



Looking Back to Look Forward: Lessons from the Immigration Histories of Midwestern Cities

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Cities of the American Midwest were largely built by immigration. Immigrants and their children were a key component of the population growth these cities experienced in the early decades of the last century. In the 1920s, however, the federal government essentially shut off immigration to the United States for a multi-decade period lasting until the 1960s.

This analysis explores how the federal immigration cutback acted as a tourniquet on the growth of 13 large Midwestern cities. Although factors such as suburbanization and migration south and west drew population from these cities, the loss of immigration was a serious blow that contributed to decades-long stagnation and declines in the numbers of residents. Only in the last few decades did immigrant populations begin to rebound in the cities, helping to stabilize ongoing loss of natives.

Today, national policymakers are once again considering deep, new cuts to legal immigration levels, including the “Buy American and Hire American” executive order from the White House, which calls for an administrative review of the immigration system, to the Senate’s Reforming American Immigration for Strong Employment (“RAISE”) Act and its House companion bill, the Immigration in the National Interest Act, which purport to halve legal immigration by legislating a selective points-based admission system.

But Midwestern cities have a special tale to tell about cuts to immigration. Contemporary versions of restrictive 1920s-era legislation will deprive many Midwestern cities of a major source of new residents and would constitute a major blow to their revival.

Key takeaways from this analysis include:

- The 13 large Midwestern cities included in this report grew by 120 percent between 1900 and 1930. Some 41 percent of this population boom was fueled by a 55 percent increase in foreign-born residents and their children.
- Following a series of 1920s-era legislation that restricted immigration to the United States, the foreign-born population of these 13 cities fell 64 percent between 1930 and 1970.
- The dramatic decline in foreign-born population correlated with stagnation and decline of overall population in Midwestern cities. Between 1950 and 1970, these cities' population collectively fell by 7.5 percent.

After the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act rewrote many of the 1920s-era restrictions, immigrants began returning to the region, albeit at lower rates than in previous decades. Since 1990, these cities' foreign-born population has grown 45 percent, helping offset an overall population loss driven by a drop in native-born residents

The legislative proposals being considered at the federal level threaten this critical demographic lifeline, and along with it, cities' economic competitiveness, local tax base and federal representation.

Immigration Was an Early Building Block of Midwestern Cities

Beginning around 1880 and extending into the 1920s, a large wave of immigration brought millions of new residents to the United States. Many of the arrivals moved to the Midwestern states and the majority of them settled in the region's cities. By 1920, immigrants were more than a third of the population in Chicago, Cleveland, and Detroit, and more than a quarter of all persons in Grand Rapids, Minneapolis, and St. Paul¹ (Figure 1). (See Appendix for full data on Midwest cities.)

	1900	1910	1920	1930	1940	1950	1960	1970
Akron, Ohio	17%	19%	18%	12%	10%	8%	6%	4%
Chicago, Illinois	35%	36%	30%	25%	20%	15%	12%	11%
Cincinnati, Ohio	18%	16%	11%	8%	6%	4%	3%	3%

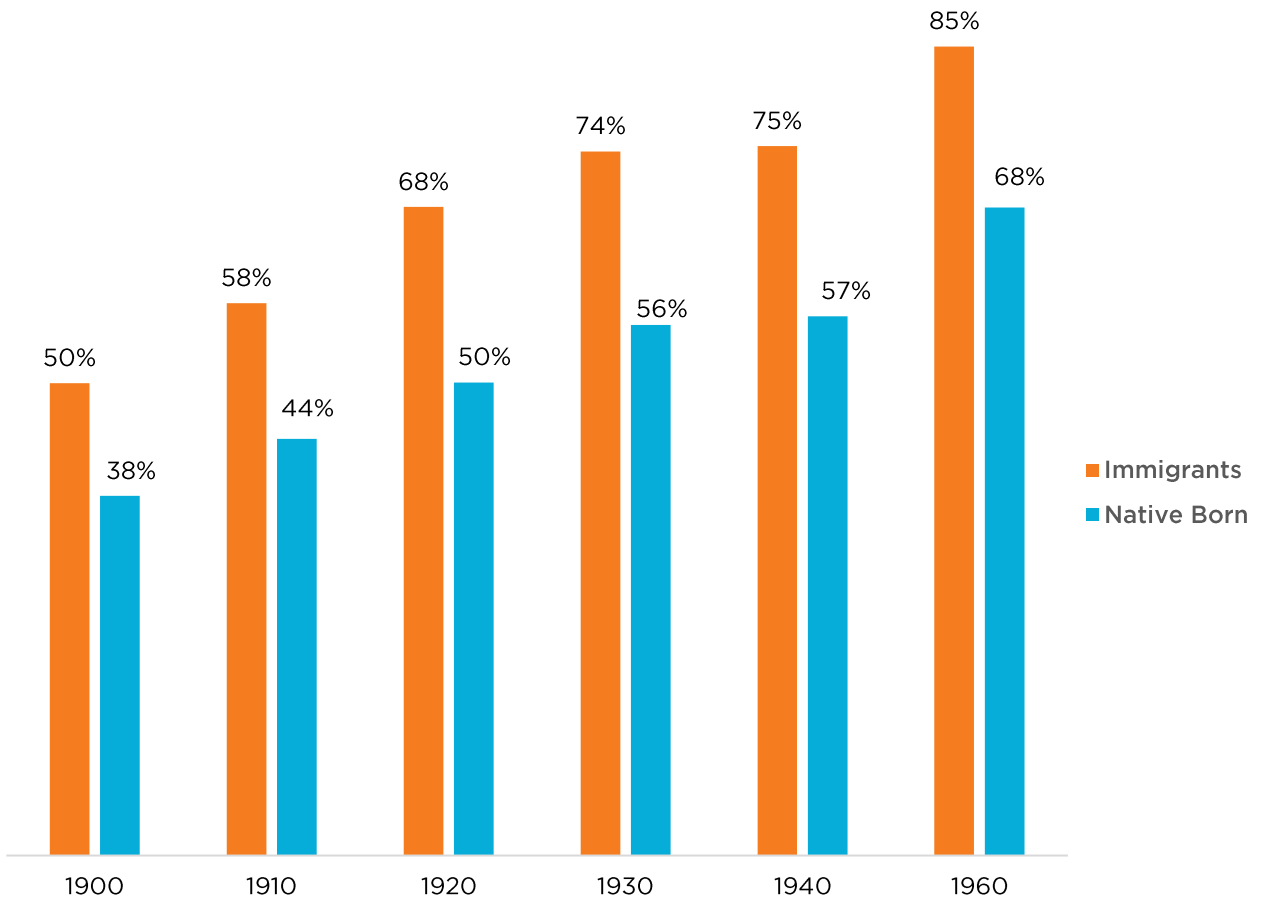
Cleveland, Ohio	33%	35%	30%	26%	20%	15%	11%	8%
Detroit, Michigan	34%	34%	29%	26%	20%	15%	12%	8%
Grand Rapids, Michigan	27%	25%	21%	16%	12%	9%	8%	5%
Kansas City, Missouri	11%	10%	9%	7%	5%	4%	3%	2%
Milwaukee, Wisconsin	31%	30%	24%	19%	14%	10%	8%	6%
Minneapolis, Minnesota	30%	29%	23%	17%	13%	9%	7%	5%
Omaha, Nebraska	23%	22%	19%	14%	10%	7%	5%	3%
St. Louis, Missouri	19%	18%	13%	10%	7%	5%	4%	3%
St. Paul, Minnesota	29%	26%	22%	16%	12%	8%	6%	4%
Toledo, Ohio	21%	19%	16%	12%	9%	7%	5%	3%

Source: US Census Bureau
Chicago Council on Global Affairs

Immigrants Choose Cities

Immigration has been critical for Midwestern cities because, reaching back at least to the late 19th century, immigrants have disproportionately chosen to live in cities. In 1900 about 50 percent immigrants in the region lived in urban areas compared to 38 percent of native-born persons. By 1960 fully 85 percent of the foreign born in the Midwest were in urban areas compared to 68 percent of native-born Midwest residents. (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Percent of Midwest Residents Living in Urban Areas



Source: Rob Paral and Associates
Chicago Council on Global Affairs

Multiple factors combined to make cities the destination of choice for immigrants of the early 20th century. There was declining availability of cheap land for agriculture. Jobs and economic activity were becoming increasingly centered in cities. In contrast to immigrants of the early and mid 1800s, more of the new arrivals themselves came from urban centers within Europe.

Most cities were growing in the early 1900s and an outsized share of the increase was often due to immigration. In Cleveland, for example, about 40 percent of growth between 1900 and 1910 came from immigration. In Detroit, immigration was 34 percent of growth in that decade and in both Milwaukee and Minneapolis it was 25 percent.

Even today, the foreign born are still disproportionately living in the cities that form the cores of metro areas. This is why a steady inflow of immigrants is more critical to cities than to suburban areas or even entire metro areas.

About 34 percent of the foreign born in metro Chicago live in the city of Chicago compared to 27 percent of the native born. Some 17 percent of the foreign born in metro St. Louis live in the city of St. Louis, compared to 11 percent of the native born. Milwaukee is home to 53 percent of its regional foreign born but only 37 percent of its region’s native born. Only in Cleveland and Detroit metro areas are immigrants more likely than natives to live in the suburbs (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Percent of Metro Residents Living in Central City, 2011-2015		
	Native Born	Foreign Born
Akron, Ohio	28.1%	30.4%
Chicago, Illinois	27.4	33.8
Cincinnati, Ohio	13.8	17.0
Cleveland, Ohio	19.1	16.2
Detroit, Michigan	16.7	9.5
Grand Rapids, Michigan	18.2	28.7
Kansas City, Missouri	22.5	27.0
Milwaukee, Wisconsin	37.1	52.9
Minneapolis, Minnesota	10.9	18.0
Omaha, Nebraska	47.5	71.2
St. Louis, Missouri	11.1	17.1
St. Paul, Minnesota	7.7	15.9
Toledo, Ohio	46.4	47.0

E.g., 28.1 percent of native-born residents of metropolitan Akron, Ohio, live in the city of Akron; for immigrants, the comparable percent is 30.4.

“2011-2015” represents the five-year period for which American Community Survey data are reported.

Source: Rob Paral and Associates
Chicago Council on Global Affairs

Immigration Restrictions Set the Stage for City Population Decline

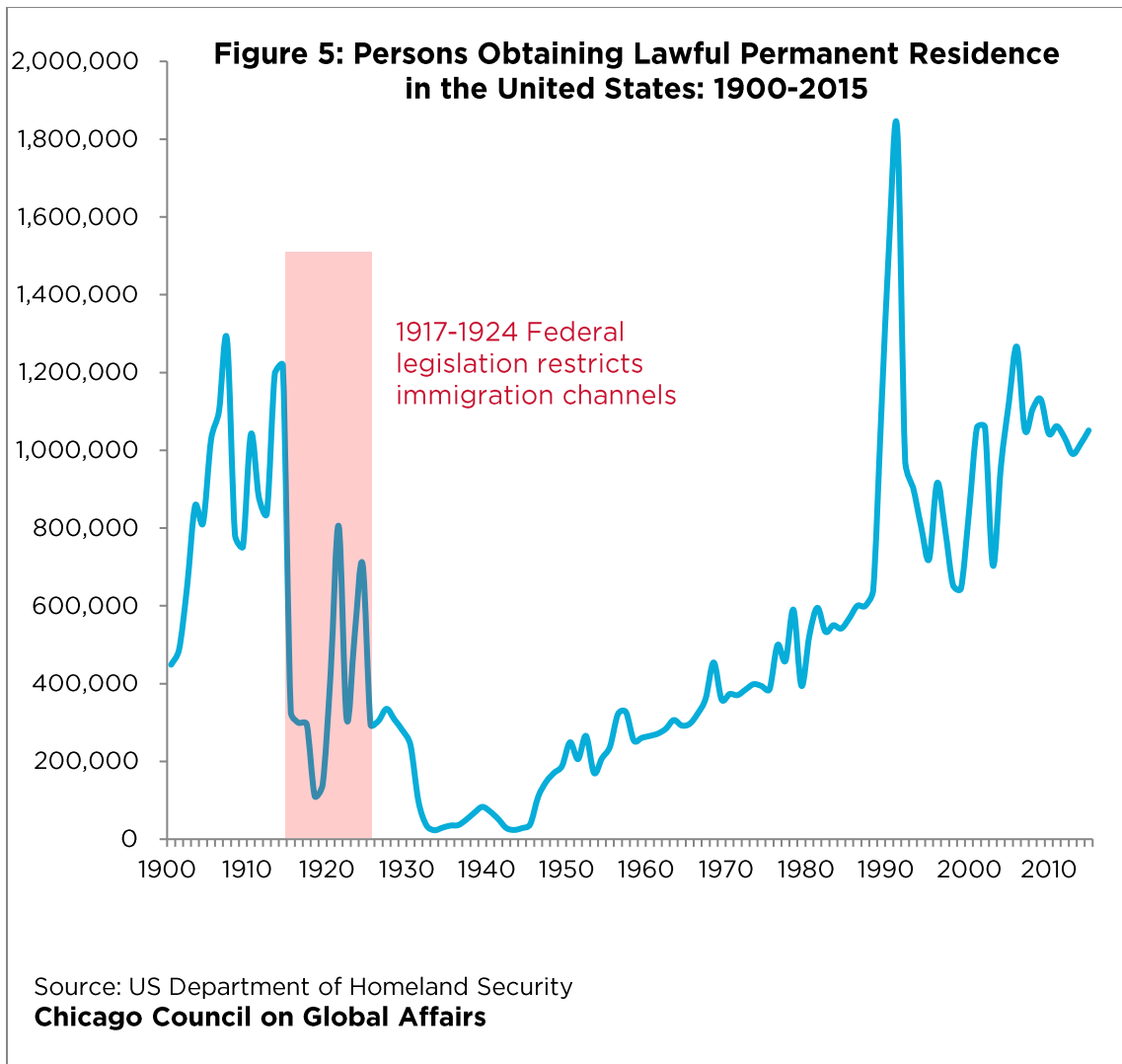
Though immigrants played an outsized role in shaping Midwestern cities in the early years of the 20th century, immigration came to almost a complete halt by the 1930s. The end was not so much the result of war or economic downturn—though the First World War and the Great Depression disrupted migration. Rather, in an ominous echo of today’s debates, a series of restrictive federal legislation consciously closed the nation’s—and, by extension, our cities’—doors to immigrants.²

Americans have been ambivalent to immigration throughout our history, with commentators as influential as Benjamin Franklin expressing disdain for the attitudes and behaviors of new arrivals as early as 1751.³ At the turn of the last century, restrictive federal immigration policies were aimed at Asia, and curtailed Chinese and Japanese immigration.⁴

Subsequent legislation was far-reaching in ending the flow of immigrants from both Asia and Europe. As detailed in Figure 4, the Immigration Act of 1917 (also known as the Literacy Act) was followed by the Emergency Quota Act of 1921 and the Immigration Act of 1924 (also known as the Johnson-Reed Act) which struck at Eastern and Southern European immigration. “New” immigrant groups such as Italians and Jews, who made up much of the post-1880 immigration, were effectively barred from coming to the United States.

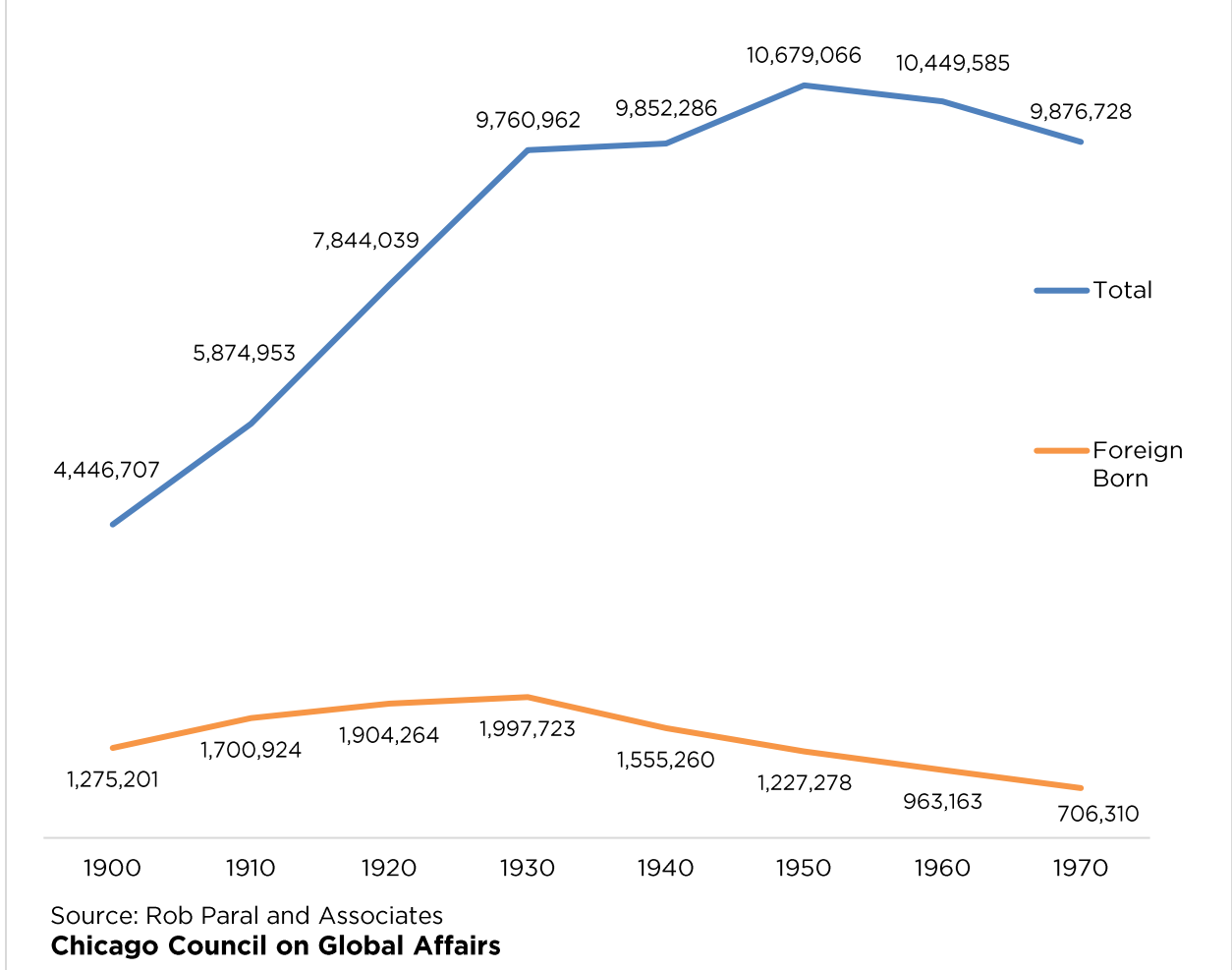
Figure 4: Key Immigration Restrictions of 1917-1924	
Literacy Act of 1917	Required immigrants to be able to read 30-40 words of their own language, levied a head tax for immigrants, and banned immigration from the majority of Asian countries.
Emergency Quota Act of 1921	Set immigration quotas for each nationality based on three percent of the 1910 census.
Immigration Act of 1924	Set immigration quotas for each nationality based on two percent of the 1890 census, thus severely restricting immigration from Eastern and Southern Europe, as well as completely prohibiting Japanese immigration.
Source: Pew Research Center/Hispanic Trends Chicago Council on Global Affairs	

Annual immigration to the United States reached some of the lowest levels in recent history in the decades immediately following the restrictive legislation. (Figure 5).



As immigrant admissions fell nationally, there were fewer migrants available to enter the Midwestern cities. The foreign-born share of these cities plummeted, ushering in a slowdown and eventual decline of the overall population. Between 1930 and 1970, the population of the 13 large Midwestern cities rose by only one percent. Between 1950 and 1970, the cities collectively fell by 7.5 percent (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Population of Large Midwestern Cities

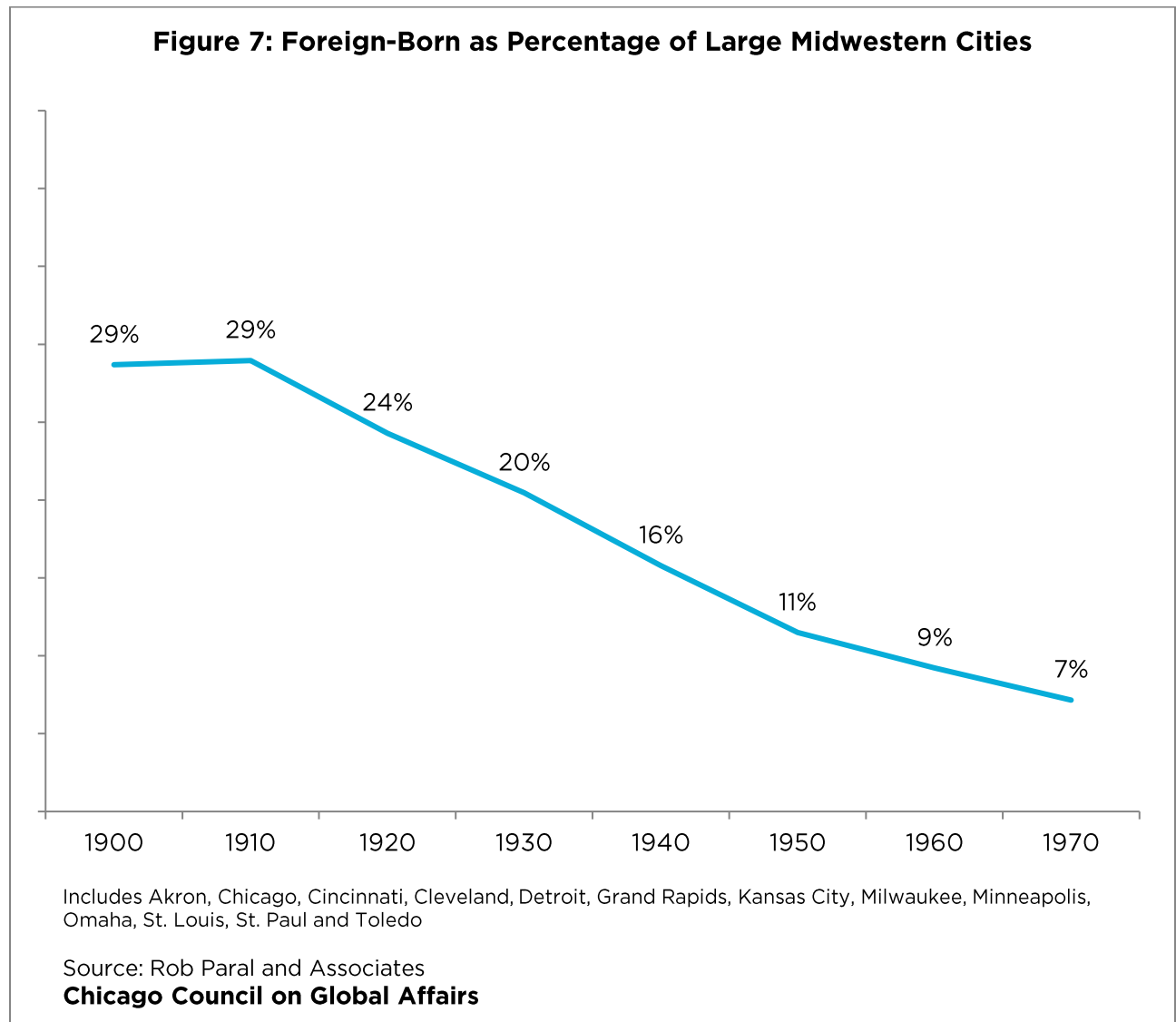


The effect of restricting immigration was not immediate: Overall population trends of these 13 Midwestern cities show continued population growth through the mid-1950s. This was due to various factors including post-war birth rates, continued in-migration of native-born Whites from rural areas, and the ongoing Great Migration northward of native-born African Americans. The effects of restrictive immigration policies are most clearly seen in the 1950s when both native- and foreign-born populations were in decline.

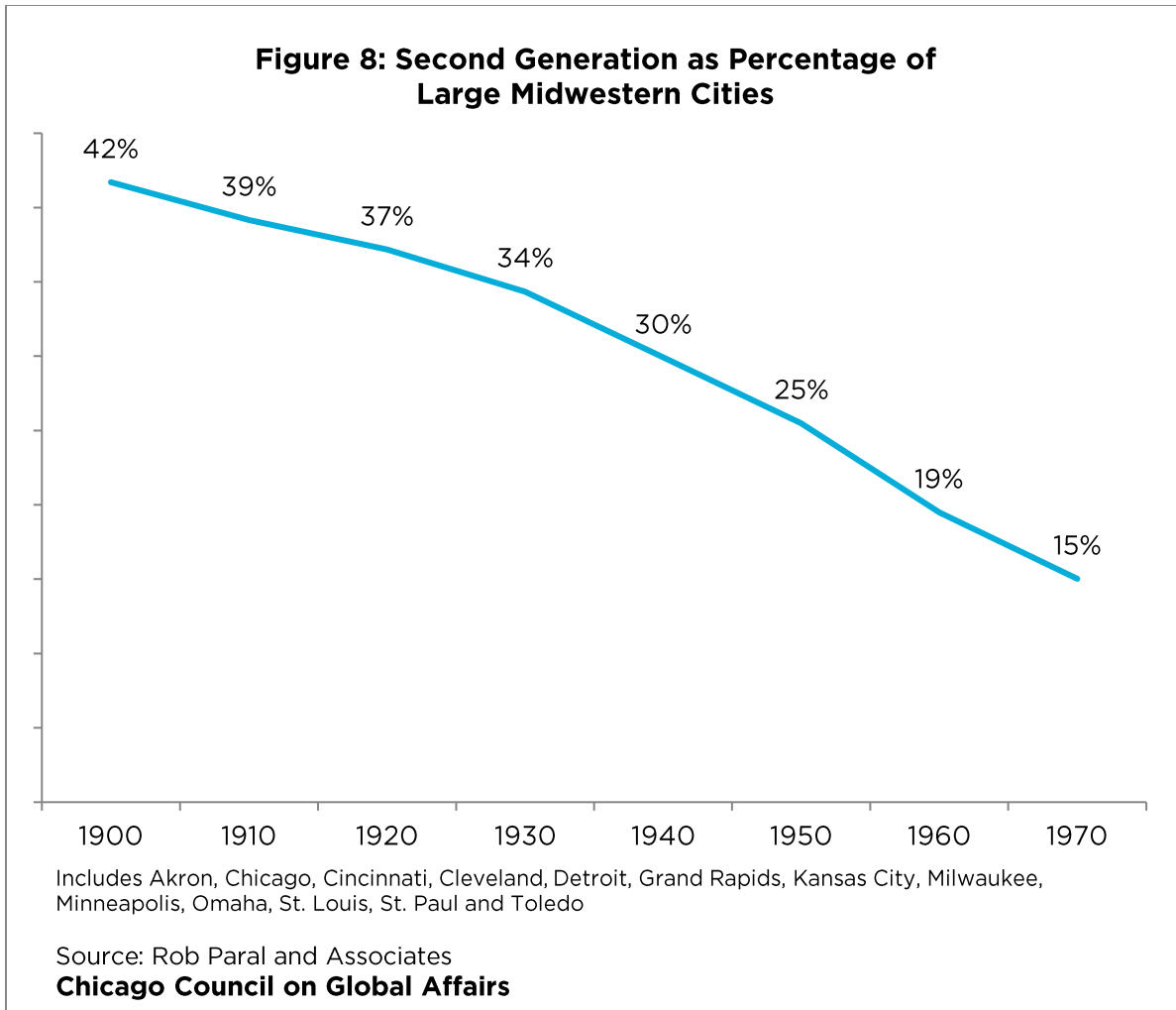
The latter half of the 20th century ushered in suburbanization, de-industrialization, and migration from the northeastern and Midwestern states to southern and western parts of the country. The loss of immigration compounded the effects of these trends that sapped population from Midwestern cities (Figure 7).

Foreign-born persons were 26 percent of the Cleveland population in 1930 but by 1970 they were only 8 percent of residents. The foreign-born share of St. Louis was

10 percent in 1930 but 3 percent by 1970. A similar tale can be told of every major Midwestern city.



Perhaps less well-documented than the decline of immigrants was the ensuing decline in the number of the US-born children of immigrants: the “second generation” (Figure 8). Following the great immigration decades of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the children of immigrants had come to represent a large share of populations in Midwestern cities. In 1920, the second generation was 38 percent of the population of Grand Rapids, 31 percent of Omaha, and 44 percent of St. Paul. With the lack of new immigration, the number of second-generation Americans began a long decline in Midwest cities, as fewer immigrants arrived to create families.



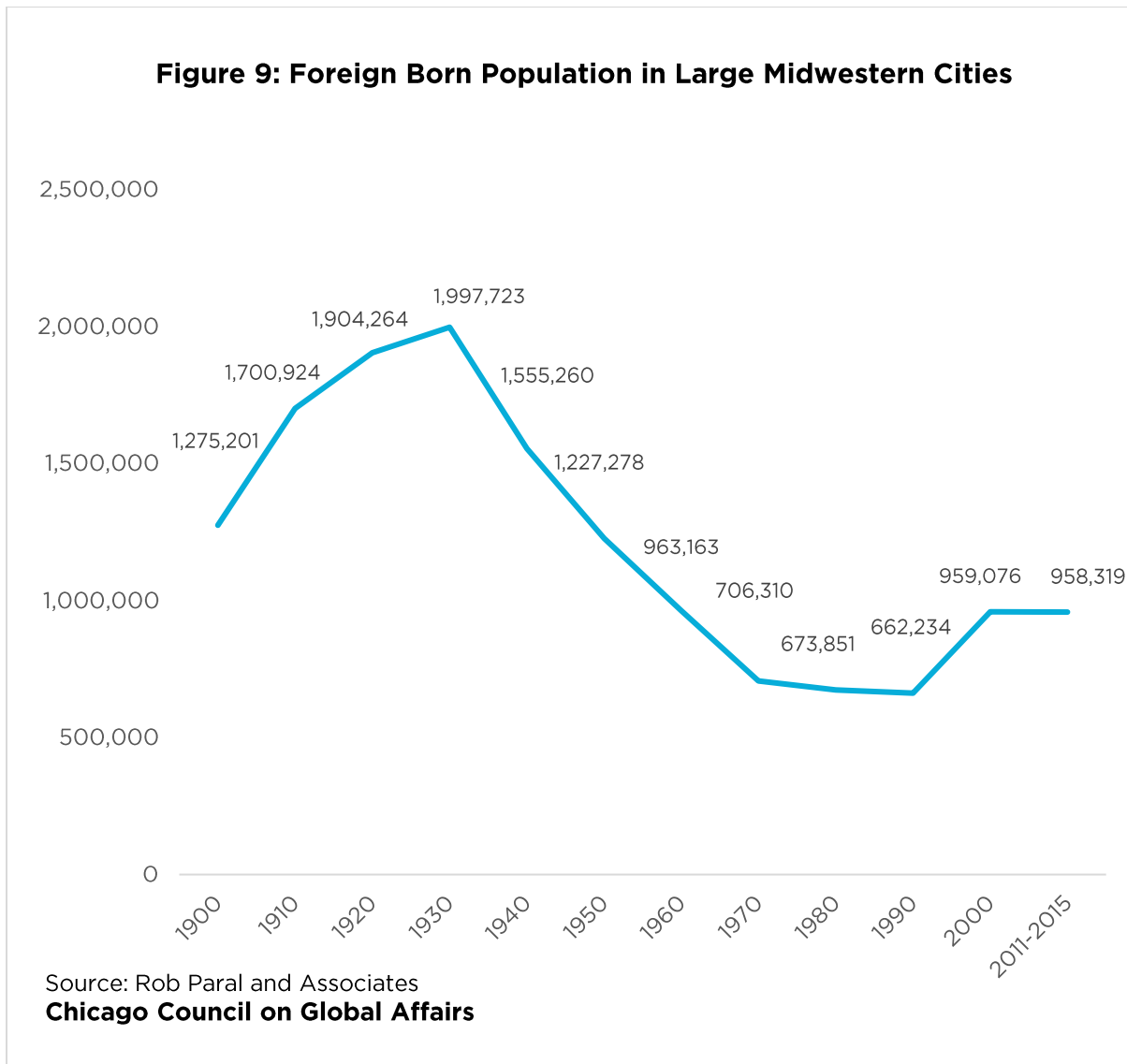
Will New Immigration Restrictions Again Set Midwestern Cities Up for a Fall?

Just as Midwestern cities were hurt by the restrictions of the early 20th century, they began to revive somewhat after a new 1965 law, the Immigration and Nationality Act, substantially rewrote American immigration policy and built much of the immigration system we have today. As a result of the 1965 legislation, the numbers of immigrants given permanent residence in the United States rose steadily from 296,000 in 1965 to approximately one million annually over the last decade.

Many, though not all, of the new immigrants of the post-1965 era moved to cities, and the effect can be seen in Census data. The foreign-born number in the large Midwestern cities rose from a low of 662,000 in 1990 to 958,000 in the 2011-2015 period.

The 1965 legislation, which replaced narrow immigration quotas with more robust family- and employment-based immigration systems, bolstered the foreign-born population, but not immediately. The legislation took some years to have an impact, as new immigrants sponsored more immigrants.

Other post-1965 legislation also contributed to increasing the numbers of new arrivals. The Refugee Act of 1980 created separate channels for admissions of persons fleeing persecution. The Immigration Control and Reform Act of 1986 granted permanent residence nationally to 2.7 million undocumented immigrants (these immigrants were already in the country, eventually many close family members were permitted to join them). The Immigration Act of 1990 increased immigration caps. Thus federal policies allowed larger numbers of foreign-born persons to enter the United States in recent decades, with an important segment of them settling in Midwestern cities (Figure 9).



The growth of immigration in Midwestern cities during this new era was more muted than the increases of the early 1900s. The new immigrants often chose to settle in the South or West, while the economies of the Midwestern cities, having shed large

numbers of manufacturing jobs, offered less opportunity than before. More of the new, post-1965 immigration also went to suburban areas of the Midwest and other regions. Indeed, after rising sharply in the 1990s, immigration has leveled off over the past decade. But the role of immigration in repopulating Midwestern cities is undeniable.

While some Midwestern cities are in outright population decline, with native-born populations leaving for other areas, immigrants are a demographic lifeline in many other places. From 1970 to 2011-2015, for example, the foreign-born population rose 53 percent in Chicago, 196 percent in Minneapolis and 249 percent in Kansas City, Missouri (Figure 10).

Innumerable new reports have described today’s immigrants reviving city neighborhoods, becoming an important part of the local labor force,⁵ buying homes,⁶ and opening businesses.⁷ Young working-age immigrants have played an important role in filling gaps in the Midwest’s native-born labor force.⁸ Foreign-born workers are ensuring the vibrancy of key Midwestern industries, including healthcare,⁹ agriculture,¹⁰ and hospitality.¹¹

**Figure 10: Population Change in Large Midwestern Cities:
1970 to 2011-2015**

	Number Change		Percent Change	
	Native Born	Foreign Born	Native Born	Foreign Born
Akron	-74,249	-2,842	-28.2%	-23.2%
Chicago	-847,570	198,147	-28.3%	53.0%
Cincinnati	-158,206	3,227	-36.0%	26.2%
Cleveland	-323,008	-37,340	-46.5%	-66.2%
Detroit city	-739,008	-82,240	-53.1%	-68.9%
Grand Rapids	-14,182	9,137	-7.6%	92.7%
Kansas City, MO	-64,816	25,559	-13.0%	249.3%
Milwaukee	-136,853	19,241	-20.2%	48.6%
Minneapolis	-75,501	41,043	-18.3%	196.6%
St. Paul city	-57,406	42,445	-19.3%	352.6%
Omaha	58,707	33,537	17.4%	312.3%
St. Louis	-309,553	5,169	-51.1%	31.8%
Toledo	-98,718	-3,074	-26.6%	-24.7%

“2011-2015” represents the five-year period for which American Community Survey data are reported.

Source: Rob Paral and Associates
Chicago Council on Global Affairs

This newest phase of immigration is again at risk if policymakers make deep cuts to the numbers of immigrants entering the United States. Indeed, cutting immigration is

arguably one of the most effective ways to hamstring continued redevelopment of Midwestern cities.

Much of the political debate around immigration has been driven by events in southern and western states where numbers of immigrant arrivals have been higher than in the Midwest. Other voices against immigration have been raised by local residents of areas where few immigrants live and indeed, where the general population may be in numeric decline. But for the cities of the Midwest, restricting current immigration levels is the last thing they need: an unnecessary tourniquet applied to a precious supply of new regional residents and workers. History tells us so.

Acknowledgement

Erica Knox contributed research to this report.

Appendix

Total Population in Midwestern Cities: 1900 to 2011-2015

	1900	1910	1920	1930	1940	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000	2011-15
Akron, Ohio	42,728	69,067	208,435	255,040	244,791	274,605	290,351	275,425	237,177	223,019	217,088	198,329
Chicago, Illinois	1,698,575	2,185,283	2,701,705	3,376,438	3,396,808	3,620,962	3,550,404	3,366,957	3,005,078	2,783,726	2,895,964	2,717,534
Cincinnati, Ohio	325,902	363,591	401,247	451,160	455,610	503,998	502,550	452,524	385,457	364,040	330,662	297,397
Cleveland, Ohio	381,768	560,663	796,841	900,429	878,336	914,808	876,050	750,903	573,822	505,616	478,393	390,584
Detroit, Michigan	285,704	465,766	993,678	1,568,662	1,623,452	1,849,568	1,670,144	1,511,322	1,203,339	1,027,974	951,270	690,074
Grand Rapids, Michigan	87,565	112,571	137,634	168,592	164,292	176,515	177,313	197,649	181,843	189,126	197,846	192,416
Kansas City, Missouri	163,752	248,381	324,410	399,746	399,178	456,622	475,539	507,087	448,154	435,141	441,269	467,990
Milwaukee, Wisconsin	285,315	373,857	457,147	578,249	587,472	637,392	741,324	717,099	636,212	628,088	596,956	599,498
Minneapolis, Minnesota	202,718	301,408	380,582	464,356	492,370	521,718	482,872	434,400	370,951	368,383	382,452	399,950
Omaha, Nebraska	102,555	124,096	191,601	214,006	223,844	251,117	301,598	347,328	314,267	335,795	390,112	440,034
St. Louis, Missouri	575,238	687,029	772,897	821,960	816,048	856,796	750,026	622,236	453,085	396,685	348,189	317,850
St. Paul, Minnesota	163,065	214,744	234,698	271,606	287,736	311,349	313,411	309,980	270,230	272,235	287,151	295,043
Toledo, Ohio	131,822	168,497	243,164	290,718	282,349	303,616	318,003	383,818	354,635	332,943	313,587	282,275

Source: Rob Paral and Associates
Chicago Council on Global Affairs

**Foreign Born Population in Midwestern Cities:
1900 to 2011-2015**

	1900	1910	1920	1930	1940	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000	2011-15
Akron, Ohio	7,127	13,249	38,021	31,694	25,478	20,855	17,363	12,247	8,701	6,811	6,911	9,405
Chicago, Illinois	587,112	783,428	808,558	859,409	672,705	526,058	438,392	373,919	435,232	469,187	628,903	572,066
Cincinnati, Ohio	57,961	56,859	42,921	34,986	25,898	20,610	16,600	12,337	10,624	10,045	12,461	15,564
Cleveland, Ohio	124,631	196,170	240,173	230,946	179,784	132,880	96,584	56,400	33,347	20,975	21,372	19,060
Detroit, Michigan	96,503	157,534	290,884	405,882	322,688	278,260	201,713	119,347	68,303	34,490	45,541	37,107
Grand Rapids, Michigan	23,896	28,387	28,427	27,349	20,374	16,460	14,219	9,856	8,740	7,456	20,814	18,993
Kansas City, Missouri	18,410	25,466	27,583	26,198	19,420	16,050	13,171	10,252	12,739	12,387	25,632	35,811
Milwaukee, Wisconsin	88,991	111,529	110,160	110,611	83,941	63,190	57,014	39,576	31,718	29,667	46,122	58,817
Minneapolis, Minnesota	61,021	86,099	88,248	81,123	64,364	48,790	34,448	20,875	18,260	22,624	55,475	61,918
Omaha, Nebraska	23,552	27,179	35,645	29,526	22,389	17,530	14,383	10,737	10,164	9,402	25,687	44,274
St. Louis, Missouri	111,356	126,223	103,626	81,346	59,647	42,055	26,479	16,260	11,878	10,034	19,542	21,429
St. Paul, Minnesota	46,819	56,657	51,722	44,652	33,716	24,465	17,414	12,038	13,135	19,893	41,138	54,483
Toledo, Ohio	27,822	32,144	38,296	34,001	24,856	20,075	15,383	12,466	11,010	9,263	9,475	9,392

Source: Rob Paral and Associates
Chicago Council on Global Affairs

¹ For this report we sought to identify a large group of Midwestern cities and track their demographic change over time. We began with the 25 largest cities in the Midwest as of 2015 and retained in our analysis those cities for which published Census Bureau reports included data on the native born, foreign born and the second generation children of immigrants since 1900. This led to the 13 cities included in the present analysis.

² As Maldwyn Allen Jones poignantly writes in his classic text on American immigration, “With the enactment of (the 1924 Johnson-Reed Act) an epoch in American history came to an end. After three centuries of free immigration America all but completely shut her doors on newcomers. The Statue of Liberty would still stand in New York harbor, but the verses on its base would henceforth be but a tribute to a vanished ideal.” Jones, Maldwyn Allen 1992 *American Immigration*. University of Chicago Press.

³ Franklin fretted that German immigration would mean that “Pennsylvania, founded by the English, (could) become a Colony of Aliens, who will shortly be so numerous as to Germanize us instead of our Anglifying them, and will never adopt our Language or Customs.” <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-04-02-0080>

⁴ The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 prohibited immigration of Chinese laborers, while the Gentleman’s Agreement of 1907 limited immigration from Japan.

⁵ Sara McElmurry and Rob Paral, “[The Midwest’s impossible stance: Stagnant, yet conflicted on immigration](#),” *Crains Chicago Business*. March 27, 2017.

⁶ David Dyssegaard Kallick, [Immigrant Small Business Owners: A Significant and Growing Part of the Economy](#), Fiscal Policy Institute, June 2012,

⁷ David Dyssegaard Kallick, [Immigrant Small Business Owners: A Significant and Growing Part of the Economy](#), Fiscal Policy Institute, June 2012,

⁸ Rob Paral, “Immigration a Demographic Lifeline in Midwestern Metros.”

⁹ Nicole Fisher, “[Midwest Diagnosis: Immigration Reform and the Healthcare Sector](#),” Chicago Council on Global Affairs, March 23, 2016.

¹⁰ Stephanie Mercier, “[Employing Agriculture: How the Midwestern Farm and Food Sector Relies on Immigrant Labor](#),” Chicago Council on Global Affairs, December 9, 2016.

¹¹ Sara McElmurry, “[Heartland Hospitality: Serving the Needs of the Midwest Economy Through Immigration](#),” Chicago Council on Global Affairs, August 24, 2017.