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As Trump Barricades the Border, Legal Immigration Is Starting to Plunge

By [Zolan Kanno-Youngs](#)

WASHINGTON — President Trump’s immigration policies — from travel bans and visa restrictions to refugee caps and asylum changes — have begun to deliver on a longstanding goal: Legal immigration has fallen more than 11 percent and a steeper drop is looming.

While Mr. Trump highlights the construction of a [border wall](#) to stress his war on illegal immigration, it is through policy changes, not physical barriers, that his administration has been able to diminish the flow of migrants into the United States. Two more measures took effect Friday and Monday, [an expansion of his travel ban](#) and [strict wealth tests on green card applicants](#).

“He’s really ticking off all the boxes. It’s kind of amazing,” said Sarah Pierce, a policy analyst with the [Migration Policy Institute](#), a nonpartisan research group. “In an administration that’s been perceived to be haphazard, on immigration they’ve been extremely consistent and barreling forward.”

The number of people who obtained lawful permanent residence, besides refugees who entered the United States in previous years, declined to 940,877 in the 2018 fiscal year from 1,063,289 in the 2016 fiscal year, according to [an analysis of government data](#) by the **National Foundation for American Policy**. Four years ago, legal immigration was at its highest level since 2006, when 1,266,129 people obtained lawful permanent residence in the United States.

And immigration experts say new policies will accelerate the trend. [A report released on Monday by the foundation projected a 30 percent plunge in legal immigration by 2021 and a 35 percent dip in average annual growth of the U.S. labor force.](#)

Trump administration officials have said that immigration into the country should be based on merit and skills, not the family-based system that for decades has allowed immigrants to bring their spouses and children to live with them.

“President Trump continues to deliver on his promise to the American people to enforce our nation’s immigration laws,” Kenneth T. Cuccinelli II, the acting deputy secretary of homeland security, [wrote in The Hill](#), a Capitol Hill newspaper, on Monday.

The rapid declines come as record-low unemployment has even the president's acting chief of staff, Mick Mulvaney, [confiding to a gathering in Britain](#) that “we are desperate, desperate for more people.”

But the doors have been blocked in multiple ways. Those fleeing violence or persecution have found asylum rules tightened and have been forced to wait in squalid camps in Mexico or sent to countries like Guatemala as their cases are adjudicated. People who have languished in displaced persons camps for years face [an almost impossible refugee cap of 18,000 this year](#), down from the 110,000 that President Barack Obama set in 2016.

Family members hoping to travel legally from Iran, Libya, Syria, Yemen and Somalia were blocked by the president's travel ban.

Increased vetting and additional in-person interviews have further winnowed foreign travelers. The number of visas issued to foreigners abroad looking to immigrate to the United States has declined by about [25 percent](#), to 462,422 in the 2019 fiscal year from 617,752 in 2016.

And two more tough policies have now taken effect. The expansion of Mr. Trump's travel ban to six additional countries, including Africa's most populous, Nigeria, began on Friday, and the wealth test, which effectively sets a wealth floor for would-be immigrants, started on Monday. Those will reshape immigration in the years to come, according to experts.

A naturalization ceremony in Los Angeles. President Trump's biggest influence on legal immigration has been through policy changes, not physical barriers.

The travel and visa bans, soon to cover 13 countries, are almost sure to be reflected in immigration numbers in the near future. Of the average of more than 537,000 people abroad granted permanent residency from 2014 to 2016, including through a diversity lottery system, nearly 28,000, or 5 percent, would be blocked under the administration's newly expanded travel restrictions, according to [an analysis of State Department data](#).

But the wealth test — or public charge rule — may prove the most consequential change yet. Around two-thirds of the immigrants who obtained permanent legal status from 2012 to 2016 could be blocked from doing so under the new rule, which denies green cards to those who are likely to need public assistance, according to a [study by the Migration Policy Institute](#).

Before Monday, immigrants were disqualified from permanent resident status only if they failed to demonstrate a household income above 125 percent of the federal poverty line, a threshold set by Congress. Now, immigration officials will weigh dozens of factors, like age, health, language skills, credit score and insurance as well as whether an applicant has previously used public benefits, to determine if the applicant is likely to use them in the future.

One factor that could also count against an applicant is the action the immigrant is undertaking: applying for a green card. Applying for the legal status is one of the negative factors that immigration officials could use to determine if someone will be a public charge, a Catch-22 that has been a key criticism from immigration advocates.

Even before the policy went into force, it discouraged immigrants and citizens in immigrant families from seeking public assistance they qualify for, such as Medicaid, food stamps, free or reduced-price school meals, or housing help, according to immigration analysts.

As ‘Public Charge’ Looms, Immigrants Drop From Assistance Rolls

“Data suggest that millions of people, including U.S. citizens, have already pulled out of safety net programs they’re legally entitled to, based on fear of the public charge rule — even though it doesn’t apply to them and never will,” said Doug Rand, a founder of [Boundless Immigration](#), a technology company in Seattle that helps immigrants obtain green cards and citizenship. “That’s not a ‘chilling effect’ — that’s a fraud upon the American people.”

Broadening the rule has been a long-sought-after goal of the White House and specifically the president’s senior adviser Stephen Miller, who [admonished career officials](#) for taking too long to enforce the policy.

After the Supreme Court on Friday [lifted an injunction](#) that blocked the policy in Illinois, the White House praised the plan the next day.

“This final rule will protect hardworking American taxpayers, safeguard welfare programs for truly needy Americans, reduce the federal deficit and re-establish the fundamental legal principle that newcomers to our society should be financially self-reliant and not dependent on the largess of United States taxpayers,” it said in a statement.

Other more subtle steps have also helped trim the number of immigrants arriving on American shores, such as requiring in-person interviews for most immigration visas and [a proposed 60 percent increase](#) in citizenship fees for most applicants.

Tara Battle, 42, a nurse in Chicago, now finds multiple policies are affecting her life and family. After meeting Daberechi Amadi Godswill, a Nigerian, in 2016 while on vacation in Gambia, Ms. Battle struck up a relationship and they married in 2018.

Since then, Ms. Battle, who supports a 12-year-old daughter on a \$35,000 annual salary, said she and Mr. Godswill had spent around \$1,000 on lawyer and processing fees, trying to bring him to the country. She believed she had taken the last step when she submitted her financial documents on his behalf this month.

Then Ms. Battle’s lawyers told her Mr. Trump had banned immigration from Nigeria. She said she would wait to see if the president lifted the ban, but if he does, she is likely to be saddled with much higher processing fees.

“Everything is up and running, the ball is already rolling. Why is it now on hold?” Ms. Battle asked in exasperation. “They’ve already done the background checks. They already did everything. The money, the fees, everything’s paid for.”

There is little sign that Mr. Trump will relent. He is already showcasing the immigration results to supporters as the election nears. While the administration [recorded 36,679 arrests at the border last month](#), slightly up from the 33,657 arrests in January 2016, the president has been celebrating an eight-month decline in border crossings since a surge of Central American families approached the border last year.

Migrants charging their phones at a temporary camp in Matamoros, Mexico, where many asylum seekers wait while their cases are processed.

“Washington Democrats put the needs of illegal immigrants before the well-being of American citizens,” Mr. Trump said at a campaign rally last week in Nevada. “You know that, you’ve been complaining it about for a long time. It’s one of the reasons you voted for Trump. They want to let anyone from around the world simply walk across the border.”

Mr. Mulvaney struck a different tone with a crowd of several hundred during a question-and-answer session with the Oxford Union in Britain, a tape of which was obtained by The New York Times.

“We created 215,000 jobs last month,” he said. “We are running out of people to fuel the economic growth.”

One aspect of Mr. Trump’s stringent immigration policies has not happened yet: The president has not deported “millions” of immigrants, as he frequently promises in speeches. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents arrested about 143,000 immigrants in the country from October 2018 to September 2019, 10 percent fewer than the previous fiscal year and the lowest level since Mr. Trump took office.

The administration has tried to change that trend by threatening retaliation against localities that embrace the policies of so-called sanctuary cities. Tactical units from the Border Patrol [have been deployed](#) to assist ICE agents. Mr. Trump took aim at those cities, including New York, in his State of the Union address, claiming they allowed “dangerous criminal aliens to prey upon the public.”

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/24/us/politics/trump-border-legal-immigration.html>