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Don't Laugh at Mayor Bloomberg's Comments on Immigration and Detroit

by [Sven Gustafson](#) on [May 3, 2011](#)

When New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg said the U.S. should require all new immigrants to live in Detroit and start businesses as a way to rebuild Motown's decimated population, he was almost certainly speaking rhetorically. He knows that's never going to happen and that such a policy would likely hurt his own city.

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A colorful corner of Detroit's Mexicantown district.

But he just might be on to something.

Bloomberg said during a [recent appearance](#) on NBC's "Meet the Press" that encouraging immigration could stem the "crisis of confidence" among business leaders about the U.S. economy.

[From the AP:](#)

"Take a look at the big, old, industrial cities, Detroit, for example," he said. "They've got a great mayor, Mayor (Dave) Bing, but the population has left. You've got to do something about that. And if I were the federal government, assuming you could wave a magic wand and pull everybody together, you pass a law letting immigrants come in as long as they agreed to go to Detroit and live there for five or 10 years. Start businesses, take jobs, whatever.

"You would populate Detroit overnight because half the world wants to come here."



Bloomberg

Bloomberg's greater point — that immigration is one way to help rebuild America's shattered inner cities (like Detroit) — isn't new, of course. New York City's population stability benefits greatly from steady immigration, the idea has been floated before in certain circles in Detroit, and [Gov. Rick Snyder has even endorsed](#) the principle. But Bloomberg may have just become the idea's most vocal champion.

To a limited extent, it's already happening in places like southwest Detroit, Dearborn, Troy and Hamtramck, which have large numbers of foreign-born residents.

"We don't have these large immigration flows," said Kurt Metzger, a demographer and director of [Data Driven Detroit](#). "Certainly things really slowed down in the latter part of the decade because of the economy. There was no pull for immigrants.

"But those communities that had foreign-born populations seem to have weathered the storm better than the others did."



Take a drive along, say, Vernor Highway through southwest Detroit or Conant in Hamtramck and it's hard not to notice the ethnic stamp on the relatively vibrant business districts — Mexican in the former and a mixture of Polish, Arab, Albanian and Bangladeshi in the latter. Detroit's Mexicantown was one of the few city neighborhoods that grew in population in the 2000 Census.

Studies have shown that immigrant groups are [more likely to start businesses](#) entrepreneurship than native U.S. citizens.

Metzger has been studying the limited 2010 data that's come from the Census Bureau, and it shows some interesting things:

- While southwest Detroit shrank in population slightly in the 2010 count, it hung on much better than the overall city, which lost nearly 25 percent of its residents. "The only group in Detroit that grew was the Latino population," Metzger said.
- Dearborn, meanwhile, actually gained overall population, including increases in the numbers of blacks, Asians and whites. "Here was a community that actually saw growth against most communities at least in the core of Wayne County that lost population," he said.
- Hamtramck, a longtime ethnic enclave surrounded by Detroit, lost 2 percent of its population but held relatively steady because of its immigrant population, Metzger believes. "The one big growth in population in Hamtramck was the Asian population, so the Bangladeshi population," he said.

With his [Detroit Works Project](#) and [residency incentives for police officers](#), Mayor Dave Bing has shown that he's willing to entertain new and innovative ideas for rebuilding the city. Why not use that creative streak on incentives to lure immigrants to the Motor City?

We could certainly do worse.

Photos by [ifmuth](#), [Plaubel Makina](#).