

Des Moines Register

DEVELOPMENT

Des Moines' population is changing. Here's how growing diverse communities are transforming the city.

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Published 7:00 p.m. CT Oct. 20, 2021 | Updated 12:06 p.m. CT Oct. 25, 2021

Hilal Groceries has been a staple in Des Moines for ethnic goods for 20 years.

Started by Abdirazak Salah, who immigrated from Egypt in 1999, the store fills a hole for many African, Arabian, Turkish, Pakistani and Indian residents who can't find culturally specific foods elsewhere.

On any given day, customers fill the aisles looking for spices such as cardamom and star anise, as well as specialty meats like goat.

The store at 1163 25th St., near Drake University, hasn't always been this busy. The store's operator, Salah Salah, son of Abdirazak Salah, said increased diversity in the city, plus a general acceptance by residents of new and different shopping experiences, has led to more customers of all races and ethnicities.

"Ten years ago people would walk in and wouldn't talk to anyone that looked different. Believe it or not, we had people come in and say, 'I walked in but didn't feel comfortable (because) people were wearing scarves,' or, 'I walked in and they were speaking different languages,'" said the younger Salah, who recently helped launch an Ethiopian restaurant around the corner from the market.

"It's come a long way from only having two customers in eight hours to now having almost 300 customers" a day, he said.

The changes at Hilal Groceries are a microcosm of those across Des Moines.

Over the last decade, the city's nonwhite population has increased 39% according to the decennial census, driven primarily by immigrants and refugees moving to Des Moines for work or to escape war-torn countries or refugee camps.

Communities of color now make up 39% of the city's 214,133 residents. That's up from 30% a decade ago, census data shows, and more than 100 languages are now spoken in Iowa's capital city.

The city has been a magnet for resettlement, behind only Charleston, South Carolina, among U.S. metro areas with the fastest-growing foreign-born population, according to Heartland Forward, a think tank focused on Midwestern issues. Des Moines' low cost of living, jobs in both high- and low-skilled industries, robust nonprofit organizations and established immigrant communities make it an attractive place, contributing to its continued growth.

More than any other factor, it's the city's new residents of color who have driven its 5% population increase, said David Peters, a sociologist at Iowa State University. Des Moines' population of non-Hispanic white residents declined by 12,814 between 2010 and 2020, and communities of color have more than offset that loss.

"In some ways the diversity in Des Moines is becoming more diverse," Peters said. "It used to be Latinos and African Americans, and now those groups are relatively flat. There is some Latino immigration growth. But what's increasing are the Asian and other minority groups."

The shift is evident across Des Moines' landscape, from dozens of new ethnic grocery stores joining the Salahs' to community and language-specific churches to an ever-changing student demographic in public schools.

"The fabric of Des Moines is changing," said Vinh Nguyen, assessment and accountability specialist for Des Moines Public Schools' English-language learner program.

Nguyen came to Des Moines from Vietnam as part of the first wave of Southeast Asian refugees to arrive in Iowa beginning in 1978. Over more than four decades, Nguyen has seen firsthand the changing face of Des Moines.

"If people have not seen it, my question to them is, 'Where have you been?' That's one thing we need to be proud of, and be recognized for the diversities (that) grow here in the Des Moines city," Nguyen said.

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Who is coming to Des Moines and why?

Des Moines has seen big changes in its Asian population, which grew 61% in 10 years, and those who identify as being of two or more races, an increase of 203%, census data shows.

The city's Asian population is a mix of refugees, led in recent years by arrivals from Myanmar and Bhutan, and immigrants from countries such as South Korea, China and India, said Ben Jung, chair of the Commission of Asian and Pacific Islander Affairs.

His parents, immigrants from South Korea, started Iowa's first Asian grocery, Jung's Oriental Food Store, in the 1970s near the state Capitol, where it still stands today under new ownership as a Laotian store. For decades, it was easy to trace where the city's Asian populations came from, Jung said.

Now, their homelands are far more diverse.

"The breadth or the sort of the bandwidth has expanded quite a bit," said Jung, owner of Ingersoll Wine and Spirits in Des Moines and West Des Moines. "I'll use myself as an example — I look in the mirror and say, 'Oh, there's an Asian guy there.' But the definition of Asian and Pacific Islander within our state is very, very diverse, encompassing lots of languages apart from the more obvious languages that people may think of as being a spoken Asian language."

Many people who identify as Asian come to Des Moines for high-skilled jobs in finance, information technology or other support positions, Peters said. They're coming from China, South Korea and India and are considered professional or economic immigrants.

"That is where a lot of the growth is," Peters said.

But there also has been a wave of so-called secondary migrants choosing to live in Des Moines after initially settling elsewhere in the U.S. Many were resettled through the refugee program in bigger cities, but find Des Moines more attractive because of lower living costs, less crime and better schools, said Sonya Streit, public information officer for the Iowa Department of Human Rights, which oversees the Office of Asian and Pacific Islander Affairs.

Others want to be closer to family or friends already living here, she said.

"Iowa is a good place to live," Streit said. "And because of the resettlement programs in the past, that kind of gives the structure for Iowa to welcome more."

Reasons behind the rise in those who identify as two or more races are harder to identify.

Peters said the U.S. has seen a cultural shift, starting with the presidency of Barack Obama, who's biracial, in which more people feel comfortable with expressing their true ethnic makeup. "People began to feel more comfortable getting some complexity to how they view their ethnic identity," he said.

So the 13,844 increase in the 2020 census in Des Moines residents who identify as more than one race may reflect a shifting of demographic categories rather than new arrivals, he said.

There's also assimilation. As more people of color move and get established in Des Moines, they begin having families with partners of a different race or ethnicity, Peters said.

Nguyen, who worked at Hoover High School in the 1990s, said he now works with the children of former students, many of whom married across races. Some, for example, have a Latino surname and a Vietnamese first name.

"I do expect that's going to become the norm and the way of life for us, you know, as this country begins to get more diverse," Nguyen said.

More: 'Students need to see themselves as they walk into the building': New mural highlights Des Moines' diversity

More grocery stores, churches and English-language learners

As the diversity of Des Moines changes, so too has the city's business, religious, educational and social services landscape.

Some, like Nguyen, have tracked the changes through ethnic grocery stores.

"The number of ethnic stores that we have in Des Moines 30 years ago, you find one or two that serve the entire Asian population," he said.

Now, as new Asian-focused stores open, they're becoming larger, like the 8-year-old C Fresh Market on the near north side of Des Moines, and more accessible to people from all walks of life.

But they're also becoming more diverse themselves.

"You have Burmese grocery stores. You have Philippine grocery stores. You have Somali grocery stores. You have Liberian grocery stores," Nguyen said.

And people can expect more Somali- and Afghan-focused stores to open here. Salah Salah has seen an increase in people from those communities moving from metro Minneapolis-St. Paul to Des Moines for better economic opportunities. Some Afghans fleeing Taliban rule also are slated for resettlement in Des Moines.

"Somalis always like to do their own thing, own their own business," Salah said. "They say there's more opportunity here because (in Minneapolis) there's (Somali stores) on every corner. So they are moving here thinking there's more opportunity."

Churches, too, have changed. Some are language- and ethnicity-specific, while others, made up of native English speakers, welcome refugee and immigrant communities.

"The history of immigration in America is the history of bringing your church with you," said John Kline, pastor at Zion Lutheran Church.

More than a decade ago, members of the Mizo ethnic group from Myanmar, who had settled in Des Moines as refugees, asked Kline to be their pastor. A few years later, members of the Banyamulenge, a Congolese tribe, also refugees, had the same request.

Zion Lutheran offers space for both to hold services in their own languages but also finds value in having its members worship together. Every second Sunday of the month, it holds a combined service for all of its congregants where "we worship in three languages and pray in 15," Kline said.

"Part of our special mission is to try to integrate ethnic church congregants to the greater body of Christ in Des Moines," said Kline, whose congregation is now made up of about two-thirds refugees and immigrants. "We don't want anybody to be isolated. We don't want anybody to be segregated."

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Des Moines Public Schools also has experienced a major change in diversity. Twenty years ago, white students made up 71% of enrollment. By the 2020-21 school year, their share had fallen to 36%, according to data from the school district.

As the population changes, more students have been enrolled in the English-language learners program, which can be traced back to the 1970s, when Southeast Asian refugees like Nguyen began arriving in Des Moines. At the time, 300 students, primarily Vietnamese, Lao, Cambodian, Tai Dam and Hmong, participated.

Today, there are 7,200 students — 4½ times more English language learners than when Nguyen began working for the district 20 years ago.

He worked to expand the program, adding ELL in each of the district's 60 schools, with the exception of three elementary schools, up from 18 in 2001. His biggest priority was to stop busing ELL students away from their neighborhood schools, support systems and friends.

"It's important because that's where they live, that's where their friends are, that's where everything happen(s) — in that area," Nguyen said.

How has the city adapted?

Des Moines' city government is adapting to its increasingly diverse population by adjusting its civil services and programming and looking at ways to attract diverse hires for its open positions, according to city officials.

Des Moines provides more than 200 services, and with the growth in communities of color, the city has looked at ways to improve its services so they're equitable for residents, visitors and local businesses, said City Manager Scott Sanders.

Part of that process is making informed decisions that impact different geographic and ethnic neighborhoods and communities in the city, said Manisha Paudel, Des Moines' chief equity officer. For example, if the parks department decides to redo a baseball field, it will first check with nearby residents to see if a more culturally appropriate field, like one for soccer, would be more beneficial to people living there.

"Equitable service really focuses on the intentionality but also impact and looking at it from a point of continuous improvement," Paudel said.

Des Moines also is looking to implement a language access policy to translate information about various city resources into other languages.

"Translating anything in 100 different languages may not feel or seem realistic, but if that is requested we want to be able to do that for our residents," Paudel said.

In addition, the city is continuously providing cultural awareness training across all its departments, Sanders said, most recently to prepare for the arrival of the Afghan refugees.

People from other countries and backgrounds "may treat building permits and code enforcement very differently" than native-born Americans, and city staff are constantly

evaluating how to be aware of those differences and adjust their approaches, he said.

Des Moines will continue to adapt and change as its population gets more diverse — something the city is intentionally trying to plan for so that residents of all backgrounds will feel welcome.

"For Des Moines to continuously have that changing demographic means that there's something attracting folks to come here, right?" Paudel said. "I think there's something to speak to that ... how a local government would normalize this celebrating, welcoming and honoring differences as a priority. And when we do that as a government entity and as a community, I think it counters any kind of exclusionary narrative that may exist."

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What's next for diversity in Iowa's capital city?

Experts say it's logical to predict the next decennial census in 2030 will show diversity in Des Moines has continued to grow.

White residents will keep moving to the suburbs, while people of color, attracted to established communities in Des Moines, will continue moving to the central city, Peters said. Birth rates among nonwhite populations will continue to rise, while older white residents will retire somewhere warmer or move to be closer to their children, he said.

Over time, some of those newcomers are likely to find their way to the suburbs, as well. The share of white population in West Des Moines, Urbandale, Clive, Johnston, Windsor Heights, and Waukee has fallen below 85% over the last 10 years, the 2020 census shows.

Immigration may be the key to growth in the Midwest, where, as in Des Moines, the foreign-born have offset population losses, said Rob Paral, a consultant who has studied the effect of immigration on Midwestern populations.

"The biggest attractor is jobs, so if you maintain this somewhat diverse economy you have, you will continue to attract immigrants," he said. "Des Moines has a lot of things in place to keep growing."

How do Iowa's main cities compare in diversity?

Each of the nine Iowa cities that is either the largest in its metro area — or in the case of Council Bluffs, part of a metro area whose largest city, Omaha, Nebraska, is in another state — saw its non-Hispanic white population decrease from 2010 to 2020, the U.S. Census shows.

The growth ranges from 10 percentage points in Sioux City to 5 points in Dubuque.

The biggest gain among people in a single racial group was Black people in Cedar Rapids, at 4.8 percentage points.

Without exception, the group seeing the largest growth in Iowa's biggest cities was people identifying as two or more races. Sioux City led the way with an 8 percentage-point increase to 10%. Des Moines was close behind, rising 7 percentage points to 10%.

Among other racial and ethnic groups, Waterloo had the highest proportion of people identifying as Black, at 18%, up 2 percentage points from 2010. Sioux City had the largest percentage identifying as American Indian, at 3%, unchanged from 2010, and Hispanic or Latino, at 21%, up from 16% in 2010.

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