

Civic Health in Wisconsin:

Civic Engagement among Foreign-Born Communities

Immigrant communities across the United States face many barriers in participating in civic activities. Considering the civic participation of foreign-born communities is essential in understanding national and state civic health. There is much to learn about the civic engagement among the foreign-born population in Wisconsin, comprising 5.1 percent of the state population. Civic health reflects the degree to which citizens participate in their communities, from local and state governance to interactions with friends or family. Civic health also relates to the overall well-being of neighborhoods, communities, states, and the nation.¹



Background

Social connections among family and friends in immigrant communities contribute to overall social and civic engagement. Civic engagement, even among homogeneous ethnic communities, can help build new identities for immigrants and create connections that prevent isolation throughout the immigration experience.² Nonprofit organizations have played an essential role in facilitating civic engagement among immigrant communities across the nation.³ Their support helps newcomers overcome the barriers they face to civic health.

Gathering Information

In order to begin learning more about civic engagement among Wisconsin's immigrant communities, we contacted organizations across Wisconsin. At this inaugural Town Hall, participants discussed barriers to, and opportunities for, civic participation. They also discussed how to better gather and share information about how foreign-born communities participate socially and politically. These perspectives will inform the Civic Health of Wisconsin Initiative's strategic plan, ensuring that this Wisconsin community's civic engagement is represented in initiatives and reporting.

The purpose of this inquiry was also to connect these organizations to the Civic Health of Wisconsin initiative. We hope that their contributions and leadership in this effort will expand our initial understanding of foreign-born residents' civic life and the many ways they contribute civically to communities around Wisconsin.

The foreign-born population includes "naturalized U.S. citizens, lawful permanent residents (immigrants), temporary migrants (such as foreign students), humanitarian migrants (such as refugees and asylees), and unauthorized migrants," according to the US Census Bureau.

Themes & Next Steps

Barriers for Individuals

- Language, local customs and systems
- Education
- Family and life responsibilities
- Access to support (childcare, transportation)
- Internet and digital literacy

Frontline Organizations

Gathering & Sharing Information

- Narratives
- Research

Support Provided

- Advocacy
- Programs
- Planning

Recommendations

- Continue to gather more information
- Invite constituents to serve as a Civic Health of Wisconsin committee representative
- Connect with municipalities to promote access and best practices
- Create a community connection framework
- Offer resources and translation

1.Center for Community and Nonprofit Studies (2020).Civic Health in Wisconsin:Connectedness in context. Retrieved 2021 from <https://uwmadison.box.com/v/civic-health-of-wisconsin>.

2.Dixon, Z., Bessaha, M.L. & Post, M. (2018). Beyond the Ballot: Immigrant Integration Through Civic Engagement and Advocacy. *Race Soc Probl* 10, 366–375.

3.Mora, G. Cristina (2013). Religion and the organizational context of immigrant civic engagement: Mexican Catholicism in the USA, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 36:11, 1647-1665