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Immigration Trends and the Immigration Debate

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Over the past 20 years, the flow and demographic profile of immigrants entering the United States has changed dramatically. Despite new trends and characteristics, much of the debate on immigration—both in the public and among many policymakers—remains outdated and often stuck on the issues and conditions of the 1990s, not 2017. Much of the public believes that illegal immigration continues at high rates and mostly through the southwest border, that most new immigrants come from Mexico, and that immigrants are mostly uneducated. Each of these may have been closer to the truth in the 1990s, but recent trends are decidedly different. Proposals like the construction of a physical border wall are reflective of an outdated understanding of immigration flows, in which most unauthorized immigration flows across the border from Mexico. Yet border crossings are at their lowest levels in decades, and current research estimates more unauthorized immigration is caused by visa overstays than illegal entry. This issue brief will explore the changes over the last 25 years in key demographic categories of immigration, along with trends in unauthorized immigration and border activity, and how they compare with the current immigration debate.
Total Immigrant Population

One reason the immigration debate is so heated today is the large size of the immigrant population residing in the United States. The total foreign-born population living in the United States has increased by over 70 percent since 1997, rising from 25.3 million to 43.4 million in 2017 (Figure 1). In 1997, the 25.3 million foreign-born residents made up 9.5 percent of the total U.S. population. Today, the foreign-born population is 1.5 times higher by percentage, at 13.6 percent of the total U.S. population.¹

Figure 1! Foreign-born population by citizenship status and share of labor force FY1997 – FY2017²

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Naturalized</th>
<th>Noncitizen</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Share of Labor Force</th>
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Source: Current Population Survey

The foreign-born have also come to account for a much larger share of the American labor force. In 1997, 11.3 percent of the labor force comprised foreign-born individuals. Now, 17.3 percent of the U.S. labor force is made up of the foreign-born (Figure 1).

While the larger number of foreign residents in the country continues to be a central focus of the immigration debate, it obfuscates many other facts about this population that are important, some of which are explored below.

Regions of Origin

One of the most significant changes in the last 20 years is where the foreign-born population has come from (Figure 2). The European share of the foreign-born population has declined substantially since 1997, falling from 17 percent in 1997 to just 10.3 percent in 2017. Asians and Central Americans have become larger shares of the foreign-born population. In 1997, Asians accounted for 26.1 percent of the foreign-born population and Central Americans accounted for 6.3 percent.
Today, those figures are 30 and 8.1 percent, respectively. South America’s share has increased as well, rising from 5.9 percent to 7.3 percent. And, although the immigration debate is often seen as synonymous with Mexico, the Mexican share of the foreign-born population has not seen much growth, holding at 27 to 29 percent over the past 20 years. In addition, because of declining rates of new immigration from Mexico and increases in Asian migration (more about that below), today there are more Asians than Mexicans living in the United States.

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Figure 2. Percentage of Foreign-Born Population by Region of Origin, 1997 and 2017

Educational Attainment

The foreign-born population is now better educated than ever before (Figure 3). The share of foreign-born individuals over age 15 with less than a ninth-grade education has declined by nearly 40 percent since 1997 to 14.4 percent. By comparison, the share of native-born individuals with less than a ninth-grade education has fallen from 5.9 percent in 1997 to 2.3 percent today. The number of foreign-born high school dropouts has also fallen, from 14.7 percent to 11.9 percent. At the same time, the share of immigrants with a high school diploma has ticked up from 23.7 percent to 25.4 percent. Meanwhile, the foreign-born population has made significant gains with respect to higher education. While the share of those with some college experience has fallen slightly from 12.9 percent to 11.2 percent, every other category of higher-educational degrees has gone up. The
percent of the foreign-born population with a bachelor’s degree has risen from 13 percent to 18.1 percent. The share of the foreign-born population holding a postgraduate degree has risen by nearly 70 percent, from 7.6 percent in 1997 to 12.8 percent. Currently, almost half of all immigrants in the United States have more than a high school education. A recent Migration Policy Institute study found that between 2011 and 2015, nearly half of all new immigrants were college graduates. According to the study, only 27 percent of new immigrants were college graduates between 1986 and 1990. This trend of new immigrant arrivals continuing to be better educated plays a large role in explaining the better educational attainment of the entire foreign-born population. Well-educated immigrants have been vital in filling needed skills in the economy, and they make significant contributions to innovation. However, these trends contradict the persistent and inaccurate public rhetoric about “unskilled” immigration to the United States.

Figure 3. Foreign-Born Population by Educational Attainment, 1997 and 2017

Source: Current Population Survey

Age and Length of Residence

The average age of foreign-born immigrants in the United States is much older than it was in the past, and most of these immigrants have resided in the country a lot longer than in the past. The share of the foreign-born population under age 34 has declined by over 30 percent since 1997. The share of those between 35 and 44 years old has held basically constant, but those who are over 45 now represent nearly 40 percent more of the foreign-born population than they did in 1997. Those aged 55 to 64 increased even more—over 50 percent from 1997 levels.
This shift has a few causes. Legal immigration spiked dramatically during the late 1980s and early 1990s,\(^9\) and most of these people likely still reside in the United States, shifting the age distribution toward the higher age brackets. Another explanation for the aging foreign-born population is that unauthorized immigrants are living in the United States longer than they have in the past.\(^9\) In 1995, only 34 percent of unauthorized adults had lived in the United States for more than 10 years, and an almost equal number had lived in the country for less than five years.\(^11\) By 2014, the percentage of those having lived the United States for 10 years had nearly doubled to 66 percent. Meanwhile, the share of unauthorized adults who have been here for less than five years has fallen by more than half, to 14 percent.

### Unauthorized Population Trends

Current rhetoric around immigration would have the public believe that unauthorized immigration is continuing in large numbers and unabated. The Pew Research Center has reported extensively on the undocumented population and estimates that there are approximately 11 million undocumented individuals in the United States.\(^12\) This is more than twice the estimated 5 million to 6 million undocumented immigrants in the United States in the mid-1990s.\(^13\) However, despite the substantial growth in the undocumented population between the late 1990s and early 2000s, it is down from a peak of 12.2 million in 2007 and has remained relatively stable over the past decade. In other words, there has not been major growth in the unauthorized population for many years.\(^14\)
Despite substantial growth between the late 1990s and early 2000s, the undocumented population has remained relatively stable over the past decade.

In addition, Mexicans are a smaller percentage of the overall U.S. population than they have been for many years. Central Americans and Asians have increasingly been a larger share of the undocumented population, while the Mexican share has steadily declined since 2009. The “Northern Triangle” countries—Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador—have all consistently increased as shares of the undocumented U.S. population. El Salvador’s growth began to take off rapidly in the mid-1990s and now is rising at more gradual rate. Guatemala saw a rapid increase in the early 2000s and now resembles El Salvador’s growth. Honduras has grown more gradually over this time. Meanwhile, India has driven the growth in the Asian undocumented U.S. population, as the levels from countries like China and Korea have largely remained constant for the past 15 to 20 years. 

**Border Trends**

Demographics are not the only facet of immigration that has changed since the late 1990s. The ways immigrants arrive has also evolved. In fiscal year (FY) 1997, for example, over 1.4 million migrants were apprehended while attempting illegal entry at U.S. borders (Figure 5). FY1997 was the sixth-busiest year ever for border apprehensions. Border apprehensions of more than 1 million per fiscal year were standard from the mid-1980s through the mid-2000s. Since then, however, apprehensions have precipitously declined to between 300,000 and 500,000 per year. During FY2016, 415,816 apprehensions were made. The drop in border apprehensions can be attributed to several factors, including increased border security, more Mexicans using legal visas (evidenced in the growth of H-2A and H-2B visas during the same period), and the growth in visa overstays as a source of unauthorized immigration (Figure 5). According to some analysts, the government’s emphasis on a “deterrence through enforcement” strategy, which applies more serious consequences for unlawful border crossing, has been a key factor in the declining level of apprehensions over the past decade. The growth in Mexicans’ usage of legal visas, coupled with a major decline in Mexican illegal immigration, has changed things dramatically at the border compared with the mid 1990s. Today, more Central American migrants are apprehended at the border than Mexican migrants. In addition, the Center for Migration Studies estimates that since 2007, annual visa overstays have outnumbered unlawful border crossings for those joining the ranks of the unauthorized. The growth of visa overstays as a source of unauthorized migration, combined with the decline in unauthorized border crossings, calls into question continued emphasis on stronger enforcement at the U.S.-Mexico border in response to the current immigration trends.
Conclusion

"Immigration in the 1990s and immigration today are wildly different. Understanding the differences is essential to improving the public debate on immigration policy."

As this issue brief has highlighted, immigration in the 1990s and immigration today are wildly different. Illegal-immigration levels have fallen substantially and now are predominantly visa overstays, not southwest border crossings. Mexico was once the dominant source of immigration to the United States but has since been overtaken by Asia. Mexico as source of illegal immigration has declined as the Northern Triangle countries grow in importance. Today, the immigrant population is far better educated than it was during the 1990s, as more people arrive with high school diplomas and college degrees, enabling them to fill vital jobs in the U.S. economy. These trends run contrary to what much of the public and many policymakers believe about immigration. This divergence has a harmful effect on discourse about immigration and manifests itself in outdated policy proposals like the southwest border wall. Understanding that immigration in 2017 does not mirror immigration in 1997 is essential to improving the public debates on immigration policy.
Endnotes


2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.


12 Ibid.


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