



**Yuriko Doku, MPA,
M.S.,**
OLLAS Assistant Director

THE SIGNIFICANT CONTRIBUTION OF LATIN AMERICAN AND CARIBBEAN IMMIGRANTS TO NEBRASKA'S ECONOMY SHOULD NOT BE IGNORED

The 24th Street corridor in Omaha, NE is a clear example of how immigrants, especially Latin American immigrants, are impacting Omaha's economy. Their labor force has been vital in creating businesses and working in key economic sectors such as construction, animal slaughtering and processing (meatpacking), and food services. Therefore, Latin American immigrants significantly contribute to Omaha's economy in producing goods and services and job creation.

The findings of a [new report](#) published by the Office of Latino/Latin American Studies (OLLAS) at the University of Nebraska of Omaha clearly corroborate the impact of the immigrant labor force in Nebraska's economy, especially in the Omaha-Council Bluffs Metropolitan Area. More specifically, it shows the crucial contribution of the Latin American immigrant labor force in sectors that are key to our economy. For example, without these workers, the meatpacking industry would lose its competitiveness as it relies heavily on immigrant workers. Thus, a labor shortage in this sector will cause drastic consequences not only to the production of meat and poultry but also to the entire economy of Nebraska.

According to this report, written by the UNO professor of economics, Dr. Christopher Decker, in 2019, immigrants contributed more than \$2 billion in total production of goods and services and created more than 17,500 jobs Omaha-Council Bluffs Metropolitan Area alone. Meanwhile, Latin American and Caribbean immigrants generated a production worth more than \$900 million and created more than 7,000 jobs in this Metropolitan Area. Therefore, it is vital to put these numbers into context to observe their impact better. For example, the number of jobs created by all immigrant workers is 14% larger than the number of workers of the two largest employers in the Omaha-Council Bluffs Metropolitan Area—Mutual of Omaha (5,900 employees) and Ameritrade (9,183 employees) combined.

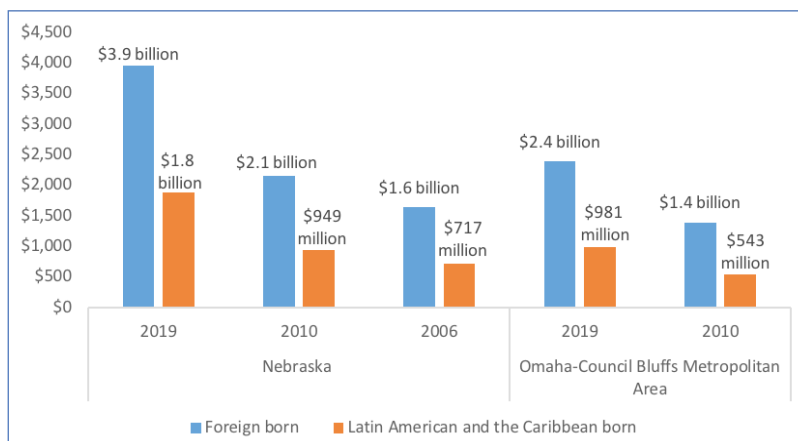
Another significant finding of this report is that the total foreign-born population in Nebraska generated \$22 billion in producing goods and services and created more than 94,400 jobs in 2019. In other words, if we put together the total number of jobs created by immigrants, they would nearly double the total population of Grand Island (51,267). Meanwhile, the Latin American and Caribbean immigrant population generated \$16.1 billion in production and created more than 79,500 jobs.

The report also highlights that in 2019, in Nebraska, immigrants mostly worked in the following sectors: construction (14%), animal slaughtering and processing (meatpacking) (61%), and food services (10%). Additionally, Latin American immigrants, who worked for these sectors, accounted for 12%, 43%, and 7%, respectively. These findings confirmed that immigrants, especially Latin American immigrants, play a critical role in the food processing and food services sectors, and without them, it would bring severe disruptions that might cause food shortages.

This most recent published report complements and updates two previous studies published by OLLAS in [2008](#) and [2012](#). The OLLAS' first report findings of the important immigrant contribution to Nebraska's economy surprised the community. The 2008 report—coming out at a crucial year for immigrants in Nebraska—showed that immigrants contributed an estimated \$1.6 billion worth of total production of goods and services and created more than 12,000 jobs in total for the state. That same year, several immigration-related legislations were introduced to the Nebraska Unicameral during its 100th Legislature, Second Session, which would negatively impact this population.

These legislations were the [LB 963](#) introduced by Sen. Friend, the [LB 1170](#) introduced by Sen. White, and the [LR 224](#) introduced by Sen. Fulton. The LB 963 would have prohibited state agencies from providing public

Figure 1. How much is the impact of immigrant spending?



Source: OLLAS Economic Impact Reports 2008, 2012, and 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.unomaha.edu/college-of-arts-and-sciences/ollas/research/reports-publications.php>

benefits to undocumented immigrants and required state agencies to verify the immigration status of people who applied for public benefits. The intention of LB 1170, on the other hand, was to give the attorney general or a citizen the right to sue an employer who knowingly employs undocumented immigrants and punish those employers by recovering the costs related to providing public services to undocumented immigrants. The LR 224 would encourage law enforcement agencies in the state to collaborate with the US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to enforce immigration laws. These bills and resolution were indefinitely postponed. Due to the sentiment created by the introduction of these bills and resolution, the Nebraska Judiciary Committee decided to conduct an interim study to more closely analyze the critical issues that affected the immigrant population in the state through the [LR 362](#). The OLLAS 2008 report was instrumental in providing factual information, allowing legislators to clearly understand immigrants' critical economic contribution to the state, thus swaying their votes to approve more welcoming laws toward immigrants. The current report also provides information that can be used to develop accurate, data-driven policies beneficial for all in Nebraska, both natives and immigrants.

By comparing the 2012 and 2021 reports, we conclude that the contribution of immigrants is of great significance not only in Omaha-Council Bluffs Metropolitan Area but also in Nebraska as a whole. For instance, in terms of job creation, in 2010, immigrants spending created more than 8,300 jobs while in 2019 created more than 17,500 jobs in the Omaha-Council Bluffs Metropolitan Area. It means 9,200 more jobs were created in 9 years. For Nebraska, in 2010, immigrants spending created more than 17,400 jobs, while in 2019 created more than 30,400 jobs that resulted in more than doubled the number of jobs.

In terms of production, one significant finding from the reports showed that in 2010, immigrants contributed \$1.4 billion of total production in the Omaha-Council Bluffs economy alone, while the impact was \$2.1 billion in Nebraska as a whole. Nine years later, that contribution has increased to \$2.4 billion in total production in the Omaha-Council Bluffs Metropolitan Area and \$4.0 billion in total production in Nebraska. Overall, the immigrants' contribution to total production in the Omaha-Council Bluffs Metropolitan Area increased by 71.4 percent between 2010 and 2019. While in Nebraska, during the same period, immigrant contribution to total production increased by 90.4 percent.

The two earlier publications also showed that construction, animal slaughtering and processing, and food services are the economic sectors with the highest concentration of immigrant workers. For instance, by comparing the findings, in 2010 and 2019, the highest number of immigrant workers were found in animal slaughtering and meat processing (54 percent and 53 percent, respectively) in the Omaha-Council Bluffs Metropolitan Area. Similarly, in Nebraska, most immigrant workers in the same sector accounted for 62 percent and 61 percent, respectively.

In the case of Latin American immigrants, the numbers do not differ. Between 2010 and 2019, this population predominantly worked in the animal slaughtering and meat-processing sector, constituting 46 percent and 30 percent of its labor force in the Omaha-Council Bluffs Metropolitan Area. Meanwhile, in Nebraska, Latin American immigrant workers in the same sector accounted for 46 percent and 43 percent, respectively.

The outcome of the recent OLLAS report shows that the immigrant population, specifically Latin American immigrants, has continuously demonstrated to play an essential role in Nebraska's economy. Therefore, their contributions should not be ignored. On the contrary, it is time to reflect on their presence and how it has been vital to our economy and our community.

Figure 2. How many jobs were generated by immigrant spending?

