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## Immigrant Entrepreneurs: The Face of the New Nashville

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### ABSTRACT

This paper examines the remarkable growth of the foreign-born population in Middle Tennessee over the past couple of decades and the significant role that immigrant entrepreneurs are playing in the economic development of the region. The largest segment of the foreign-born is Hispanic, with Mexico accounting for the greatest percentage, and sizeable numbers of Kurds, Somalis, Sudanese, and Laotians. The Chinese and Indian communities are prominent in business. At the same time, the issue of illegal immigration is working its way to the top of the legislative agenda in the U.S. Congress, making it all the more important for us to document this phenomenon. Middle Tennessee, comprising the greater Nashville metropolitan area, is now home to thousands of new residents from around the world, earning it the sobriquet as one of the nation's New Ellis Islands. Since the 1970s research has confirmed the important contribution that the small business sector is making to the U.S. economy, accounting for a large portion of job creation and innovation. Richard Herman and Robert Smith, in their recent book entitled *Immigrant, Inc.*, make the case that immigrant entrepreneurs are driving the new American economy and will save the American worker. The paper draws upon research conducted by faculty and graduate students in the College of Business at Tennessee State University during 2008-2009. With funding from the Tennessee Board of Regents, a College of Business team conducted a series of focus groups, face to face interviews, and an extensive questionnaire in the fall of 2008 and spring of 2009. On three occasions the TSU team hosted public forums in which the results of the survey were shared with those participating in it as well as public officials responsible for economic and community development. Team members relied upon the intermediary services of immigrant chambers of commerce and other community organizations with ties to foreign-born business owners. In the course of the survey the Metro Nashville government conducted a referendum on a proposal to require an English Only amendment on public documents. The Mayor's Office and Nashville Chamber of Commerce lobbied against the amendment, which was roundly defeated. But it was a coalition of immigrant groups that rallied against the amendment, bringing them together in a common cause that made the difference. There is reason to believe that a New Nashville is taking form and finding its voice.

### KEYWORDS

Immigrants, Refugees, Entrepreneurship, Entrepreneurs, Nashville, Small Businesses, Foreign-Born Business Owners, Hispanics.

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