



Immigration in the United States

Deliberation Issue Guide

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What is Deliberation?

In a deliberation, people gather to discuss possible approaches to complex problems.

Participants bring their unique values and goals, recognizing how each person’s experience may inform their analysis of approaches to a problem.

Deliberation is not about finding a “solution,” but rather exploring various potential strategies, weighing costs and benefits, and building connections with other participants.



A Deliberation Process

Deliberations are flexible, but they follow a general pattern that helps to keep conversation flowing and ensures that all approaches are considered.

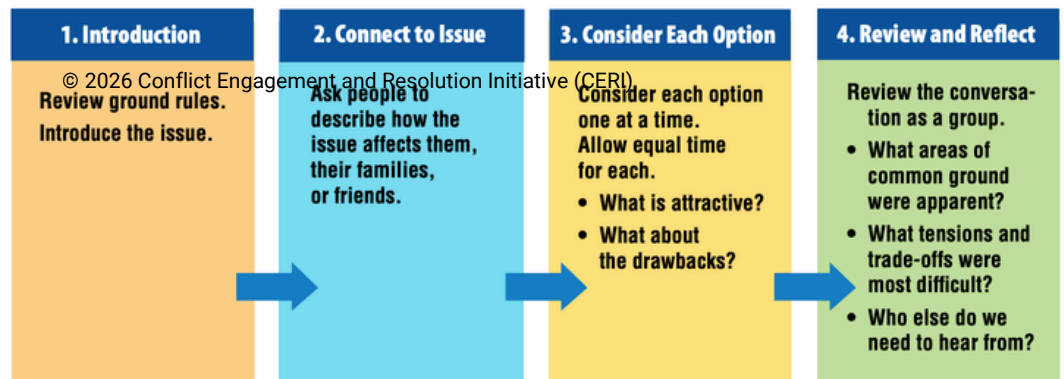


Figure 1. Stages of Deliberation. Source: National Issue Forums. *Immigration: Who should we welcome? What should be done?* National Issue Forums. (2020)

Ground Rules

Consider all approaches carefully

Seek to build a respectful atmosphere

Listen to understand

It's okay to disagree, but do so with curiosity, not hostility

Be brief and allow others to participate, no one should dominate

Consider both national and local actions that we can take

About this Issue Guide



Almost every American is impacted by immigration. This guide is intended to encourage thoughtful discussion about how we should approach this complex topic. The five perspectives outlined here present different ways of understanding the challenges involved, pushing us to consider what matters most when addressing difficult issues that lack simple solutions. Please read it through to the end, as new information is introduced under each Approach.

As presidential administrations change our leaders' attitudes and policies towards immigration change drastically. As President Trump begins his second term in office, longstanding norms and policies around immigration are being reconsidered. In this moment of uncertainty, it is vital that we carefully consider the issue.

Questions that we face around immigration include:

- Should we try to decrease immigration? Or should we welcome newcomers?
- Should we deport those living here without authorization, or do the consequences of removing millions of people outweigh legal violations?
- Should we welcome more immigrants to create a more dynamic and diverse society, or does this threaten national unity?
- Should we open our doors to more refugees and asylum seekers fleeing violence and war, or should we be cautious about admitting these individuals?
- Should we add or reinterpret laws in order to tighten security, or does doing so threaten basic principles of freedom?

These questions are not rooted in political parties. To answer them, we must look beyond the categories of “conservative” or “liberal.”

The development of this guide involved extensive research, including policy analysis, surveys of news sources and social media communications, reviews of nonpartisan public opinion data, and analysis of scholarly research. Development took place in 2024, inspired by the National Issues Forum's (2020) Guide to Immigration.

Introduction

Newcomers have flocked to the United States since before its founding as a nation. Throughout the 1800's, migrants from Europe journeyed across the Atlantic, drawn by the promise of religious freedom and prosperity. They were followed in the early 1900s by people from Russia, Mexico, China, Japan, and the Middle East. The height of immigration occurred in the mid to late 19th Century when political instability and famine drove countless people from all continents to American shores, and many others were brought without a choice **[1]**.

Although immigration transformed the American labor force, economy, and culture, it was not the political issue that it is today until the late 1800s, when a series of laws restricted who was able to legally immigrate to the United States **[2]**. Bans were placed on criminals, people suspected of having a disease, anarchists, poor people, and people of Asian descent. Immigration from Eastern Europe, Southern Europe, and Africa was limited as well. These restrictions reflected social anxieties and nativist sentiments. People saw some immigrants as threats to American culture and jobs. The Great Depression further intensified these fears and immigration controls became stricter **[3]**.

The political debate around immigration changed significantly in 1965 when the Immigration and Nationality Act eliminated racial quotas and created a new system that prioritized family reunification and skilled immigrants **[4]**. Since the 1960s, debates about who should be admitted to the United States have taken a central role on the political stage.

In 1982, the Reagan administration dramatically increased border enforcement, but also legalized large swaths of previously unregulated migration into the United States. The Act provided legal protection for people who came into the country for seasonal work and created a path to citizenship for many undocumented immigrants. President Reagan also decreased deportations, especially for children.

Except for President Obama's Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program (DACA), policies since 1990 have tended to favor border control, prioritizing law enforcement and restricting admission to the country. Most significantly, The 1996 Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act dramatically increased border security, expanded deportable offenses, imposed stricter penalties for undocumented presence, restricted access to public benefits for immigrants, and made it harder for asylum seekers and those seeking legal status to enter the country **[5]**. A few years later, congress ended a policy that had allowed undocumented immigrants to apply for citizenship. The path to citizenship that had been open to past generations of immigrants was suddenly closed **[6]**. After 9/11, surveillance expanded, visa screening tightened, and immigration enforcement increased further. Immigration enforcement was also transferred to the newly created Department of Homeland Security (DHS)**[7]**. The Obama, Trump, and Biden administrations further restricted unlawful immigration, either by deporting hundreds of thousands of undocumented people living in the United States, decreasing refugee quotas, or both.

Who is an immigrant?

According to the United States Government, an immigrant is anyone who legally lives in the United States and is not a United States citizen [8]. This includes people who hold visas, green cards, and lawful permanent resident status. The term “immigrant” does not include people who are now American citizens but were not at the time of their birth. The term “foreign-born” is used by the government to describe immigrants and former immigrants who are now citizens. Others may use these terms interchangeably.

How many foreign-born people are there in the United States?

As of 2023, roughly 47.8 million foreign-born people were living in the U.S., this is roughly 14%, which is higher than almost any point in US history (see Figure 3) [9].

How does the government determine who to admit to the United States?

1. **Family reunification:** Roughly 80 percent of green cards are given to family members of US citizens and American employees.
2. **Employment-based Immigration:** Some green cards are available each year for immigrants who are moving to the United States to work. Almost all immigrants who are coming to the United States to work must have an employer who will sponsor them for a visa, such as an H-2A visa for temporary agricultural workers and an H-2B visa for non-agricultural workers.
3. **Humanitarian relief:** People who have experienced persecution in their home country and can demonstrate that they have a “well-founded fear” that they will be persecuted upon their return can apply for refugee status or asylum [10]. Asylum is granted to people who are already in the United States, while refugee status is provided to people who are vetted abroad or upon arrival and are approved for resettlement. Resettled refugees and those granted asylum can apply for a green card [11]. In 2023, less than 0.2% of American immigrants were refugees [12].

Who is an undocumented immigrant?

The term undocumented immigrant refers to people who live in the United States without the legal right to do so. Entering or staying in the United States without documents may violate the law, depending on a person’s legal status. The government uses the terms “undocumented noncitizen,” “undocumented non-U.S. citizen,” or “undocumented individual” to refer to people in this group [13]. Some people also use the term “unauthorized immigrant” to describe this group.

What is DACA?

People brought into the country as young children may be protected by DACA [14]. DACA stands for Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals Program. President Obama signed this executive order in 2012. DACA allows people to seek temporary protection from deportation and to be able to work. However, maintaining DACA protections requires re-applying every two years, and the program is currently closed to new applicants due to legal battles.

How many undocumented noncitizens are there in the United States?

As of 2022, 11 million unauthorized immigrants lived in the United States. This group comprises 23% of the foreign-born population [15]. Of that 23%, roughly half (45%) entered the country legally with visas. They then stayed longer than their visas permitted, making them undocumented immigrants [16].

Has the proportion of immigrants in the United States increased?

It depends on how far back into history we look. In 1890, the proportion of foreign-born American residents peaked at 14.8 percent. By 1970, it had fallen to just 4.7 percent. In 2022, about 13.6 percent of the U.S. population was foreign-born. So, the current proportion of immigrants in the United States has increased since 1970 but decreased since 1890 [17].

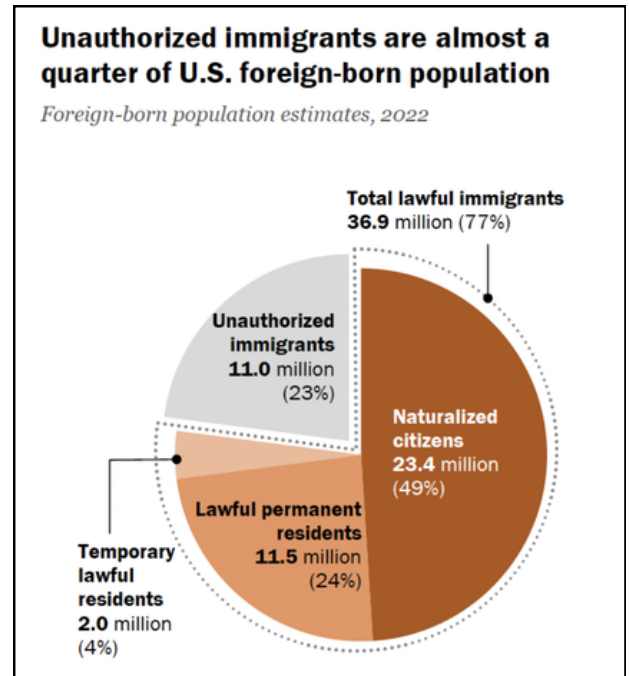


Figure 2. Unauthorized Immigrants. Source: Pew Research. "Unauthorized Immigrants are almost a quarter of the US Foreign-born Population" (2024)

Immigrant share of the U.S. population, 1850-2023

% of U.S. population that is foreign born

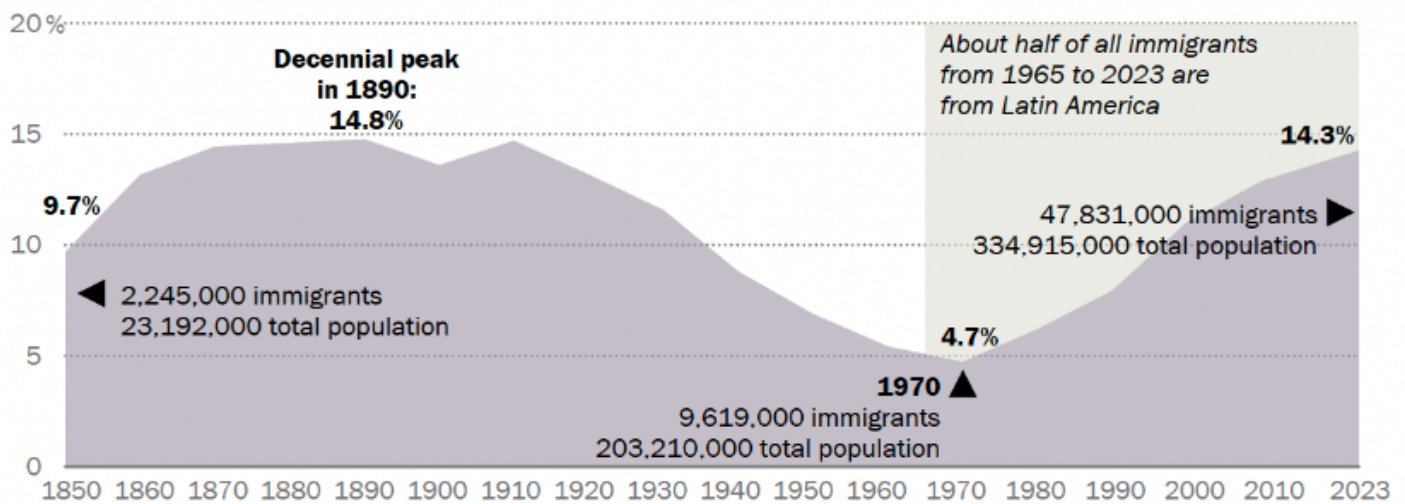


Figure 3. Graph of Immigrant share of U.S. Population. Source: Pew Research, "Immigrant Share of the US Population 1850-2023," (2024)

Immigration impacts all Americans. While some towns and cities flourish with vibrant populations of newcomers, others face challenges in accommodating them. As communities across the United States grapple with immigration, birth rates are falling. Without immigration, the American population will begin shrinking by 2030 **[18]**. Employers have constantly imported high and low-skilled workers alike to fill domestic labor shortages. These dynamics, among others, shape ongoing debates over immigration:

- Is it possible to limit immigration through border control?
- Should we limit immigration into the United States? If so, how can we slow immigration without hurting key industries?
- Is undocumented immigration a problem? If so, how should we address it?
- How can we respect asylum claims without overwhelming the immigration system?
- How does immigration impact economic growth and job security?

This issue guide helps us grapple with these challenging questions. It provides a framework that allows us to think carefully about when and how we should welcome newcomers into the United States.

It presents five approaches, each based on a different understanding of the issue. Every policy approach includes several actions and drawbacks.

No one approach is “right”. Each is supported by academics, politicians, and policy-makers and each has risks and drawbacks associated with it. We must consider these approaches along with their trade-offs, if we are to create a just and stable immigration system that reflects our values.

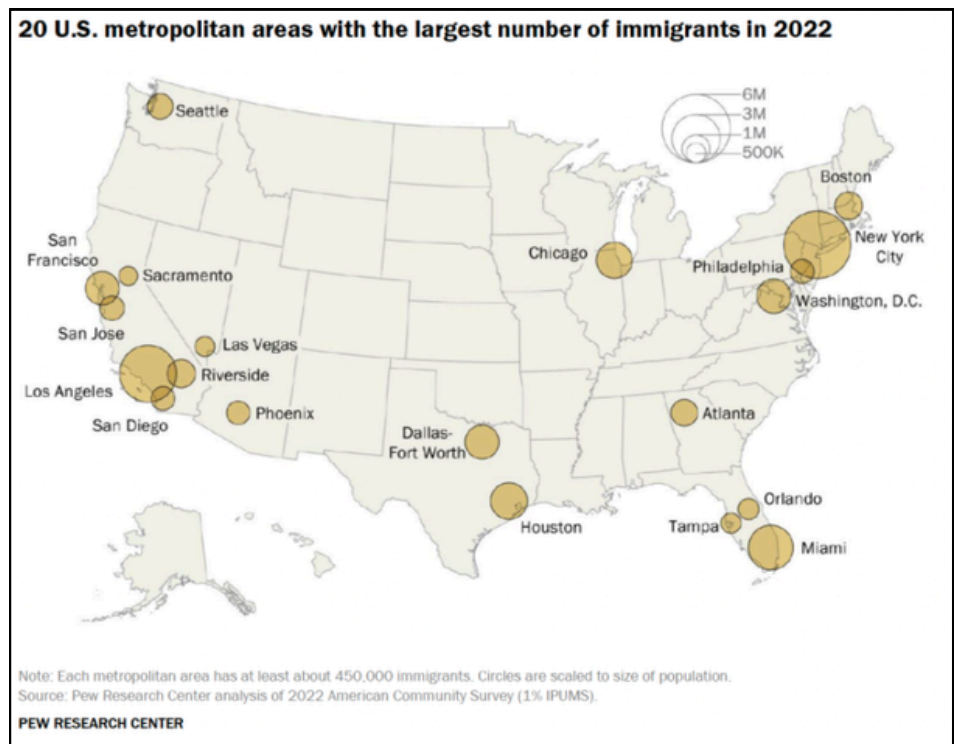


Figure 4. U.S. Metropolitan areas with the largest number of immigrants. Source: Pew Research. “Metropolitan areas with the largest number of Immigrants in 2022” (2023)

Approach 1:

Welcome Newcomers; Improve Legal Pathways

Migration is a key foundation of the United States and a distinctive feature of its development. Waves of migration have provided labor for agriculture, industry, and infrastructure projects, helping to fuel the country's expansion and industrialization. Immigrants have brought with them different traditions, languages, cuisines, religions, and perspectives, enriching American culture.

The U.S. has historically been a beacon of hope for those fleeing persecution, poverty, and war. From welcoming refugees after World War II to offering sanctuary to people escaping totalitarian regimes during the Cold War, the U.S. has played a prominent role in providing asylum and resettling refugees. The Refugee Act of 1980 aligned U.S. law with international standards established by the 1951 UN Refugee Convention and legally bound the United States to hear every asylum claim [19]. The Refugee Act created a formal legal framework for processing asylum claims, allowing individuals physically present in the U.S. or arriving at its borders to apply for asylum. Welcoming migrants and refugees aligns with the ideals of freedom and democracy that the United States was built upon. Modern migration now helps maintain demographic growth and offset declining birth rates and an aging population.

However, modern immigration laws deprive many immigrants of basic rights, subjecting them to long-term detention without hearings, access to legal representation, or family contact, which weakens constitutional protections for everyone. Additionally, many undocumented migrants residing in the United States are left in legal limbo, in which they lack certain legal protections and are criminalized through their migration status. This approach aims to create a more humane and functional immigration system by expanding legal pathways for long-term migrants residing inside and outside the United States. The United States would continue hearing every asylum case while also expanding legal pathways to help alleviate an overwhelmed and outdated migration system. This policy approach focuses on upholding the fundamental rights of migrants by respecting U.S. law, maintaining due process, judicial review, and fairness in the immigration system. More legalization paths would support undocumented migrants stuck in legal limbo and alleviate the asylum system.

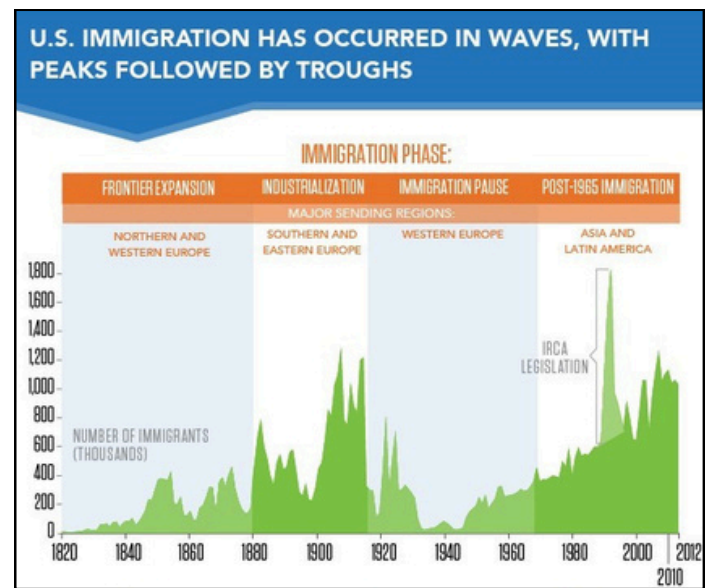


Figure 5. Waves of Migration. Source: Martin, Philip. 2013. *Global Migration: Demographic Aspects and Its Relevance for Development*. Population Bulletin 68(2). Washington, DC: Population Reference Bureau.

What should we do?

Respect all asylum claims: Withdraw harmful bans that block access to asylum based on manner of entry and ensure all qualifying asylum claims are respected. This approach states that as long as asylum seekers surrender themselves to immigration authorities and claim asylum, they should have the right to explain their case and provide evidence demonstrating that they have suffered persecution on account of a protected ground in the past and/or that they have a “well-founded fear” of future persecution in their home country. Respecting all asylum claims not only complies with internal laws we are bound to but also promotes the human rights of refugees seeking asylum.

More legal pathways for migration: One of the main drivers of illegal migration is the lack of accessible, legal pathways for people seeking economic opportunities abroad. Short-term seasonal migration programs create a structured and predictable option for individuals who might otherwise resort to risky and irregular methods of migration. Many industries, particularly agriculture, hospitality, and construction, face acute seasonal labor shortages. These sectors often require temporary workers during peak seasons, which local labor forces cannot always meet. Short-term migration programs enable businesses to access a reliable and flexible workforce, ensuring economic stability and preventing losses due to unmet labor demands. Seasonal migration programs offer economic benefits to migrants from low-income countries. By participating in such programs, migrants can earn higher wages than in their home countries, which they can send back to support their families.

A clear path to legal residency status for undocumented immigrants in the United States: Congress should implement a policy that provides a path for permanent legal status for undocumented immigrants who have not committed serious crimes. They should create a permanent legalization process for immigrants who have lived in the U.S. for at least 10 years. Congress should eliminate the penalties imposed on undocumented immigrants who aim to adjust their status through legal channels, such as family or employer sponsorship. This action would allow undocumented immigrants to secure permanent legal residency without pursuing citizenship. This status would be more affordable and less time-consuming. It would not include the right to vote or other citizenship privileges. A new legalization program would officially bring more than 5% of workers under labor law protections. As a result, they would see wage increases, spend more within the U.S., and make regular contributions to taxes.

Establishment of an Independent Immigration Court System: Because the Immigration Court is managed through the Department of Justice, it is potentially subject to delays and political influences. Migrants oftentimes wait years to have their cases heard. The delays postpone decisions for vulnerable populations who may be eligible for protections, such as asylum. Currently, many immigrants, including children, must navigate immigration court without legal representation, often resulting in unfair rulings. To ensure a fairer and more efficient process, Congress should restructure the immigration court system by creating an independent federal immigration court system, similar to independent courts that now exist for taxes, international trade, and veterans claims. This change would reduce case backlogs, improve efficiency, and strengthen public trust in the system. An independent immigration court would also include a dedicated public defender's office to provide legal representation for low-income immigrants facing deportation, ensuring that due process and fairness are upheld.

Tradeoffs & Drawbacks

Major reforms would need additional funding and a revamp of the system: The need to process applications, verify documentation, and ensure compliance with the new regulations represents a significant financial commitment.

Legal changes may strain integrating migrants into communities: A broad amnesty could overwhelm social systems, as they may not be prepared to meet the sudden demands for housing, education, and healthcare services

Security concerns may go unaddressed: If asylum processing is overwhelmed, it might delay or limit background checks, making it difficult to track individuals who may pose a threat to public safety.

System gaps may be exacerbated: Each agency and organization—from immigration services to healthcare and housing—faces increased demand, which can expose inefficiencies and lead to backlogs in the system, and reveal gaps in communication and organization.

Approach 2:

Enforce the Law; Be Fair to Those Who Follow the Rules

This approach aims to ensure that current immigration laws are being followed and enforced so that those who enter the country illegally are held accountable for their violation. People who legally immigrate to the United States contribute to the country by stimulating the economy through their hard work and spending, as well as enriching American culture through the practices and experiences they bring with them. However, overwhelming numbers of undocumented immigrants entering the country have caused many Americans to forget or ignore these contributions and instead associate immigration with illegal activity and a strain on the job market.

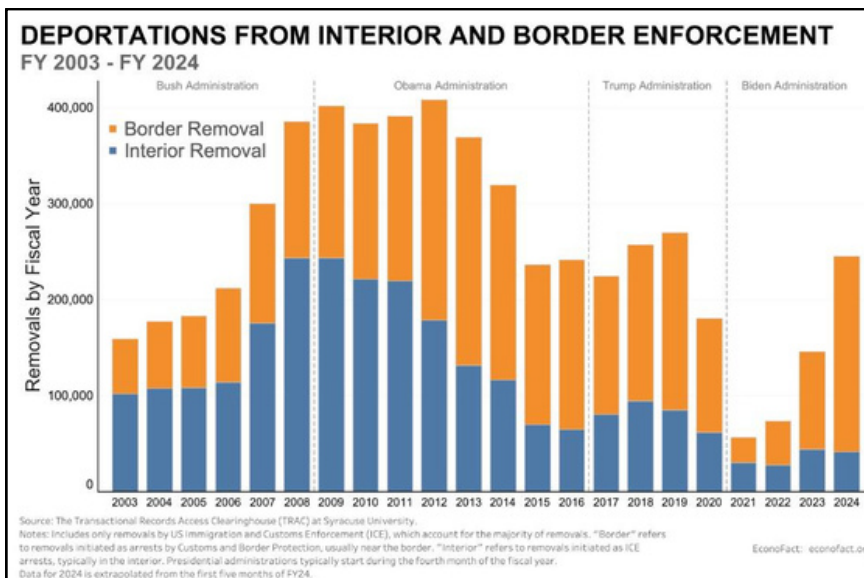


Figure 6. Deportations from Interior and Border Enforcement. Source: Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse (TRAC) at Syracuse University.

Additionally, the Department of Homeland Security has had to make changes to its budget and where its focus lies to prioritize deterring illegal immigration. As a result, millions of people have had to wait to enter the country through legal means while others have taken advantage of the system and circumvent the law to live in the United States illegally. Currently, the wait to gain a green card from countries with many applicants can be decades.

By the end of 2023, “the number of applicants waiting for decisions on asylum claims increased by about 1 million” [20]. Meanwhile, 11 million unauthorized immigrants were living in the United States, according to Pew Research [21]. This policy approach seeks to address the problem of illegal immigration by enforcing clear and just laws that control illegal immigration while being fair to those who enter the country legally. To increase the fairness of immigration to the United States, we must focus on tightening security at the U.S.– Mexico border, work harder to identify and deport immigrants who are in the country without valid documentation and reduce incentives to enter and stay in the country illegally.

What should we do?

Get Tough on Undocumented Immigrants: According to this approach, we must work harder to identify and deport undocumented immigrants. One of the approaches to handling undocumented immigrants in the U.S. deputizes local police officers and National Guard soldiers to perform ICE deportation procedures. Additionally, existing laws such as the 1996 Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act and the Alien Enemies Act of 1798 could be used to deny due process to undocumented immigrants suspected of gang and cartel involvement, hastening their deportation. To handle the burden of deportation on ICE facilities, this approach would call for budget redistribution to increase the capacity of ICE detention centers.

Tighten Security at the U.S.–Mexico Border: The number of border encounters, or migrants who cross the southern border into the U.S. without authorization, decreased by 77% between December 2023 and August 2024. This can be attributed to policy changes, including President Biden’s executive order limiting asylum for migrants who enter the country illegally. Additionally, there has been an “unprecedented level of cooperation between the U.S. and Mexico” to decrease border crossings [22]. The decrease in border encounters in light of these moves indicates that enforcing the law is a successful and beneficial way to handle the crisis at the border. This approach would continue to strengthen border security by requiring immigrants entering the United States via the southern border to remain in Mexico while waiting for U.S. immigration courts to process their claims. Additionally, this approach would call for the continuance of the construction of a border wall in order to deter the illegal crossing of immigrants at the U.S.– Mexico Border.

Enforce Employment Authorization: In 2022, Pew reported that unauthorized immigrants made up about 4.8% of the workforce [23]. The New York Times also reported that “undocumented immigrants are overrepresented in low-skilled jobs such as farming, construction, and child care” [24]. Despite requirements for employers to “verify the identity and employment authorization” of anyone they hire, undocumented workers are still slipping through the cracks. These gaps are partially because the Immigration Reform and Control Act – which made it illegal for employers to *knowingly* hire undocumented immigrants – provides some leeway through the “knowingly” loophole. This loophole has led many employers to rely on subcontracting and day labor so they can use the labor of undocumented immigrants while leaving room for reasonable doubt.

This approach suggests that we should require employers to use E-Verify when hiring new employees. E-Verify uses data from the Department of Homeland Security and the Social Security Administration to verify potential employees’ work authorizations. By mandating this

program, it would become harder for undocumented immigrants to find work, helping to deter illegal immigration.

Make The Legal Immigration Process More Efficient: Due to the backlog of applications for United States visas and green cards, wait times for those trying to live in the country as legal immigrants can be anywhere from a week to 20 years. Wait times also vary by country of origin due to country limits, resulting in higher wait times for immigrants from countries such as India, Mexico, and the Philippines. Delays encourage going around the system. To encourage the use of legal pathways to immigration, more resources could be reallocated to the screening of immigration applications. Additionally, we should abolish country limits and eliminate extremely high wait times based on nationality. Finally, spouses and children of primary applicants should not have separate application reviews that lengthen wait times and use up capacities. By removing some barriers, legal immigration becomes simpler, and many reasons for illegal immigration become defunct.

Tradeoffs & Drawbacks

Harmful to families and children: Many families in the United States have at least one member who is undocumented. The enforcement – or threat of enforcement – of deportation and the risk of separation of parent and child has been shown to cause a significant amount of psychological distress, especially in children. This may surface as depression, anxiety, or PTSD and often results in behavioral issues.

High economic cost: In order to increase the enforcement and detainment capacities of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), money would have to be found and allocated to these agencies. This means the federal budget would need to undergo a major overhaul and/or the federal government would need to increase taxes.

Loss of workers could harm the economy and United States infrastructure: In 2022, there were an estimated 8.3 million undocumented immigrants in the workforce; most of these workers were reported to work in the construction and farming industries [25]. If undocumented immigrants are barred from working either due to deportation or employers' inability to hire them, the United States risks a scarcity of workers in two industries that Americans heavily rely on every day.

Approach 3:

Slow Down; Integrate Communities

Rapid population growth driven by immigration can stretch public services, including healthcare, education, housing, and social welfare programs. Schools may become overcrowded, healthcare facilities may deal with a higher flow of patients, and affordable housing may become even more strained. A sudden influx of migrants can heavily impact labor markets, especially in lower-wage sectors, where increased job competition can push down wages, particularly affecting workers in economically distressed communities.

Immigration drives demographic shifts in the U.S. by increasing racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity while also slowing population aging through younger migrant populations. These changes can lead to cultural transformations, influencing traditions, language use, and social norms. Some Americans worry about the perceived loss of national identity, challenges in social integration, and tensions over differing values, contributing to debates on assimilation and multiculturalism. Immigrants may pose a risk to the security of elections, and lowering the rate of migration may ease concerns regarding political and electoral influence.

Slowing down immigration can give local governments, federal agencies, and relevant organizations time to expand infrastructure and public services to meet the needs of both new arrivals and existing residents. A gradual immigration process can help mitigate the challenges of cultural integration and resource strains. Slowing the pace of immigration gives society more time to adapt to cultural diversity, fostering smoother social integration. Integration programs such as language learning, job training, and community outreach help migrants understand and respect local laws, values, and customs. When legal migrants are not effectively integrated, they may face discrimination, economic hardship, or marginalization. A multilevel collaborative response ensures that migrants have equal access to opportunities and resources, which helps prevent the formation of isolated or disenfranchised communities. By slowing down, we can rebuild our common bonds through multi-level coordination.

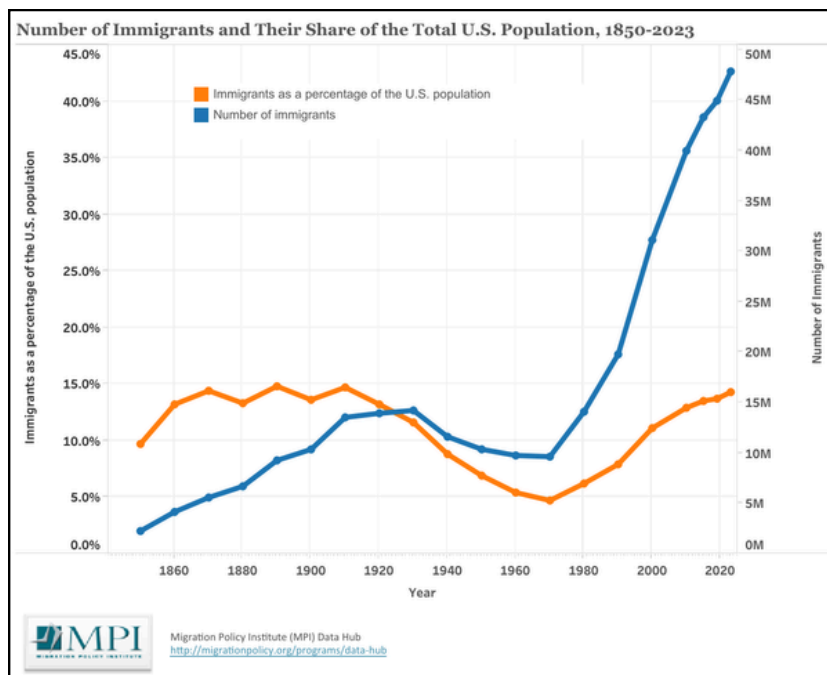


Figure 7. Number of Immigrants as Share of US Population 1850-2023. Source: Migration Policy Institute (MPI). Immigrant Population Over Time. Tabulation of data from U.S. Census Bureau, 2010–2023 American Community Surveys (ACS), and 2000 Decennial Census. Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2023.

What should we do?

Create a mechanism for multi-level coordination: This approach says that we must collaborate with refugee resettlement agencies, governments, and nonprofits experienced in integrating new immigrants to develop strategies for post-arrival support and social integration. A Center for Migrant Coordination could be established within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to coordinate efforts between DHS components, the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), state and local governments, and non-profit organizations at the border and in receiving communities. Multi-level coordination and collaboration allow us to rebuild common bonds for partners and migrants.

Lower Legal Immigration: Challenges such as barriers to employment and social services prevent the integration into communities. Lowering the amount of legal migration through quotas and targeted visa restrictions can help address concerns about enforcement mechanisms, labor market saturation, resource allocation, and social integration. The unrestricted entry of migrants has placed significant pressure on local governments, federal agencies, and other organizations. High levels of legal migration can place pressure on local job markets, potentially limiting opportunities for domestic workers, particularly in low-skilled sectors. By reducing immigration and prioritizing visas for essential industries or highly skilled workers, the government can better align migration policies with economic needs and national interests.

Tighten criteria for asylum: Being strict with asylum criteria is needed to maintain the integrity of the asylum system and prevent its misuse by individuals who do not meet qualifications or have a criminal background. This approach argues that migrants may claim asylum for economic reasons or to escape general instability—circumstances that, while challenging, do not qualify under international asylum law. Strict adherence to asylum criteria ensures fairness, prioritizes those in the greatest danger, and discourages misuse of the system, which can undermine public support for humanitarian policies.

Prioritize High Skilled Migration (H1B Visas): Restricting legal and illegal migration while prioritizing visas for those with high skills could help address economic and societal challenges by ensuring that immigration policies directly align with labor market needs. H1B visas target highly skilled workers, particularly in STEM fields, which are critical to driving innovation and maintaining global competitiveness. This targeted approach ensures that migration serves as a tool to strategically bolster industries that fuel long-term prosperity encouraging community support and investment.



Tradeoffs & Drawbacks

Less workers for key industries: If fewer immigrants enter a country and the native birth rate drops, there are fewer working-age people to support an aging population, which can lead to economic challenges and strain social safety nets. Certain industries rely heavily on migrant workers, including healthcare, agriculture, construction, and hospitality. Lower immigration and birth rates can lead to a scarcity of workers.

A national common identity leads to cultural loss and forced assimilation: A common identity often emphasizes assimilation. Over time, practices, traditions, and native languages may be lost as individuals feel pressured to conform to the national common identity. Identifying some differences as less desirable can lead to stereotyping and social exclusion rather than integration.

Tightening asylum criteria may cause harm: Some legitimate but complex asylum claims may not meet higher evidentiary standards and may be unfairly excluded due to narrow definitions of persecution. Tightening the criteria for asylum claims may lead to wrongful rejections and deportations to unsafe conditions, and some asylum seekers may turn to undocumented migration or human smuggling if legal pathways become too restrictive.

Approach 4:

Targeted Immigration is Needed for Our Country's Economic Health

This policy approach states that targeted immigration is required to build and sustain the U.S. economy. As such, policies that encourage immigration into the country should be enacted, and immigrants integrated.

This approach notes that the United States was built, in part, by immigrants, and the nation has long been the beneficiary of the energy and ingenuity that immigrants bring. This tradition of welcoming immigrants is reflected in the fact that 13.6 percent of the nation's residents are foreign-born, more than half of whom are naturalized citizens. In instances where the United States had carried out mass deportation of immigrants, the economy had suffered significantly, with U.S. workers losing their jobs, and those employed paid lower wages. For example, the deportation of 454,000 immigrant workers not authorized to be in the United States from 2008 to 2015 reduced the employment share of U.S.-born workers by 0.5 percent and reduced their hourly wages by 0.6 percent [26].

Immigrants contribute significantly to the US economy. Statistics have shown that immigrants are more likely to be of working age. This means they are more likely to be active in the labor force, allowing them to contribute to the economy as consumers and taxpayers, helping fund social services and programs like Medicare and Social Security. Available evidence also shows that immigration stimulates the American economy with immigrants disproportionately working in essential jobs such as construction, agriculture, healthcare, transportation, and utilities, contributing significantly to various sectors and overall economic growth in the country [27] [28].

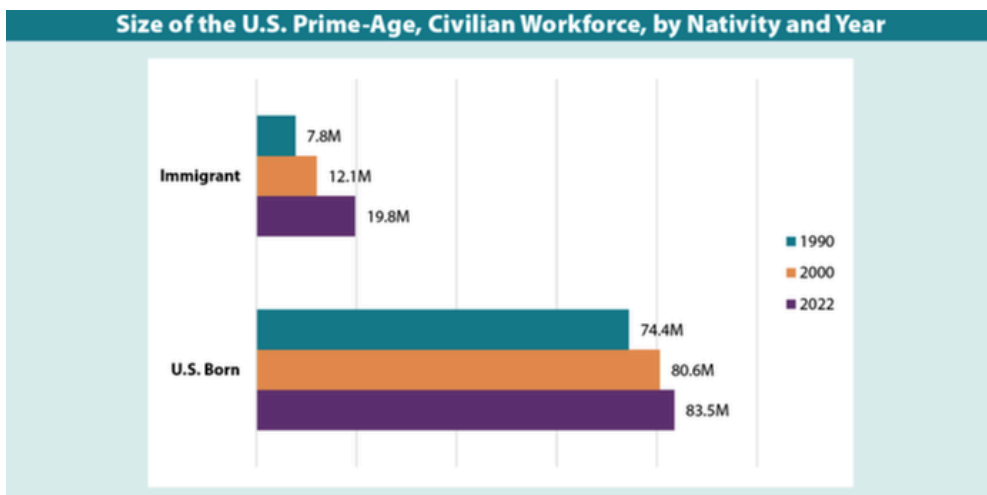


Figure 8. U.S. Size of the U.S. Prime-Age, Civilian Workforce, by Nativity and Year. Source: Migration Policy Institute “Explainer: Immigrants and the U.S. Economy” (2024)

What should we do?

Raise the caps and visa categories to shape immigration

The current visa categories such as the H1-H2, and EB1-EB5, visa caps are insufficient to meet the demand for high-skilled workers, especially in sectors like technology, healthcare, and engineering. Increasing the cap would allow more skilled professionals to contribute to the U.S. economy. For example, in 2023, demand for H-1B visas far exceeded supply, with only 85,000 visas available despite hundreds of thousands of applications from US organizations needing workers. Again, the agricultural sector relies significantly on temporary foreign labor. Expanding the H-2A visa program, which offers temporary visas for seasonal agricultural workers, would help alleviate labor shortages in farming. Finally, the EB-5 Immigrant Investor Program allows foreign investors to obtain a green card by investing in U.S. businesses that create a minimum of 10 jobs. This program has the potential for expansion, particularly to encourage investment in economically depressed areas, such as rural communities or former industrial cities, which would greatly benefit from new capital and job creation.

Incentivize immigration to underserved areas

Implementing regional visa programs that encourage immigrants to settle in areas facing population declines or workforce shortages, such as rural regions, the Midwest, or Rust Belt cities, could help revitalize struggling communities. Immigrants could receive benefits like expedited green cards or tax incentives for relocating to these areas. Additionally, states and local governments should be given more flexibility to attract immigrants to meet local labor demands. Federal and state governments could collaborate to create immigration policies tailored to specific regional needs, such as attracting healthcare workers to rural hospitals or skilled tradespeople to areas with aging infrastructure.

Offer premium processing to reduce backlogs

Currently, many highly skilled workers, especially those from countries like India and China, experience lengthy wait times for employment-based green cards due to per-country limits. Reforming or eliminating these quotas would enable more talented professionals to work and live in the U.S. without the uncertainty of prolonged delays. Additionally, offering more options for premium processing, which speeds up the review of green card applications, would enhance the U.S.'s appeal as a destination for global talent by reducing bureaucratic obstacles. It could also increase the competitiveness and skill set of American companies and spur innovation.

Recognize foreign degrees and certifications

Many immigrants arrive with advanced degrees or professional experience that could fill important roles in the U.S. economy, but they face difficulties in having their foreign qualifications recognized. Simplifying and standardizing the process for recognizing foreign credentials—particularly in fields like medicine, engineering, law, and teaching—would allow skilled immigrants to contribute fully without facing underemployment.

Tradeoffs & Drawbacks

Potential displacement of domestic workers: Increasing the number of H-1B visas may lead to the displacement of American workers, particularly in the technology sector. Companies may use the program to hire cheaper foreign labor instead of investing in training or hiring domestic workers.

Limited long-term commitment: Immigrants might initially move to underserved areas to take advantage of incentives, but they may not stay in these regions long-term if economic opportunities in larger cities or more developed areas are more attractive. This could result in temporary boosts that don't lead to sustained economic revitalization.

Oversaturation of the job market: By easing green card backlogs, there could be an oversupply of workers in specific high-skill sectors like engineering or tech, potentially creating competition that drives down wages or reduces job opportunities for U.S. citizens.

Variability in educational and professional standards: Recognizing foreign degrees and certificates could streamline skilled immigrants' entry into the workforce and address talent shortages in critical sectors. However, educational and professional standards vary significantly across countries. Ensuring that foreign qualifications align with U.S. standards—particularly in high-stakes fields like medicine, engineering, law, and teaching—might require complex verification processes or retraining programs. This could strain resources, introduce delays, and potentially compromise public trust in professional services if standards are not consistently maintained.

Approach 5:

Protect American Citizens, Strengthen Immigration Laws

This approach asserts that immigrants present threats to community and to national security. They also present a strain on the system. The current flow of immigration – both illegal and legal – is too high for the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to handle, and the United States’ current immigration policies are outdated and need to be replaced. According to Customs and Border Patrol reports, immigrants have been caught entering the country with weapons and drugs at high rates, posing safety risks to communities. The issue of national security is not isolated to the influx of undocumented immigrants – who only make up one-quarter of immigrants in the United States – but also includes those who have taken advantage of legal pathways to enter and live in the country despite their potential threat to Americans. This approach argues that to ensure Americans’ safety, security, and well-being, the current flow of all immigrants into the country must be reduced.

This approach aims to address this issue by rewriting or reinterpreting current laws as well as implementing new laws that will raise the standards for immigration into the United States. It also seeks to reduce incentives for illegal immigration by implementing punishments for those who offer assistance to undocumented immigrants and by redefining who is eligible for birthright citizenship. Finally, by expanding the authority of DHS agencies, this approach focuses on redirecting resources to deport any individual who is in the country illegally.

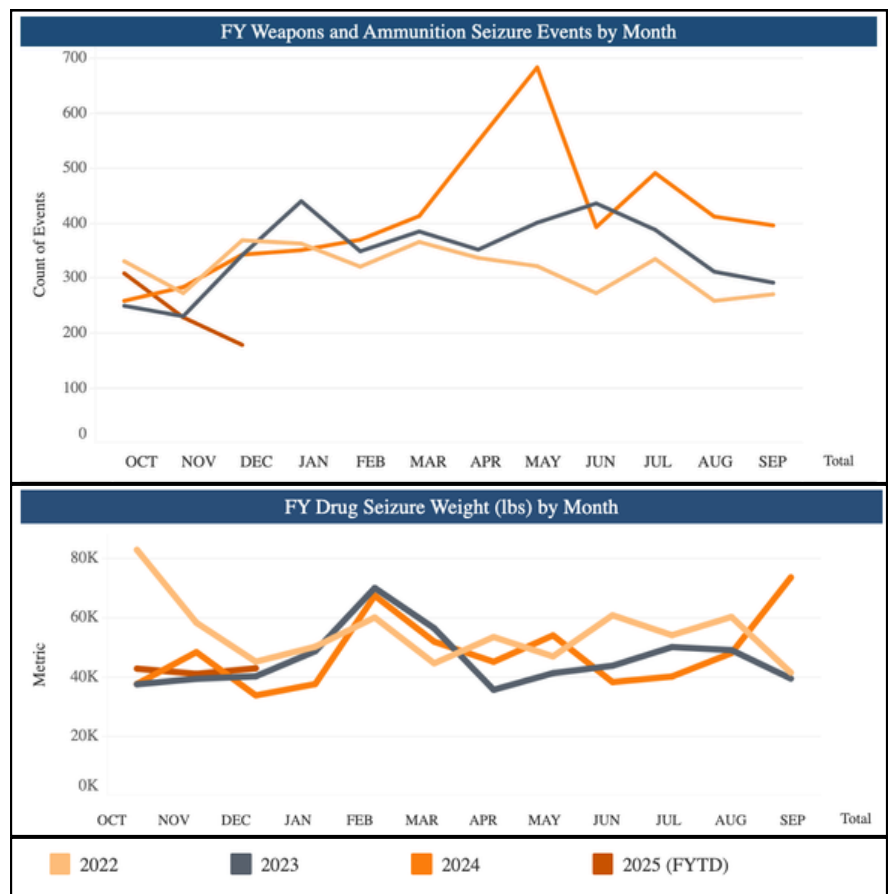


Figure 9. U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) Drug Seizures Weapons and Ammunition Seizures and Drug Seizures, 2022 - 2025 (forecasted). Source: U.S. Customs and Border Protection “Drug Seizure Statistics” (CBP) (2024)

What should we do?

Raise barriers to immigration, make the process more selective: This approach aims to overhaul the immigration process in order to ensure the safety of United States citizens and alleviate the strain of the immigration process on DHS. The first step in changing the immigration process would be raising the cost of application fees to increase the barriers to immigration. Next, the implementation of a point system would ensure that only the best and brightest are awarded visas while also simplifying and streamlining the application review process. This system would award points based on education, age, English proficiency, and achievement for each individual applying for a work visa. Additionally, a base requirement of points to apply for a visa would limit the number of applications to be reviewed. All visa applicants would also undergo ideological screenings to reinforce national security, such as investigation into affiliations with or participation in protests. Finally, this approach would limit the scope and duration of “temporary protected status” (TPS) grants to maintain stricter standards for immigration into the United States, and change the standards for what constitutes TPS.

Limit birthright citizenship: The 14th Amendment to the United States Constitution states that “all persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the state wherein they reside.” This approach claims that pregnant people who give birth in the United States as temporary or unauthorized immigrants without a partner who is a United States citizen or lawful permanent resident are not “subject to the jurisdiction thereof.” This alternative interpretation of the law would mean that their child or children, while born within the borders, are not eligible for birthright citizenship. Through this reinterpretation of the 14th Amendment, this approach aims to end what some might see as the abuse of birthright citizenship by undocumented and temporary immigrants who plan to use their child’s legal right and ability to later sponsor family members for legal permanent residency in order to become permanent residents themselves. By closing this loophole, immigrants into the United States will have to use the traditional pathway to immigration and therefore undergo thorough screening, protecting the safety of American citizens.

Punish individuals and institutions who harbor undocumented immigrants: The current framework doesn’t hold United States citizens and legal residents accountable who aid undocumented immigrants. Many immigrant households and families in the United States are considered to be of “mixed status,” meaning that some family members may have U.S. citizenship or are legal residents, while other family members are in the country illegally. To discourage the harboring of illegal immigrants, this approach holds that we should have higher penalties for those in the country legally. This could include barring U.S. citizens from qualifying for federal housing subsidies if they live with anyone who is not a U.S. citizen or

legal permanent resident, or revoking eligibility for public housing and work permits for legal residents who are supporting family members who are in the country illegally.

Additionally, many people who entered the country illegally as children before 2012 have been protected under Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA). Some colleges and universities offer in-state tuition to these undocumented immigrants, incentivizing unlawful behavior in order to pursue education. By denying loan access to all students at schools that provide in-state tuition to illegal immigrants (including DACA recipients), this approach deters these institutions from offering such assistance and, in turn, abolishes this incentive for illegal immigration.

Expand deportation of all individuals who are in the United States unlawfully: Currently, DHS prioritizes deportation for individuals who pose an “immediate security or public safety threat.” Some consider this is not enough to ensure the safety of American citizens. This approach aims to deport any immigrant who is in the country illegally, including DACA recipients, regardless of criminal background. In order to do this, funding to Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) would need to increase, as would their authority. This expansion of authority would encourage ICE officials to make arrests at schools as well as workplaces suspected of hiring illegal immigrants as well as schools. Schools could be required to request students’ proof of citizenship during enrollment to collect and report this information to ICE. Finally, we could expand current Expedited Removal processes, allowing illegal immigrants to be deported within a day of arrest, thus cutting down on time in ICE detention and reducing the financial strain on the judicial system.

Tradeoffs & Drawbacks

High economic cost: The expenses of increasing ICE raids and using military force are high, which would require an increase in taxes or a reallocation of funds from elsewhere in the federal budget. Additionally, the deportation of immigrants – especially those who are actively in the workforce – could harm American industries and cause a labor shortage.

The court of world opinion: Domestic immigration law does not exist in a silo and could have major effects on international diplomacy. Mass deportation could affect relations with countries that receive these deportees, as they are often countries in turmoil and/or not the deportee’s country of origin. Similarly, stricter immigration laws – especially those affecting

refugees and asylum seekers – could harm relations between the United States and allied countries and trade partners. The United States could be seen to be supporting international laws only when convenient, yet violating international principles on asylum.

Legal Roadblocks: The logistics of passing new laws – or rewriting laws – that violate current domestic and international law could be time-consuming and costly. Even with the use of Executive Orders and legal loopholes, the backlash could lead to legal battles that incur high spending, use of government resources, and public disapproval.

Potential increase in illegal immigration: Many undocumented immigrants have entered the country illegally due to desperation and the current barriers to legal immigration such as high wait times and country quotas. Despite the threat of immigration enforcement, people might be more inclined to attempt to enter the country through illegal means if it becomes more difficult to immigrate to the United States legally.

Violates the Constitution: Some of these suggestions may violate the Constitution, including the infringement of due process and the reinterpretation of birthright citizenship. The implementation of many elements of this approach could lead to dangerous shifts in the structure of the United States government.

Against national ideals: The United States has a strong history of providing asylum and resettling refugees, which is deeply tied to the principles of freedom and democracy. Implementing the changes this approach suggests would go against these ideals and instead neglect human rights as a major principle of U.S. policy.

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