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A Pennsylvania town is thriving with Haitian immigrants – and is the latest target of Republican hate

Despite a revitalization, Donald Trump wrongfully claimed Charleroi is 'virtually bankrupt' with 'massive crime'



More than 60% of voters in Charleroi's Washington county backed Trump in the 2020 presidential election. Photograph: Bloomberg/Getty Images

Stephen Starr in Charleroi, Pennsylvania

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There is one thing about her community that makes Kristin Hopkins-Calcek prouder than anything: her city is now one of the few boroughs in [Pennsylvania](#) with a growing population.

“We haven’t invested in our borough for a long time,” says the Charleroi council president, “and now we are finally able to do that - it’s because we have a need to.”

Surrounded by retired power plants, railway lines and steel mills, Charleroi in south-west [Pennsylvania](#) was once the epitome of Rust belt America. For decades, factories here and in the surrounding area closed and people moved away, its population falling by about 60%.

But in recent years, immigrants have descended on the town of 4,200 people, drawn by well-paying jobs and cheap housing. According to the 2020 census, for the first time in a century, more people chose to make this quiet community on the banks of the Monongahela River their home rather than flee it.

The first jobs Rodny Michel could find when he arrived in Charleroi four years ago were line work at a food-preparation company and, later, similarly grueling work at an Amazon factory in a nearby town. Today, as the native of [Haiti](#)’s capital, Port-au-Prince, sees his community grow in Charleroi, his work day involves turning an empty, dated store on Fallowfield Avenue into a Caribbean restaurant that will serve the town’s growing immigrant community.

“Sometimes I work for 12 hours a day,” he says from inside the Global Food Mart, a Caribbean grocery store where shoppers play arcade games and sift through boxes of tropical fruit.

“It will be the first for our community and I’m proud of that.”

But while locals such as Michel and Hopkins-Calcek see Charleroi as being in the midst of a revitalization, others have tried putting the town’s immigrant communities to political use. It is something that has thrust this tiny community into the national spotlight of America’s bitterly fought and divisive 2024 election.

Last month, [Donald Trump](#) wrongfully claimed Charleroi was “virtually bankrupt” and experiencing “massive crime” due to the presence of immigrants, in an attempt to turn immigration into his keystone election platform.

Like Springfield in neighboring Ohio, where [bomb threats and neo-Nazi marches](#) followed Trump’s false claims of immigrants eating people’s pets, Charleroi has attracted [rightwing YouTubers](#) and [KKK groups](#) posting recruitment pamphlets on local Facebook groups.

The former president's comments have also found support among locals.

"When Covid was here, people were losing their jobs, but these folks were allowed in [to America]. That tells me there was something going on there," says John Horner, who works part time as a watch fixer on Fallowfield Avenue, where craft stores, empty shopfronts and thrift stores displaying Maga shirts are interspersed with grocery stores catering to the local Caribbean community.

"On a personal level, I am concerned about folks coming across the border. I wasn't OK with that."

Overall, Horner says, he has "mixed emotions" about people fleeing war and poverty being accommodated in the US.

"They open up their own stores and they buy off their own people. A lot of them aren't here because of war, they're here because of connections - they heard from others [about Charleroi]," he says.

All this is happening at a time of significant uncertainty for Charleroi.

Local media has reported that federal investigators believe a staffing agency has been hiring undocumented immigrants in and around Charleroi, and paying them in cash.

Last month, it emerged that a glass factory in Charleroi that employs about 300 people will **move its operations** 170 miles (274km) west to Ohio, sending shockwaves through the community. The town's poverty rate is **25%**, more than twice that of Pennsylvania as a whole.

That has allowed Trump to make inroads locally. More than **60% of voters** in Charleroi's Washington county backed Trump in the 2020 presidential election.

Nationally, immigration has become a central campaign issue in recent months, despite a major fall in the number of immigrant encounters recorded by the US border patrol at the US's southern border. In August, the number of encounters - **58,038** - was a fraction of its height during the Trump administration, when it reached 132,856 in May 2019. **Just 46** of the people encountered at the border last August were Haitian nationals.

Studies show that Haitians and other people legally in the US on temporary protected status (TPS) have played an important role in the country's critical infrastructure. Analysis of federal government data by the Center for American Progress, a progressive thinktank, found that **more than 131,000**

immigrants on TPS worked in essential occupations such as healthcare and food processing during the Covid-19 pandemic.

But back in Charleroi, local leaders have moved quickly to help the growing immigrant population.

In 2022, a Neighborhood Partnership Program paid for in part by local companies that depend on immigrant labor was set up to provide services that help integrate immigrant communities.

Two years ago, Charleroi established a community liaison officer position, filled by a Haitian national, to help enroll immigrants in English-language classes, register children at schools and set up health-testing sites at a local library, among other measures. As well as the sizeable Haitian community, the borough is home to more than a thousand immigrants from Liberia, Jamaica and elsewhere.

“Our business owners in town are overjoyed with the influx of foot traffic and the revitalization of our downtown,” says Hopkins-Calcek. “It’s been a long time since there has been any investment in Charleroi.”

In his time in Charleroi, Michel says that he’s never been subjected to negative interactions and that he and other immigrants see the efforts local authorities are making.

“In Haiti, the government don’t take care of the people like they do here,” he says.

Horner admits that despite his misgivings about what he hears about happening thousands of miles away at the US-Mexico border, Haitian immigrants have been a positive for the town.

“They come in here a lot looking for cheaper clothes and other stuff,” he says.

“As a businessperson, [immigrants] are good for business. Capitalism is a good thing. I have no problem. I have no complaints.”
