



MEMORANDUM

To: Mayor and Council

From: Brion Oaks, Chief Equity Officer *Brion Oaks*

Date: September 16, 2021

Subject: Advancing Immigrant Incorporation in Austin, TX Report

Nearly 8 years ago on September 19, 2013, the Austin City Council declared Austin to be “a welcoming city for international newcomers.” This proclamation was part of a series of steps taken by Council to work towards becoming a welcoming and inclusive city that supports and meets the needs of our various immigrant communities. More recently through the adoption of the FY20 budget, Council created the City’s first Immigrant Affairs position, housed in the City’s Equity Office, and the position was filled by Rocío Villalobos at the end of March 2020.

The purpose of this memorandum is to highlight a recent report that will aid the City’s continued efforts to become a certified Welcoming City. Certified Welcoming is a formal designation for cities and counties that have created policies and programs reflecting their values and commitment to immigrant inclusion. The City of Austin’s Equity Office partnered with Dr. Ruth Wasem and her Immigrant Incorporation Team from the LBJ School of Public Affairs to produce a report about advancing immigrant incorporation in the City of Austin. Dr. Wasem previously produced similar reports for the City of Dallas and the City of San Antonio.

According to “Advancing Immigrant Incorporation in Austin, TX,” Austin has made great strides and scored highly in areas such as Government Leadership, Community, and Legal Support. The establishment of the Commission on Immigrant Affairs, the City’s partnership with and support of community-based organizations that serve our immigrant communities by providing access to legal services and other types of supports, and the creation and hiring of the Immigrant Affairs position in the City’s Equity Office led to high scores in these areas.

Although the aforementioned measures put Austin at 43 out of the 100 largest cities in 2020 for immigrant incorporation, the City of Austin falls below average on measures of Civic Participation, Livability and Job Opportunities. Additionally, Austin’s naturalization rate is one of the lowest among its peers, which negatively affected Austin’s Civic Participation ranking. While naturalization may not be every immigrant’s goal, or even be attainable for all immigrants, becoming naturalized yields economic benefits to those who pursue citizenship. English language proficiency is closely tied to naturalization

rates, job opportunities, as well as civic participation. Many non-English-speaking residents abstain from engaging in the community due to language barriers and the associated challenges with communicating.

Given these findings, researchers recommend that the City of Austin:

- Formally establish and staff an office charged with immigrant affairs and incorporation.
- Explore policy options to remedy its comparative low wages in key sectors of the economy.
- Develop and preserve affordable housing.
- Continue to collaborate with public universities and colleges and other nongovernmental organizations to deliver workforce development programs.
- Ensure information about requirements for starting businesses are accessible in immigrant communities.
- Support naturalization with additional resources and available coursework aimed at the English language proficiency and civics education required to qualify for naturalization.
- Establish community hubs that bring agencies and neighborhood groups together to provide specialized services as needs ebb and flow.
- Develop initiatives to encourage civic participation across all communities.

As next steps for this report, Dr. Wasem will present these findings at the next meeting of the Commission on Immigrant Affairs. We will work with the commission to use these findings to make budget recommendations to the City Manager and Council. Please contact Rocío Villalobos (Rocio.Villalobos@austintexas.gov) if you have any questions. Thank you.

CC: Spencer Cronk, City Manager
Anne Morgan, Acting Deputy City Manager
CMO Executive Team
Brion Oaks, Chief Equity Officer

ADVANCING IMMIGRANT INCORPORATION IN AUSTIN, TX



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Austin is one of the fastest growing cities in the United States and is identified as an emerging gateway for immigrants. The single largest source country for immigrants to Austin continues to be Mexico, but immigrants from Asia are increasing in numbers and relative proportion. Immigrants from Africa doubled over the past decade and make up 4 percent of the foreign-born population. In other words, Austin's foreign-born residents are increasingly diverse.



Austin is among cities that have embraced the "welcoming communities" movement. Welcoming communities seek to have long-time residents and recent immigrants work together to create stronger communities. A growing body of research shows that immigrant incorporation policies yield positive outcomes for both native- and foreign-born residents of a city.

This report serves to inform the City of Austin as it advances its immigrant incorporation efforts.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



RESEARCH



There is considerable scholarship on the racial and economic segregation of Austin over the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century. Immigrants are arriving to a city that has a deep history of residential segregation, and they are pushing a few of these boundaries.

The report is the culmination of several phases of research and analysis.

The initial phase draws on the New American Economy (NAE) Cities Index because it provides a baseline to compare the largest 100 US cities based on their immigrant integration scores.

The report focuses on a subset of U.S. cities that are similar to Austin on key economic and demographic factors. We further investigate the immigrant incorporation policies of successful peer cities.

Another phase of the research is socioeconomic analysis of the foreign-born population in Austin. We utilize the 2019 American Community Survey (ACS) Five-Year Estimates to identify census tracts with concentrations of foreign-born residents and analyze key traits.

In asset mapping Austin's immigrant neighborhoods, we overlay census tracts with selected community assets, attributes, and incidents.

Key Findings

Austin's three-year trends on the NAE indices show consistent improvement overall, ranking 43 out of the 100 largest cities in 2020. The overall scores increased from 2.6 and 2.7 in 2018 and 2019 respectively to 3.03 in 2020, out of a possible score of 5. Indices of legal support, government leadership and community are driving Austin's ranking. Austin, however, falls below the median on civic participation, livability, and job opportunities. Austin's naturalization rate of 68.5 percent is one of the lowest rates among its peers.

Austin's subpar score of 2 on job opportunities sounds an alarm for the city, especially given the city's overall record of prosperity and economic growth. Median wages in the construction sector in Austin (\$32,960), for example, fall below state (\$34,980) and national (\$43,000) levels.

The densest area of foreign-born population centers around the intersections of North Lamar and Rundberg Lane. There are a few other pockets with 35-49 percent foreign-born residents in west Austin. Nonetheless, most immigrants live in east Austin and south Austin near the airport.

The starkest contrast among foreign-born neighborhoods comes when those census tracts with higher percentages of the foreign born who were born in Asia are compared with those who were born in Latin America. Asian immigrants are overwhelmingly living in west Austin, the historically white and wealthier half of the city.



Affordable housing continues to be one of the most pressing issues facing Austinites-native or foreign born. Foreign-born residents experience rent burden at a rate 4.8 percent higher than natives. The census tracts identified as most vulnerable to housing displacement align with those census tracts with high foreign-born concentrations.

The asset mapping illustrates a “crescent moon” of assets, attributes, and incidents along the heavily populated central corridor of Austin, bending toward west Austin. Whether it is the location of affordable housing units, hospitals, fire stations, or public libraries, the patterns mirror the longstanding racial and economic divides in the city.

RECOMMENDATIONS




The empirical analyses undergird policy options the City of Austin might take to foster vibrancy, resilience, and economic potential in immigrant communities. The report focuses on five policy areas that the City of Austin can advance if prioritized and acted upon:

- 1) leadership and governance;
- 2) civic engagement and inclusivity;
- 3) economic prosperity and job growth;
- 4) livability; and
- 5) community resilience.

The recommendations are gleaned, in part, from our study of comparable cities.

The recommendations are as follows:

- Austin formally establishes and staffs an office charged with immigrant affairs and incorporation.
- Austin continues to support naturalization with additional resources and available coursework aimed at the English language proficiency and civics education required to qualify for naturalization and develops initiatives to encourage civic participation across all communities.
- Austin explores policy options to remedy its comparative low wages in key sectors of the economy, continues to collaborate with its public universities and colleges and other non-governmental organizations to deliver workforce development programs, and ensures information about requirements for starting businesses are accessible in immigrant communities.
- Austin continues to leverage all the policy tools available to develop and preserve affordable housing and ensures that immigrant neighborhoods are factored in—and immigrant voices included—as priorities are set and plans are executed.
- Austin uses community and neighborhood risk factors that encompass immigrant populations to identify at-risk parts of the city, locates assets and resources where people are most vulnerable in places convenient and appropriate, and establishes community hubs as public spaces that bring agencies and neighborhood groups together to provide specialized services agilely as needs ebb and flow.

A photograph of the Austin skyline at night, featuring several illuminated skyscrapers and their reflections in the water. The text is overlaid on the image.

For the complete report, go to
<https://hdl.handle.net/2152/86821>

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ADVANCING IMMIGRANT INCORPORATION IN AUSTIN, TX



JULY 2021

REPORT FOR THE CITY OF AUSTIN

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Cover photograph credits: Naturalization Ceremony in El Paso, TX, by Paul Ratje/AFP/Getty Images, *Newsweek*, (2019), and Election Day in Austin, Texas, by Eric Gay, *Associated Press*, (2018).



Advancing Immigrant Incorporation in Austin, TX

July 15, 2021

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Final deliverable for Immigrant Affairs and Welcoming Communities contract between the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs and the City of Austin (202002650-001/CT 4400 20091501170).

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Austin is one of the fastest growing cities in the United States and is identified as an emerging gateway for immigrants. The single largest source country for immigrants to Austin continues to be Mexico, but immigrants from Asia are increasing in numbers and relative proportion. Immigrants from Africa doubled over the past decade and make up 4 percent of the foreign-born population. In other words, Austin's foreign-born residents are increasingly diverse.

Austin is also among cities that have embraced the “welcoming communities” movement. Welcoming communities seek to have long-time residents and recent immigrants work together to create stronger communities. A growing body of research shows that immigrant incorporation policies yield positive outcomes for both native- and foreign-born residents of a city.

This report serves to inform the City of Austin as it advances its immigrant incorporation efforts.

RESEARCH

There is considerable scholarship on the racial and economic segregation of Austin over the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century. Immigrants are arriving to a city that has a deep history of residential segregation, and they are pushing a few of these boundaries.

The report is the culmination of several phases of research and analysis. The initial phase draws on the New American Economy (NAE) Cities Index because it provides a baseline to compare the largest 100 US cities based on their immigrant integration scores. The report focuses on a subset of U.S. cities that are similar to Austin on key economic and demographic factors. We further investigate the immigrant incorporation policies of successful peer cities.

Another phase of the research is socioeconomic analysis of the foreign-born population in Austin. We utilize the 2019 American Community Survey (ACS) Five-Year Estimates to identify census tracts with concentrations of foreign-born residents and analyze key traits. In asset mapping Austin's immigrant neighborhoods, we overlay census tracts with selected community assets, attributes, and incidents.

KEY FINDINGS

Austin's three-year trends on the NAE indices show consistent improvement overall, ranking 43 out of the 100 largest cities in 2020. The overall scores increased from 2.6 and 2.7 in 2018 and 2019 respectively to 3.03 in 2020, out of a possible score of 5. Indices of legal support, government leadership and community are driving Austin's ranking. Austin, however, falls

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RECOMMENDATIONS

The empirical analyses undergird policy options the City of Austin might take to foster vibrancy, resilience, and economic potential in immigrant communities. The report focuses on five policy areas that the City of Austin can advance if prioritized and acted upon: 1) leadership and governance; 2) civic engagement and inclusivity; 3) economic prosperity and job growth; 4) livability; and 5) community resilience. The recommendations are gleaned, in part, from our study of comparable cities.

The recommendations are as follows.

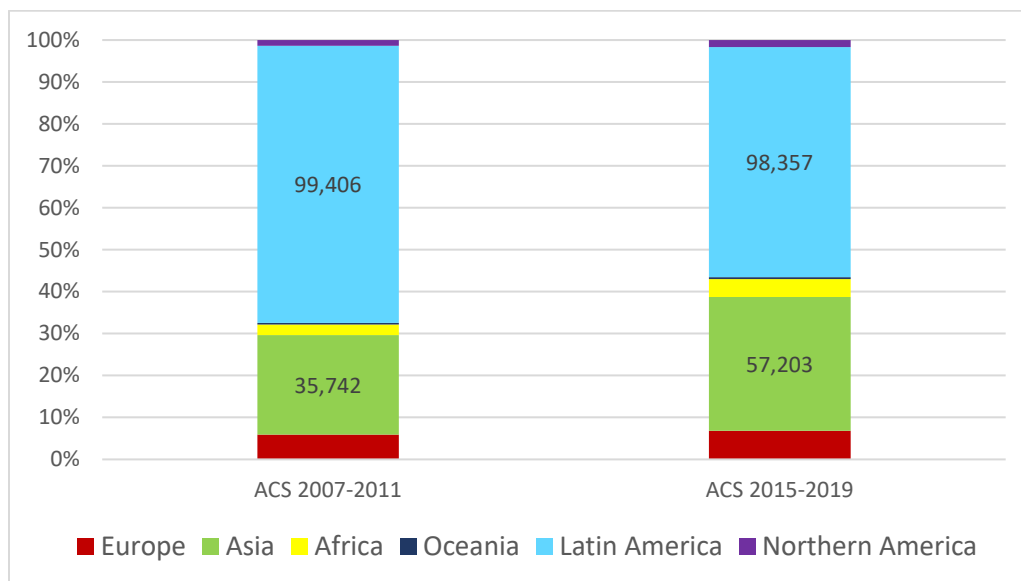
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Introduction

Austin is one of the fastest growing cities in the United States. Just over half (51.5 percent) of its one million residents were born in Texas. Although internal migration from other parts of the United States contributes most of its growth, immigrants make up an important portion of the population growth.¹ In 1990, foreign-born residents made up 6.9 percent of Austin's population, and this percentage almost doubled to 13.0 percent in 2000. A noteworthy demographic analysis of the period 1990 to 2005 found that the growth in Asian immigrants was higher than the national average coming from China, India, and Vietnam.²

Figure 1. Foreign-Born Austin Residents' Region of Birth



Source: American Community Survey, Table B05002, 2007-2011 5-year estimates and 2015-2019 5-year estimates.

Today, Austin is identified as a major immigrant gateway, experiencing rapid growth of the total foreign-born population.³ Foreign-born residents of Austin are estimated at 180,000 and comprise 18.8 percent of the population. As Figure 1 shows, immigrants from Latin America are the largest group of foreign-born residents, but that number has plateaued and makes up a slightly smaller proportion of foreign-born Austinites in recent years. The single largest source

¹ This report uses the term “immigrants” in the colloquial usage and not the legal definition of lawful permanent resident. For the purposes of this report, immigrants are synonymous with foreign-born residents and encompasses those who are lawful permanent residents, those residing with temporary visas (e.g., temporary workers, international students, investors), and those residing without immigration authorization.

² Emily Skop and Tara Buentello, “Immigration and Transformation Deep in the Heart of Texas,” in *Twenty-First Century Gateways*, edited by Audrey Singer, Susan Hardwick and Caroline B. Brettell, Brookings Institution Press, 2008, pp. 257-261; and Chris Ramser, “Austin Migration Insights,” Austin Chamber of Commerce, March 4, 2020, pp. 1-6.

³ Audrey Singer, “Metropolitan Immigrant Gateways Revisited, 2014,” *Brookings* (2014).
<https://www.brookings.edu/research/metropolitan-immigrant-gateways-revisited-2014/>

country for immigrants to Austin continues to be Mexico. Immigrants from Asia are increasing in numbers and relative proportion, now making up about one-third of the foreign-born residents of Austin. Immigrants from Africa comprise only 4 percent but doubled from the 2007-2011 period to the 2015-2019 period. In other words, Austin's foreign-born residents are increasingly diverse.⁴

A movement for more inclusive communities is occurring across the United States and around the world. Often referred to as "welcoming communities," the aim is to make sure that long-time residents and recent immigrants alike participate in creating stronger communities with equal opportunity. The objectives include removing barriers that traditionally prevent immigrants from fully participating in decision-making while being mindful that long-time residents have concerns about changing demographics. A growing body of research shows that municipal governments' immigrant incorporation policies yield positive outcomes for both native- and foreign-born residents of a city.⁵

Austin, Texas, is among other leading cities that signed on to the "welcoming communities" movement, and the city is working to establish an immigrant affairs office. The Austin City Council's Commission on Immigrant Affairs has been advising city elected officials on issues of concern to immigrants for well over a decade, including focus group and survey research on the degree that Austin is welcoming for immigrants.⁶ The city council passed a motion to work towards creating an Office of Immigrant Affairs in 2018.⁷ In 2019, the Austin City Manager's office produced "Serving Austin's Immigrant Community" report.⁸ The Commission on Immigrant Affairs continues to meet regularly, propose local city ordinances, direct funding to partnerships with local nonprofits, and make recommendations for city policies.⁹

This report serves to inform the City of Austin as it advances its immigrant incorporation efforts.

Meaningful distinctions across words such as assimilation, integration, acculturation, and incorporation can complicate the discussion. The differences in usage result in part from the field of discipline, e.g., political science, psychology, or sociology, and from the focus of the research, e.g., labor force and economic measures, political participation, or cultural identity. International literature uses integration to describe the mutually beneficial way immigrants can

⁴ American Community Survey, Table B05002, 2007-2011 5-year estimates and 2015-2019 5-year estimates.

⁵ Mary C. Waters and Marisa Gerstein Pineau, *The Integration of Immigrants into American Society* (The National Academies Press, 2015), pp 3-11.

⁶ City of Austin Commission on Immigrant Affairs, Austin: Welcoming City Initiative Final Report, September 2015.

⁷ Phil Prazan, "After Border Visit, Austin Takes Steps to Create Immigrant Affairs Office," KXAN, June 28, 2018, <https://www.kxan.com/news/local/austin/after-border-visit-austin-takes-steps-to-create-immigrant-affairs-office/>.

⁸ Elaine Hart, "Serving Austin's Immigrant Community Report," City of Austin Office of the City Manager, August 19, 2019, <https://www.austintexas.gov/edims/document.cfm?id=325605>.

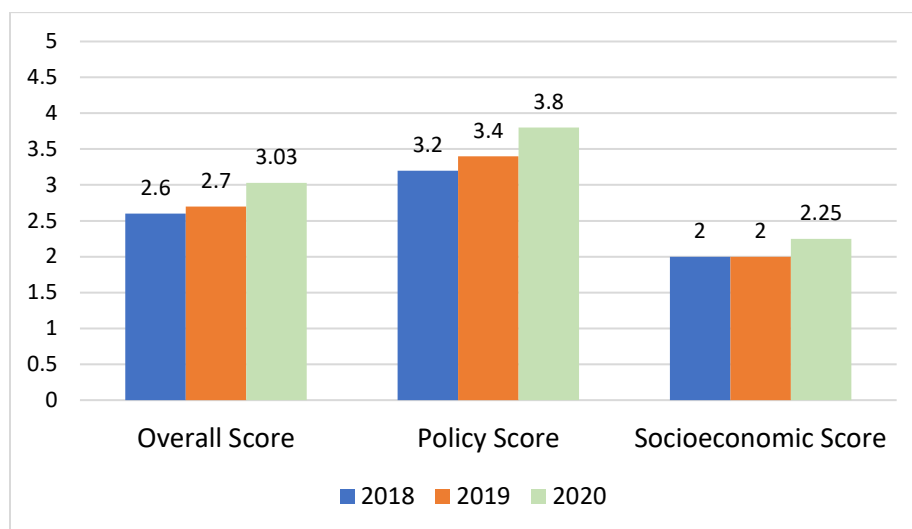
⁹ City of Austin Commission on Immigrant Affairs, "Annual Internal Review," <http://www.austintexas.gov/edims/document.cfm?id=326298>

be accepted into the fabric of society; however, in the context of the United States, integration sometimes has a negative connotation. Similarly, assimilation is a value-laden term. We have chosen the term incorporation as most appropriate for our policy research, because incorporation is predicated on social cohesion between both immigrant and native-born populations.¹⁰

Key Indicators

Key indicators and metrics help define what it means to be a welcoming community across different cities' immigrant incorporation efforts. The New American Economy (NAE) Cities Index measures what they refer to as integration efforts across the one hundred largest cities in the United States.¹¹ This index utilizes nation-wide standardized data to rank these cities according to three different scoring metrics: their overall score, policy score and socioeconomic score. Thus far, the NAE Cities Index has been released three times, once in September 2018, once in November 2019 and once in September 2020.¹² A closer look at Austin's scores provides insight into how the city's efforts to integrate foreign- and native-born residents rank in comparison to the other ninety-nine cities, signaling Austin's strengths and identifying areas for improvement.

Figure 2. Three-Year Trends in Austin's NAE Integration Scores



Source: New American Economy, 2020

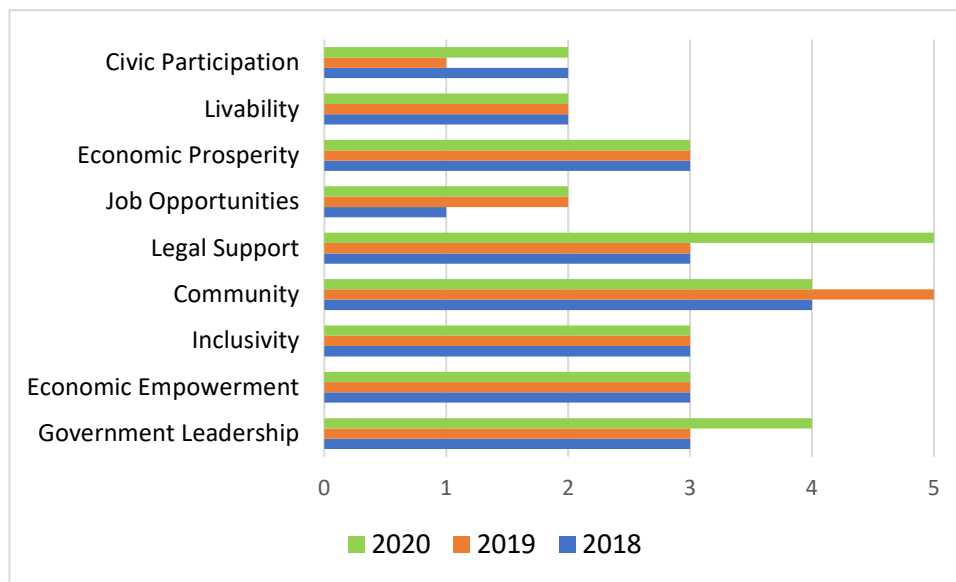
¹⁰ For a discussion of the scholarly research on immigrant incorporation, see Ruth Ellen Wasem et al, *Welcoming Communities: Immigrant Incorporation in Dallas, Texas*, LBJ School of Public Affairs, University of Texas, (2020), pp.2-3, 9-21 <https://repositories.lib.utexas.edu/handle/2152/82248>

¹¹ New American Economy describes itself as “a bipartisan research and advocacy organization fighting for smart federal, state, and local immigration policies that help grow our economy and create jobs for all Americans.” <https://www.newamericaneconomy.org/>

¹² NAE looks at the 100 largest cities in the United States by total population, using the microdata from the 5-year sample of the American Community Survey (ACS). For their methodology, see <https://www.newamericaneconomy.org/cities-index/about-cities-index/#methodology>

Austin's three-year trends show consistent improvement overall, ranking 43 out of the 100 largest cities in 2020.¹³ The overall scores increased from 2.6 and 2.7 in 2018 and 2019 respectively to 3.03 in 2020, out of a possible score of 5 (Figure 2). Indices of legal support, government leadership and community are driving Austin's ranking (Figure 3). However, Austin falls below the median on civic participation, livability, and job opportunities.¹⁴

Figure 3. Austin's Trends on Key NAE Indices, 2018-2020



Source: New American Economy, 2020

Austin's Peer Cities

For this report, we used the 2019 American Community Survey (ACS) Five-Year Estimates to identify Austin's Peer Cities.¹⁵ The peer cities are: Chandler, Arizona; Scottsdale, Arizona; San Diego, California; Denver, Colorado; Atlanta, Georgia; Minneapolis, Minnesota; Lincoln, Nebraska; Charlotte, North Carolina; Durham, North Carolina; Raleigh, North Carolina; Portland, Oregon; Nashville, Tennessee; Irving, Texas; Plano, Texas; Seattle, Washington; and, Madison, Wisconsin. Not surprisingly, the peers include state capitals, university towns, music and

¹³ The NAE rankings are relative. That is, if Austin's metrics remain constant from one year to the next, but other cities improve, Austin's ranking will go down. Similarly, if Austin's metrics remain constant and other cities go down, Austin's rankings will be higher. If Austin's metrics improve at a faster rate than other cities, Austin's rankings will improve.

¹⁴ For a full discussion of what these indices means for Austin, see: Ruth Wasem, Aaron Escajeda, Micaela McConnell and Ana Perez, "National Comparisons: Austin and Peer Cities Performance of Immigrant Incorporation," memorandum to Rocio Villalobos, Immigrant Affairs Coordinator, City of Austin, January 18, 2021, pp. 4-13 (hereafter referred to as January 18, 2021, Memorandum).

¹⁵ For an explanation of our peer cities methodology, see January 18 Memorandum, pp. 13-15.

cultural centers, and high-tech hubs. Figure 4 shows the 16 peer cities on a map of the United States.

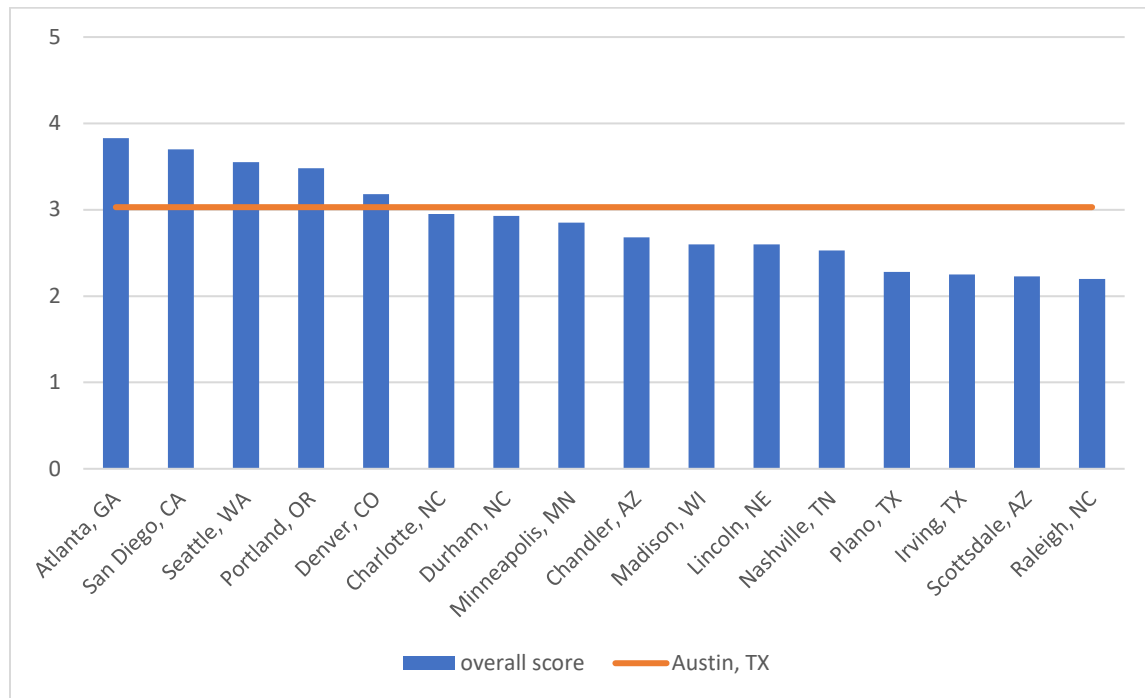
Figure 4. Map of Peer Cities



Austin ranked in the middle of peers—6 of 16—on its overall NAE ranking (Figure 5). Atlanta, San Diego, Seattle, Portland and Denver scored higher, but none of the peer cities achieved a 4 or 5 score.

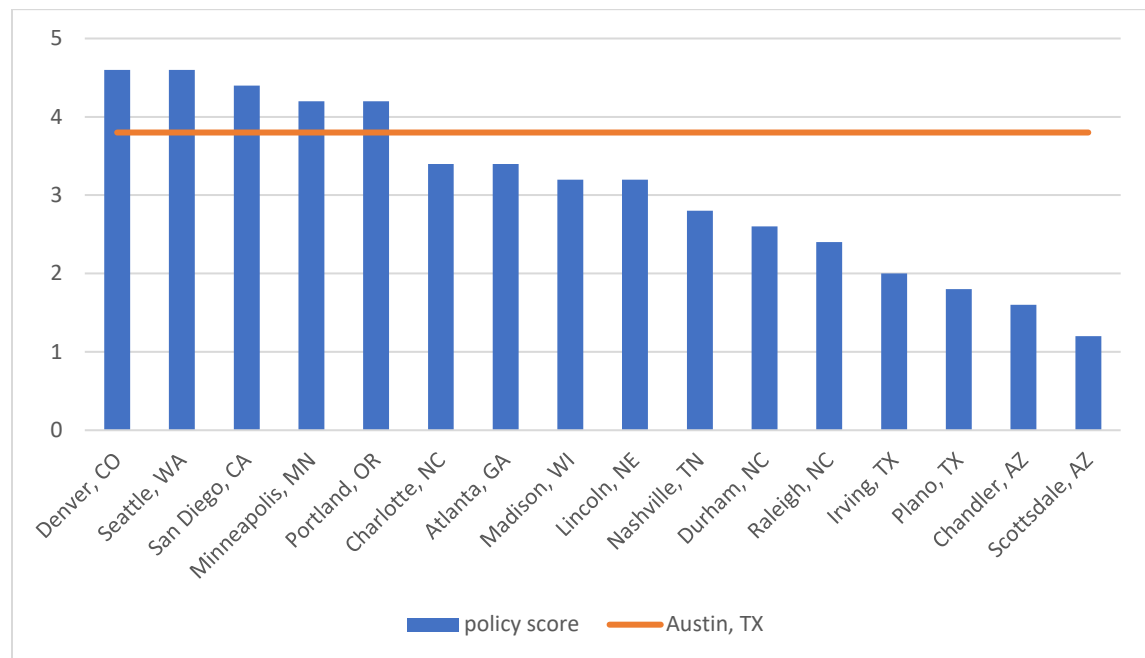
Policy is Austin’s strength, where it ranks 6 of 16 with a policy score of 3.75 out of 5 (Figure 6). The policy score gauges when immigrant incorporation is a priority of city government. The distribution of the policy scores across the peers ranges more widely, from highs of 4.6 in Denver and Seattle to a low of 1.2 in Scottsdale. The actions of the Austin City Council, the Commission on Immigrant Affairs, and the City Manager, which are discussed later, have boosted Austin’s policy score.

Figure 5. Austin and Peer Cities on NAE Overall Score



Source: New American Economy, 2020

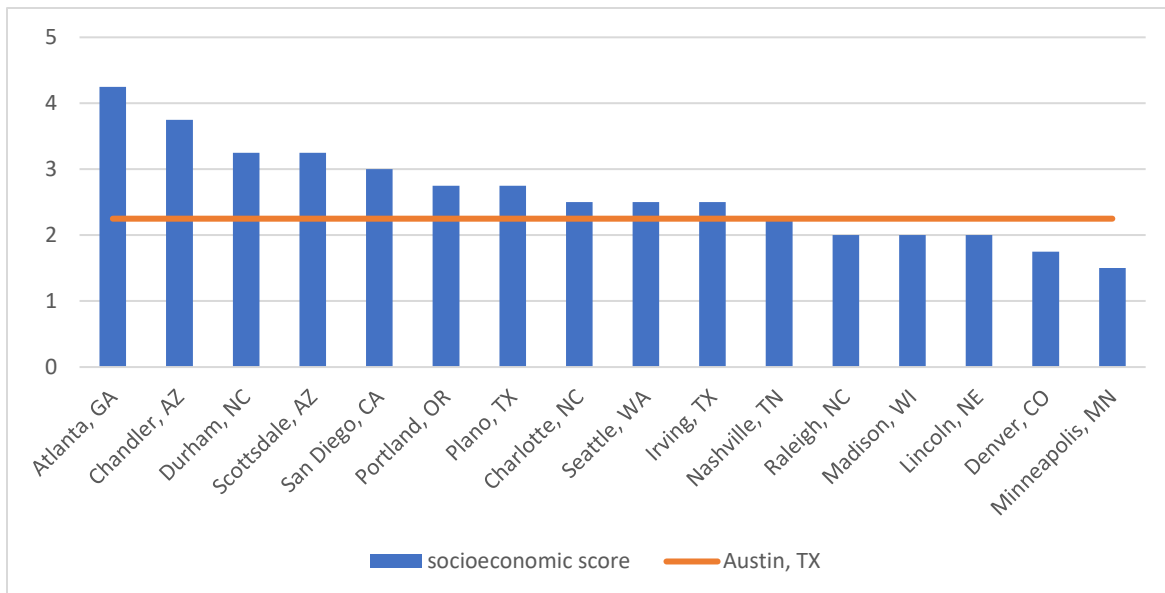
Figure 6. Austin and Peer Cities on NAE Policy Score



Source: New American Economy, 2020

Socioeconomic measures, a challenge for Austin and many of its peers, capture systemic factors that are generally harder to change without targeted policy interventions (Figure 7). Efforts to enact such targeted policies often encounter political obstacles when they challenge the economic and social status quo. A closer examination of Austin’s key indices and immigrant neighborhoods sheds light on potential opportunities and barriers to successful incorporation efforts.¹⁶

Figure 7. Austin and Peer Cities on NAE Socioeconomic Score



Source: New American Economy, 2020

Austin’s Immigrant Neighborhoods

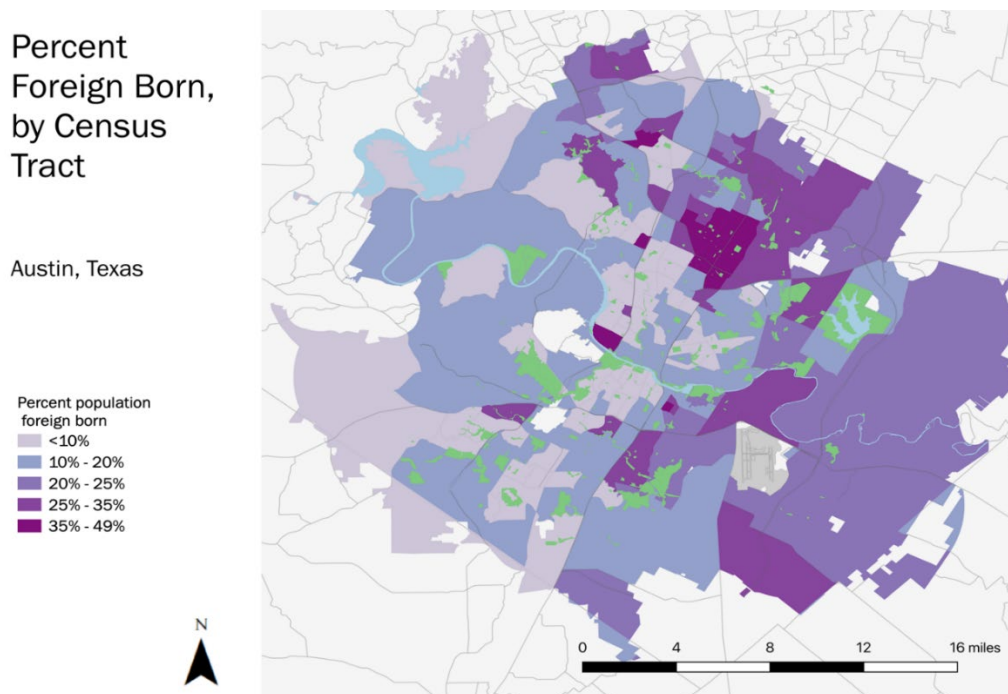
The distinctions between the western and eastern sides of Austin are well-known. It is as if the Balcones Fault divides Austin into the “haves” in the hills and the “have-nots” on the flat lands. There is considerable scholarship on the racial and economic segregation of Austin over the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century. Generally, African Americans were predominant in east Austin, and Hispanic residents clustered in south Austin. In contrast to other fast-growing U.S. cities, Austin has lost African American residents over the course of this century.¹⁷

¹⁶ January 18, 2021, Memorandum, pp. 16-31.

¹⁷ Eliot M. Treter, *Shadows of a Sunbelt City: The Environment, Racism and the Knowledge Economy in Austin*, University of Georgia Press, 2016; Andrew Busch, *City in a Garden: Environmental Transformations and Racial Justice in Twentieth Century Austin, Texas*, University of North Carolina Press, 2017; and Eric Tang and Bisola Falola, “Those Who Left: Austin’s Declining African American Population,” Institute for Urban Policy Research and Analysis Policy Brief, University of Texas, 2014 .

Immigrants are arriving to a city that has a deep history of residential segregation, and they are pushing a few of these boundaries. As Figure 8 shows, the densest area of foreign-born population centers around the intersections of North Lamar and Rundberg Lane. There are a few other pockets with 35-49 percent foreign-born residents in west Austin. Nonetheless, most immigrants live in east Austin and south Austin near the airport.

Figure 8. Austin's Percent Foreign Born by Census Tract



Source: ACS 2015-2019 5-Year Estimates.

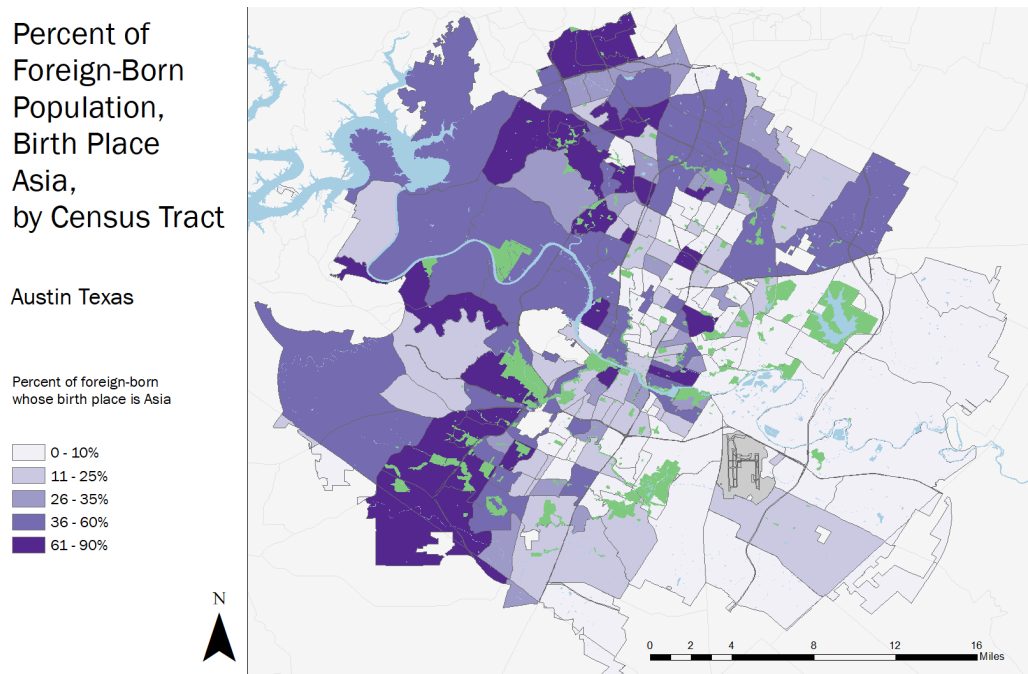
The starkest contrast among foreign-born neighborhoods comes when those census tracts with higher percentages of the foreign born who were born in Asia (Figure 6) are compared with those who were born in Latin America (Figure 7). Asian immigrants are overwhelmingly living in west Austin, the historically white and wealthier half of the city.¹⁸ This pattern conforms to earlier analysis by Emily Skop and Tara Buentello who found Chinese and Indian immigrants to Austin arrived with high levels of education, professional training, entrepreneurial skills, and financial resources. Immigrants from Latin America are living in east and south Austin, historically home to Austin's Hispanic residents. Skop and Buentello's analysis of the 1990 to 2005 period described Mexican immigrants to Austin as "less-educated, unskilled, and poorer" than the immigrants from China and India.¹⁹ As discussed above, immigrants from Latin

¹⁸ For additional maps by race and region of birth, see Ruth Wasem, Aaron Escajeda Ana Perez, and Tania Uruchima, "Neighborhood Analysis and Asset Mapping," memorandum to Rocio Villalobos, Immigrant Affairs Coordinator, City of Austin, May 26, 2021, Appendix A (hereafter referred to as May 26, 2021, Memorandum).

¹⁹ Emily Skop and Tara Buentello, "Immigration and Transformation Deep in the Heart of Texas," pp. 263-265.

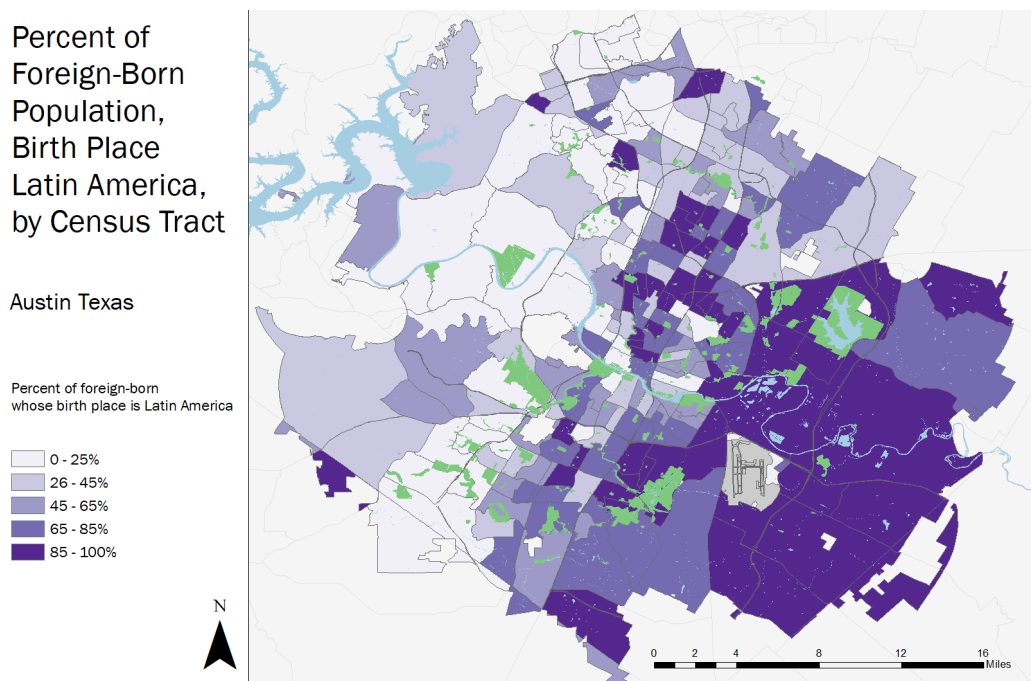
America make up the largest group, and immigrants from Asia are the fastest growing and second largest group.

Figure 9. Austin's Percent Foreign Born by Birth in Asia



Source: ACS 2015-2019 5-Year Estimates.

Figure 10. Austin's Percent Foreign Born by Birth in Latin America



Source: ACS 2015-2019 5-Year Estimates.

Priorities and Recommendations

This report builds on research presented in earlier memoranda that provide deep dives into how Austin compares with other cities on a national level²⁰ and how Austin fares on a neighborhood level,²¹ and both sets of analyses identify several important areas where Austin would benefit from further efforts. Some of the areas that warrant policy interventions are largely in the domain of regional and state policies, most notably access to affordable healthcare and improved transportation systems. This report focuses on five policy areas that the City of Austin can achieve if prioritized and acted upon: 1) leadership and governance; 2) civic engagement and inclusivity; 3) economic prosperity and job growth; 4) livability; and 5) community resilience. Our recommendations are gleaned from our study of comparable cities.

Priority: Leadership and Governance

Recommendation: Office of Immigrant Affairs

As stated at the onset, Austin has long had a Commission on Immigrant Affairs that advises the Austin City Council, and the council voted to become a “welcoming city for international newcomers” in September 2013. A 2015 report from the Commission identified Austin’s progress and shortfalls in achieving this objective.²² In 2018, the council passed a motion to work towards creating an Office of Immigrant Affairs, and last year Austin staffed the position of the Immigrant Affairs Coordinator in the Office of Equity.²³

We recommend that Austin formally establish and staff an office charged with immigrant affairs and incorporation. Cities that are serious about immigrant incorporation generally have an office focused on immigrant affairs. If Austin wishes to follow through on our additional recommendations and other immigrant incorporation initiatives, it will need an administrative home to coordinate and oversee these efforts. Peer cities and nearby Texas cities offer various approaches to structuring such an office.

Peer Cities’ Offices for Immigrant Affairs and Incorporation

The Denver Office of Immigrant and Refugee Affairs, for example, was established in 2005 “to ensure that immigrants and refugees are being supported along their integration journey in Denver.” The three-person staff leverages their roles through to partnerships with nonprofits, community-based organizations, local residents and government agencies.²⁴

²⁰ January 18, 2021, Memorandum.

²¹ May 26, 2021, Memorandum.

²² City of Austin Commission on Immigrant Affairs, Austin: Welcoming City Initiative Final Report, September 2015.

²³ Phil Prazan, “After Border Visit, Austin Takes Steps to Create Immigrant Affairs Office,” KXAN, June 28, 2018, <https://www.kxan.com/news/local/austin/after-border-visit-austin-takes-steps-to-create-immigrant-affairs-office/>.

²⁴ Denver Office of Immigrant and Refugee Affairs, *Denver Immigrant and Refugee Community and Neighborhood Assessment Report*, Dec., 2019, <https://www.denvergov.org/files/assets/public/human-rights-amp-community-partnerships/documents/2019-neighborhood-assessment.pdf>.

In 2009, the Mayor of Nashville also established the New Americans Advisory Council with local leaders in Nashville's immigrant and refugee communities. Today, the Nashville Mayor's Office for New Americans has the stated purpose "to engage immigrants and empower them to participate in our government and our community."²⁵

Seattle established its Office of Immigrant and Refugee Affairs (OIRA) in 2012 and converted its Immigrant and Refugee Advisory Board to the Immigrant and Refugee Commission. Both actions elevated the roles and responsibilities of the entities charged with immigrant incorporation.²⁶ The Seattle OIRA has a director and nine staff.

Atlanta developed the Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs in 2015. The office works to strengthen the relationships between the community and to build trust between foreign-born residents and the local government. The office now serves 16 communities and over 950 families on a weekly basis.²⁷ As a result of the partnerships, the office has also created a text bank that allows mass texts with information and important resources to be quickly sent among community partners and participating residents. Not only does this allow for rapid communication between the office and community members, but it has also served as a way for community members to connect with the office for information and an avenue to become more involved with the office and the community at large.

Charlotte established an Office of Equity, Mobility, and Immigrant Integration (EMII) in 2018 after the Immigrant Integration Task Force published its report in 2015. EMII is charged with advancing immigrant integration through equitable policies, programs, and services. The office has received an increase of city funding in the last half of a decade, fortified partnerships with community organizations and published a strategic plan and development outline to address the short and long-term goals.²⁸

Within Texas, Dallas established in 2017 the Office of Welcoming Communities and Immigrant Affairs that developed a multi-year Welcoming Plan to guide successful integration of migrants and refugees in Dallas. Their mission is "to bridge the space between newcomers and existing Dallas residents, to find common ground, to foster informed understanding and to promote shared leadership."²⁹

²⁵ Metropolitan Government of Nashville and Davidson County, "Mayor's Office of New Americans," [Nashville > Mayor's Office > Diversity and Inclusion > New Americans](#)

²⁶ Seattle City Council Bills and Ordinances, "Ordinance 123822 Introduced as Council Bill 117394," Feb, 15, 2012, http://clerk.seattle.gov/~archives/Ordinances/Ord_123822.pdf

²⁷ Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs, Welcoming Atlanta, 2021, <https://www.welcomingatlanta.com/>.

²⁸ City of Charlotte, Office of Equity, Mobility and Immigrant Integration, [Office of Equity, Mobility, & Immigrant Integration \(charlottenc.gov\)](#); and Laura Brache, "Charlotte And Mecklenburg County Governments Playing Catch-Up With Growing Latino Population," WFAE, June 26, 2020, [Charlotte And Mecklenburg County Governments Playing Catch-Up With Growing Latino Population | WFAE 90.7 - Charlotte's NPR News Source](#)

²⁹ Ruth Ellen Wasem et al, *Welcoming Communities: Immigrant Incorporation in Dallas, Texas*, LBJ School of Public Affairs, University of Texas, (2020), pp.2-3, 9-21 <https://repositories.lib.utexas.edu/handle/2152/82248>

Houston's Office for New Americans has outlined goals for making the city more welcoming towards immigrants, includes playing an information-provider role, for example by developing and translating tools, promoting positive immigrant narratives like through art programming, and coordinating with other departments, like coordination on an immigrant-focused emergency plan with the Department of Homeland Security. In addition to assisting immigrants, Houston's goals include increasing immigrant representation on boards and commissions.³⁰

Priority: Civic Engagement and Inclusivity

Recommendation: Naturalization and Civic Involvement

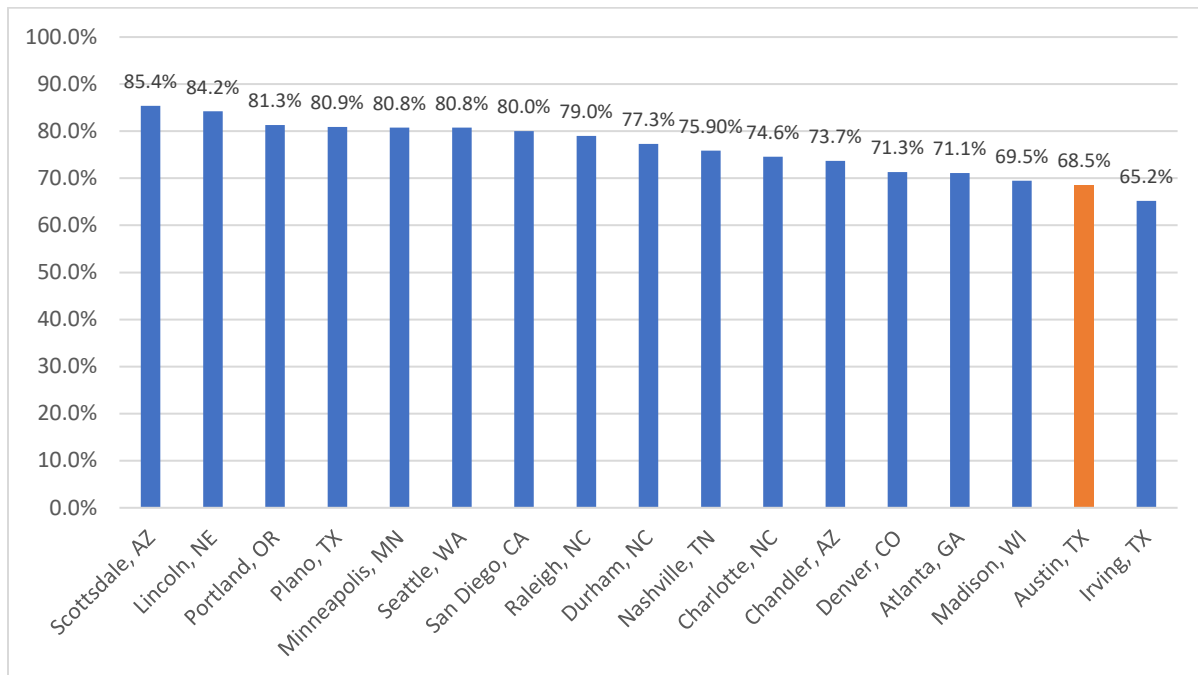
Current research outlines a clear socioeconomic divide between immigrants who are naturalized and those who are not. Although naturalization may not be every immigrant's goal, it does confer economic benefits to those who pursue citizenship. While success in the labor market after naturalization is tied to higher education and English language proficiency, naturalization also provides direct benefits. Naturalized individuals are more secure, more civically engaged, eligible for a wider range of jobs, and earn 50 to 70 percent more than their noncitizen counterparts.³¹

Nationally and among its peers, Austin has a mediocre civic engagement score of 2 on the NAE index. This low score stems largely from its naturalization rate of 68.5 percent. Austin has one of the lowest rates of naturalization rate among its peers, with only Irving, Texas, having a lower rate (Figure 11).

³⁰ City of Houston, Office of New Americans and Immigrant Communities, [Office of New Americans and Immigrant Communities \(houstontx.gov\)](https://www.houstontx.gov/new-americans/)

³¹ Madeline Sumption and Sarah Flamm, The Economic Value of Citizenship for Immigrants in the United States, 2012, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/citizenship-premium.pdf>.

Figure 11. Naturalization Rates of Austin and its Peer Cities



Source: New American Economy, 2020

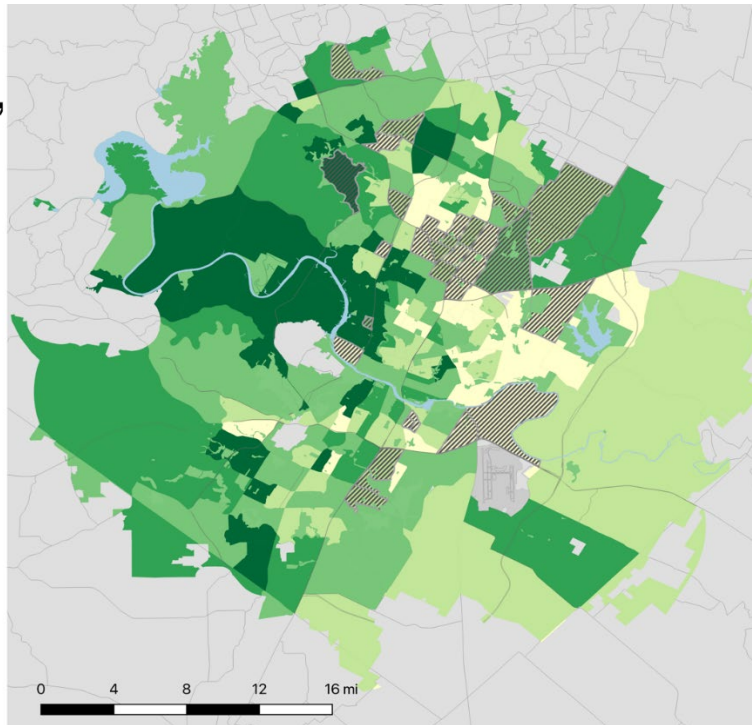
The economic disparity between Austin’s naturalized and noncitizen communities can be seen in Figure 12 along the geographic divide, with noncitizen people living in central and southeast Austin and naturalized people living in west Austin.

Figure 12. Percent Naturalized in Austin by Census Tract

Percent Naturalized, by Census Tract Austin, Texas

Percent population foreign born
 30% - 49%

Percent foreign born naturalized
 <20%
 20% - 34%
 34% - 48%
 48% - 64%
 64% - 86%



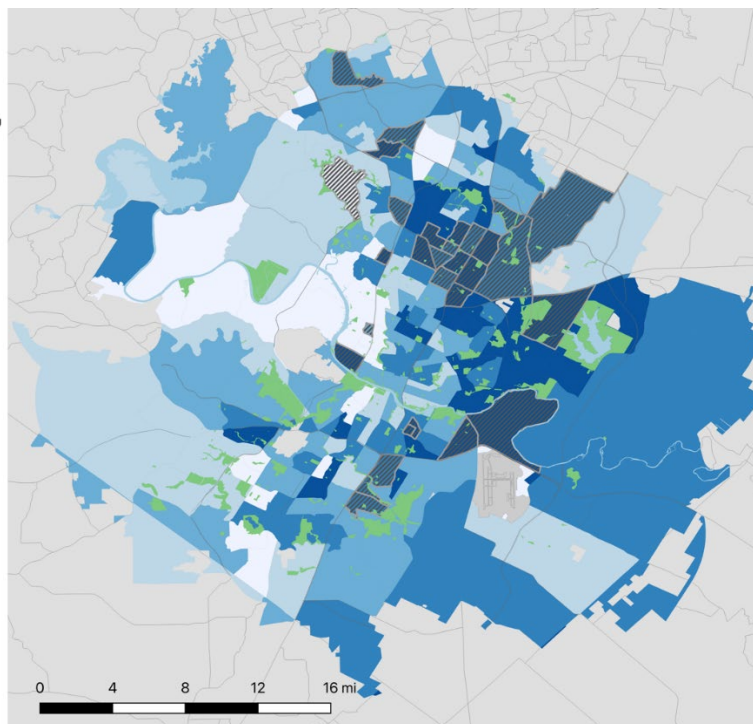
Source: ACS 2015-2019 5-Year Estimates.

Figure 13. Percent Noncitizens in Austin by Census Tract

Percent Noncitizen, by Census Tract Austin, Texas

Percent total population FB
 30% - 49%

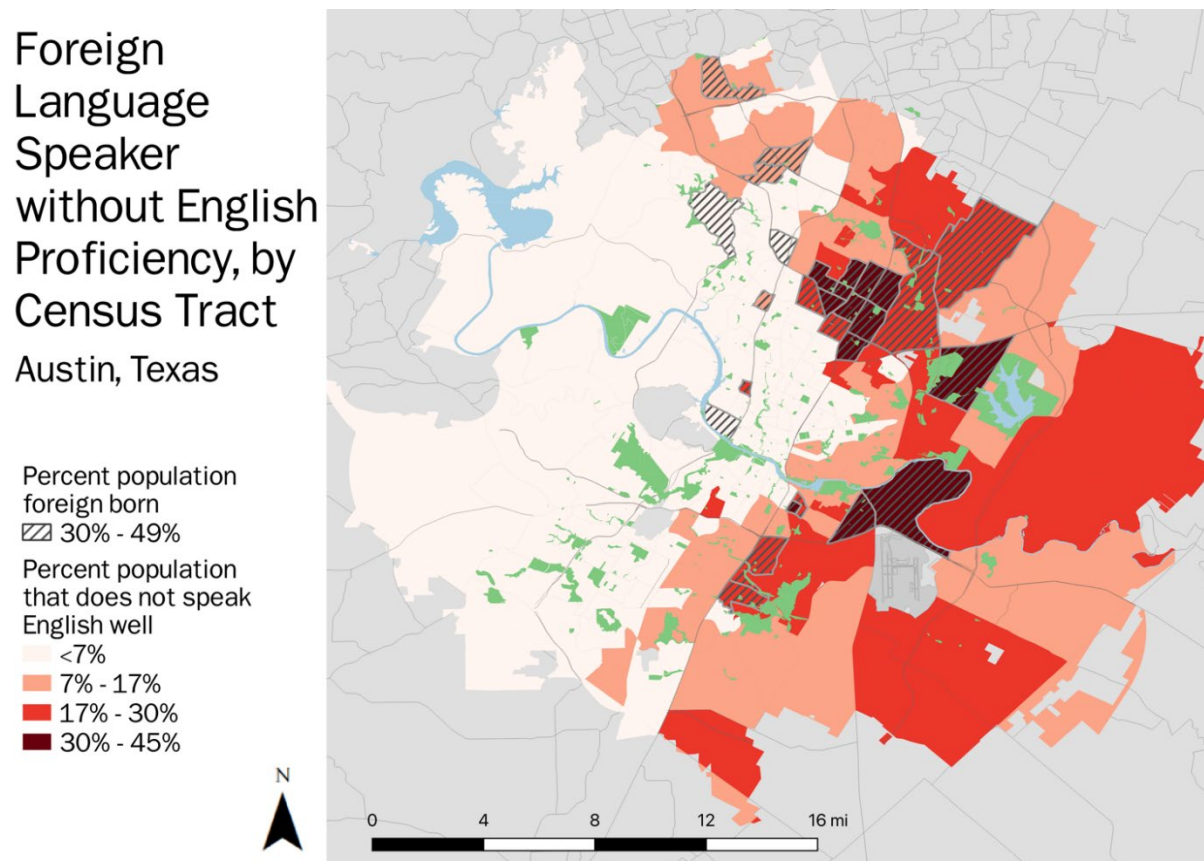
Percent noncitizen
 <33%
 33% - 49%
 49% - 64%
 64% - 78%
 78% - 99%



Source: ACS 2015-2019 5-Year Estimates.

Naturalization and web-based ESL classes through two public libraries in Austin helped 445 lawful permanent residents prepare for naturalization between 2015 and 2019.³² Investment in expanding services at libraries and community colleges in neighborhoods with a high concentration of noncitizens could help connect more people to services. The Austin Public Library citizenship portal is available in English and Spanish, the most common foreign language in Austin, spoken by 24.9 percent of households. Austin’s 2019 Language Access Plan identified Chinese, Korean, Tagalog, Vietnamese, and Urdu as the next widest spoken, each around 1 percent of households. Developing materials in these increasingly common languages represents a first step toward better welcoming these communities.³³

Figure 14. Limited English Proficiency in Austin by Census Tract



Source: ACS 2015-2019 5-Year Estimates.

We recommend that Austin 1) continue to support naturalization with additional resources and available coursework aimed at the English language proficiency and civics education required to qualify for naturalization and 2) develop initiatives to encourage civic

³² Elaine Hart, “Serving Austin’s Immigrant Community Report,” City of Austin Office of the City Manager, August 19, 2019, <https://www.austintexas.gov/edims/document.cfm?id=325605>.

³³ City of Austin, [Language Access Plan](#), 2019.

participation across all communities. Austin’s peer cities offer examples of programs that target naturalization and civic engagement.

Peer Cities’ Efforts to Encourage Naturalization and Civic Participation

The Mayor’s Office of Welcoming Affairs in Atlanta established a strong campaign to encourage naturalization.³⁴ Welcoming Atlanta has partnered with the New Americans Citizenship Naturalization Program to create an avenue for citizenship-seeking residents to prepare for the Naturalization process. In addition to their MyCity Atl Naturalization coursework, this program supports participants through coursework and provides assistance to help navigate the process from completing the application to studying for the exam.³⁵ Furthermore, the city also offers a multilingual voting guide to encourage eligible foreign-born residents to educate themselves and enable them to exercise their right to vote.

The City of Seattle Office of Immigrant and Refugee Affairs utilizes a tech-based portal similar to TurboTax called Citizenshipworks.³⁶ The portal that was developed by a network of nonprofits can spot potential problems in citizenship applications and connect users to an expert. Additionally, Citizenship Clinics run through community partners offer free naturalization assistance from volunteer attorneys and interpreters. Workshops are held periodically, although with COVID restrictions they are currently only offered online.³⁷

Denver has robust programs that prepare would-be citizens for the naturalization interview and test, notably its Denver Public Library’s Plaza program. The Denver Office of Immigrant & Refugee Affairs (DOIRA) partnered with the Colorado Immigrant Rights Coalition on the America is Home Grant to host workshops to help legal permanent residents (LPRs) to complete their application for Citizenship. It is important to note that Denver has an America is Home Scholarship that helps cover some of the fees and expenses related to citizenship.³⁸

Scottsdale, Arizona is among the highest scoring peers in Civic Participation (scoring a 4), on the tails of Seattle and San Diego. The Scottsdale Public Library offers a 10-week citizenship course.³⁹ The naturalization rate of foreign-born residents of Scottsdale is 85.4 percent, almost 17 percentage points higher than Austin.

³⁴ City of Atlanta Mayor’s Office of Immigrant Affairs, “Welcoming Atlanta,” <https://www.welcomingatlanta.com/>

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ According to their website, Citizenshipworks was created in 2011 by the Immigration Advocates Network, the Immigrant Legal Resource Center, and Pro Bono Net to make applying for citizenship easy and accessible to all. <https://www.citizenshipworks.org/en/who-we-are>

³⁷ Seattle Office of Immigrant and Refugee Affairs, “New Citizen Campaign,” <https://www.seattle.gov/iandaffairs/programs-and-services/citizenship>

³⁸ Denver Office of Immigrant and Refugee Affairs, “Citizenship,” <https://www.denvergov.org/Government/Departments/Human-Rights-Community-Partnerships/Divisions-Offices/Office-of-Immigrant-Refugee-Affairs/Citizenship>

³⁹ Scottsdale Public Library System, Citizenship Workshop, 2021, <https://scottsdale.libnet.info/event/2879137>.

In Nashville, the Mayor's Office of New Americans has partnered with U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) to create Pathway for New Americans, a program, third of its kind in the nation, which supports immigrants in Nashville who aspire to become U.S. citizens.⁴⁰ Through this program, New American Corners were established in five Nashville libraries and community centers.⁴¹ These corners are stocked with resources to help immigrants prepare for the naturalization interview and exam as well as provide trained staff to help provide direction, and free classroom space.⁴²

Many non-English speaking foreign-born residents abstain from engaging in the community due to language barriers and the associated challenges with communicating. Breaking down language barriers encourages connection in a community and can serve as a pathway of meaningful access for community members. Minneapolis, for example, launched language services after its 2015 Language Access Plan, offering 311 'language lines' in Spanish, Somali and Hmong.

Atlanta's iSpeak ATL language service⁴³ available across the city is a prime example. Users work together to identify the language, dial a language service number and select the corresponding language interpreter. As demonstrated in Atlanta, it is also important to ensure that document translation is culturally relevant and accurate to effectively communicate with the non-English speaking foreign-born residents. As Austin continues to advance the Language Access Plan, allocating funds for language services and evaluating the community needs through assessments to identify the most needed languages will help Austin continue to tailor language services to empower the entire community.

Three of Austin's peers – Denver, Nashville, and Lincoln – participate or use the MyCity Academy framework. MyCity Academy is a program intended to empower immigrant and refugee residents to participate and become more engaged with their city.⁴⁴ MyCity Academy connects participants with individuals in city offices and teaches them about the services, resources, and benefits available, as well as how to access these.⁴⁵ MyCity Academy participants will: gain an understanding of city government and services, improve their ability to access existing resources and services, gain leadership capacity, and become a part of the larger

⁴⁰ Metro Government of Nashville & Davidson County (2020). *Pathways for New Americans*. Metro Government of Nashville & Davidson County Official Site. Retrieved from <https://www.nashville.gov/Mayors-Office/Diversity-and-Inclusion/New-Americans/Parent-Ambassadors.aspx>

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ City of Atlanta Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs, iSpeak ATL, 2020, <https://www.welcomingatlanta.com/ispeakatl/>.

⁴⁴ City and County of Denver (2020). *My City Academy*. City and County of Denver Official Site. Retrieved from <https://www.denvergov.org/content/denvergov/en/human-rights-and-community-partnerships/our-offices/immigrant-and-refugee-affairs/my-city-academy.html>

⁴⁵ Ibid.

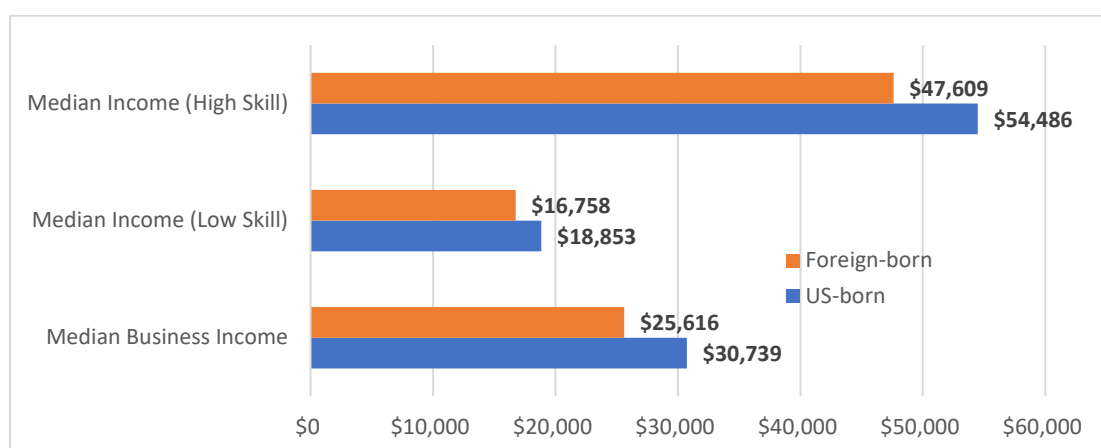
community network.⁴⁶ After graduating from this program, participants are then able to become leaders in their community to show others how to access services and participate in the community.

Priority: Economic Prosperity and Job Growth

Recommendation: Workforce Development and Entrepreneurial Resources

Closely linked, economic prosperity and job opportunities are central to an immigrant community's ability to thrive. Foreign-born Austin residents' income lags behind native-born Austin residents across the categories that NAE measured (Figure 15). The gap is larger among high-skilled workers and business income than that of low-skilled workers.

Figure 15. NAE Economic Prosperity Indicators in 2020: Foreign-Born and Native-Born Austin Residents



Source: New American Economy, 2020

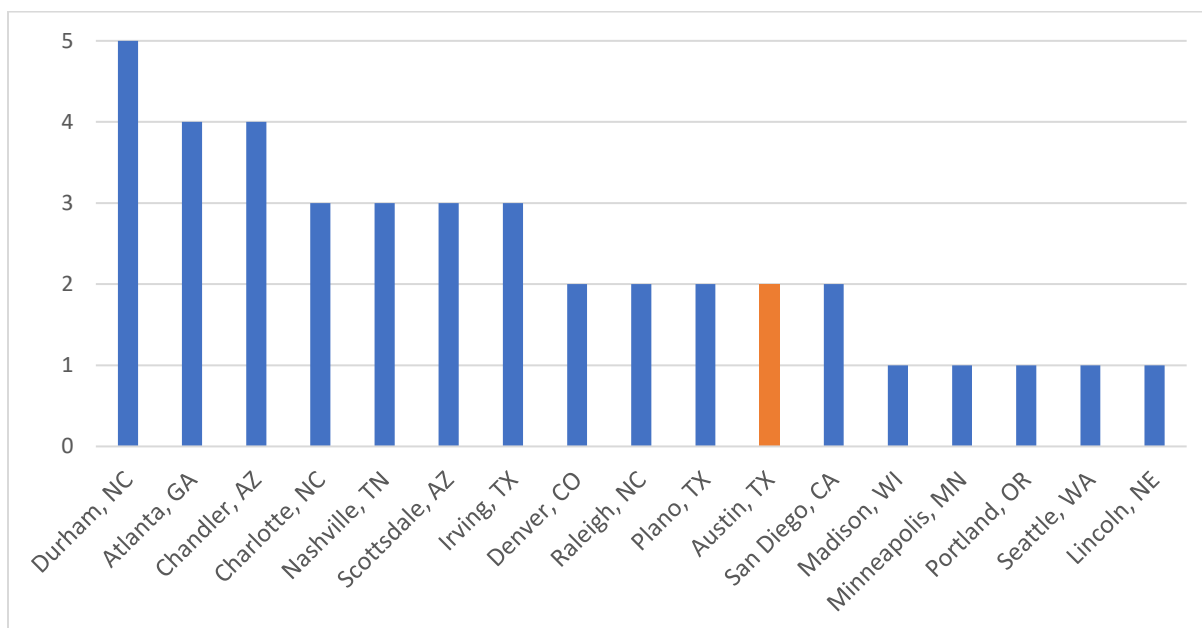
A 2018 Urban Institute report reviewing service providers in Dallas, Miami, and Seattle found that the primary barriers immigrants face when pursuing education and training were limited English proficiency, difficulty transferring foreign credentials and overseas job experience to the US market, low digital literacy, high housing costs, lack of transportation and childcare, and financial pressures.⁴⁷ Naturalization and language classes discussed above are steps individuals can take to improve their employment opportunities.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Hamutal Bernstein and Carolyn Vilter, Upskilling the Immigrant Workforce to Meet Employer Demand for Skilled Workers, *Urban Institute*, July 2018. https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/98766/upskilling_immigrant_workforce_to_meet_employer_demand_for_skilled_workers_2.pdf last accessed July 31, 2020.

Austin's subpar score of 2 on the NAE job opportunities score sounds an alarm for the city, especially given the city's overall record of prosperity and economic growth.⁴⁸ Only 5 peer cities scored lower (Figure 16). These disparities warrant a closer look.

Figure 16. NAE Job Opportunities



Source: New American Economy, 2020

One perspective on the economic prosperity of foreign-born residents is presented in Figure 17, which overlays neighborhoods that have a concentration of immigrants with median income by census tract. Again, foreign-born residents of Austin are more likely to live in neighborhoods with modest or low incomes. The notable exceptions are those census tracts in west Austin that are also home to persons born in Asia and home to naturalized citizens. Figure 18 further informs this pattern as it overlays the high-density foreign-born census tracts by residents employed in professional, scientific, management and administrative sectors.

⁴⁸ The NAE combines five metrics to construct the job opportunities score: labor force participation rate, employment rate, the share of workers in high prestige occupations, the share of people who are part-time workers, and the share of people who are self-employed.

Figure 17. Median Income in Austin by Census Tract

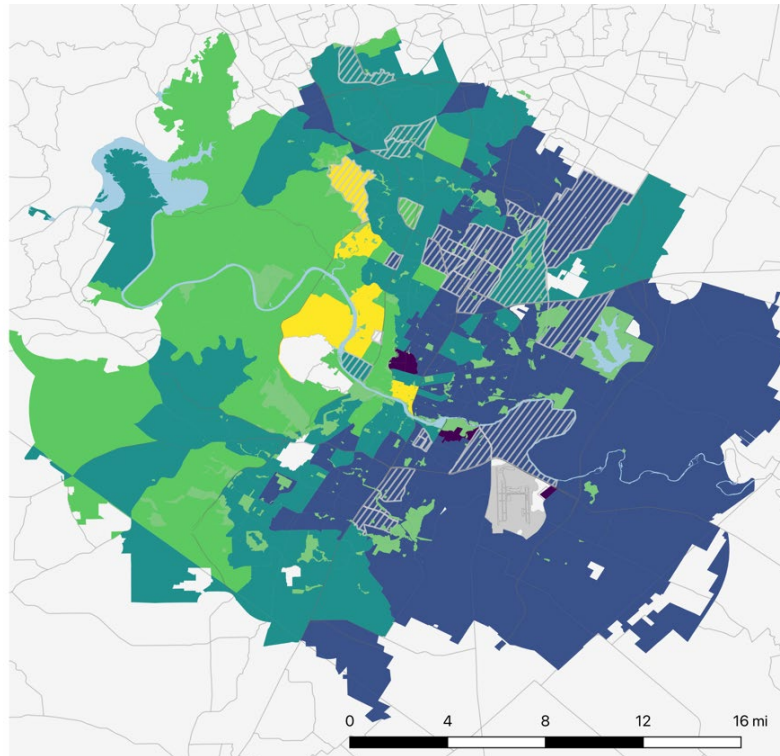
Median Income, by Census Tract

Austin, Texas

Percent foreign born
30% - 49%

Median income,
in dollars

- <\$20,000
- \$20,000 - \$40,000
- \$40,000 - \$60,000
- \$60,000 - \$80,000
- \$80,000 - \$90,194



Source: ACS 2015-2019 5-Year Estimates.

Figure 18. Professional, Scientific, et al, Employment in Austin by Census Tract

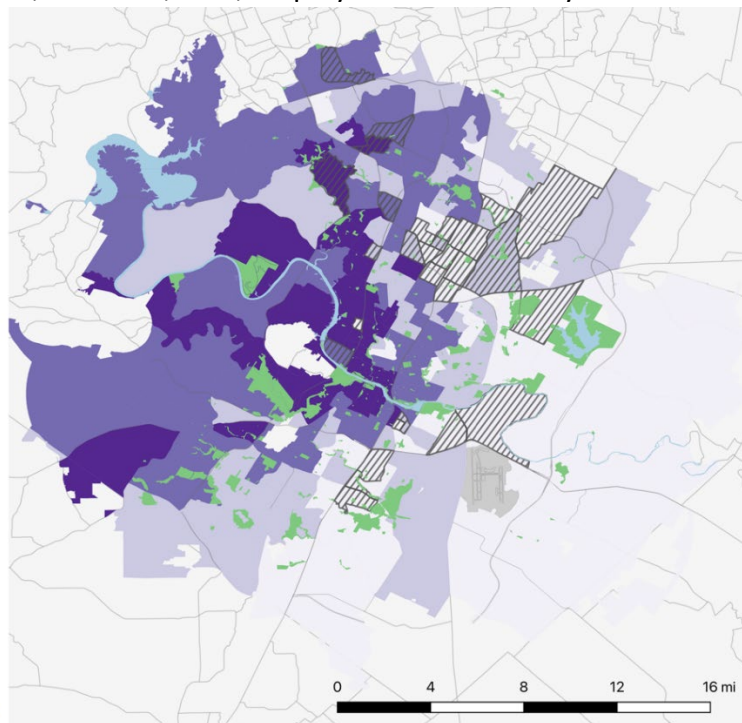
Professional, Scientific, Management, and Administrative Industry, by Census Tract

Austin, Texas

Percent foreign born
30% - 49%

Percent workforce
in industry

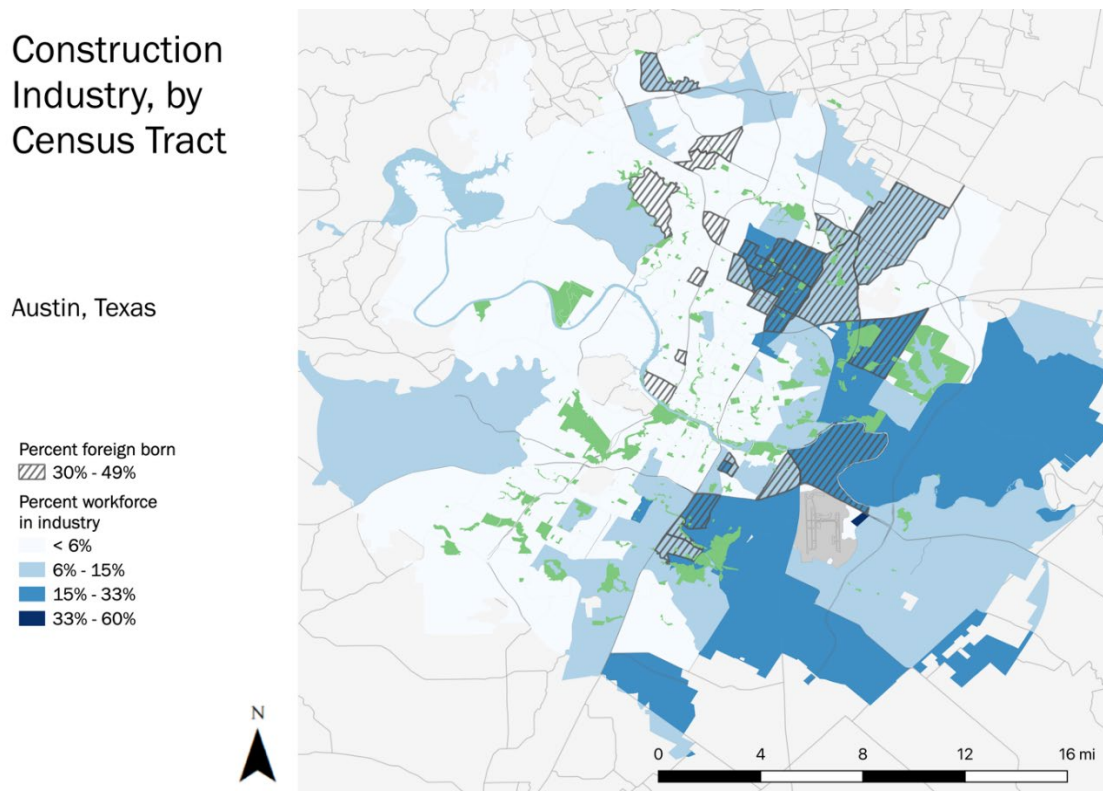
- < 8%
- 8% - 15%
- 15% - 22%
- 22% - 36%



Source: ACS 2015-2019 5-Year Estimates.

One sector reliant on foreign-born workers is the construction industry, and Austin has a booming construction sector. Figure 19 shows that employment in the construction industry overlaps with several of the high-density foreign-born census tracts. The average annual wages for construction workers is \$43,000 nationwide, but only \$32,960 in Austin. Unfortunately, Austin’s construction workers are also earning less than the average annual wage of \$34,980 for Texas statewide.⁴⁹ The relatively low wages paid to construction workers in Austin may be a contributing factor to the modest incomes reported in census tracts that are high-density foreign born.

Figure 19. Employment in Construction in Austin by Census Tract



Source: ACS 2015-2019 5-Year Estimates.

Most of the census tracts that are at least 30 percent foreign born have unemployment rates below six percent, and some are below three percent. The east Austin census tracts are among those with the highest unemployment, generally. This pattern fits with the high labor force participation rates of immigrants coupled with the likelihood they are employed in sectors with less job security.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Occupational Employment and Wages, May 2020, 47-2061 Construction Laborers. <https://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes472061.htm#st>

⁵⁰ May 26, 2021, Memorandum, pp. 14-15.

We recommend Austin 1) explore policy options to remedy its comparative low wages in key sectors of the economy, 2) continue to collaborate with its public universities and colleges and other non-governmental organizations to deliver workforce development programs, and 3) ensure information about requirements for starting businesses are accessible in immigrant communities. Any public policies that aim to improve the economic standing of low-wage workers and aspiring entrepreneurs would improve economic prosperity for all Austin residents, native and foreign born.

The Austin City Council has already taken important steps of raising the living wage for regular city workers (2018) and temporary city workers (2019) to \$15 per hour. The state of Texas links the state minimum wage to the federal minimum (\$7.25 per hour) and prohibits local jurisdictions from raising the minimum wage for private employees. If it has not already done so, Austin should explore the legal reach of city ordinances requiring the higher living wage for entities receiving public funds through contracts with the City of Austin.

Given the comparatively low wages in Austin’s construction sector and construction’s central role in a rapidly growing city, Austin policy leaders should be exploring mechanisms or incentives to lift construction wages to be at least on par with Texas statewide, if not national levels.

Peer Cities’ Efforts to Improve Job Opportunities

Lincoln’s Lincoln’s New American Task Force CareerLadder program connects skilled participants with careers. The CareerLadder project was recently selected as Google.org Impact Challenge Nebraska People’s Choice winner and was awarded \$125,000 in additional funding to connect skilled immigrants and refugees to careers.⁵¹ CareerLadder utilizes MyCity Academy framework, a leadership development program for new Americans, to foster civic engagement and empower participants to engage with local institutions.⁵²

Durham outranked Austin and the other peer cities with a score of a 5 in both Economic Prosperity and Job Opportunities, emphasizing economic development in their 5-year strategic plan and forming a strong collaboration with the Chamber of Commerce. The city has initiated growth in this goal through the Triangle Regional Career Pathway Collaborative.⁵³ This initiative has stimulated collaborations between the city of Durham, the Capital Area and Kerr-Tarr workforce boards to increase vocational training and skills development programs.⁵⁴

⁵¹ City of Lincoln Nebraska (2020). *Career Ladder*. City of Lincoln Official Site. Retrieved from <https://app.lincoln.ne.gov/city/natf/careerladder.htm>

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Triangle Regional Careers Pathways CAWD, Triangle Regional Careers Pathways, 2021, <https://trianglecareerpathways.com/>.

⁵⁴ The Kerr-Tar Workforce Development Board oversees workforce and business services planning and policy development for Franklin, Granville, Person, Vance, and Warren counties in North Carolina.

However, low scores in job opportunities do not necessarily indicate a city does not have innovative programming. Seattle, which scored a 1 in the NAE Job Opportunities category, runs a nationally recognized, no-cost ‘Ready-to-Work’ program founded in 2015. Administered through community partners, the city offers English language classes before connecting individuals with full-time work. During the pandemic, the city has been able to provide computers to participants to continue classes and training online. Although the program has only served 270 individuals since its inception, participants are able to move on to full-time jobs and more advanced classes through Seattle’s community colleges.⁵⁵

Priority: Livability

Recommendation: Affordable Housing and Neighborhood Preservation

The NAE Livability indicator captures the accessibility to homeownership, healthcare coverage⁵⁶ and standards of living. Austin’s scores have remained at a 2 for the past three years, a concerning low score (Figure 20). Austin has seen tremendous growth over the past few decades attributable to the rising economic industries and businesses relocating to the city, placing increasing rent burdens on low-to-middle income families. A 2017 Urban Institute study identified specific neighborhoods whose residents were more susceptible to the implications of rising living costs, many of which overlap with foreign-born resident neighborhoods.⁵⁷

Affordable housing continues to be one of the most pressing issues facing Austinites – native or foreign born. The proportion of the housing stock that was priced at or below \$300,000 decreased by 20 percent between 2011 and 2017. Stable, quality housing is vital to people’s livelihood. Immigrants typically have less access to affordable housing and higher rates of overcrowding. This issue is compounded in cities like Austin, where growing housing markets edge native-born residents to suburban communities around high-value urban core real estate. A 2019 report by Harvard University’s Joint Center for Housing Studies concluded that Austin’s median income and housing stock has not keep pace with the boom in land prices and growing population.⁵⁸

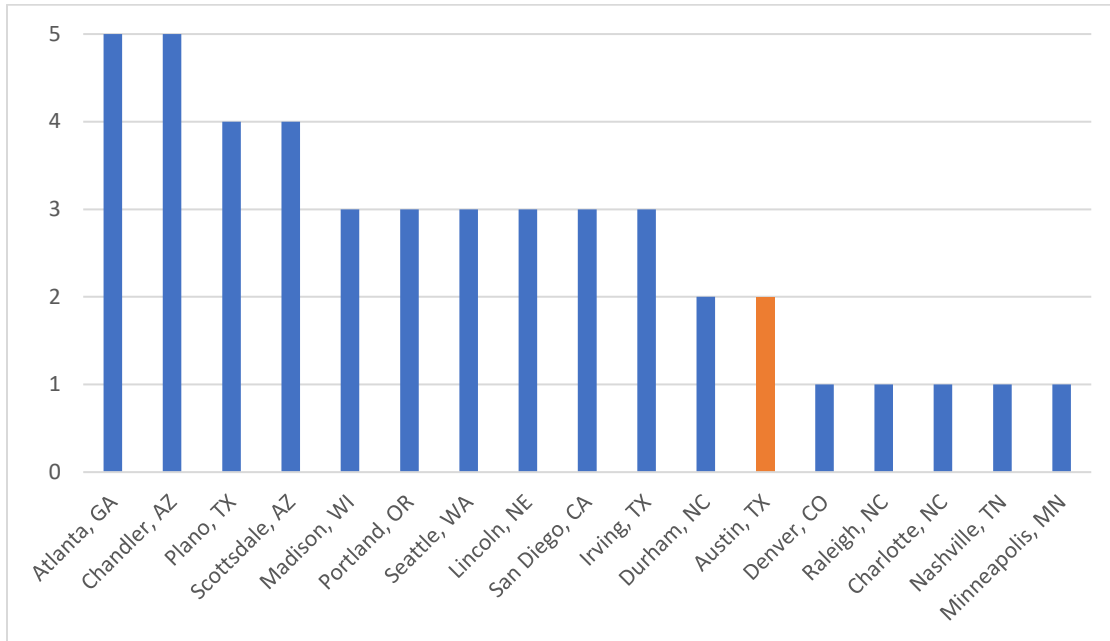
⁵⁵ For additional programs, see: Bloomberg Associates, *Toolkit: Supporting Immigrant and Refugee Entrepreneurs*, August 2020, [BA_NAE_Support_Immigrant.pdf](https://nae.org/BA_NAE_Support_Immigrant.pdf) ([newamericaneconomy.org](https://nae.org/)).

⁵⁶ The wide gaps in access to affordable healthcare between native-born and foreign-born residents of Austin are analyzed in both the January 18, 2021, Memorandum and the May 25, 2021, Memorandum. Since the policies of the State of Texas, the health insurance industry, and the federal government dominate the issues of access to affordable healthcare, we opted not to address it in this report presenting policy options for the City of Austin.

⁵⁷ Hedman, Elliot, Srini, Kooragayala, “Austin and the State of Low- and Middle-Income Housing,” Urban Institute, 2017, https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/93781/austin_lmi_housing.pdf

⁵⁸ Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University, *The State of the Nation’s Housing 2019*, interactive maps and tables accessed at [Harvard JCHS State of the Nations Housing 2019.pdf](https://www.jchs.harvard.edu/state-of-the-nations-housing-2019).

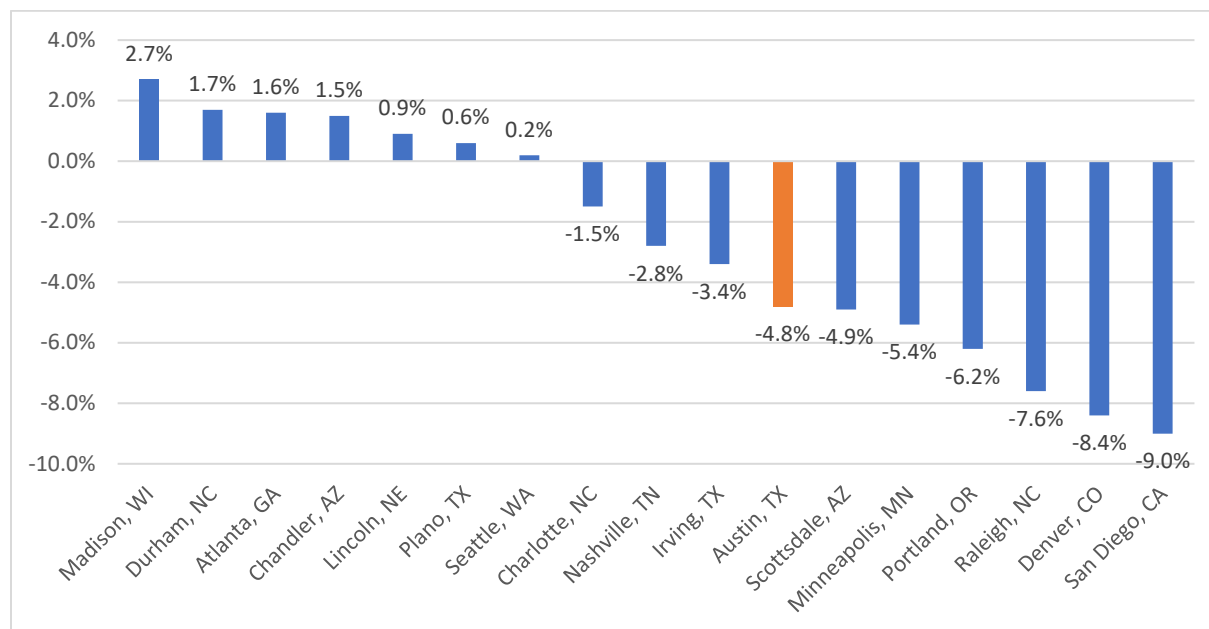
Figure 20. NAE Livability Score for Austin and its Peer Cities



Source: New American Economy, 2020

Rent burden is a common metric for assessing a city's affordability, defined as the percentage of the population paying greater than 30 percent of their income in housing costs. The peer analysis showed that rent burden and higher rates of overcrowding disproportionately affect the immigrant community in Austin. Although Austin is in the top half of peers with regard to the percentage of the general population experiencing rent burden, the rate of rent burden is slightly *lower* than the national average of 49.6 percent. Housing affordability is a problem across the country, but some peers have larger disparities between the native- and foreign-born communities. In the figure below, negative values indicate instances in which foreign-born communities have higher rates of rent burden. Within Austin's peer group, immigrants appear to pay more of their income at much greater rates. In concert with higher rates of overcrowding, housing instability is a greater concern for immigrant residents of Austin.

Figure 21. Percentage Difference in Portion of Rent-Burdened Population, Native versus Foreign Born, for Austin and its Peer Cities

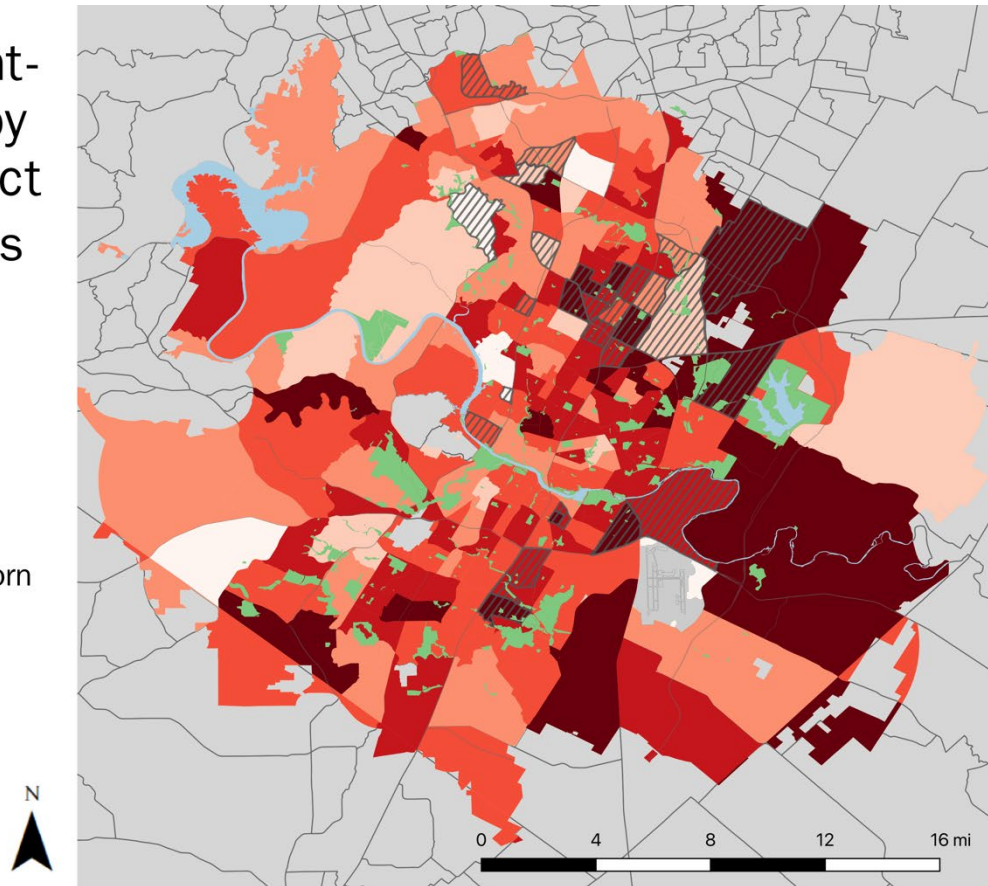
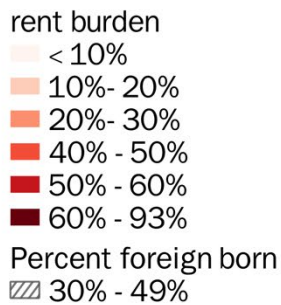


Source: American Community Survey, Five-Year Estimates, 2019.

Austin's foreign-born residents experience rent burden at a rate 4.8 percent higher than natives. However, disparities between foreign born and native residents can be understood geographically, with some census tracts experiencing rent burden at a rate as high as 93 percent of residents. As Figure 22 shows, not all high-density foreign-born census tracts have a high rate of rent burden.

Figure 22. Percent Rent-Burdened Residents in Austin by Census Tract

Percent rent-burdened, by Census Tract Austin, Texas

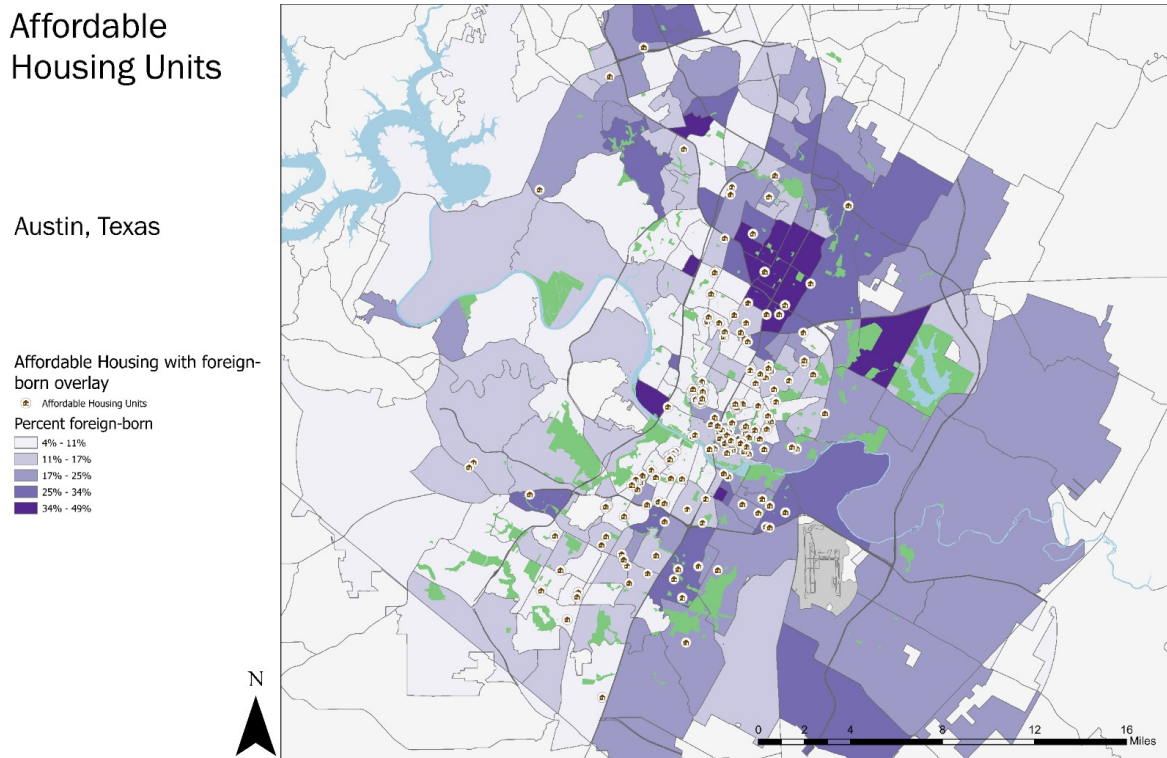


Source: ACS 2015-2019 5-Year Estimates.

The census tracts identified as most vulnerable to housing displacement in a 2018 study conducted by the Community and Regional Planning program (University of Texas) align with those census tracts this research identifies as having high foreign-born concentrations.⁵⁹ With a few exceptions, affordable housing units are not located in census tracts with concentrations of foreign-born residents (Figure 23).

⁵⁹ Heather Way, Elizabeth Mueller, and Jake Wegmann, "Uprooted: Residential Displacement in Austin's Gentrifying Neighborhoods and What can Be Done About it. University of Texas, 2018. <https://sites.utexas.edu/gentrificationproject/..austin-uprooted-report-maps/>

Figure 23. Affordable Housing Units in Austin by Census Tract



Source: ACS 2015-2019 5-Year Estimates; and University of Texas Community and Regional Planning program (2018).

We recommend the City of Austin 1) continue to leverage all the policy tools available to develop and preserve affordable housing; and 2) ensure that immigrant neighborhoods are factored in—and immigrant voices included—as priorities are set and plans are executed.

The *Imagine Austin* household indicators label the affordability issue in Austin as dire.⁶⁰ The city has outlined in the Strategic Direction 2023 a focus on equitable land distribution and the diversion of more resources to affordable housing.⁶¹ Continuing to invest in this strategic plan and partnering with NGO's to implement these strategies may help alleviate the shortage of affordable housing. While Austin is still working to address these gaps, Austin has also approached these disparities with innovative initiatives outlined in the strategic plan and the Austin Strategic Housing Blueprint.

The City's *Strategic Housing Blueprint* adopted by council in 2017 planned for 60,000 affordable housing units over the next ten years. These units would only be available to households making less than 80 percent of the median family income, or roughly \$60,000 for a family of

⁶⁰ City of Austin, "Priority Program 6: Develop and Maintain Household Affordability Throughout Austin," [Household Affordability | Open Data | City of Austin Texas](#)

⁶¹ City of Austin, "Strategic Performance Dashboard," [Strategic Performance Dashboard | Open Data | City of Austin Texas](#)

four.⁶² The blueprint recognizes that it must aim to prevent displacement of longtime residents and make sure that affordable housing does not mean fewer public services like access to public transportation or sidewalks. Goals set out by the blueprint to fund at least 20 people under the median family income or in non-permanent supportive housing are low compared to the need, and in 2018 the city failed to meet its goals in every single council district except District 4.⁶³ Thus far, Austin has not identified foreign-born residents as a subpopulation warranting targeted outreach.

Austin Tenant's Council services are available only in English and Spanish, and affordable housing units are not readily available due to long waiting lists. Again, naturalization and legal residence status are required for eligibility for public housing through the Housing Authority of the City of Austin.⁶⁴ Meaningful efforts to help foreign-born community members in lower income census tracts where fewer people are naturalized are needed to address this gap in access to affordable housing.

A similarity between communities with successful preservation efforts is the formalized convening of stakeholders, both public and governmental, with the express purpose of tackling neighborhood preservation and increasing affordable housing. Creating an interagency preservation working group may increase communication and strengthen Austin's commitment to preservation. Members of this working group could be selected from a variety of departments in the city of Austin, using an "all hands on deck" approach. By developing this working group, Austin's commitment to neighborhood preservation and affordable housing will outlive any changes in departmental or political leadership.

Currently, Austin's Anti-Displacement Task Force is made up of local stakeholders from housing and tenant advocates, non-profit housing organizations, representatives of the development industry, affected persons who have experienced or are experiencing displacement, Urban Studies, and Planning experts, Housing Finance experts, Land Use experts, and neighborhood condition experts (City of Austin Resolution No. 20170817-053). However, the commitment of this task force only extended for 10 months starting in 2018 (City of Austin Resolution No. 20170817-053), which has long passed. Austin would be wise to extend the timeline of the existing task force to recommit to anti-displacement efforts.

⁶² City of Austin, Austin Strategic Housing Blueprint, 2017, https://www.austintexas.gov/sites/default/files/files/StrategicHousingBlueprint_Final_September_2017.pdf.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ HACA, Public Housing Admissions and Continued Occupancy Policy, 2014, <https://www.hacanet.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/ACOP-12-21-17.pdf>.

Peer Cities' Efforts to Preserve Neighborhoods and Increase Affordable Housing

Most of Austin's peer cities are also grappling with these issues, and the COVID-19 pandemic has made affordable housing problems more acute.⁶⁵ Last year, Portland City Council approved zoning code changes to enable faith- and community-based organizations build affordable housing on their land.⁶⁶ San Diego is working to develop a strategy to preserve and expand affordable housing.⁶⁷ In April 2021, Charlotte officials announced the creation of the 2025 Charlotte-Mecklenburg Housing and Homelessness Strategy, their first comprehensive effort to address housing instability and homelessness, which engages the public, private and non-profit sectors in the endeavor.⁶⁸

Peer city Denver is part of a regional stakeholder approach to preserve affordable housing. The Colorado Housing Preservation Network, facilitated by the Colorado Housing and Finance Authority, has a subcommittee of government agencies that provides strategies for preserving affordable housing in at-risk properties. The Colorado Housing Preservation Network combines the expertise and resources of local governments, state organizations, federal agencies, and nonprofits to preserve affordable housing stock. In the network's first year, almost 5,000 affordable rental apartments in 65 properties were preserved through collaboration, engagement, and cooperation.⁶⁹

Priority: Community Resilience

Recommendation: Assets, Resources, and Community Hubs

Wrapping up this report on advancing immigrant incorporation in Austin is a discussion of community assets and resilience. The asset mapping of Austin illustrates a "crescent moon" of assets, attributes, and incidents along the heavily populated central corridor of Austin, bending toward west Austin. Whether it is the location of affordable housing units, hospitals, fire stations, or public libraries, the patterns mirror the longstanding racial and economic divides in the city of Austin. Even the locations of licensed childcare, shaped more like a "quarter moon,"

⁶⁵ Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University, *The State of the Nation's Housing 2021*, interactive maps and tables accessed at [The State of the Nation's Housing 2021 \(harvard.edu\)](https://www.harvard.edu/state-of-the-nation-housing-2021).

⁶⁶ Government of Portland, Oregon, "Expanding Opportunities for Affordable Housing adopted unanimously by City Council," press release, June 19, 2020, [Expanding Opportunities for Affordable Housing adopted unanimously by City Council | Portland.gov](https://www.portland.gov/newsroom/2020/06/19/expanding-opportunities-for-affordable-housing-adopted-unanimously-by-city-council)

⁶⁷ San Diego Housing Commission, "Preserving Affordable Housing in the City of San Diego," Prepared for the San Diego Housing Commission by HR&A Advisors and National Housing Trust, May 2020, [Affordable-Housing-Preservation-Study.pdf \(sdhc.org\)](https://www.sdhc.org/sites/default/files/2020-05/Affordable-Housing-Preservation-Study.pdf)

⁶⁸ Charlotte-Mecklenburg Housing & Homelessness Dashboard, "2025 Charlotte Mecklenburg Housing and Homelessness Strategy," [Char-Meck Housing & Homelessness Strategy - Mecklenburg County - Housing & Homelessness Dashboard \(mecklenburghousingdata.org\)](https://www.mecklenburghousingdata.org/2025-Charlotte-Mecklenburg-Housing-and-Homelessness-Strategy)

⁶⁹ Denver Regional Council of Governments, Denver Regional Council of Governments Honors Colorado Housing Preservation Network," press release, April 26, 2018, [DRCOG MVA ColoradoHousingPreservationNetwork.pdf](https://www.drcog.org/newsroom/2018/04/26/colorado-housing-preservation-network)

shows more availability in west Austin. Census tracts with high concentrations of foreign-born residents overlap with households that lack vehicles. Similarly, census tracts that are high-density foreign born are also among those that are more reliant on public transportation.⁷⁰

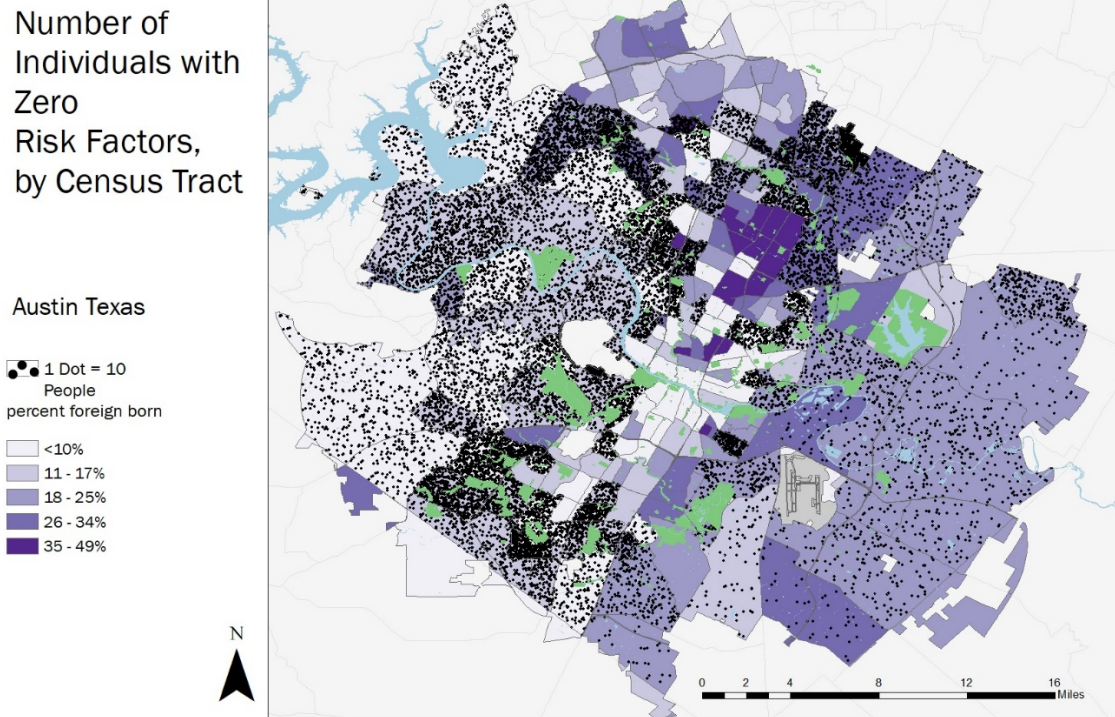
Measuring community resilience is one way to drill down on the vitality of neighborhoods in the face of socioeconomic stressors, health crises, or natural disasters. In this instance, community resilience is defined as the capacity of individuals and households within a community to absorb, endure, and recover from the impacts of pandemic. The Community Resilience Estimates (CRE), designed by the U.S. Census Bureau, are specific to the current COVID-19 pandemic. The CRE measures are calculated using information on individuals and households from the 2018 American Community Survey (ACS), the Census Bureau's Population Estimates Program (PEP), as well as publicly available health condition rates from the National Health Interview Survey (NHIS).⁷¹

It is no surprise that west Austin has the greatest number of individuals with zero risk factors on the CRE (Figure 24). The densely populated crescent area has the largest swath of individuals with zero risk factors. Although those with three or more risk factors are scattered across the city, census tracts with high concentrations of foreign-born residents also have many individuals with three or more risk factors (Figure 25).

⁷⁰ May 25, 2021, Memorandum, pp. 17-25.

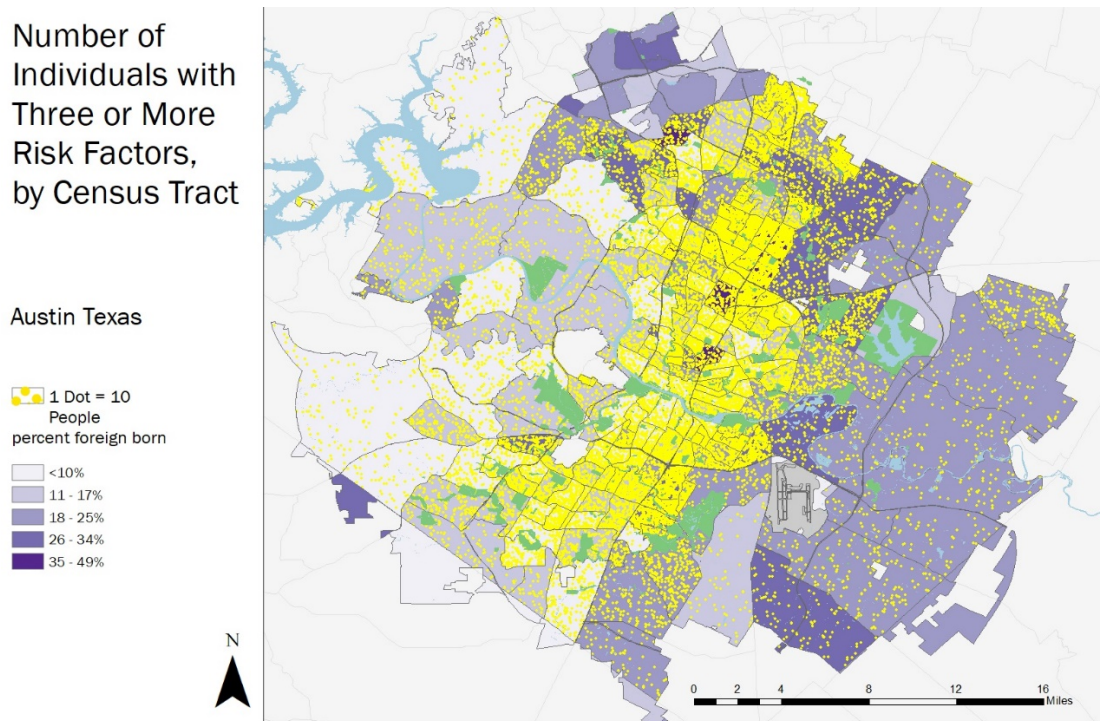
⁷¹ May 25, 2021, Memorandum, pp. 23-24.

Figure 24. Number of Individuals with Zero Risk Factors in Austin by Census Tract



Source: ACS 2015-2019 5-Year Estimates.

Figure 25. Number of Individuals with Three or More Risk Factors by Census Tract



Source: ACS 2015-2019 5-Year Estimates.

The modeling techniques used to develop the CRE are flexible and can easily be modified for a broad range of natural disasters or other stressors on communities. It is an excellent example of a methodology that may be used to develop indices of immigrant incorporation.

We recommend that Austin 1) use community and neighborhood risk factors that encompass immigrant populations to identify at-risk parts of the city; 2) locate assets and resources where people are most vulnerable in places convenient and appropriate; and 3) establish community hubs as public spaces that bring agencies and neighborhood groups together to provide specialized services agilely as needs ebb and flow.

Austin is already considering community resilience hubs. After the prolonged failure of the Texas energy grid--Electric Reliability Council of Texas (ERCOT)--during a winter storm in February 2021, the Austin City Council passed a resolution directing the city manager to “conduct a resilience hub assessment to identify potential locations throughout the City to serve as resilience hubs, including schools, recreation centers, libraries, and other trusted, well-known, community-managed facilities.”⁷² It would be optimal if Austin’s resiliency hub option moves beyond the “emergency shelter approach” the council entertained in 2019 to the community hub models being developed across the United States, Canada and Australia. Several of Austin’s peer cities offer examples.

Peer Cities’ Efforts to Build Community Resilience and Establish Hubs

In 2018, peer city Minneapolis began exploring “resilience hubs” to support community preparedness and sustainability. Resilience hubs are neighborhood centers “designed to coordinate culturally sensitive, multilingual services to better meet the needs of diverse groups of community members. In addition to the day-to-day benefits, hubs can provide a safe place for temporary shelter and relief during days of extreme heat or operate as centers for distributing necessities such as food and multilingual information after disaster events such as floods.”⁷³ When they operate year-round, they foster community-building efforts that increase resilience in preparation for emergencies. Minneapolis partnered with Little Earth of United Tribes, the only public housing community in the United States where Native Americans are given preference, to establish a resilience hub pilot.⁷⁴ Minneapolis is reportedly expanding its

⁷² Austin City Council, Item 28 Resilience Hub resolution and amendments, April 6-8, 2021, [Item 28 – Resilience Hubs Amendment - City of Austin Council Message Board \(austincouncilforum.org\)](https://austincouncilforum.org/Item-28-Resilience-Hubs-Amendment-City-of-Austin-Council-Message-Board)

⁷³ Bethany Rogerson and Mimi Majumdar Narayan, “Resilience Hubs Can Help Communities Thrive—and Better Weather Disasters,” Pew Charitable Trusts, June 22, 2020, [Resilience Hubs Can Help Communities Thrive and Better Weather Disasters | The Pew Charitable Trusts \(pewtrusts.org\)](https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/articles/2020/06/22/resilience-hubs-can-help-communities-thrive-and-better-weather-disasters)

⁷⁴ Minneapolis Health Department and Sustainability Division and the Little Earth of United Tribes, “Minneapolis Climate and Health Resilience Hub Pilot,” presentation, accessed at [Climate and Health Resilience Hub Pilot Project Report Presentation \(minneapolismn.gov\)](https://www.minneapolismn.gov/Climate-and-Health-Resilience-Hub-Pilot)

community hub approach to respond to systemic inequities that breed police shootings, civic unrest, and the growth of homeless encampments.⁷⁵

Portland aspires to create the “Twenty Minute Neighborhood” with a community hub at its center. The hub is intended to be a vibrant center of community life providing services residents need every day. Portland’s Bureau of Planning and Sustainability drew on community participation as it analyzed existing communities, identifying those areas that have the greatest number of barriers to achieving this goal.⁷⁶

Atlanta and Fulton County began community engagement sessions on the topic of resiliency hubs in March 2021. The session announcement stated: “Resilience Hubs enhance community resilience to social, economic and environmental challenges through outreach and engagement, education, services and program offerings, and implementation of technologies.”⁷⁷ Much like Minneapolis and Portland, Atlanta is exploring a more expansive role for the community hubs.

In closing, Austin has many levers to advance immigrant incorporation, particularly through pursuing intersectional policies, strengthening community partnerships, and promoting agile city services and programs that adapt to this dynamic city. To become a more welcoming community, Austin could commit to coalition building among government agencies, local organizations, and faith communities serving immigrant communities. Austin could improve accessibility to government services and programs that directly support and celebrate foreign-born residents through language access programs, entrepreneurship initiatives, and access to higher education opportunities. City policies to expand affordable housing and to foster wage growth would improve economic stability and livability for all people living in Austin, regardless of citizenship. Supporting livable communities across neighborhoods, cultures, incomes, and races in turn strengthens social cohesion between foreign- and native-born residents.

⁷⁵ Carey L. Biron, “Resilience Hubs: A New Approach to Crisis Response,” quoting Ron Harris, Chief Resiliency Officer of Minneapolis, *Christian Science Monitor*, June 15, 2021.

⁷⁶ City of Portland, Oregon, “20-Minute Neighborhoods,” *Portland Plan*, accessed at <https://www.portlandonline.com/portlandplan/index.cfm?a=288098&c=52256>

⁷⁷ Fulton County, Georgia, Fulton County and Southface Kick Off Resilience Hub Engagement Sessions, press release, March 5, 2021, [Fulton County & Southface Kick Off Resilience Hub Engagement Sessions \(fultoncountyga.gov\)](https://www.fultoncountyga.gov/news/2021/03/05/fulton-county-and-southface-kick-off-resilience-hub-engagement-sessions)