

Fact Sheet

A Historical Perspective on Immigration in Oregon

I. For much of its history, Oregon has not been a welcoming place for people of color

- Oregonians' attitudes towards racial, ethnic, and cultural difference were profoundly influenced by encounters between European settlers and native tribes. After repeated clashes and conflicts with white settlers over land, natural resources, and trading opportunities, native peoples in Oregon often lost their land, were forcibly relocated to reservations, and consigned to the margins of social and economic life.
- From the outset, Oregon took steps to preserve political and economic privilege for settlers of European descent. The Oregon constitution prohibited blacks and Chinese from voting or holding land, and the Oregon legislature later banned interracial marriage. This strong antipathy toward people of color, legitimated through law and reinforced by custom, set the tone for how Oregonians would regard immigrants seeking to enter their new state.

II. Oregonians consistently distinguished between "desirable" and "undesirable" immigrants, favoring newcomers from northern and central Europe over those from southern and eastern Europe or non-European countries

- Immigrants from northern and central Europe were generally welcomed in Oregon and enjoyed a relatively unencumbered path to gaining economic success and social acceptance.
- Chinese and Japanese immigrants were viewed as "alien" and "unassimilable" by many Oregonians. Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they suffered discrimination, harassment, and even violence at the hands of white Oregonians who felt threatened by their cultural difference and feared them as economic competitors.
- Many Oregonians supported 1920s federal legislation that limited immigration from southern and eastern Europe and opposed lifting these restrictions when more liberal immigration policies were approved in the 1960s.

Recent trends in immigration to Oregon reflect significant new developments along with continuity

- Beginning in the early 1980s, Oregon became a leading destination for refugees fleeing turmoil in their homelands. Refugees came especially from Southeast Asia, and the Soviet Union and more recently from African countries.
- Refugees have benefited from an array of services provided by churches and private agencies, along with family and kinship networks that have offered vital support.
- The wave of immigration to Oregon that has captured the most public attention has been the dramatic increase in people coming from Mexico. There has been a longstanding Mexican presence in Oregon, accompanied by the creation of social institutions aimed at helping Mexican immigrants improve their living and working conditions.
- It is estimated that 125,000-175,000 of Oregon's current foreign-born population is unauthorized and mostly of Mexican descent.. The question of legal status has come to dominate public and political discussion of immigration, both in Oregon and throughout the nation.
- Oregonians' views on immigration retain considerable continuity. Distinctions between "desirable" and "undesirable" immigrants persist, along with an emerging argument that the state's quality of life cannot be maintained if population growth swelled by immigration persists. Proponents of immigration continue to assert that immigrants make major economic and social contributions and express confidence that they can be integrated into Oregon's political and cultural mainstream.