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Green Light to Growth

THE ECONOMIC BENEFITS OF CLEARING
GREEN CARD BACKLOGS

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Executive Summary

Millions of people sit in green card backlogs, waiting to receive lawful permanent resident (LPR) status in the United States. These backlogs have clear human costs, with many people set to wait decades before receiving their green card and essential roles in fields such as health care and national security going unfilled.

Importantly, the backlogs also have considerable economic costs, by restricting the jobs people can hold while in the backlog and preventing those outside the United States from joining a labor force in dire need of more workers. This report quantifies the economic benefit that would be achieved if the current employment- and family-based green card backlogs were cleared. The key takeaways are as follows:

Clearing green card backlogs would result in trillions in GDP gains over 10 years.

- We estimate the total green card backlog, both employment- and family-based green card backlogs, to comprise 7.6 million individuals. This includes pending applications (the “processing” backlog) and approved applications waiting for green card availability (the “cap-based” backlog).
- Under our central estimate, clearing this backlog would increase gross domestic product (GDP) by \$3.9 trillion over 10 years.

Most of the economic benefit comes from new entrants to the country, with a significantly smaller but still positive benefit arising from those already in the United States moving from temporary to permanent immigration status.

- These GDP gains result from new entrants to the United States and adjustments from temporary to permanent status for those currently inside the country. The economic benefit of status adjustments has gone largely unquantified in previous studies.
- The vast majority (99%) of the estimated GDP benefit is from new entrants, who increase the size of the U.S. labor force and the productivity of the wider economy. We estimate that the remaining 1% of the benefit comes from enabling adjustments of status, which removes job restrictions for those in temporary status and, as a result, increases the productivity of those immigrants.
- This difference in impact is primarily due to the greater estimated impact an individual new entrant has on the economy compared to that of an individual adjusting from temporary to permanent status.

Increasing green card limits and resources for visa processing are the main policies that would deliver the GDP benefits.

- Clearing cap-based backlogs would be responsible for 71% of the GDP benefit and clearing processing backlogs would be responsible for the remaining 29%. This underlines the vital importance of legislative changes that increase green card limits.
- Increasing green card limits would reduce both current and future backlogs, meaning they would likely have even greater economic benefits than the numbers presented in this report.
- However, without simultaneously increasing resources for visa processing, changing green card limits may have a limited effect on cap-based backlogs.

Economic benefits of clearing backlogs are distributed across states, with wealthier states receiving more benefits on average. Decentralized state-based visa programs could help redistribute benefits.

- The highest estimated GDP benefit goes to California (19%), followed by New York (13%), Florida (11%), Texas (10%), and New Jersey (6%)—the five states with the largest immigrant populations.
- There is a slight positive relationship between a state's real per capita personal income and the economic benefit it receives from clearing backlogs as a proportion of its GDP. This means that wealthier states would, on average, receive greater economic benefits from clearing backlogs.
- Decentralized state-based visa programs could help distribute immigrants more evenly throughout the United States. Such programs could allow immigration to be a tool to reduce economic inequality between states and enhance international competitiveness.

Without prompt action, visa backlogs will continue to grow, as they have for decades. This report adds to the growing chorus of research that emphasizes the vital importance of policy change to deal with green card backlogs. Failure to act will have considerable human and economic costs for both the foreign and native-born populations.

Introduction

Millions of people sit in green card backlogs, waiting to receive lawful permanent resident (LPR) status in the United States. Some of these individuals are waiting for their petition to be adjudicated and, they hope, approved. Even if approved, many still wait decades before they receive their green card due to annual green card limits set in law. Hundreds of thousands of people will likely die before they can receive the green card for which they have already been approved.¹

These backlogs have clear human costs. Many people face the risk of having to leave the country if they lose their jobs before they achieve LPR status. The backlog also has serious consequences for Americans, as essential jobs, such as nurses and national security staff, go unfilled while foreign workers remain in the backlog to receive their green cards.^{2,3}

Importantly, the backlogs also have considerable economic costs. Restrictions on the jobs people can take while in the backlog prevent individuals from working in roles best suited to them, constricting productivity. Keeping people outside of the country when they have been approved for a green card prevents them from joining the U.S. labor force, contributing their knowledge and skills, and supporting an economy that is struggling with declining labor force participation due to its aging population.⁴ This report quantifies the economic benefit that would be achieved if the current employment and family-based green card backlogs were cleared.

The analysis in this report proceeds in the following steps:

- 1. Estimating the size of the backlogs:** We estimate backlog sizes for both employment- and family-based green cards using recent data from U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). This analysis includes both applications that have not yet been processed (*processing backlog*) and ones that have been approved but for which green cards have not yet been granted (*cap-based backlog*).
- 2. Estimating the GDP gains that would be achieved by clearing these backlogs:** We split backlog numbers into two groups: 1) adults residing in other countries who would be new entrants upon receiving a green card, and 2) adults who reside within the United States, meaning their immigration status would change from temporary to permanent upon receiving a green card. We estimate the productivity benefits associated with new entrants and adjustments of status using academic literature and calculate 10-year GDP benefits from clearing backlogs over and above the CBO's baseline forecast. Including the productivity benefits of adjustments of status differentiates this research from previous studies.

3. Estimating the geographic distribution of these economic benefits:

We apportion the economic benefits to U.S. states using DHS data on the number of family-based and employment-based green cards granted for each state in 2022 as well as the breakdown between adjustments of status and new entrants.

We estimate the overall economic benefit, measured in GDP gains over a 10-year horizon, to be in the trillions, underlining the economic cost incurred by maintaining the backlogs. Notably, the estimates we present reflect the benefit of clearing only *current* backlogs, which lawmakers could achieve with policy changes such as recapturing unused green cards (included in the proposed bipartisan Eliminating Backlogs Act of 2023), granting a one-time waiver for immediate issuance of cards in the backlog, or setting a time limit for someone to wait before a green card would be immediately issued (included in the proposed bipartisan Dignity Act of 2023). Importantly, different policy changes, such as increasing annual green card limits (also in the Dignity Act of 2023), eliminating per-country limits, or increasing resources for visa processing (included in the proposed Visa Processing Improvement Act), would reduce both current and future backlogs, which would likely have even greater economic benefits than what we estimate in this report.

Drivers of Green Card Backlogs

Millions of people are currently sitting in green card backlogs, waiting to receive lawful permanent resident (LPR) status. Many have been approved for a green card but have not received it due to annual green card limits, leaving them in a *cap-based backlog*. Others sit in a *processing backlog*, waiting for their petition to be adjudicated, after which they may join the cap-based backlog. Each backlog type has distinct drivers that cause wait times for green cards to increase.

DRIVERS OF PROCESSING BACKLOGS

The application process for a family preference green card (for relatives of U.S. citizens or existing green card holders in categories that are subject to annual caps) or for an employment-based green card begins with the individual's sponsor filing a petition with USCIS, a component of DHS. When these petitions are processed, the individual in question is then approved or rejected for a green card, depending on whether they meet eligibility requirements. If a petition has been filed but not yet processed, it forms part of the *processing backlog*.

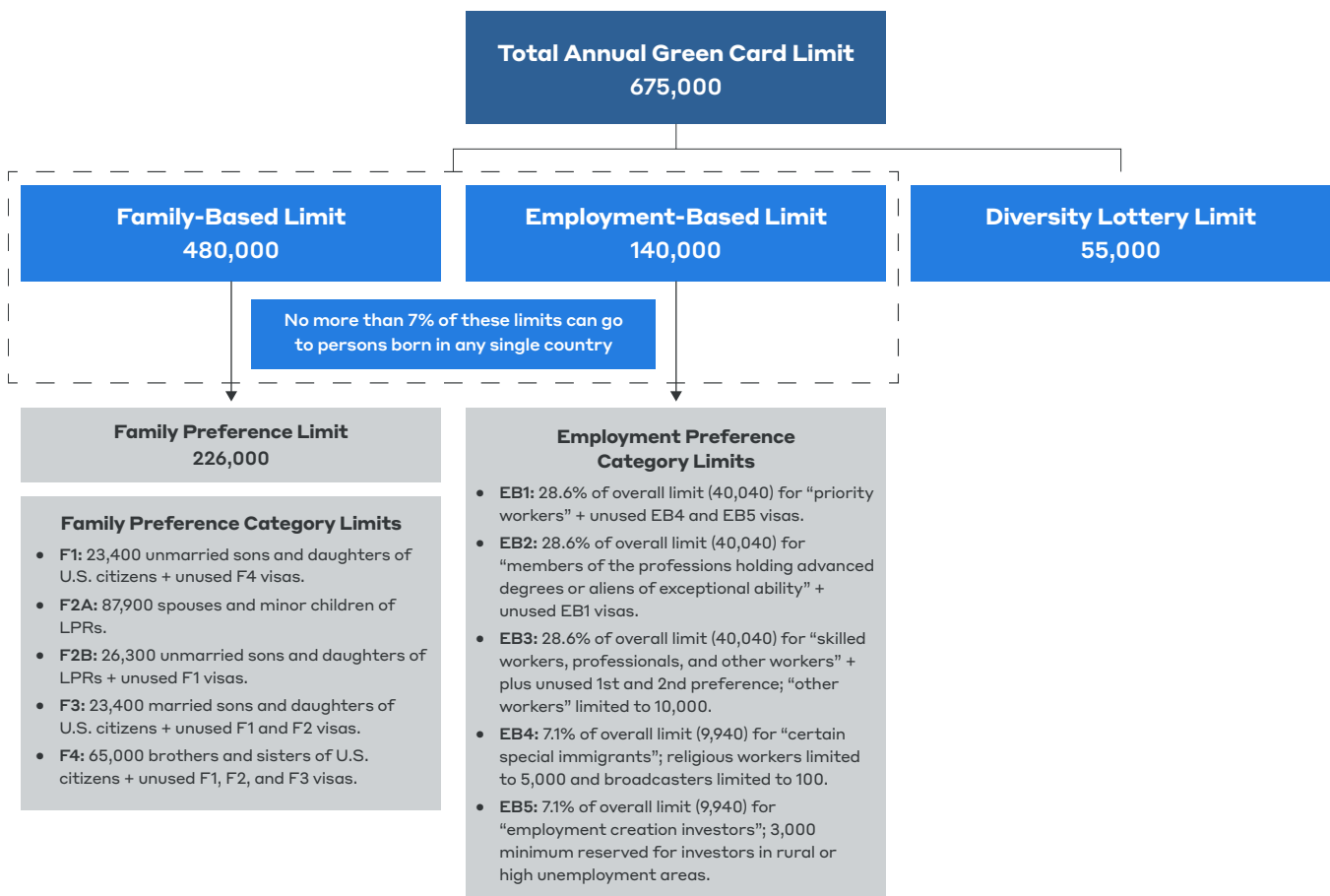
Processing backlogs have been a systemic problem for years. A USCIS Ombudsman report initially identified the problem in 2006, and data show that the size of processing backlogs has been growing significantly since 2010.^{5,6} The reasons for this are manifold.⁷ In recent years, changes implemented by the Trump administration resulted in longer application forms, requests for additional evidence, and more scrutiny for renewals.⁸ Furthermore, during the COVID-19 pandemic there was a halt in visa processing as well as a USCIS hiring freeze.⁹

While the Biden administration has reversed some Trump-era policies and visa processing is no longer halted due to COVID, resources are not sufficient to clear the current processing backlog. USCIS largely relies on manual processing, highlighting the need for digitization.¹⁰ Generally, the number of staff, amount of funding, and quality of processing infrastructure act as constraints to clearing the current backlog, allowing the backlog to continue to increase.¹¹

DRIVERS OF CAP-BASED BACKLOGS

As shown in Figure 1, there are numerous annual green card limits set forth in the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA), with an overall annual limit of 675,000. Certain family-based petitions are not subject to these annual caps—namely spouses, minor children, and parents of U.S. citizens—nor are petitions from those adjusting from asylee or refugee status to a green card. As a result, the annual limit on green card issuances is exceeded almost every year, with significantly more individuals being sponsored for employment- and family-based green cards in the capped categories than the limits allow.^{12,13} In short, the demand for green cards exceeds the supply, resulting in a backlog of cases.

Figure 1: Summary of Annual Green Card Limits



Source: BPC graphic using information from the Congressional Research Service.

When an individual's petition is approved, they are assigned a "priority date," which designates their place in the queue for a green card. This "priority date" is the date on which their petition was filed, if a family-sponsored immigrant, or the date on which their employment-based case was filed with either the Department of Labor (for categories requiring labor certification) or USCIS (for categories that do not require labor certification). Only when an individual's

priority date is earlier than the “current” priority date shown in the most recent monthly Visa Bulletin from the Department of State can that person move forward in the application process and receive their green card.¹⁴

Sometimes the “current” priority date moves backward to an earlier date, meaning that some individuals who were previously able to receive their green card must rejoin the cap-based backlog and wait for their priority date to become “current” again. This change, called “visa retrogression” occurs when more people apply for a visa in a particular category than there are visas available for that month.¹⁵

Importantly, the INA specifies that no more than 7% of the family- and employment-based annual limits can go to any one country. In practice, this means that individuals from certain countries with high volumes of green card applications often have to wait years or decades, with the prospect that some may even die before receiving the green card for which they have already been approved.¹⁶ This is particularly the case for India and China in the employment-based categories and Mexico and the Philippines in the family-based categories.¹⁷ For example, the Cato Institute estimates that the backlog for EB2 and EB3 applicants (see Figure 1 for definitions) from India would take 134 years to process under the current annual caps and that roughly 60% of these individuals will never receive their green cards, either dying (an estimated 414,363 individuals) or aging out (an estimated 134,429 individuals) before doing so.¹⁸

While both cap-based and processing backlogs are important, understanding their different drivers is necessary to inform the policy prescriptions required to eliminate them or reduce their size. Importantly, policies intended to reduce one type of backlog may not be sufficient in isolation. Increasing green card limits may simply move individuals from the cap-based backlog to the processing backlog if there are insufficient resources to see the cases to completion. Similarly, increased resources for visa processing could simply move individuals from processing backlogs to cap-based backlogs due to annual green card limits.

Economic Benefit of Clearing Backlogs

The analysis to estimate the economic benefit achieved by clearing green card backlogs proceeds in three steps:

1. Estimating the size of the backlogs.
2. Estimating the economic benefits of clearing the backlogs.
3. Estimating the geographic distribution of these economic benefits.

SIZE OF THE BACKLOGS

We estimate the cap-based and processing backlogs by making use of data from USCIS and the DHS 2022 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics.¹⁹ USCIS provides data as of March 2023 on approved petitions that are awaiting visa availability for each preference category, forming the cap-based backlog for *principals*—prospective immigrants who are directly sponsored for green cards.^{20,21}

If a principal applicant is approved for a green card, their *derivatives* (spouses and children) also become eligible for a green card. Derivatives are not exempt from green card limits, so they must be added to the cap-based backlog.

We estimate the number of derivatives by making use of the ratio between principals and derivatives granted LPR status for each preference category, based on data from the DHS 2022 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics. The preference categories are summarized in Figure 1.

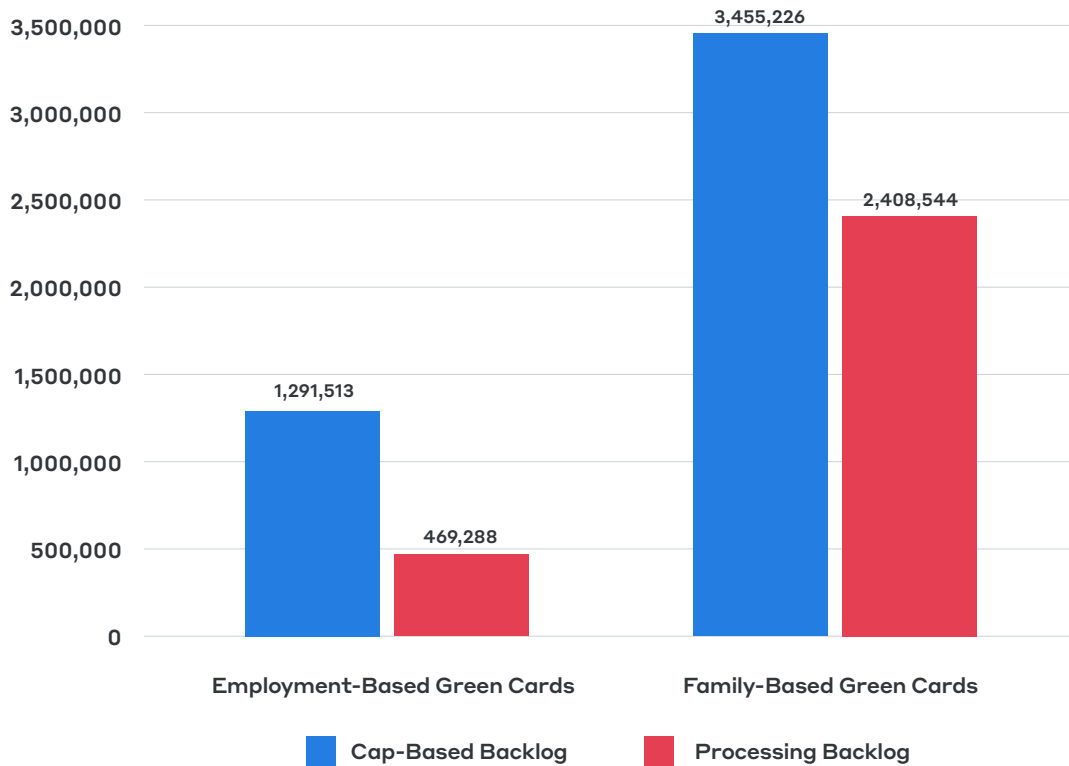
USCIS also provides data as of the end of March 2023 on the number of pending petition forms—in other words, those applications that have not yet been processed.²² This allows us to estimate the size of the processing backlogs for both employment- and family-based green cards. Once again, estimated derivative numbers are added by making use of the DHS 2022 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics.

Figure 2 below summarizes the estimated backlog sizes. The size of the backlogs reaches the millions for both employment- and family-based green cards.

Overall:

- In total, there are 7.6 million individuals in a backlog waiting for green cards.
 - Family-based backlogs account for 5.9 million, and are larger than employment-based backlogs, at 1.8 million.
 - Cap-based backlogs, accounting for 4.7 million, exceed processing backlogs, at 2.9 million.

Figure 2: Estimated Backlog Sizes



Source: BPC calculations using data from DHS.

METHODOLOGY: ESTIMATING THE ECONOMIC BENEFITS OF CLEARING THE BACKLOGS

Our goal is to estimate the 10-year GDP benefits that would be achieved by clearing these backlogs, i.e., if we were able to give a green card this year to everyone who is waiting. We do this by estimating the resulting increases in both the number of workers and worker productivity—both of which are key determinants of economic output.

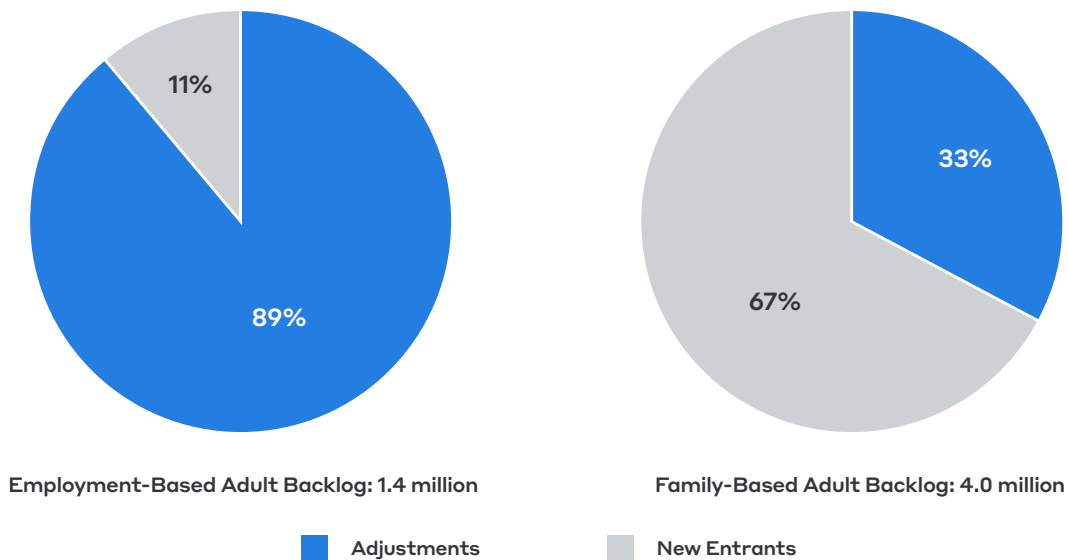
First, we remove children from our backlog figures. While some children are likely to work in the next 10 years, estimating this proportion precisely is outside the scope of this analysis. Notably, removing children reduces the overall backlog by roughly 2.2 million people, from 7.6 million to 5.4 million, and means that our economic impact estimates are likely conservative.

To estimate the economic benefit of clearing the adult backlog, we divide the backlog into *new entrants* and *adjustments of status*. New entrants are those who are currently outside of the United States and so would be able to enter the country upon receiving their green card. Adjustments of status are those who already reside within the United States and so would be adjusting

from temporary to LPR status upon receiving a green card. We estimate the proportion of the backlog that is new entrants vs. adjustments of status for each preference category using data from the DHS 2022 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics, which includes this breakdown for those who received LPR status in 2022.²³

Figure 3 shows the estimated proportion of new entrants and adjustments of status for both employment- and family-based backlogs. While the vast majority (89%) of the employment-based adult backlog would be individuals adjusting from temporary to permanent status upon receiving their green card, a majority (67%) of the family-based adult backlog would be new entrants into the United States.

Figure 3: The Proportion of Backlogs that are New Entrants and Adjustments of Status



Source: BPC calculations using data from DHS.

Economic Benefits of New Entrants

A wealth of research demonstrates the economic benefits of new entrants, particularly high-skilled entrants.²⁴ One key effect is increasing the size of the labor force, which is especially important in the face of today’s sizable labor supply issues, which are set to grow further as the U.S. population ages.^{25,26,27} The other key effect is increasing productivity as new entrants bring vital skills and expose native workers to new forms of knowledge.²⁸

To estimate the GDP benefits that would result from granting green cards to new adult entrants in the backlog, we calculate both the output resulting from new entrants themselves working in the United States *and* the impact they would have on labor productivity across the economy. For the first calculation, we adjust and increase the CBO’s estimated labor force in 2023 by the number of new entrants expected to be granted green cards through clearing the

backlog. We then assume the now-adjusted labor force grows at the CBO's forecasted growth rate until 2033. For the productivity calculation, we utilize both a small and large value estimate (upper- and lower-bound estimates) from the academic literature on the impact of immigration on productivity. These estimates are applied to increase the CBO's "potential labor force productivity" figure for 2023, which we then also assume grows at the CBO's forecasted growth rate through 2033. Next, we measure the "lower-" and "upper-" bound impacts of new entrants on economic output by multiplying the resulting labor force productivity estimates by both the number of workers already in the United States and the number of new entrants.

When determining the increase in the size of the labor force, we assume differing labor force participation rates. We assume that principals receiving employment-based green cards and who are new entrants have a labor force participation rate of 100% over the 10-year period. This is because most employment-based immigrants have an employer sponsoring them or a specific job they are being sponsored to work in. Actual participation is likely to be lower over that time frame for any number of real-life events, but we cannot accurately estimate those for this group. For all other adults, including principal family-based immigrants and both employment-based and family-based derivative adults, we assume the average labor force participation rate for the foreign-born as reported by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS).²⁹ The exclusion of children from the analysis acts to lower our estimated economic impact, even though some of these children are likely to contribute to economic output in the 10-year window. This mitigates the possible overestimation of 100% labor force participation for principal employment-based new entrants.

The "upper" estimate of the impact of new entrants on productivity comes from a 2012 paper by economist Giovanni Peri where he considers differing immigration levels across U.S. states from 1960 to 2006. Peri estimates the resulting impacts on the inputs to production (employment, average hours worked, average skill intensity, and physical capital), on productivity (total factor productivity and the skill bias of productivity), and, through these, on output per worker.³⁰ Peri finds that immigration boosts productivity—with a 1% increase in immigrants as a share of initial employment leading to a 0.47% increase in output per worker.

The "lower" estimate comes from George Borjas, who also considers the effect of new entrants on different U.S. states but uses a different methodology for estimating the impact on economic growth.³¹ Borjas finds that immigration boosts Gross State Product (GSP) but does not find a significant impact on GSP per capita. Borjas' estimated impact is among the most pessimistic in the literature, and so we include it as our lower estimate. We selected the estimates from Borjas and Peri because they are both leading figures in the field of labor economics, and their respective studies have been highly cited by other researchers.

Notably, applying Borjas' and Peri's estimates of the productivity impact of immigration in this case may understate the economic benefits of clearing the current green card backlogs. This is because both studies define net immigration as the change in the number of foreign-born individuals in the United States according to census data, and so include refugees and asylees, which are populations that are not in the backlogs. Instead, the backlogs we are considering comprise employment- and family-based legal immigrants who are likely to have, on average, better English-language ability, more educational experience, better access to family support, and better mental and physical health, all of which will boost their productivity.³² However, in the absence of quantitative research on the different productivity impacts of different categories of immigrants, we use the estimates from Peri and Borjas as the best alternatives.

Economic Benefits of Adjustments of Status

Previous studies that have estimated the economic benefits of granting more green cards, whether by reducing the size of backlogs or recapturing unused green cards, have typically estimated the economic benefits from new entrants only.^{33,34} However, there are also likely to be economic benefits from enabling adjustments from temporary to permanent status for those individuals already within the United States. This is because temporary workers face restrictions that can influence their ability to change jobs, pursue career advancement, or engage in specific types of employment (see appendix). When these immigrants adjust from temporary to LPR status, they can take jobs that are best suited to them and work more productively. Indeed, there is evidence of a considerable spike in voluntary job changes upon receipt of LPR status, with an estimated 20% reduction in mobility during the period an individual is in temporary status but has applied for a green card.³⁵ This suggests that obtaining LPR status can facilitate better matching of foreign-born workers to jobs, improving their productivity.

There are no studies that we are aware of that measure this productivity impact directly. However, some studies estimate the wage impacts of adjusting from temporary to LPR status. According to the marginal revenue productivity theory of wages, an increase in worker productivity should increase the worker's wage (see appendix).³⁶ If this is the case, we can use a worker's increase in wages after adjusting to LPR status as a proxy for their increase in productivity.

Previous research has utilized this theorized link between wages and productivity, including regarding the economic benefits of citizenship for undocumented immigrants.³⁷ In addition, there is empirical evidence for the marginal revenue productivity theory of wages—economist Edward Lazear analyzed data from the United States from 1989 through 2017 and found a remarkably close relationship between wages and productivity.³⁸ Despite this, the marginal revenue productivity theory of wages is not unanimously accepted. For instance, labor markets are not always highly competitive, and

there may be some degree of monopsony power that enables firms to pay workers less than their marginal revenue product. Indeed, if workers face restrictions on job mobility, as we have outlined, some degree of monopsony power may exist.³⁹ For this reason, we think it reasonable to treat any estimate of the impact of adjusting to LPR status on wages as an “upper” estimate of the impact on productivity. We assume that adjustment to LPR status has no productivity impact in our “lower” estimate, an undoubtedly conservative assumption.

There are few recent studies on the impact of adjusting to LPR status on wages. Older studies, some of which estimate very large wage impacts, are not suitable to use because of more recent legislative changes that have increased an individual’s degree of job mobility when waiting to receive a green card (see appendix).⁴⁰ The most appropriate study that investigates the wage boost from adjusting status, conducted by labor economist Xuening Wang, estimates an increase of 4.7%, and only for male workers.⁴¹ While this is a modest increase, we think it important to use this as our upper estimate of the impact of adjustments of status on productivity, to ensure that this impact is accounted for. To account for Wang’s research finding that the wage (and implied productivity effect) is only for men, we assume the backlogs are equally split between men and women and apply this effect to 50% of the adjustments.

RESULTS: GDP AND FISCAL IMPACTS OVER A 10-YEAR HORIZON

Our final results, shown in Table 1, represent GDP gains over 10 years from clearing the backlogs, on top of the CBO’s February 2023 baseline economic forecast from 2023-2033.⁴² Our middle estimate, which is an average of the lower and upper estimates, is that **clearing both employment- and family-based backlogs would increase GDP by \$3.9 trillion over 10 years**. A key assumption is that the U.S. government clears the entire backlog in 2023. This is a hypothetical scenario, but it allows us to understand the scale of the economic impact of clearing the backlog.

Table 1: Economic Benefits Over 10 Years from Clearing Backlogs

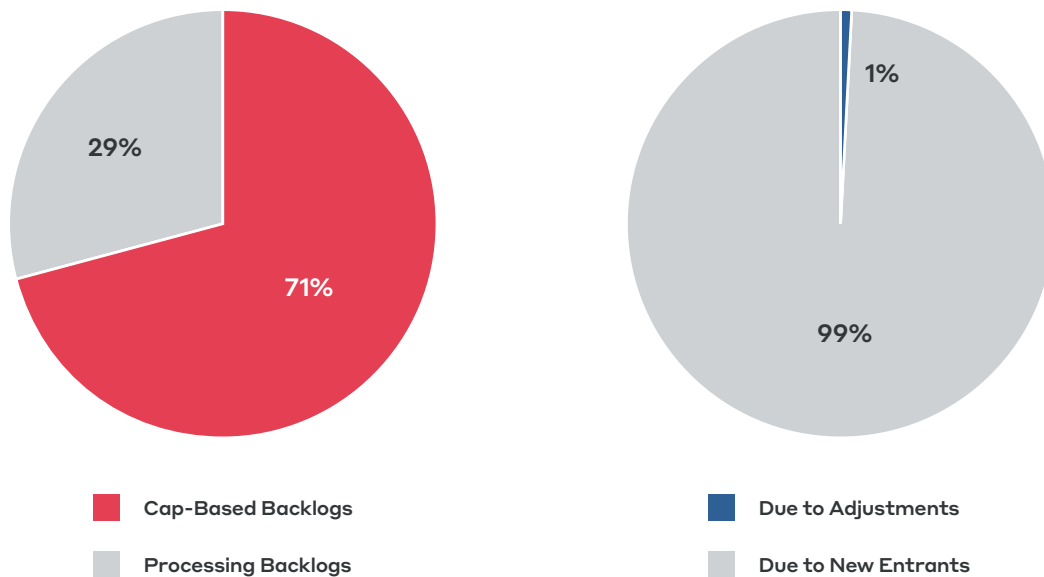
GDP GAINS OVER 10 YEARS			
	Employment-Based	Family-Based	Total
Lower	\$181 billion	\$2.6 trillion	\$2.8 trillion
Middle	\$250 billion	\$3.6 trillion	\$3.9 trillion
Upper	\$319 billion	\$4.6 trillion	\$4.9 trillion

Source: BPC calculations.

Table 1 shows that most of the estimated economic benefit comes from clearing the family-based backlogs. This is not only because the family-based backlog is larger than the employment-based backlog (as shown in Figure 2) but also because clearing the family-based backlog is associated with a greater proportion of new entrants coming into the labor force, as most of these individuals are currently outside of the United States (as shown in Figure 3). However, a limitation of this analysis is that it assumes that new entrants on family-based green cards have the same productivity impact as those entering on employment-based green cards. This is because the literature does not include studies that estimate the productivity impacts resulting from diverse types of immigration. Given that our immigration system sets aside more employment-based visas for those entering with higher levels of skill and education, it is reasonable to assume that employment-based immigration would have larger productivity impacts. Indeed, there is evidence that those who enter on student and work visas are more likely to conduct entrepreneurial and innovative activities than those entering via other visa types.⁴³ In addition, there is evidence that foreign STEM talent has a significant impact on total factor productivity growth in U.S. cities.⁴⁴

Figure 4 provides further breakdowns of the estimated economic benefits of clearing the green card backlogs.

Figure 4: Breakdowns of Economic Impact



Firstly, 71% of the estimated economic benefit comes from clearing the cap-based backlog, with only 29% coming from clearing the processing backlog. This is driven by the larger size of the cap-based backlog.

Interestingly, 99% of the estimated economic benefit comes from new entrants, with only 1% accounted for by adjustments of status. This is because the literature finds only a modest wage boost from adjustments of status. However,

this may underestimate the economic benefit of adjustments of status since some potential effects are not captured. For example, some researchers have conjectured that temporary work status can restrict entrepreneurship as LPR status is required to start a business and can give potential entrepreneurs the confidence to do so knowing that the United States will be their long-term home.^{45,46}

We can also use the estimated productivity increases from clearing the backlogs to estimate the impact on the federal deficit. The CBO's "Rules of Thumb" provides a calculator for converting a change in productivity growth relative to their February 2023 baseline into a net change in the deficit.⁴⁷ Clearing the backlog suggests an increase in annual productivity growth from 2023-2033 of 0.04 percentage points each year, resulting in an estimated \$125 billion reduction in the deficit over 10 years.

Geographic Distribution of Economic Benefits

To conclude the analysis, we estimate the distribution of the estimated economic benefits across U.S. states. This can help us understand the distributional effects of clearing green card backlogs and to what extent wealthier or less affluent areas of the country would benefit.

We apportion the total employment- and family-based backlogs to U.S. states using data from DHS on the number of family-based and employment-based green cards granted for each state in 2022.⁴⁸ These estimated state backlogs are then broken down into adjustments and new entrants using data from the DHS 2022 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics on the overall ratio between adjustments and new entrants across all states.⁴⁹ Finally, total GDP impacts are apportioned to each state using the average benefit for an adjustment of status or a new entrant.

Figure 5 shows the total economic benefit enjoyed by each U.S. state, with a darker shade indicating a larger benefit. The economic benefit is somewhat concentrated in states with larger immigrant populations rather than being evenly distributed across the U.S. See the appendix for a full summary of the total benefit that goes to each state.

Figure 5: Distribution of Total Economic Benefit From Clearing Green Card Backlogs Across States and Territories (\$ Billions of GDP Gains Over 10 Years)

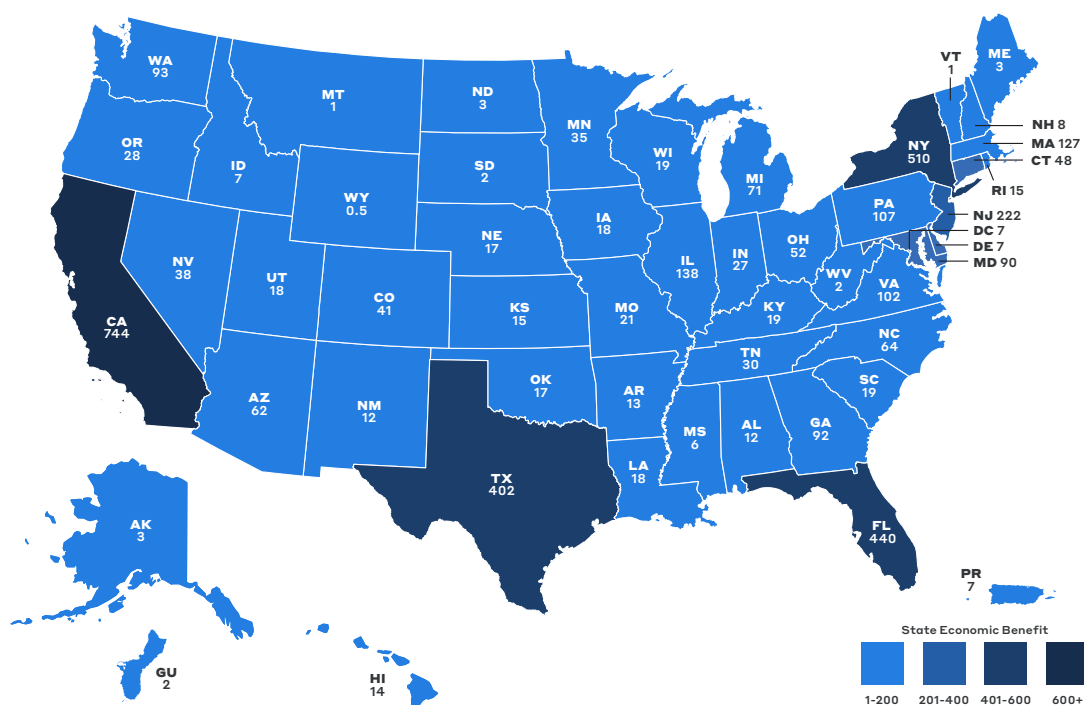


Table 2 shows the five states that enjoy the greatest economic benefits from clearing green card backlogs, which are also the five states with the largest immigrant populations.⁵⁰ California experiences the greatest economic benefit of any state, with 19% of the total benefit. New York, Florida, and Texas all receive about the same proportion of benefits, at 13%, 11%, and 10%, respectively. This is followed by New Jersey with 6%, and then all other states, which cumulatively make up 40% of the benefit.

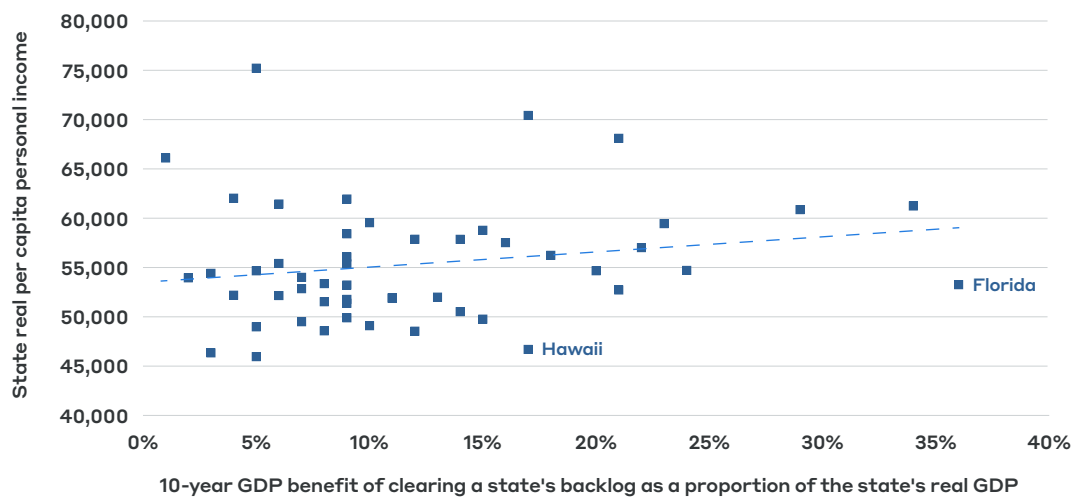
Table 2: Five States with the Largest Economic Benefit from Clearing Green Card Backlogs

State	Total Benefits (GDP Gains Over 10 Years)	Proportion of Benefits
California	\$ 744 billion	19%
New York	\$ 510 billion	13%
Florida	\$ 440 billion	11%
Texas	\$ 402 billion	10%
New Jersey	\$ 222 billion	6%

Source: BPC calculations using DHS data.

It may be the case that these states enjoy most of the benefit *and* that this benefit is a relatively small proportion of their economy. To evaluate if wealthier states benefit the most from clearing green card backlogs, Figure 6 below shows a scatter plot of a state’s real per capita personal income against the 10-year economic benefit from clearing a state’s green card backlog as a proportion of state real GDP.

Figure 6: Relationship Between the Benefit of Clearing a State’s Backlog and How Well-Off a State’s Citizens are



Note: State economic data from the Bureau of Economic Analysis. State real GDP is for 2022 and state real per capita personal income is for 2021.

There is a slight tendency for wealthier states to benefit more from clearing green card backlogs, as shown by the upward-sloping trend line. However, certain states are relatively less well-off in terms of per capita GDP but benefit relatively more from clearing green card backlogs. As shown in Figure 5, these include Florida and Hawaii.

Conclusion and Policy Implications

The analysis conducted in this report uncovers several policy-relevant findings. Firstly, clearing green card backlogs would result in trillions of dollars in GDP gains over 10 years, primarily driven by the new immigrants entering the country. This highlights the considerable importance of policy change to clear these backlogs.

Most of the estimated economic benefit comes from clearing cap-based backlogs, as these are larger than processing backlogs. This underlines the importance of legislative changes that alter green card limits, as has been proposed in various pieces of legislation currently pending in Congress.⁵¹ It should be noted that altering green card limits would reduce both current and future backlogs, and so is likely to have even greater economic benefits than the numbers presented in this report. Even so, policy changes that focus on clearing current backlogs may be more tractable in the short run. For example, proposals to recapture unused green cards are gaining support in Congress, as shown by various relevant bills introduced in recent years, such as the bipartisan Eliminating Backlogs Act of 2023 and the U.S. Citizenship Act.⁵²

It is also important to note that legislation that alters green card limits would not, by itself, necessarily reduce cap-based backlogs while processing backlogs continue to exist. Indeed, our supposition that the entire backlog would be cleared in one year is fairly unreasonable at the current level of resources at the agencies that process these applications. Any attempt to reduce cap-based backlogs will also require increased resources and/or efficiency improvements for visa processing, as in the Visa Processing Improvement Act.^{53,54} A simple estimate of the budgetary impact of clearing the backlogs suggests that deficits would be reduced by \$125 billion over 10 years, showing that, while scaling up resources to clear backlogs would cost some money, it would also result in a positive budgetary return. Previous research on this topic suggests the benefit exceeds the cost.⁵⁵

While this report finds that the majority of the economic benefit from clearing green card backlogs comes from new entrants, it also finds a positive economic impact from enabling adjustments of status, something that has been largely ignored in previous studies. This benefit arises due to the job immobility individuals face while on temporary status, meaning that any legislative change to increase this mobility would have clear economic benefits. BPC previously found bipartisan support for reducing the transaction cost for workers on temporary status to change jobs and steps to make this process easier for workers.⁵⁶

Finally, our analysis of the geographic distribution of the economic benefits shows that there is a slight tendency for wealthier states to benefit more from clearing backlogs. Policies that help direct those entering the United States on immigrant and non-immigrant visas to less well-off states could help reduce economic inequality between states. This could be achieved through decentralized state-based systems that allow states or local governments to sponsor foreign-born workers based on local labor needs.⁵⁷ Such policies could also boost U.S. competitiveness by ensuring that place-based investment programs, such as regional innovation and technology hubs, can access the skilled talent they need.⁵⁸

Further research could be built on the analysis of this report. Academic research on the productivity impacts of distinct types of immigration, such as different immigrant skill levels, industries, or categories of entry, would allow for a more accurate estimation of the economic impacts of clearing backlogs. We expect such research would increase the estimates of clearing the backlogs, and particularly the employment-based backlogs given the relatively high skill levels of these individuals.⁵⁹ In addition, other economic benefits could be accounted for in future work. For example, it has been suggested that delays in obtaining green cards can deter immigration, including reducing the number of Chinese and Indian Ph.D. graduates from U.S. STEM programs.⁶⁰ The loss of such highly skilled talent has significant economic costs that may be possible to quantify. Additional economic benefits from enabling adjustments from temporary to permanent immigration status, such as boosting entrepreneurship, could also be incorporated into future analyses.

Appendix

LABOR MOBILITY RESTRICTIONS AND JOB PORTABILITY CHANGES

Temporary workers face certain limitations on the jobs they can take, including when they are applying for LPR status. These limitations are not as restrictive as they once were. While it used to be the case that temporary workers were tied to specific employers, Congress in 2000 enacted the American Competitiveness in the Twenty-First Century Act (AC21), which enabled some flexibility for temporary workers seeking LPR status to change jobs.⁶¹ Specifically, beneficiaries of an approved employment-based immigrant visa petition in the 1st, 2nd, or 3rd preference categories could transfer, or “port,” to a qualifying new job offer in the “same or a similar occupational classification” as the job offer for which the petition was filed.

Despite this change, temporary workers still face restrictions, for example in changing the field they work in, and may feel reluctant to leave an employer who has sponsored them for permanent residence for fear of negative consequences.

THE MARGINAL REVENUE PRODUCTIVITY THEORY OF WAGES

The logic of the marginal revenue productivity theory of wages is that a firm would not pay a worker more than the revenue they earn for the firm (their marginal revenue product), as employing this worker would then result in a net loss. On the other hand, in a competitive labor market, a firm would not be able to pay a worker less than their marginal revenue product as it would be in the interest of another firm to pay slightly more to hire that worker. Therefore, assuming a competitive labor market, firms will pay workers their marginal revenue product and any increases in worker productivity will be matched by a proportionate increase in the worker’s wage.

TOTAL ECONOMIC BENEFIT FROM CLEARING GREEN CARD BACKLOGS ACROSS STATES AND TERRITORIES

State / Territory	Total Benefits (GDP Gains Over 10 Years)	Proportion of Benefits	10-Year GDP Gain as a Proportion of the State's Real GDP
California	\$ 744 billion	19%	23%
New York	\$ 510 billion	13%	29%
Florida	\$ 440 billion	11%	36%
Texas	\$ 402 billion	10%	21%
New Jersey	\$ 222 billion	6%	34%
Illinois	\$ 138 billion	4%	16%
Massachusetts	\$ 127 billion	3%	21%
Pennsylvania	\$ 107 billion	3%	14%
Virginia	\$ 102 billion	3%	18%
Washington	\$ 93 billion	2%	15%
Georgia	\$ 92 billion	2%	14%
Maryland	\$ 90 billion	2%	22%
Michigan	\$ 71 billion	2%	13%
North Carolina	\$ 64 billion	2%	11%
Arizona	\$ 62 billion	2%	15%
Ohio	\$ 52 billion	1%	8%
Connecticut	\$ 48 billion	1%	17%
Colorado	\$ 41 billion	1%	10%
Nevada	\$ 38 billion	1%	20%
Minnesota	\$ 35 billion	1%	9%
Tennessee	\$ 30 billion	1%	7%
Oregon	\$ 28 billion	1%	11%
Indiana	\$ 27 billion	1%	7%
Missouri	\$ 21 billion	1%	6%
Kentucky	\$ 19 billion	0.5%	9%
South Carolina	\$ 19 billion	0.5%	8%
Wisconsin	\$ 19 billion	0.5%	6%
Utah	\$ 18 billion	0.5%	9%
Louisiana	\$ 18 billion	0.5%	8%
Iowa	\$ 18 billion	0.5%	9%
Oklahoma	\$ 17 billion	0.4%	9%
Nebraska	\$ 17 billion	0.4%	12%
Kansas	\$ 15 billion	0.4%	9%
Rhode Island	\$ 15 billion	0.4%	24%
Hawaii	\$ 14 billion	0.4%	17%

State / Territory	Total Benefits (GDP Gains Over 10 Years)	Proportion of Benefits	10-Year GDP Gain as a Proportion of the State's Real GDP
Arkansas	\$ 13 billion	0.3%	10%
Alabama	\$ 12 billion	0.3%	5%
New Mexico	\$ 12 billion	0.3%	12%
New Hampshire	\$ 8 billion	0.2%	9%
Puerto Rico	\$ 7 billion	0.2%	-
District of Columbia	\$ 7 billion	0.2%	5%
Delaware	\$ 7 billion	0.2%	9%
Idaho	\$ 7 billion	0.2%	7%
Mississippi	\$ 6 billion	0.2%	5%
Maine	\$ 3 billion	0.1%	4%
North Dakota	\$ 3 billion	0.1%	6%
Alaska	\$ 3 billion	0.1%	5%
South Dakota	\$ 2 billion	0.1%	4%
West Virginia	\$ 2 billion	0.1%	3%
Guam	\$ 2 billion	0.1%	-
Montana	\$ 1 billion	0.0%	2%
Vermont	\$ 1 billion	0.0%	3%
Wyoming	\$ 480 million	0.0%	1%

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