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As President Donald Trump Plans a Wall, What We Know About U.S. Immigration



By Jeffrey Sparshott

President **Donald Trump** is moving ahead with [plans to build a wall](#) along the southern U.S. border, part of a broader effort to stem the flow of immigrants to the country. The pledge resonated from [the first day of his candidacy](#), when he said Mexicans are “bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists.”

What do we really know about immigration from Mexico and other nations?

Who’s Coming

First, the U.S.’s southern neighbor is no longer the top source of immigration to the country. The [number of immigrants arriving from Mexico](#) has been falling steadily since 2004. A **Pew Research Center** study showed [more Mexicans have been leaving the U.S.](#) to return home than arriving. Meanwhile, [arrivals from India and China are climbing](#), making the

The broad shifts leaves Asians on track to become [the largest foreign-born group in the U.S.](#)

Many of the newcomers are [students or people with college degrees](#), not day laborers. Nearly half of the most [recent immigrants have a bachelor’s degree or better](#), compared with less than one-third for the native born population.

New SchoolShare of immigrants ages 25 or more with at least a bachelor's degree, by years of arrival
THE WALL STREET JOURNAL
Source: Census Bureau via Jed Kolko, Indeed
2011-2015 2006-2010 2005 or before
Native-born 0% 51 015 2025 3035 4045 50

While most [tallies lump legal and illegal migrants](#) together, estimates show [the undocumented population has leveled off](#) as numbers from Mexico decline. (The decline from Mexico outweighed a slight uptick in illegal immigration from Central America, where poverty and violence have driven people north in recent years.)

Through immigration flows have clearly shifted, waves of new arrivals certainly transformed parts of the U.S. That, in turn, [influenced the most recent presidential election](#).

Economic Growth

The economics of immigration, meanwhile, are [still hotly contested](#). Some studies show a net, albeit slight, benefit from immigration.

In one of the most comprehensive analyses in decades, the **National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine** last fall found that waves of immigrants arriving in the U.S. have [helped the economy over the long haul](#) and had little lasting impact on the wages or employment levels of native-born Americans.

“Immigration enlarges the economy while leaving the native population slightly better off on average, but the greatest beneficiaries of immigration are the immigrants themselves as they avail themselves of opportunities not available to them in their home countries,” the report said.

Finances and Wages

Still, there are costs. Notably, immigration burdens government finances, especially education budgets at the state and local levels, a factor that could weigh on taxes.

More directly, an influx of lower-skilled workers can lead to slightly [lower wages for some](#). **George Borjas**, a Harvard economics professor, found the effects of U.S. immigration especially [acute for low-skilled Americans](#).

“The biggest winners from immigration are owners of businesses that employ a lot of immigrant labor and other users of immigrant labor,” Mr. Borjas wrote in a report for the **Center for Immigration Studies**, a group favoring strong border enforcement.

Business

Businesses—especially in agriculture, construction, building maintenance and food preparation—have long relied on immigrants to fill their ranks. More recently, high-tech, hospital and other hard-science industries heavily recruit from outside the U.S.

A Wall Street Journal article in November highlighted [complaints about a shortage of low-skilled workers](#). “Without Mexican labor our industry is at a standstill,” **Nelson Braddy Jr.**, the owner of **King of Texas Roofing Co.**, said at the time.

The firm was helping build a new **Toyota** North American headquarters in a Dallas suburb.

It’s not just laborers. Tech companies have long favored an [increase in legal immigration](#) as they look to fill jobs for engineers, programmers and other skilled positions.

Immigrants often contribute to the economy in other ways. A study from the **National Foundation for American Policy**, a think tank based in Arlington, Va., showed immigrants founded more than half of the current crop of [U.S.-based startups](#).

Which brings us back to growth: Over the long run, an [economy's potential growth rate](#) comes down to [how many people are working](#), how much and how productive they are.