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Immigrants Are Saving Our Cities

BY JULIA VITULLO-MARTIN Wall Street Journal

Article Highlights:

- "Immigrants have significantly improved the quality of life in many of America's most successful cities."
- "All booming American cities are immigrant cities."
- "One group has steadfastly supported immigrants: the smart big-city mayors."



The fate of a 2-year war on illegal immigrants declared by the mayor of Hazleton, PA., is now in the hands of a federal judge. He will rule on Hazleton's Illegal Immigration Relief Act, which penalizes local businesses and landlords who employ or rent to illegal immigrants.

During the trial, that concluded last Friday, Mayor Lou Barletta argued that some 10,000 undocumented immigrants have ruined Hazleton's quality of life: Violent crime has doubled in the past 2 years, unreimbursed medical expenses have jumped 60% and the annual school budget for teaching English as a second language, soared 42%.

Business owners and landlords argued the opposite - that immigrants had revitalized Hazleton's moribund economy, filling once-vacant apartments and patronizing once-declining businesses. The result: Hazleton's budget has been in the black for 3 years.

In other cities the verdict is already in: Immigrants have significantly improved the quality of life in many of America's most successful cities. Take Flushing, Queens. Passersby on the way from one of New York's airports into Manhattan may notice that Flushing has it all - high-end seafood in elegant settings, bubble tea cafes and fried noodles from street vendors, not to mention Vietnamese pho and Korean barbecue. A jumble of restaurants, bakeries, storefronts and cultural institutions, Flushing, home to 177,000 people, is thriving.

Asians moved into Lower Manhattan; Dominicans and other Caribbeans spread through the Bronx and North Manhattan; the Russians flooded Brighton Beach in Brooklyn; the Irish returned to North Manhattan; Bengalis, Turks, Albanians, Uzbeks, Romanians moved to Queens. Immigrants are now even revitalizing sections of the most bucolic borough, Staten Island.

One group has steadfastly supported immigrants: the smart big-city mayors - Michael Bloomberg (New York),

Antonio Villaraigosa (Los Angeles), Richard Daley (Chicago), Manny Diaz (Miami), Thomas Menino (Boston). "No public policy is more important to cities than federal immigration policy," says Mitchell Moss, professor of planning and public policy at New York University. "The immigration act of 1965 that opened up the country again and did more for cities than all the HUD bureaucrats put together or all the money spent on federal housing, transportation and welfare."

All booming American cities are immigrant cities. Those that welcome immigrants tend to have vital economies that expand exponentially as immigrants open new businesses, fill vacant jobs and move into declining neighborhoods. Immigrants form "extended clans," to use a term coined by Nathan Glazer and Pat Moynihan. They capture, and sometimes even invent, markets.

Jewish diamond cutters, Korean grocers, Chinese restaurateurs, Russian massage therapists, Irish bartenders and Greek coffee-shop owners aren't stereotypes. They are the reflection of a real economic phenomenon. Immigrants sell goods and services to their own group and, once successful, to everybody else.

With little capital, they start labor-intensive businesses employing friends and neighbors. The neighborhoods they settle in are decrepit, the commercial streets tired, the infrastructure overtaxed, the schools deplorable, but so what? All that will change when immigrants reach a core number, making an area their own.

New York, with some 3 million immigrants, is the ultimate immigrant city, and the country's wealthiest. These 2 facts are not unrelated. New York may be unique in many respects, but there is no reason that the positive effect of immigrants can't be felt in cities much smaller.

Highly entrepreneurial, Dominicans are opening small businesses in their new cities of Reading and Harrisburg, Pa., Grand Rapids, Mich., and Daytona, Fla. - all cities that had been suffering from declining residential demand.