - o They go on to [suggest that](#) “the Midwest needs this kind of entrepreneurial energy, but historically the region has had some trouble attracting and retaining this talent. Business incubators in immigrant communities, microloan programs, and other initiatives to make credit available can make a difference.”²⁸
- In Milwaukee, the **International Institute of Wisconsin** [provides](#) educational and social opportunities for new Americans by facilitating “services and programs for immigrants, refugees, and the community to assist with cooperation and integration into society.” The organization’s goal is to “help individuals and families obtain self-sufficiency and promote multi-cultural understanding throughout the community.”²⁹

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: Wisconsin](#)” (New York: Partnership for a New American Economy, 2013).

⁶ Partnership for a New American Economy, “[Map the Impact of Immigrants Across America: Wisconsin](#)” (New York: Partnership for a New American Economy, 2013).

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Office of Foreign Labor Certification, [*Annual Report: October 1, 2010 – September 30, 2011*](#) (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Labor, 2012).

⁹ U.S. Census Bureau, [*State & County Quick Facts: Wisconsin*](#) (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Commerce, 2011).

¹⁰ 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).

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² 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).

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ 77 Square Staff, [*List of ethnic grocery stores in Madison*](#) (Madison, WI: *Madison.com*, September 22, 2011).

¹⁵ Gayle Worland, [*A growing and eclectic mix of restaurants make Park Street a foodies' delight*](#) (Madison, WI: *Wisconsin State Journal*, February 6, 2011).

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Chris Rickert, [*South Side TIF retains a piece of authenticity*](#) (Madison, WI: *Wisconsin State Journal*, May 5, 2012).

¹⁸ 77 Square Staff, [*Madison's ethnic grocery stores offer a culinary trip around the world*](#) (Madison, WI: *Madison.com*, September 22, 2011).

¹⁹ Abby Callard, [*Ethnic groceries: Milwaukee's melting pot of shops includes Indian, Asian, Mexican and Middle Eastern cuisines*](#) (Milwaukee, WI: *MilwaukeeMag.com*, April 29, 2013).

²⁰ Tannette Johnson-Elie, [*From El Salvador to Milwaukee, a family of entrepreneurs*](#) (Milwaukee, WI: *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, March 29, 2006).

²¹ Tannette Johnson-Elie, [*Immigrants create a new land of opportunity: Cities benefit from entrepreneurial spirit, connections, studies say*](#) (Milwaukee, WI: *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, February 8, 2006).

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Rick Romell, [*State's Asian Indians thrive in entrepreneurial society: Immigrant group uses drive, degrees to achieve prosperity*](#) (Milwaukee, WI: *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, February 7, 2010).

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Tamar Jacoby, [*US Economic Competitiveness at Risk: A Midwest Call to Action on Immigration Reform*](#) (Chicago: The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 2013).

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ International Institute of Wisconsin, [*International Institute of Wisconsin*](#) (Milwaukee, WI: International Institute of Wisconsin, 2013).

Immigrant Entrepreneurs in:

Wisconsin

*In 2010, new immigrant
business owners generated*

**\$589
million**

*in total net
business income*



4.3%

*of business owners in
Wisconsin are immigrants*



10,342

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

Read more at ImmigrationPolicy.org