

Fact Sheet

Oregon: An Emerging Immigrant Gateway

Why has Oregon become an immigrant gateway?

- *Since the late 1980s, Oregon's diverse population grew at a pace that exceeded all expectations, yet the state's social service, health care, and education systems have been slow to respond to demographic changes, adding barriers to the challenge of immigrants' adaptation.*
- *A set of interrelated factors propelled immigration in Oregon. One of the most important reasons was economic decline in traditional immigrant gateway states, such as California, Texas, and Illinois, while the economy of the Pacific Northwest continued to grow during the 1990s.*
- *Migrants were attracted by opportunities for employment in the agricultural sector. Mexicans and other Latin American workers settled in Oregon with their families, aided by informal social networks of other farmworkers who were already settled in the state.*
- *Oregon has a very efficient refugee resettlement and social service network. The state ranks eleventh in the nation for the number of refugees that are resettled here. This special political classification is designed to help protect victims of religious, political, and other types of persecution in their homelands. Political and environmental refugees and their families from the Middle East, Southeast Asia, the former Soviet Union, and Africa live in Portland, Salem, and Medford. They add to our social and cultural diversity.*

Adjustment to a new environment

- *Despite rapid demographic changes that are reshaping our state, the perception of Oregon as a "white" place is deeply entrenched and has been influenced by the predominant settlement of European Americans, particularly Germans, Scandinavians, people from Great Britain, and other Americans from the Midwest and the East Coast.*
- *The stories of immigrants and refugees who now reside in Oregon share memories of abuse in their homelands, lengthy stays in refugee camps awaiting permission to enter in the United States, difficulties overcoming the color line that often separates them from Oregon's mainstream culture, and frustration about failure to obtain "anything other than minimum-wage employment."*

Re-emerging immigrant gateway in a new economy with a changing political climate

- *Unlike earlier periods when new immigrants found work in occupations tied to the "primary sector" (lumbering, farming, and fishing), the new Oregon's economy opens up jobs in the technology and managerial sectors that require language proficiency and skills that many foreign-born Oregonians do not have. Complicating the situation, the technology bubble burst in the early 2000s. Although the economy of our state largely recovered and employment levels rebounded, both native and foreign-born Oregonians remain concerned about their future prospects, especially as signs of a serious economic recession begin to show.*
- *Another significant event that shaped the prospects for immigrants' integration was widespread public fear and anxiety following the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Immigrants and refugees who are easily identifiable by physical appearance, religious beliefs, or distinctive surnames are more likely to be considered security risks.*
- *In a politically charged atmosphere, many questions remain about the immigrant experience in Oregon and the future directions of public policy. Will immigrants residing in towns, metropolitan areas, and rural communities find opportunities for becoming part of the larger fabric of American life? Does their decision to move to Oregon promise more multiethnic neighborhoods, better access to jobs, and eventually economic, social, and cultural adjustment? How will policymakers, communities, and the immigrants themselves address these concerns? Responding to these questions will be one of Oregon's major twenty-first century challenges.*