By the Numbers:
Immigration Changing Trends Over Time

- Since the 1960s, the number of immigrants and the composition of the foreign-born population in the United States have shifted and fluctuated significantly.
- In 1960, the foreign-born population in the United States was 75 percent European and 9 percent Latin American. Today, more than 53 percent of the foreign-born population comes from Latin America and only 12 percent from Europe.
- The foreign-born population also surged after the 1960s, from about 9.6 million in 1960 to 40 million today, but remains below earlier levels as a percentage of the total population.

Changing Composition of the Foreign Born Population

Prior to the 1960s, the U.S. immigration system was governed by immigration quota laws from the 1920s. These nationality-specific quota systems reflected regional preferences: Northern and Western Europeans were viewed as a preferred source of immigrants, while immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe, Asia, and Africa was restricted. The laws were also an attempt to decrease the inflow of immigrants after the foreign-born population reached 13.9 million in 1920—a record high at the time and the highest percent of the overall population at 15 percent. The quotas, which many believed were discriminatory, stood out in the midst of the social changes that came in the 1950s and 1960s, and were ultimately replaced by the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act.

The 1965 immigration reforms are often credited as the beginning of a major wave of immigration, shifting the demographic makeup of the immigrant community in the United States. In changing a system from one that favored region, race, and nationality to a system that favored family ties and skills more equitably across nations, the law allowed for an eventual shift in the major sources of immigration away from Northern and Western Europe toward Asia and the Americas.

The result was a major (and ongoing) shift in the composition of foreign-born population. In 1960, the foreign-born population in the United States was 75 percent European, 9 percent Latin American, and 5 percent Asian. Today, more than 53 percent of the foreign-born population comes from Latin America, while 28 percent comes from Asia, and only 12 percent comes from Europe (Figure 1).

In absolute numbers, the overall flow of immigrants to the United States also significantly increased after the act’s passage. Since 1965, the foreign-born

---

**Figure 1. Composition of Foreign-Born Population in the United States (1960–2010)**

- Europe
- Latin America
- Asia
- Africa
- Northern America
- Oceania

Source: U.S. Census Bureau
population of the United States has increased from about 9.6 million (or about 5 percent of the total U.S. population) to 40 million in 2010 (about 14 percent of the population) (Figure 2). In that time span, new immigrants and their descendants accounted for 55 percent of U.S. population growth, adding 72 million to the total population.¹

**Legal Immigration by the Numbers**

Congress once again overhauled U.S. immigration policy in 1990 and amended the system set up in 1965 to attract even more educated and diverse immigrants. The Immigration Act of 1990 included preference categories, numerical limits, and a heavier emphasis on education and skilled immigrants. It also increased the overall cap for employment-based immigrants and created new non-immigrant temporary work programs.

According to the Department of Homeland Security statistics, 9.8 million lawful permanent residents (LPRs) were admitted between 1990 and 1999—the most for any decade in U.S. history until that point (Figure 3). In fact, that decade-to-decade increase was also the highest since the turn of the century, when 8.2 million LPRs were admitted between 1900 and 1910. Another 14 million LPRs have been admitted between 2000 and 2013. Since 1990, 44 percent of admitted LPRs have been from Latin America, 33 percent from Asia, and 13 percent from Europe.

---

¹ The 1921 Emergency Quota Law and the National Origins Act of 1924.
