

The Role of Immigrants, Asylum Seekers, and Refugees in Confronting Maine's Demographic Challenges

by Robert W. Glover

The author argues that Maine's future will largely depend on the steps we take to ensure that we reverse the state's demographic decline—an aging population and young people moving away—that has been unfolding in slow motion for decades. Reckoning with our demographic challenges requires finding ways to make Maine's population more diverse by making the state a welcome destination for immigrants, asylum seekers, and refugees.

Virtually anyone who has spent time in the state of Maine is aware of the state's demographic situation—an aging population, young people moving away, and the corresponding challenges for the labor force, school systems, municipal and state revenues, and the vitality of our communities.

Many of the key policy challenges that we face as a state grow out of these demographic shifts. If one digs deeply enough into any of the major policy debates we see at the state or local level, such as health care, taxation, economic development, or school budgets, eventually the state's challenging demographic situation rears its head.

Demographic trends can fundamentally affect every aspect of a community, a state, or a nation. Yet these developments plod along incrementally. A recent article from the Pew Research Center described demographic transformations as “dramas in slow motion” (Taylor 2014). That these developments unfold in slow motion means that the policies designed to counteract them likely cannot be quick fixes and sometimes take decades to yield results. In a policy climate focused on individual legislative sessions with an eye towards the next electoral cycle, it can be hard to tackle policy issues that may entail short-term costs and take a decade or more to yield demonstrable positive benefits.

Yet this is precisely what we need to do in Maine at this moment. Maine's future will largely depend on the steps we take today to ensure that we reverse the demographic decline that has been unfolding in slow motion for decades. Reckoning with our demographic challenges requires finding ways to make Maine's population

more diverse. In short, the future of Maine depends upon the steps we take to make Maine a welcome destination for those from beyond our national borders: immigrants, asylum seekers, and refugees.

Conflating the immigrant, refugee, and asylum seeker groups can obscure their varied experiences and legal statuses, their reasons for coming here, and their needs and networks of support upon arriving in the country and the state. (See sidebar for definition of these terms.) For my purposes in this article, the emphasis is not so much on which groups we receive or encourage to settle within the state. The larger point is that Maine desperately needs individuals to settle here to shift our demographic trend and that we should be doing more to welcome and support these individuals, no matter the specific circumstances of their origin.

MAINE'S “DEMOGRAPHIC WINTER”

In many ways, Maine's demographic winter is simply a more extreme example of nationwide trends. The state's population reflects the long-term effects of a post-World War II baby boom, a period when a growing middle class took to the suburbs, enjoyed economic prosperity, and had unprecedented numbers of children. The baby boomer generation peaked at 78.8 million in 1999, but by mid-century will constitute just 15.5 million individuals as this generation ages and passes away (Fry 2015)

Maine has a significantly higher share of baby boomers than any other state, 29.4 percent of the population in 2010 (Rector 2013). As a result, Maine is the

Defining Terms: Immigrants, Refugees, and Asylum Seekers

One of the most challenging aspects of the public discourse around immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers in the United States is definitional. These terms, though often used interchangeably, denote different legal status and personal experiences for the individuals who hold them. Using them haphazardly can obscure the complex policy realities confronting each set of individuals.

The U.S. government uses the inclusive term **alien** to refer to anyone residing within the country who is not a U.S. citizen. The term **immigrant** is typically reserved for those who are residing within United States for an extended period of time after entering from another country-of-origin with authorization to work while here. These individuals are also called **lawful permanent residents** or LPRs. Such individuals, if possessing the right sets of skills and qualifications, may be able to stay in the country indefinitely (IRS 2016). **Nonimmigrant aliens** refers to those with authorization to be in the country, but generally for some limited purpose or duration. For instance, this category would include students holding F-1 student visas to authorize their presence in the country while gaining their education (IRS 2016).

In broader usage, immigrant has come to mean one who has entered the country from another country, whether by legal channels or not (by illegally crossing a border or overstaying a visa). This latter category of individuals is referred to as **illegal** or **undocumented** immigrants. Their presence is not authorized; they are not legally eligible to work, and if apprehended, they can be subject to removal proceedings and deportation.

Refugees and **asylum seekers** inhabit a somewhat different legal universe, in part articulated by the U.N. Convention on the Status of Refugees of 1951 and its 1967 protocol, as well as U.S. national laws and proce-

dures that dictate how these individuals are received. The Refugee Convention obligates states that are party to the convention to grant protection to those “who have been persecuted or fear they will be persecuted on account of race, religion, nationality, and/or membership in a particular social group or political opinion” (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services 2015). Their key difference lies in where and when they seek protection and entry into the United States.

Refugees meet the definition laid out in the formal convention above, but seek their refugee status from outside the country, often through the U.N. High Commission on Refugees (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services 2015). Once refugees are granted this status, they are eligible to be admitted to the United States by the U.S. State Department and receive cash assistance, the right to work legally, and other benefits from the U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement. According to a *New York Times* article by Somini Sengupta (August 25, 2015), the United States currently accepts about 70,000 refugees annually. Refugees cannot be returned to their country of origin under international law.

Asylum seekers, on the other hand, are already in the United States, seeking admission at a port of entry (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services 2015). They must meet the same definition as refugees, but declare their intention to seek asylum upon entering the United States. The credibility of their case for asylum is assessed by an asylum officer or immigration judge, and this process typically takes at least six months. During that time, asylum seekers are detained for an average of 65 days as initial investigation into their claim takes place. They also face strict limitations on work eligibility and receive few, if any, transitional benefits from the federal government.

oldest state in the nation with a median age of 44.2 years, significantly higher than the national figure of 37.7 (U.S. Census Bureau 2015). This older population results in lower birth rates. In 2010, Maine had a birth rate of 10.2 per 100 women, while the national average stood at about 13.5 (Rector 2013).

In fact, in 2015, Maine was one of only seven states that saw population decline, a small drop of 0.1

percent, but a harbinger of things to come (U.S. Census Bureau 2016). The state is beginning to experience a phenomenon known as natural population loss, where the annual number of deaths outpaces the number of births. According to an article by Darren Fishell in the *Bangor Daily News* (January 23, 2015), this happened in 2011, 2013, and 2014. Though Maine has had recent years in which overall state population grew, this

is not occurring via the natural cycle of births and deaths; these periods of growth were a function of migration into the state.

Yet we cannot talk about this demographic picture without also discussing diversity. Maine's demographic winter is linked to its extremely low levels of ethnic and racial diversity. Since 2010, nearly 93 percent of American population growth has come from ethnic and racial minorities, and current projections estimate that non-Hispanic whites will actually cease to be the majority of the population by the mid-2040s (Johnson 2014). Ethnic and racial minorities are having children at faster rates than non-Hispanic whites, evident in the declining birth rates of a state such as Maine, where the population is 95 percent white (U.S. Census Bureau 2016).

These are the demographic facts that Maine must confront in facing its future. The implications have long been known. Research and policy planning documents have long told of a demographic challenge on the horizon nationally, and particularly in states such as Maine. These demographic trends can have economic impacts, with a smaller labor pool potentially making the state a less attractive destination for businesses. Older individuals are less likely to buy homes, start businesses, and make the major life decisions and investments that drive the local economy.

These demographic changes also mean a corresponding contraction of the state's tax base and other streams of revenue needed to run state and local governments. Maine's K–12 school system and universities have already been struggling to maintain themselves in an environment in which there are fewer and fewer young people within the state to educate. Locally owned businesses in rural communities may find it difficult to remain open in the face of a declining customer base, already a troubling fact of life in many Maine communities.

In many ways, the greatest challenges of demographic decline have thus far been averted by healthier, more active elderly populations who remain in the workforce longer and contribute in essential ways to their communities and workplaces (Kaye 2015). Yet these strategies will not, and cannot, be a permanent solution. Maine must begin planning for the coming decades when increasing numbers of older Mainers will no longer be able to participate in the workforce and more baby boomers begin to die.

MAINE'S EXISTING IMMIGRANT, REFUGEE, AND ASYLEE COMMUNITIES

In identifying the trends on the horizon for our state's population, we must first recognize that significant growth and diversification has already occurred. From 2000 to 2013, Maine's percentage of foreign-born residents grew by 21.8 percent to 44,687 individuals, now constituting 3.4 percent of the state population (AIC 2015). In fact, in many years this growth has been the only thing preventing the state from experiencing net population decline. Although Maine's diversity relative to other parts of the country remains quite low, the state's population has become more diverse.

The impact of such recent population shifts can be seen in Maine's communities as well. The story of Lewiston and its roughly 5,000 Somali refugees is one of revitalization, new energy, and dynamism, though not without its challenges and obstacles. We could look at the small Downeast town of Milbridge where nearly a quarter of school-age children are now Latino, largely due to hundreds of workers who chose to leave seasonal employment and establish roots in the area over the last decade. From 2006 to 2010, 2,711 individuals born outside the country became business owners in Maine, with incomes of over \$120 million, or 3.3 percent of all net business income in the state (AIC 2015).

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Nor does such does such diversification of the state appear to be abating, as new entrants originating from Sudan, Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Djibouti have settled in the greater Portland area over the last decade. Many of these individuals came to Maine fleeing persecution, violence, or war in their countries of origin, initially entering the country as asylum seekers. It seems reasonable to say that whatever Maine's future may hold, it will undoubtedly be more ethnically, racially, and religiously diverse than its recent past.

Confronting Maine's demographic challenges will involve a variety of important policy steps. Foremost among these is ensuring that we retain more of our younger population while also working to support our active and engaged older populations. However, any strategy aimed at reversing the trends of population stagnation and decline in the long term must work to make Maine a more welcoming environment for immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers.

TURNING THE TIDE: WHAT CAN BE DONE?

As with most policy issues, the good news is that we are not encountering this issue anew. Many states and municipalities facing similar demographic trends have set out to address these problems before us, and we can learn from their efforts. Throughout, we can remain mindful that Maine's history is one of newcomers (French Canadians, Irish, Italians, Swedes) arriving in the state amidst challenging circumstances, but eventually establishing themselves and thriving.

Thinking constructively about how to make Maine a destination for immigrants, asylum seekers, and refugees will, for many, require a shift in mindset. We have seen numerous recent concrete policy debates at state and municipal levels about the impacts of immigrants, asylum seekers, and refugees, or the merits of providing municipal general assistance for asylum seekers not eligible for federal assistance while the legitimacy of their claim is being investigated. Unfortunately, these debates have been dominated by concerns about short-term costs or preoccupation with the cultural impact of diverse new groups. Other states and cities that have worked over the past decades to make themselves destinations for new Americans also confronted these challenges.

It is true that those coming to the United States, particularly asylum seekers and refugees, will have unique life circumstances that in the short term, may place strain upon the new communities in which they reside. Individuals fleeing war, conflict, persecution, or poverty may have few resources with which to begin their new lives. These characteristics will manifest themselves initially in a set of needs: access to transportation, affordable housing, legal assistance, availability of language training and translation services in schools and workplaces, access to medical care, and preparation for the culture shock of moving to a new society with what will likely be radically different norms and values. To be

successful in attracting and retaining new arrivals, we must meet these needs through collaboration between state and local governments with community-based organizations and nonprofit organizations.

Rather than thinking of these short-term costs as a parasitic drain upon states and communities, we must think of them as an investment in the continued viability and vitality of Maine's communities. In the same way that we would provide tax incentives or other favorable conditions for businesses that invest in the state, we must bear the short-term costs associated with the needs of new populations to avert future demographic disaster. Note that this effort does not depend upon altruism. It does not state that we must bear these costs because it is "the right thing to do" (although many would argue that it is). Rather, this effort would be rooted in pragmatism, our demographic reality, and ensuring the continued viability of Maine and its communities.

In addition, we must not assume that those arriving in our state as immigrants, asylum seekers, or refugees are monolithically poor and uneducated. Many of the individuals arriving in the United States have advanced degrees, entrepreneurial experience, skills, and cultural capital. These are assets that can benefit our state. However, we must first provide resources to help these individuals to transition to their new society and embrace these new arrivals with enthusiasm and hospitality, rather than suspicion and distrust.

WHAT CAN MAINE LEARN FROM OTHER COMMUNITIES?

Many states and communities that faced challenging demographic futures like Maine's 10 or 20 years ago have taken such steps. In this sense, Maine is well behind the curve. The past two decades have seen demographic transformations in states such as Minnesota, Iowa, Nebraska, and Tennessee. At the forefront of these efforts were systematic attempts to make states and communities attractive destinations for immigrants, asylum seekers, and refugees. Beyond simply shifting population trends away from demographic decline, many of these communities have seen revitalization efforts that would have been impossible without their new arrivals. In fact, a 2015 report found that from 2000 to 2013, immigrants accounted for 48 percent of the growth in business ownership in the United States (Kallick 2015). However, such transformations did not

occur overnight. The economic benefits associated with these more diverse communities require commitment through and beyond the transition period.

These locations took concrete steps to ensure that those arriving from other countries would have the support they needed to be successful in their transition to a new society and culture. Given Maine's relative lack of diversity compared to other parts of the country, I highlight steps taken at the outset of strategies to encourage the arrival of more immigrants, asylum seekers, and refugees.

Strategic Planning

Perhaps the most important initial step taken elsewhere involved intentionality and strategic planning. Whether at the municipal or state level, the starting point for many efforts was careful study, the establishment of measurable benchmarks and goals, and the development of multiyear plans articulating action steps to promote resettlement. As Singer notes, "it can be challenging if not impossible to design service programs without an understanding of who is living in the community and what their needs may be" (2004: 19). The same holds true of states and municipalities seeking to encourage more immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers to settle in an area. For instance, the "Welcome Dayton" initiative to create a welcoming and supportive environment for immigrants and refugees in Dayton, Ohio, was the product of multiple years of study and an inclusive community dialogue that played out over months (Welcome Dayton 2011).

Careful planning can enable communities to be proactive in meeting the needs of their new members in the early stages of integration into those communities, rather than reactive as needs and gaps emerge. Such planning efforts need to coordinate with diverse stakeholders from state and local government, to education, health care, nonprofits and service providers, and the philanthropic sector. The National League of Cities (2011) provides a guide for how to structure and facilitate these initial planning dialogues. In addition, these localized efforts can tap into national efforts such as the White House Task Force on New Americans (2015), aimed at supporting local and municipal initiatives to attract and retain those from abroad. This effort highlights best practices and provides tangible financial and human resources to create welcoming communities for immigrants, asylum seekers, and refugees.

Creating a Hub of Organization and Support

Once the initial planning phase is complete, many communities, municipalities, and states have elected to establish an ongoing institutional hub of organization and support. This often occurs in the form of an "Office of New Americans," which have been established in cities such as Chicago, Nashville, and Columbus, or at the state level in Michigan and New York. In fact, this idea has been already been proposed in Portland, Maine, by Mayor Ethan Strimling, as reported in an article by Randy Billings in the *Portland Press Herald* (March 15, 2016). Such offices work to coordinate the collaboration necessary to help new arrivals from abroad to transition into their new communities in a diverse set of domains: language acquisition, entry into education and the workforce, cultural integration and support, access to basic services, and navigating the path to citizenship. These transitional supports cut across the public and private sector, various levels of government, and different state and federal agencies, as well as nonprofit organizations. Centralizing this information and facilitating access for those transitioning to a new community and a new country can make this overwhelming process more manageable.

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Focusing on the Needs of New Arrivals

Though planning and institutional infrastructure can help prepare for the arrival of immigrants, asylum seekers, and refugees, understanding the needs of new arrivals will require ongoing communication. For instance, a key part of the Welcome Dayton program in Ohio was working with leaders in immigrant communities to identify and address needs as they arose: identifying specific neighborhoods as immigrant entrepreneurship zones or providing municipal

identification cards for individuals not eligible for any other form of official identification cards, even cultural events such as multicultural soccer tournaments (Welcome Dayton 2011). Such goals were developed and implemented with the stakeholders from immigrant communities directly included in the conversation, enabling both a sense of ownership and ensuring a greater responsiveness to the needs of immigrant communities in Dayton.

In many other locales (San Francisco, St. Louis, Pittsburgh), the office charged with serving as an organizational hub for resources and services has overseen the establishment of communication channels. These communications and dialogues then inform ongoing, local needs-based policy interventions specific to newcomers. However, the effectiveness of such efforts depends crucially upon establishing these channels for dialogue at the initial stages of an effort to bring immigrants, asylum seekers, and refugees to a community. Though it is difficult to anticipate all of the needs that might arise in implementing a larger strategy, creating effective channels for dialogue has enabled cities and communities to be responsive as the needs arise.

Raising Awareness

Last, communities and states have made efforts to broadcast that they are welcoming, inclusive environments for immigrants, asylum seekers, and refugees through publicity efforts and public communications. For many of these individuals, the cities and communities where they eventually take up residence may not have been their initial destination, but rather a product of secondary migration. Lots of factors go into making a decision about where to settle, the most significant often being the presence of friends, family members, and a community network into which an individual can seek support.

Yet cities can influence where individuals choose to settle by making it clear that their presence is a valued and that institutional and community resources exist to support them. One of the most striking examples here is St. Paul-Minneapolis, Minnesota. The city has some of the highest numbers of refugees in the country and is a top destination for secondary refugee resettlement (U.S. DHHS 2015). Ali examined the factors driving immigrants and refugees to choose this destination and found that respondents cited “plentiful (skilled and unskilled) jobs, good public schools, an existing community of their ethnic or national origin, and a warm social

welcome” (2009: 89). Cities and communities working to attract more individuals must recognize that they are doing so in a competitive environment. This, by necessity, entails working to promote and market what makes their destination uniquely supportive and welcoming.

CONCLUSION: TOWARD A DIVERSE AND VIBRANT FUTURE IN MAINE

Maine’s future, much like its past, will be written by the steps it takes today to engage new arrivals from “away”—whether we are referring to out-of-state arrivals or those coming from beyond the borders of the United States. If we want to stave off the negative effects of the state’s demographic decline, we must strive to keep more young people here and assist seniors in aging in place while remaining in the workforce for as long as they are able. Yet these strategies alone do not constitute a permanent solution. Many, perhaps most, of us have a narrative of our own origins in this country that includes the arrival of our ancestors in the United States having endured struggle and seeking opportunity. Though the circumstances may be different, and the challenges faced by today’s societies different from those of the past, this same narrative will inform the future of the state of Maine and the nation.

Periods of demographic and cultural transition such as this can be challenging. Such moments may induce fear and the temptation to blame new arrivals for societal and economic challenges they had little hand in creating. Yet the story of the nation is one in which we have faced those challenges and overcome them. Many of us would not be in this country had we not done so. Some of Maine’s most celebrated leaders such as Edmund Muskie and George Mitchell have been first-generation Americans. Maine’s economic, social, and political future will be more diverse than its recent history. Yet if we want to retain the vibrant communities in which we live and work, we must summon the courage and the political will to embrace this challenge. 🐟

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