

NINA MOINI: A recent report from the Minnesota Chamber Foundation found the state's economy is slipping in national rankings. The state ranks near the bottom in terms of workforce growth and net migration, which means more people are leaving the state than moving here.

Much of the growth that is happening in the state's labor force is made up by foreign-born workers. They've driven 60% of workforce growth in recent years. That's according to the Chamber Foundation. These numbers point to a different conclusion from the one President Donald Trump made recently in a dehumanizing tirade about Somali Minnesotans when he said they, quote, "contribute nothing."

Concordia University Economics Professor Bruce Corrie has done a lot of thinking and writing about the contributions of immigrants to the state's economy, including as a response to the president's comments. And he joins me now. Thanks for your time this afternoon, Professor.

BRUCE CORRIE: Thank you for having me.

NINA MOINI: How concerned are you as an economist about trends like outmigration and slow of the growth of the labor force. Some of these terms are-- it's hard to understand what that really means on the ground for people every day in terms of how everybody lives their lives. What do you think?

BRUCE CORRIE: Yeah, you're right. Ultimately, it is human beings, or we call them workers in economics, or labor, produce the wealth in every city or county or state or nation. So having enough workers as well as productive workers is very critical. And in the Minnesota context, I think there's a solution in terms of the immigrant workers, immigrant workforce, which makes about 12% of the total workforce in Minnesota, according to the latest census data.

NINA MOINI: Yeah, and we have had folks on from the Minnesota Chamber to talk about some of these findings in the past. So this isn't nothing new that people are just talking about. How critical do you think foreign-born workers fit into the state's economic outlook?

BRUCE CORRIE: I'd like to think that foreign-born workers make Minnesota affordable, wealthy, productive, and alive in various forms. So in terms of making life affordable, they help bring down the cost of everyday items or services like we do, whether we're eating out or getting our roof fixed. And their talent and skills help produce. For example, about 17% of the manufacturing workforce are foreign-born in Minnesota.

So they are adding wealth and value and helping paying into the system. That total income, according to the latest census, is about \$26 billion, which is-- for example, Ramsey County's GDP is about \$53 billion, so a big impact, even a consumer engine in local economies. So not only that, they bring in also culture like art, music, dance, and adds vitality and life, like you could see, in Little Africa and little? Mekong on University Avenue in St. Paul.

NINA MOINI: Do you know, Professor, or think about what some of the reasons might be for this idea that more people are leaving the state and the people who are moving in are foreign-born most of the time, it sounds like? What are some of the reasons people might be leaving the state?

BRUCE CORRIE: It varies for-- that could be different reasons. For example, our young people go out and study in a different state because they want to be away from home. So that might end up them living in a different state or a different county, in Minnesota's case, too.

Or there could be people who are retiring and moving to warmer climates, or some of them move because of economic reasons. So various reasons why there's this out migration, but also the declining birth rate, graying of the population among certain segments of the population can all factor in.

NINA MOINI: Would you say the economy is reliant on foreign-born workers in the state?

BRUCE CORRIE: I'd say that they play a very critical role in the state, just from the numbers itself, and then in the practical world where they are in key sectors of the economy, such as manufacturing and professional services, for example. And many of them doing jobs that we can't find people to do, such as in agriculture.

So in these areas of the economy-- the other interesting fact about Minnesota is the graying population. Indeed, the Department of Economic Development says about a third of our workforce is aging, over 55 years of age. And interestingly enough, foreign-born workers, are, in that demographic, a lot of them in the 34 to 65 years of age, where it's a critical labor force component.

So right now, they are a very important part of our solution to Minnesota's workforce and manufacturing challenges. And in the future, the new generations that are in the schools and colleges are going to be that new workforce that we need.

NINA MOINI: I know it's probably a lengthy process, but do you know how folks arrive at these numbers? You've estimated the amount immigrants contribute to Minnesota's economy to be \$26 billion, Somali Minnesotans, Somali Americans contributing \$8 billion. How do you go about getting those numbers to prove to the public, or whoever wants to know that these are real numbers?

BRUCE CORRIE: Great question, great question. I tend to use, for the most part, information a high school student can get, and that is from the census. So the numbers that I quoted, \$26 billion, is from the 2024 American Community Survey. I took the population of foreign-born and multiplied it by their per person income to get that \$26 billion.

In terms of that larger impact of \$8 billion, I used an economic model called IMPLAN. So it's a very popular tool that's used by a lot of people to show economic impact. It has its limitations, but it gives us at least a sense of the magnitude of impact. We don't go with-- So \$8 billion tells us that, hey, this community has a fairly significant impact on the Minnesota economy in terms of their workforce.

NINA MOINI: In some of your other interviews that you've given you've talked about people's intrinsic value, and it's much more than their economic contributions. And to that, I would say, obviously. So when we're talking about this time that we're in right now, talking about people's economic contributions, it can almost feel dehumanizing in a way. Why is it important for you to make sure that people do understand these numbers and impacts?

BRUCE CORRIE: Well, I started doing this work mainly focusing on the economic contributions of what I call the ALANA communities-- African, Latino, Asian, and Native American-- because in the early '90s, I would look at newspapers and I would see all these negative information and data about these communities.

So I dug into the data and found, wow, when you look at consumer power-- I call them immigrant capital, ethnic capital-- they are contributing in so many different ways as entrepreneurs, as workers, as taxpayers, as cultural capital, and global networks. And nobody ever documented or captured that impact. And they were always going with the negative.

So I focus on one aspect of their identity, the economic aspect. And I also focus on the contribution. What I encourage people to do and what people do is, look at what is the net benefit cost. And that's a whole different calculation. What I offer is the basis of a conversation with people that says, OK, you say here are all these different costs. Well, let's look at the benefit and let's talk rationally, practically how we can approach a solution.

NINA MOINI: Just lastly, Professor, so you've done all this work in creating economic opportunities, data out there, helping people grow their communities. Are there any policies, or is there anything that you can see from your perspective that could be implemented to really help support those goals?

BRUCE CORRIE: Yeah, that's another good question, too, because as far as the foreign-born immigration, here's the big dilemma. The costs of people in the system, like health care or access to the welfare system and so on, is felt at the local level and can be seen. The benefits tend to get at the federal level in the form of taxes paid.

So local communities face the cost, and they don't often see the benefits like I document forward even currently. At the same time, the federal government, while has not really acknowledged that the cost that local governments are facing, and they have not fixed an intelligent immigration policy in the national level.

So we need that kind of policy change to make sure that we have enough workers, we have enough people to continue this American dream, this American vision for the world. And then on the other side, for people to move out of poverty and achieve economic mobility, we need to invest in good education, in capacity building, like access to capital, and entrepreneurship.

And from my experience, that if you give people access, they'll take advantage, and they'll take advantage of the opportunity that comes their way. And this is the American story of people making ends meet, surviving, growing, and in the case of the foreign-born, bringing new talents, new ideas, new vitality to society so that it can continue the onward growth and the progress of civilization.

So if we fix these two things, I think we'll make a long way. And finally, I think we need to be patient with each other and talk less and actually engage more--

NINA MOINI: Very good.

BRUCE CORRIE: --in practical ways.

NINA MOINI: Yeah, get to somebody. Yeah. Thank you so much, Professor. Really appreciate your time.

BRUCE CORRIE: Thank you for having me. I appreciate it, too.

NINA MOINI: Bruce Corrie is a professor of economics at Concordia University.