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BALTIMORE'S POLICIES TO ATTRACT AND RETAIN IMMIGRANTS

A COMMUNITY-ENGAGED EVALUATION

EXTERNAL REPORT

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**Baltimore's Policies to Attract and Retain Immigrants:
A Community-Engaged Evaluation**

External Report

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Since the early 2000s, Baltimore City has implemented or supported policies, programs and projects for immigrant integration that could increase local immigrant settlement and help reverse the population and economic decline the city experienced after the 1950s (Filomeno 2017). In 2013, these policies went through a breakthrough. Former mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake convened The New Americans Task Force, “a diverse group of stakeholders,” to develop “a plan to retain and attract immigrants as part of the mayor’s goal to grow Baltimore” (MIMA 2014). In 2014, with support from the Abell Foundation, the task force published a report with recommendations for the city to promote economic growth and community well-being through immigrant integration (The New Americans Task Force 2014). By December 2016, Baltimore City had an executive order preventing discrimination of immigrants by city personnel, hired bilingual police officers, recruited the Latino Economic Development Center (LEDC) to Baltimore, created the Mayor’s Office for Immigrant and Multicultural Affairs (MIMA), supported numerous cultural events with immigrant communities, and adopted other policies for immigrant integration. Although Baltimore City has seen immigrant populations grow in recent decades, it remained unclear if and how local policies had contributed to those gains until now.

From September 2016 to October 2017, Dr. Felipe Filomeno and four research assistants of the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC) conducted a systematic assessment of the policies for immigrants adopted by the City of Baltimore until the end of 2016. The goal of the policy assessment was to investigate if and how those policies have increased local immigrant settlement. This analysis will inform further improvements in local immigration policies. The study was funded by UMBC and the Abell Foundation and was conducted in collaboration with the Mayor’s Office of Immigrant and Multicultural Affairs of Baltimore City.

To assess the efficacy of local policies to attract and retain immigrants, the research team conducted a formative policy evaluation using a qualitative method. Formative evaluations assess policies that are in the middle of their life cycles, having started to be implemented but not yet so developed that policymakers cannot make adjustments after the evaluations are concluded. Formative evaluations often focus on the process of policy implementation: what a policy is actually doing, whether or not it is serving the target population the way it is supposed to, whether or not the actions of those in charge of applying the policy match the ultimate goals of the policy, etc. The formative evaluation of Baltimore’s policies for immigrants investigated multiple dimensions of immigrant life in Baltimore and how local policies have performed in each of those dimensions. To put

it simply, the evaluation investigated how local policies have affected immigrant well-being in Baltimore City, which would ultimately influence local immigrant settlement. The stronger the contribution of a policy for immigrant well-being, the more likely the policy would be to increase immigrant settlement.

The first step in the study was to identify the policies to be evaluated. This should not include all local policies, only those that specifically apply to immigrants (including refugees and unauthorized immigrants). Filomeno (2017) analyzed Baltimore's policies for immigrants adopted between 1979 to 2014. His analysis was updated in this evaluation to cover the period until the end of 2016. This update required the research team to conduct an interview with the director of MIMA, a review of MIMA's 2016 activity report and a review of policy documents of other agencies of the local government published online after September 2014 (date of publication of the New Americans task force report).

To evaluate the policies, the principal investigator conducted semi-structured interviews with ten of the main immigrant-supporting organizations of the local civil society, including religious charities, non-profit service providers and advocacy groups. These organizations are familiar with the local government and some of them have actually participated in the making of local policies for immigrants (Filomeno 2017). Because they have worked with immigrants in Baltimore for several years, they have a broad and deep understanding of their lives in the city (including how they are affected by local policies).

In addition, the research team held four focus groups with different segments of the local immigrant population: immigrant community leaders (6 participants), immigrant small business-owners (11 participants), high-skilled and professional immigrants (8 participants) and Latino immigrants (12 participants). Immigrant community leaders have knowledge of collective problems faced by their communities and, being community advocates, they are likely to be knowledgeable about the local government. Immigrants who are small-business owners, professionals or high-skilled are especially important for the city's strategy of economic development, repopulation and urban revival. Latinos are the largest immigrant group in Baltimore. Asian immigrants are the second largest immigrant group in Baltimore, but correspond to only half the size of the Latino population. Because the principal investigator was unable to recruit enough participants for a focus group for Asian immigrants, an online questionnaire for this segment of the population was circulated and 12 responses were received. The principal investigator also conducted participant observation in 21 events of local immigrant communities, including informal meetings with community members, rallies, festivals and community forums. The policy evaluation relied on a thematic analysis and triangulation of data collected from the official documents, interviews, focus groups, questionnaire and participant observation. For a detailed description of the research method, please see the methodological guide published in conjunction with this report.

In what regards the effect of these policies on immigrant well-being and its implications for local immigrant settlement, this policy evaluation found “a glass half full.” On one hand, immigrants and immigrant-supporting organizations recognize city efforts at immigrant integration in all areas as positive contributors to immigrant well-being. On the other hand, they identified several limitations in the design or implementation of those policies that should be addressed if Baltimore is to develop as a welcoming city. Some of these limitations are related to recommendations of The News Americans Task Force that have yet to be implemented. Below is a summary of the findings and recommendations from this policy evaluation.

One of the most salient challenges for immigrants in Baltimore is the language barrier due to a lack of fluency in English. This barrier hinders communication between the local government and immigrants as well as the awareness of this population about local resources and their capacity to access them. The city’s most praised contributions to solve this problem have been the hiring of bilingual staff members and the availability of language interpretation services over the telephone at city agencies. However, the utilization of these services was pointed out as inconsistent across city agencies and local public schools. The local government should develop channels for direct communication with the immigrant population and increase the number of staff members with competence in foreign languages and intercultural communication. The city should also work with immigrant-supporting organizations to increase the access of immigrants to English language instruction.

Another major concern of immigrants in Baltimore is inter-ethnic and inter-racial discrimination in daily life. The city’s most appreciated contributions in this area have been an executive order establishing an anti-discrimination policy (the study found only two individual reports of discrimination at city agencies) and the support to events of immigrant communities. The city should enhance the cultural component of those events and develop intercultural and multicultural events and programs that can help reduce discrimination on the community level.

In the area of education, the most welcomed contributions of the Baltimore City Public School System have been the expansion of ESOL programs and of staff with intercultural and foreign language competence in schools. The school system should continue to expand these programs because schools are important for immigrants not only as providers of education for children but also as community spaces and gateways into life in the United States.

Housing is another top concern for immigrants in Baltimore. Immigrants face serious difficulties as potential home-buyers and as tenants because of lack of knowledge about home-buying and rental rules, lack of credit history and proper income

documentation, or lack of a social security number. Rising housing costs and abuse by landlords were also identified as significant problems. The most valued initiatives of the city in this area are the promotion of information sessions for immigrants about housing and the support for a mortgage program for unconventional home buyers developed by an OSI-Baltimore fellow at the Southeast Development Corporation. This is, however, an area in which the city needs to significantly expand its efforts. Long term immigrant settlement is highly dependent on immigrants' ability to secure adequate housing.

Some immigrant-supporting organizations stressed that immigrants lacking a conventional identification document often cannot access services and resources, including housing and banking. Two immigrant-supporting organizations mentioned that a municipal ID card could reduce discrimination against immigrants (which are often assumed to be undocumented if they lack an ID issued by a government agency of the United States). Following an initiative of City Councilman Brandon Scott, the city should create a municipal identification card available for immigrants residing in Baltimore. For such a program to be successful, the municipal ID card should be offered to all residents of Baltimore as a way to retrieve materials from local public libraries, benefit from discounts in local businesses, etc.

Access to employment and the desire to start a business are also salient matters for immigrants in Baltimore. Discrimination is felt by both high-skilled immigrants (who feel local employers avoid hiring foreigners and do not recognize foreign academic credentials) and by low-skilled immigrants (who are particularly vulnerable to violations of labor rights). The city's most successful initiatives in this area have been the recruitment of the Latino Economic Development Center, the expansion of immigrant-friendly services at the Small Business Resource Center and the support to the Baltimore RISE program for refugee insertion into the job market. The city should expand these programs and further advertise them to immigrant communities. The City Office of Civil Rights and Wage Enforcement should expand its outreach to the immigrant population as well.

Public safety is another top concern among immigrants in Baltimore, who feel especially vulnerable to criminals. The city has successfully improved policing in immigrant communities, especially with the policy of non-involvement of local police with immigration enforcement, the hiring of bilingual police officers and the faster process for immigrants seeking documentation for a U visa. There is, however, a need to expand these efforts that help build trust between immigrants and the local police force, with compensation for more officers to acquire foreign language and intercultural competence. The Baltimore City Police Department should also systematically track the victimization of individuals according to race and ethnicity.

The creation and operation of MIMA was widely praised by immigrants and immigrant-supporting organizations in Baltimore. However, MIMA is also seen as seriously understaffed. The city should invest additional resources in the agency, which is crucial for the implementation of the recommendations of this report and to turn immigrant integration into a principle of policy making, implementation and evaluation followed across city agencies. For Baltimore City to be truly welcoming of immigrants, the resources, needs and rights of immigrants should be systematically taken into account in the planning, adoption and implementation of local policies. This does not mean that every city agency will have to provide special services or resources to immigrants, but it does mean that every city agency with a potential impact on immigrants should adapt its policies, programs and projects to take advantage of immigrant resources, to respond positively to their needs, and to respect their rights. Local government agencies should be asking: How is this program likely to affect immigrants? How could immigrants be involved in this program? How could we make this program more inclusive of immigrants? In many situations, this will likely not harm the cost/benefit balance of programs, because research shows that immigrant integration can generate gains for the immigrant-receiving community as a whole. In addition to strengthening MIMA, two other initiatives could make immigrant integration more systematic in Baltimore City: (1) the creation of a guide for immigrant integration for city agencies and staff, (2) a local law for immigrant integration.

In 2016, MIMA published a welcoming guide for immigrants with instructions on how to access services and resources in Baltimore. Local government officials also need a guide on how to welcome immigrants and account for them in local public policies. This guide could have a general part (with instructions about the city's approach to immigrant integration, intercultural relations and immigrants' rights) and an agency-specific part addressing the policies of each agency (which could be developed by the agencies in collaboration with MIMA). Once created, this welcoming guide for city officials should become part of official training programs.

Baltimore has a long history of immigration and the first rudiments of a local immigration policy were created in 1979, when former mayor William D. Schaefer appointed a liaison for the Latino community. Following the example of other major cities, Baltimore could consolidate its approach to immigration in a local law for immigrant integration that would take into account current policies (especially the 2012 executive order), immigration-related resolutions of the City Council, the 2014 report of The New Americans Task Force and this policy evaluation. Local immigrant integration is an organic process involving multiple areas of life. Challenges in one area (for instance, language) affect challenges in other areas (for instance, interactions with police). Thus, policies in one area can affect policies in other areas, in ways that can be hampering or supportive. A local law for

immigrant integration would guarantee that policy changes happen holistically, taking into account interactive effects and the work of multiple local government agencies. For instance, a municipal ID card could facilitate the access of immigrants to bank accounts, which could reduce the likelihood that immigrants would be carrying large amounts of cash and thus become vulnerable to robbery. At the same time, by enrolling in a municipal ID card, immigrants would be taking a step forward in their civic integration and, if leaving their contact information, would be reachable for city outreach efforts.

Another important legislative initiative for immigrant integration in Baltimore would be the extension of voting rights in local elections to immigrants that are not yet U.S. citizens. Several local jurisdictions in the state of Maryland already allow non-citizen immigrants to vote. This would be a major driver of local immigrant integration, with potential effects on all policy areas. Immigrants would become more aware of local policies, have an increased sense of belonging to Baltimore and local public officials would be more likely to respond to their demands. At the very least, the Baltimore City Hispanic Commission could be expanded into a Baltimore City Immigrant Commission. The expanded commission would include non-Latino immigrants, fostering intercultural relations, increasing its representativeness and contributing to the integration of Asian immigrants (whom this study found to be particularly unaware of local policies for immigrants).

At last, it is noteworthy that successful policies for immigrant integration aimed at increasing local immigrant settlement tend to have a multiplier effect. Vibrant immigrant communities are magnets for new immigrants. The social networks of immigrant communities, whose scope can range from local to transnational, can significantly affect patterns of immigrant settlement. Established immigrant communities in Baltimore can attract new immigrants because of the information and social support they can provide to potential newcomers. This, however, also implies that immigrant communities elsewhere can pull immigrants who are socially connected to them away from Baltimore. This can happen even on the local level, as when immigrants move from the city to surrounding counties. This is another reason for a holistic approach to policy change, in which multiple actions are taken to support established and thriving local immigrant communities, turning them into major draws for newcomers. Although Baltimore has some competitive disadvantages vis-à-vis surrounding counties when trying to attract immigrants (such as higher crime rates and real estate taxes), the city's cultural diversity and the concentration of immigrant communities and supporting organizations are strong competitive advantages. The city could take advantage of this by following the recommendation of The New Americans Task Force to develop a "Welcome Ambassador" training program to existing community members.

References

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