

IMMIGRATION TO THE USA

HISTORY

EVOLUTION

TODAY'S ISSUES

**Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore,
Send these, the homeless tempest-lost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door.**

Emma Lazarus, The New Colossus

A SONNET BY AMERICAN POET EMMA LAZARUS (1849-1887). SHE WROTE THE POEM IN 1883 TO RAISE MONEY FOR THE CONSTRUCTION OF A PEDESTAL FOR THE STATUE OF LIBERTY (*LIBERTY ENLIGHTENING THE WORLD*). IN 1903, THE POEM WAS CAST ONTO A BRONZE PLAQUE AND MOUNTED INSIDE THE PEDESTAL'S LOWER LEVEL.



1. The colonies

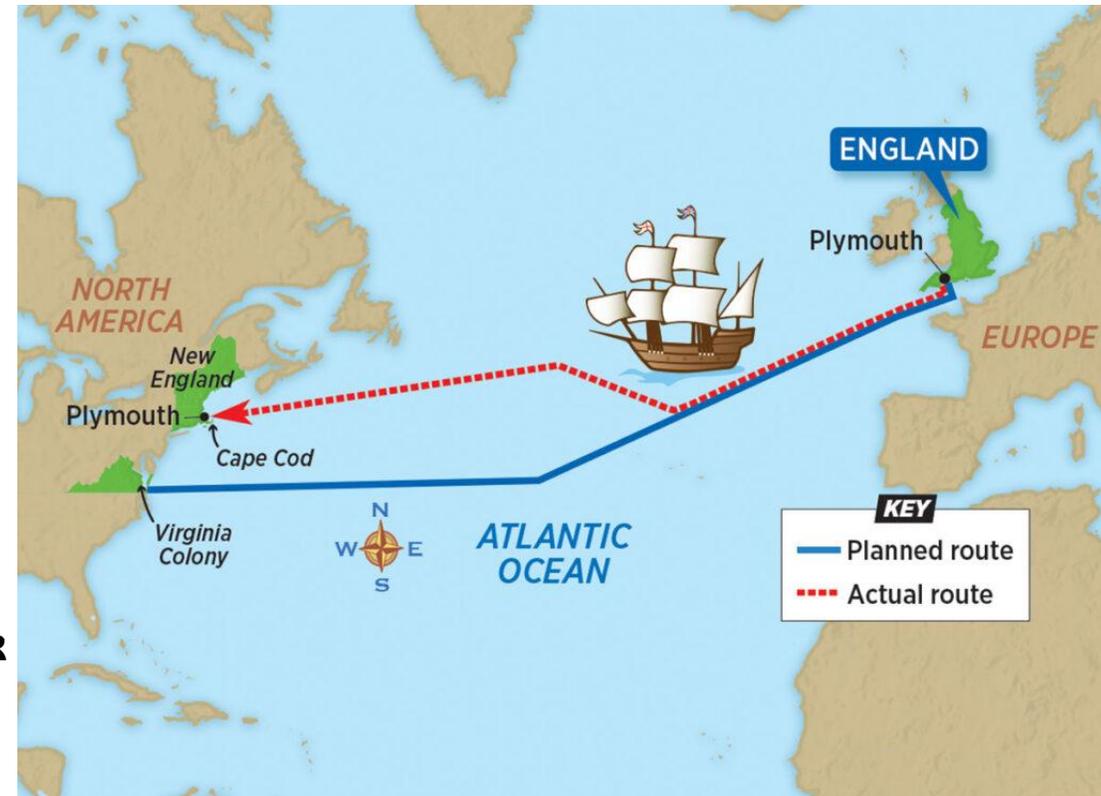
Although everyone remembers the “Pilgrim Fathers” who crossed the Atlantic on the *Mayflower* and settled in today’s Massachusetts in 1620, the first relatively successful English settlement was Jamestown, Virginia in 1607.

From 1629 to 1640, large numbers of Puritans settled in the Northeastern coast (from Maine to present day New-York).

This area would later be called “New England”.

The Dutch were also present and built New Amsterdam in the 1620s (later to become New York City).

Before 1790, the largest groups of migrants came from **England, Germany, Scotland, Ireland, France** (the Huguenots) and most of them were Protestant.



This was the first and longest era of immigration that lasted until the American Revolution in 1775.



Thirteen colonies in North America

(Color indicated = area of today's states).

2. “Old Immigration”: 1790-1870

The following period, up to approximately the 1870s is referred to as **Old Immigration** mostly from Western Europe: **England, Ireland, Scotland** (many of them settling in the Southeast), **Germany and Scandinavia**. With the exception of the Irish (who started coming massively in the 1850s because of the “Potato Blight”), they had **Anglo-Saxon roots** and were **protestant**. They were thus quickly assimilated and welcome.

Apart from the urban centres of New England many of those migrants settled in the countryside, later following *the Frontier* and reaching the Midwest regions in the 1870s, “the prairie”, where they cultivated the land.

3. “New Immigration”: 1870-1924/1929

- Immigration changed in the 1870s; the period of “New Migration” consisted mainly in **people from Eastern and Southern Europe** while the **Irish** kept immigrating. So those immigrants were **Catholic** Irish and Italian, and also **Jews**, from **Russia and Eastern Europe**, often escaping persecutions.

- Immigration from **Asia and Japan** to the west coast also increased.

Those migrants settled in developing urban centres and often fuelled the spreading industry of the country, in the industrialized Northeast in particular, with cities like New-York City, Philadelphia and Chicago.

- On many occasions, **tensions arose**. The new migrants were **said to keep their own culture, their own language and most of all their religion**. But they could hardly do otherwise as they lived in their own city districts (In New-York City, the Lower East Side for the Jewish immigrants, Little Italy for the Italians).

👉 Ellis Island era
Peak immigration: from 1892 to 1924.
Factories, cities grow fast...

Ellis Island / Angel Island : immigration stations

ELLIS ISLAND (1892-1954)

- It is located in New York Harbor
- Immigrants arriving from Europe were processed there
- Officials checked:
 - identity
 - health
 - legal status
- About 12 million people entered the U.S. through Ellis Island.
- 👉 Today, Ellis Island is a museum and a symbol of European immigration to the U.S.



ANGEL ISLAND (1910-1940)

- Located in San Francisco Bay, California
- Mostly processed immigrants from: China, Japan, Korea, the Philippines
- Important difference: Angel Island was much more restrictive than Ellis Island
 - 👉 Angel Island is often called the “Ellis Island of the West”, but the experience was much harder.
- Between 300,000 and 500,000 immigrants went through Angel Island

1924: stricter immigration laws

The tensions and the fears from part of the population led to the quota laws of 1924 (which restricted the number of immigrants who could be admitted from any country to 2% of the number of people from that country who were already living in the United States in 1890).

In 1917 Congress had already imposed literacy tests to enter the country. According to some, this actually led to a disguised form of discrimination against certain origins.

The depression of 1929 seriously curbed immigration.

Many migrants escaping Nazi Germany came to the USA but not all of them could do so, as administrative restrictions had been set.

4. From 1930 to 1965

Low immigration period

- Strict quotas
- Preference for Northern Europeans

Some migration from:

- Mexico
- Caribbean

- At the end of World War II, **"regular" immigration** almost immediately increased under the official national origins quota system as **refugees from war torn Europe** started immigrating to the U.S. After the war, there were jobs for nearly everyone who wanted one, including immigrants.
- The period between 1945 and 1954 was called the decade of the "wetback" to refer to **Mexican illegal immigrants** (as many of them chose to cross the Rio Grande).
The immigration from Latin and Central America has been a controversial issue since then.
- In the wake of the Cuban revolution in 1959, hundreds of thousands of **Cubans** sought asylum in the USA, mostly in Florida.
- The Hungarian insurrection in 1956 led to a temporary breach in the Iron Curtain. A large community of **Hungarians** immigrated to the USA at that point..

5. From 1965 to 1980

The **Immigration and Nationality Act Amendments of 1965** abolished the system of quotas.

By equalizing immigration policies, the act resulted in **new immigration from non-European nations** which changed the ethnic make-up of the United States.

After the withdrawal of American troops from South Vietnam in 1975, **many immigrants (and refugees) came from Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia**

Major change: 1965 Immigration Act
(racial quotas end)

New main origins:

- **Latin America (Mexico, Cuba, Central America)**
- **Asia (China, India, Philippines, Korea)**

Refugees: Vietnam, Cuba

5. From the 1990s to the 2010s

- Two major groups of immigrants appeared in the 1990s: **the Chinese and the Indians**, usually workers with a high level of qualification.

Contrary to most **Latinos** who settle first in city centres, the Chinese and the Indians tend to move to the more well-off suburbs.

- **2001 Patriot Act** expended the scope of aliens ineligible for admission (following the **September 11, 2001 attacks**).

- Data from the Census Bureau show that in 2010, **40 million foreign-born people lived in the USA**. Immigrants from **Latin America, the Caribbean and Asia account for over 80% of the newly arrived**. In 2009 **Mexican-born immigrants accounted for more than 29%** of all foreignborn residents in the USA.

- In 2009, the top five states by the number of immigrants were **California, New York, Texas, Florida and New Jersey**.

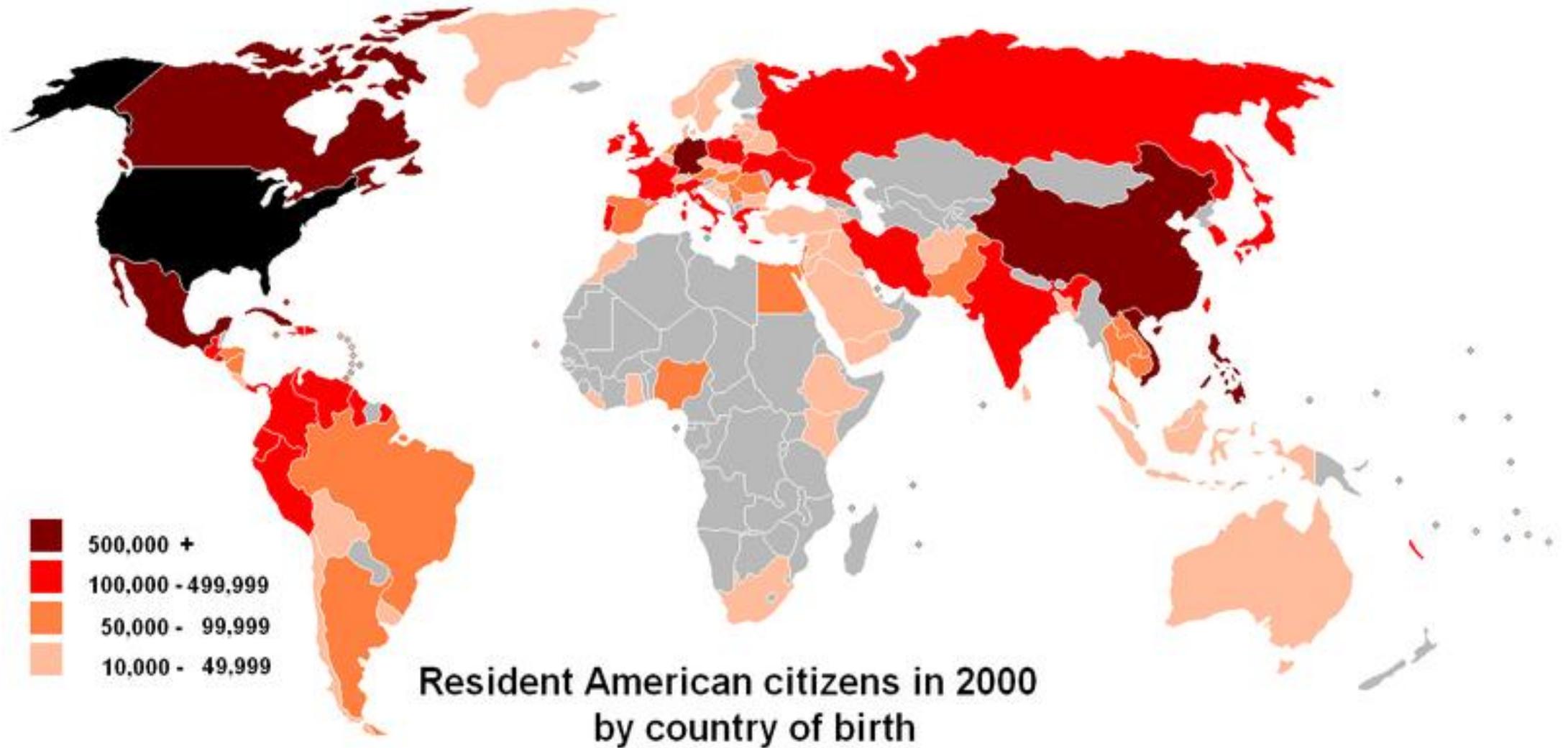
-About **11.2 million undocumented immigrants lived in the USA in 2010**.

Global immigration

- **Latin America**
- **Asia**
- **Africa (Nigeria, Ethiopia, Somalia)**

Reasons:

- **Jobs**
- **Education**
- **Refuge and asylum**



6. Since the 2010s

Mixed flows + strong political debate

👉 Immigration = a major political issue
One of the reasons why Trump was
elected again in 2024?

Trends:

- Fewer Europeans
- More from Latin America, Asia, Africa
- Focus on asylum and unauthorized immigration

- **People's opinion** on immigration in the U.S. seems to have changed. Half of Americans now say tighter controls on immigration would do "a great deal" to enhance U.S. **national security**.
 - Public opinion surveys suggest that Americans see both the good and bad sides of immigration.
 - Yet some surveys show that the U.S. public has a far more positive outlook about legal immigration than illegal immigration. The public is less willing to provide government services or legal protections to illegal immigrants.
 - The country feels threatened by illegal immigration and fears a "**mexification**" of the American culture.
- The status of illegal workers is highly debated. Some propose criminalizing them; others believe the **US-Mexico border** should be made harder to cross.

In January 2025, 53.3 million immigrants lived in the United States – the largest number ever recorded. In the ensuing months, however, **more immigrants left the country or were deported than arrived**. By June, **the country's foreign-born population had shrunk by more than a million people**, marking its first decline since the 1960s.

A new Pew Research Center analysis of Census Bureau data finds that, as of June 2025:

- 51.9 million immigrants lived in the U.S.
- 15.4% of all U.S. residents were immigrants, down from a recent historic high of 15.8%.
- 19% of the U.S. labor force were immigrants, down from 20% and by over 750,000 workers since January.

Starting in mid-2024, several policy changes have affected the U.S. immigrant population:

- In June 2024, President Joe Biden announced new restrictions on asylum applications, leading to a sharp decline in border encounters with immigrants seeking asylum protections.
- In his first 100 days since returning to the White House in January, President Donald Trump took **181 executive actions on immigration** to curtail the arrival of new immigrants and deport noncitizen immigrants. The full effects of these policies remain to be seen, but already they are contributing to a declining immigrant population – especially the unauthorized immigrant population

TRUMP and IMMIGRATION

Donald Trump has made immigration one of the central themes of his political career. He argues that the United States must strongly control its borders in order to protect national security, public safety, and American jobs.

Trump's views on immigration

Donald Trump believes that immigration to the United States should be **limited and strictly controlled**. He clearly distinguishes between what he calls “legal” and “illegal” immigration, but he has also criticized legal immigration programs that allow large numbers of people to enter the country. He supports a system that favors immigrants with high skills and economic value, rather than family-based immigration.

Trump often uses strong language to describe illegal immigration, presenting it as a threat to the country. He argues that the government has a duty to protect the border and to remove people who enter or stay in the U.S. without authorization.

Figures and numbers

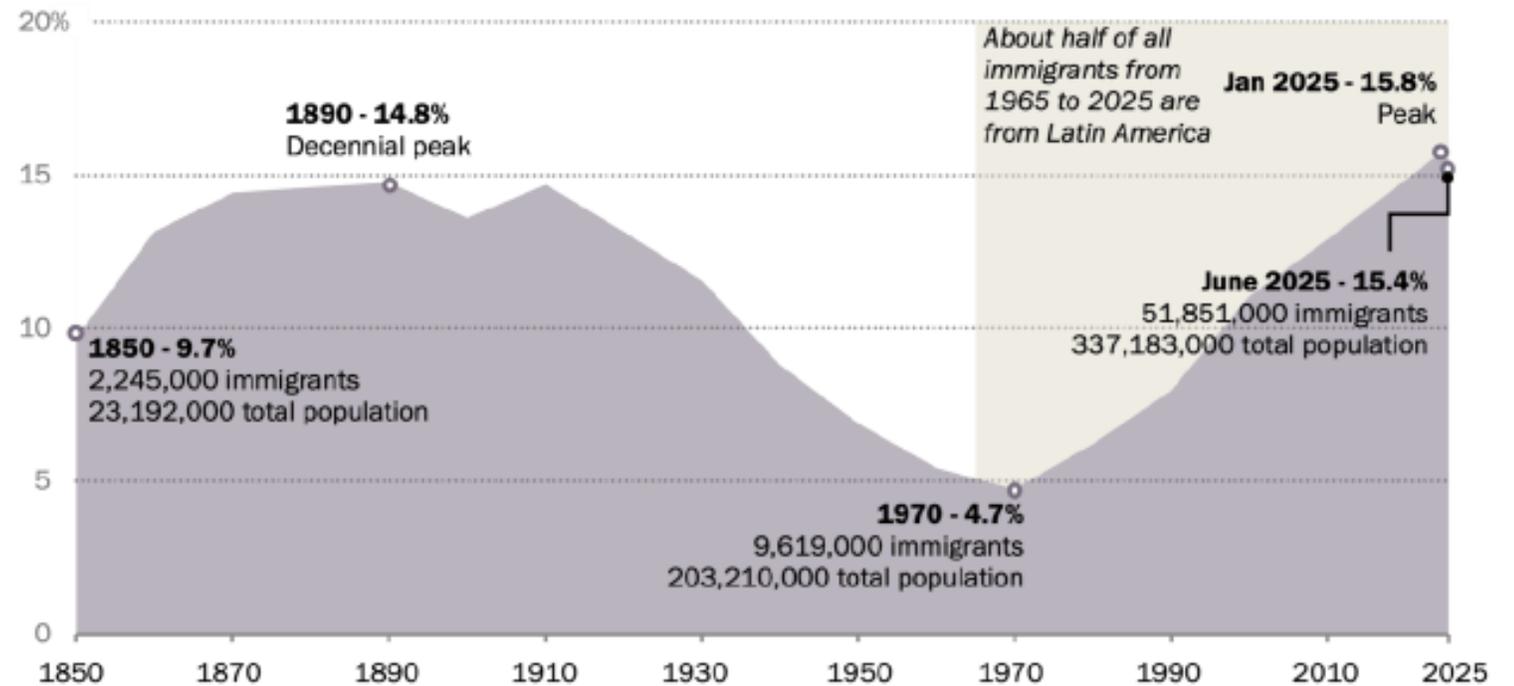
Since January 2025, the Trump administration has increased immigration enforcement and deportations.



<https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2025/08/21/key-findings-about-us-immigrants/#how-many-people-in-the-u-s-are-immigrants>

U.S. immigrant population peaked at nearly 16% in January 2025

% of U.S. population that is foreign born



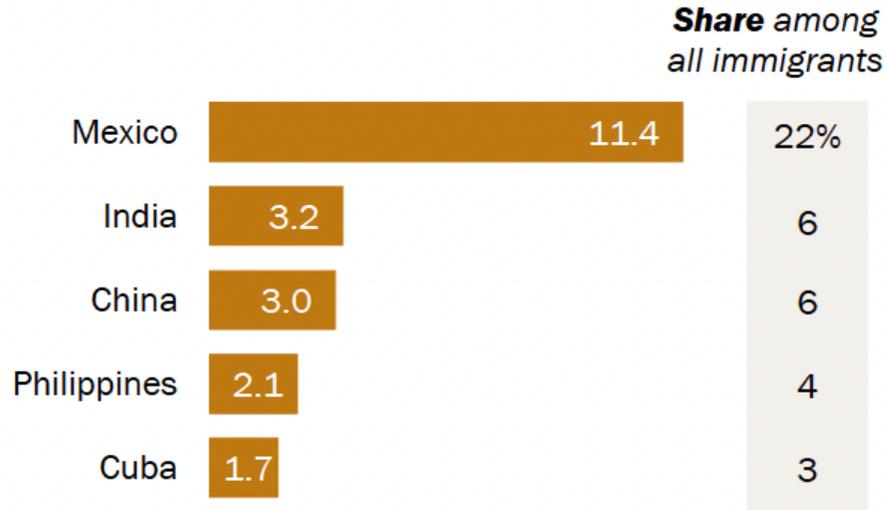
Note: Populations are rounded to the nearest 1,000. Shares are calculated using unrounded population numbers. Data for 2025 represents the civilian, noninstitutional population.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, "Historical Census Statistics on the Foreign-Born Population of the United States: 1850-2000," Pew Research Center tabulations of 2010 and 2023 American Community Surveys and 2025 Current Population Surveys (IPUMS).

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Mexico is by far the most common birthplace for U.S. immigrants

Top 5 countries of birth for immigrants living in the U.S. in 2023, in millions



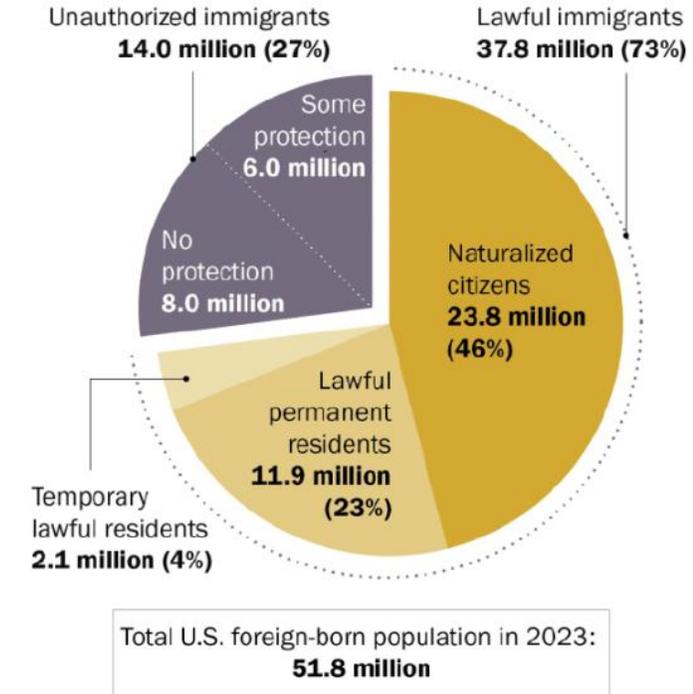
Note: China includes Hong Kong but not Taiwan.

Source: Pew Research Center estimates based on augmented U.S. Census Bureau data (IPUMS).

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Unauthorized immigrants were 27% of the U.S. foreign-born population in 2023

Foreign-born population estimates, 2023



Note: These figures differ from published U.S. Census Bureau totals because they are adjusted to account for population undercount. The unauthorized immigrant population includes those with temporary protection from deportation under Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) and Temporary Protected Status (TPS), as well as pending asylum claims and various other statuses. Source: Pew Research Center estimates based on augmented U.S. Census Bureau data (IPUMS).

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

20 U.S. metropolitan areas with largest number of immigrants in 2023

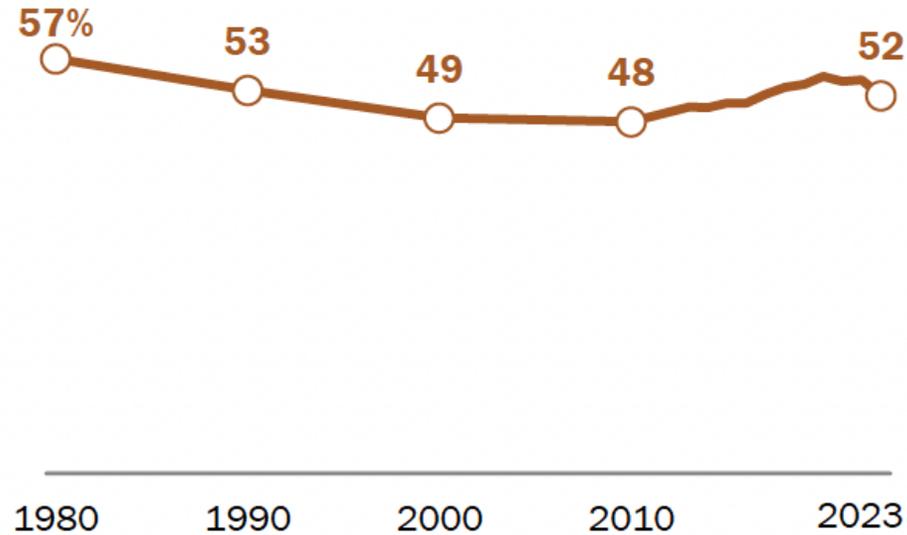


Note: Each metropolitan area has more than 500,000 immigrants. Circles are scaled to size of population.
Source: Pew Research Center estimates based on augmented U.S. Census Bureau data (IPUMS).

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As of 2023, about half of U.S. immigrants were English proficient

% of foreign-born population ages 5 and older who are English proficient



Note: English proficient are those who speak only English at home and those who, if they speak a language other than English at home, indicate they can speak English at least “very well.”
Source: Pew Research Center tabulations of 1980-2000 decennial censuses and 2010, 2013-2023 American Community Surveys (IPUMS).

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Immigration and deportation by ICE and CBP since Jan 2025:

(= Immigration and Customs Enforcement and Customs and Border Protection)

NB:

ICE is a post-9/11 agency, created in 2003 to enforce immigration laws.

CBP March 1, 2003. After the **9/11 attacks**, the U.S. reorganized border and security agencies - the **Department of Homeland Security (DHS)**

CBP → border control & entry into the U.S.

ICE → enforcement **inside** the U.S.

<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/ng-interactive/2025/aug/29/trump-immigration-ice-cbp-data>

<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2026/jan/06/minnesota-immigration-agents-trump>