

Topics / Immigration in America / Immigration in America: Outlook

The U.S. Census Bureau estimated that there were about 38 million foreign-born individuals living in the United States in 2008. While the estimates of undocumented immigrants are harder to establish, some estimates suggest that there are between 9 and 11 million undocumented immigrants in the United States today. This is a large population, and it raises a great deal of controversy.



According to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the population of illegal immigrants in the United States increased by 27% between 2000 and 2009. However, DHS also reported that the number of unauthorized immigrants decreased from 11.6 million in January 2008 to 10.6 million in January 2009—the sharpest decrease in the last 30 years. Experts attribute the recent decline to tougher border security measures and the economic recession, which has resulted in fewer jobs for day laborers. As a result, many illegal immigrants have been returning to their countries of origin.

The debate over immigration in the United States has two opposing sides: one believes in heavy restrictions on immigration and the other believes in fewer restrictions on immigration. There are several large and controversial organizations that promote heavy restrictions on immigration; one of the biggest is the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR), and another is the Minutemen Project. Both of these groups are vocal about their opposition to immigration and have a special focus on stopping undocumented immigration. There are several nonprofit and advocate organizations, ranging from national, state, and city groups, that focus on immigrant rights. Together, these groups advocate for immigration legislation that is not as strict, especially concerning the use of such public services as Medicare and the ability to work in the United States. Many of these groups favor granting the same rights to undocumented immigrants as to other immigrants. The two opposing views on immigration center arise from a fundamental disagreement on the possible effects of immigration on U.S. society. One of the main points of contention is the effect of immigration on the nation's economic growth and prosperity.

Immigrants and the Economy

One of the most strongly held beliefs by advocates of strict immigration is that immigrants negatively affect the labor market. More specifically, they argue that increased numbers of immigrant workers increase unemployment and decrease wages of native workers. In this view, immigrants increase unemployment because they take away jobs from native U.S. workers and decrease wages because they are highly concentrated in low-wage occupations. However, most scholarly research on this subject has failed to provide strong support for these beliefs. The main conclusion of this academic research has been that immigrants only modestly affect the labor market opportunities of native-born workers—at least at the broad, national level. However, large populations of immigrants concentrated in an area may adversely affect local labor markets. Unfortunately, these local markets that are the most visible, so U.S. society as a whole may have a distorted picture of the situation.

Immigrants and Social Services

Another debate centers on whether or not the amount that immigrants pay in federal, state, and city taxes is large enough to offset the benefits immigrants receive in social services. There is some evidence that immigrant

households are slightly overrepresented among the welfare population and that immigrants may in fact "assimilate into welfare" the longer they are in the United States. In addition, some find that when examining all levels of government together (federal, state, and local), immigrants actually generate more revenue in taxes paid than they take out in social services received. However, examining the different levels of government reveals that immigrants are sometimes the greatest fiscal drain on the local governments compared to federal and state governments. Unfortunately, coming to definite conclusions about the effects of immigrants on the economy is hindered by lack of consistent and reliable evidence or data, especially because the characteristics of the undocumented population are hard to measure.

Outlook

The reaction to the immigration debate is most visible in the legislation drawn up by federal, state, and local governments. One of the largest immigration reform laws in the second half of the 20th century was the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA), which was intended to reduce undocumented immigration. IRCA also criminalized the act of hiring undocumented workers. One of the ideas behind this legislation was that immigration would decrease if immigrants had fewer employment opportunities. IRCA also established a one-year amnesty for undocumented immigrants that had been working in the United States since 1982. Under IRCA, about 2.7 million undocumented immigrants and others that did not qualify for visas were legalized. Another law that was drafted in reaction to concerns over immigration was Proposition 187 in the state of California. This proposition restricted educational and health services from undocumented immigrants. In fact, several states have attempted to pass legislation similar to California's proposition.

In 2005, the House of Representatives approved the Border Protection, Antiterrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act, which provided for a 700-mile fence along the U.S.-Mexican border, allowed the federal government to take custody of undocumented immigrants detained by local authorities, and required employers to verify their employees' legal status. The bill started some of the largest protests by immigrants and immigrant advocacy groups in recent U.S. history. In early 2006, there were protests in about 102 cities, and the numbers of protesters ranged from 25,000 in Madison, Wisconsin, to 750,000 in Los Angeles, California. The most contested parts of the bill by these groups were the criminalization of undocumented immigrants and any individual that helped them stay in the United States. In addition, many immigrant advocates called for a provision in the bill to allow a path of legalization for undocumented immigrants already in the United States. This "path to citizenship" was one of many provisions included in the Comprehensive Immigration Reform Act, which was introduced in the U.S. Senate in 2007. In 2010, the so-called Dream Act sought to provide a path to legalization for some students in the United States illegally. All three bills failed to gain enough support and were never passed into law.

In the absence of comprehensive federal legislation, border states have considered legislation to cope with the influx of illegal immigrants entering the country. In April 2010, the Arizona state legislature approved SB 1070, which was signed into law by Gov. Jan Brewer. Considered by many as the toughest immigration bill in the nation, SB 1070 allows the police to detain individuals suspected of being in the country illegally, makes it a misdemeanor for a foreign national to be caught without proof of legal residency, and permits lawsuits against a government official or agency that fails to enforce federal immigration laws. In June 2012, the Supreme Court struck down some of the law's provisions but upheld the law's requirement that state and local law enforcement check the status of people who have been stopped, detained, or arrested if there is a "reasonable suspicion" they may be in the country illegally. While supporters of the bill believe it will discourage illegal immigrants from entering or remaining in the state, opponents have argued that the law will lead to racial profiling and the harassment of both legal and illegal residents who appear to be Hispanic. The Arizona law reignited the national debate and renewed calls for Congress to overhaul the immigration system.

One of the most important factors in determining immigrant policy concerns the political group in power. A conservative congress and presidency generally support stricter immigration reform, while a liberal legislative body generally supports less restrictive immigration reform (in particular, more allowances for immigrant use of social services). The data on immigration does not offer a clear picture, so it will be the feelings of the people, expressed in voting for one party or another, that will likely direct immigration debates into the future. The only certain thing about the immigration debate is that it will continue to be one of the most visible issues in the United States for many years to come, especially because millions of immigrants continue to enter the country each year.

Katy M. Pinto

Further Reading

Desipio, Louis, and Rodolfo O. de la Garza. *Making Americans, Remaking America: Immigration and Immigrant Policy*. Boulder CO: Westview Press, 1998; Hing, Bill Ong. *Deporting Our Souls: Values, Morality, and Immigration Policy*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006; Loucky, James, Jeanne Armstrong, and Larry J. Estrada, eds. *Immigration in America Today: An Encyclopedia*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing, 2006.

Select Citation Style:

MLA

Pinto, Katy M. "Immigration in America: Outlook." *Issues: Understanding Controversy and Society*. ABC-CLIO, 2014. Web. 15 Sept. 2014.

[back to top](#) **Entry ID: 944088**