

Immigration: The Basics

Who is an immigrant?

According to U.S. law, an immigrant is a foreign-born individual who has been admitted to reside permanently in the United States as a Lawful Permanent Resident.

Where do immigrants come from?

Immigrants come to the U.S. from all over the world. The graph to the right shows the different origins from which immigrants to the U.S. currently come. Foreign born persons make up 11.7% of the U.S. population and number 33.5 million.

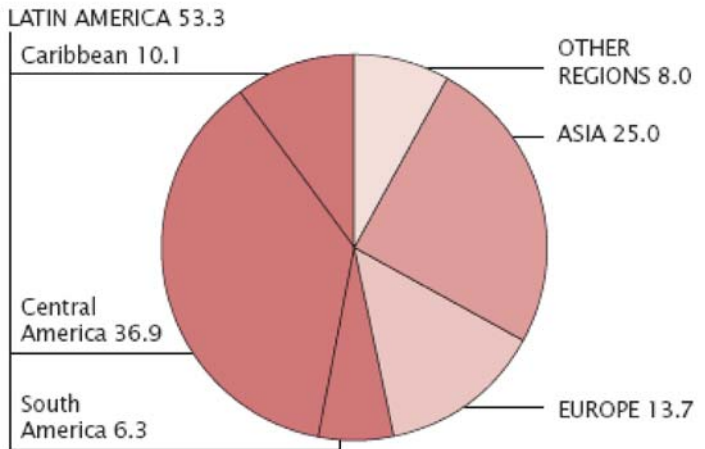
How do immigrants get admitted to permanently reside in the U.S.?

Typically, a foreign-born individual seeking to become an LPR can do so in one of three ways:

- Through **family-sponsored immigration**, a U.S. citizen can sponsor his or her foreign-born spouse, parent (if the sponsor is over the age of 21), minor and adult married and unmarried children, and brothers and sisters. A Lawful Permanent Resident can sponsor his or her spouse, minor children, and adult unmarried children.
- Through **employment-based immigration**, a U.S. employer can sponsor an individual for a specific position where there is an absence of U.S. workers.
- By winning one of a limited number of immigrant visas available in the annual **diversity visa lottery** that is open to immigrants from certain countries.

Foreign Born by World Region of Birth: 2003

(In percent)



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 2003 Annual Social and Economic Supplement.

Does the number of immigrants coming to the U.S. increase each year?

The number of immigrants coming to the United States each year, legally and illegally, grew very rapidly starting in the mid-1990s, hit a peak at the end of the decade, and then declined substantially after 2001. By 2004, however, the annual inflow of foreign-born persons was down 24% from its all-time high in 2000.

How do immigrants contribute to society?

Immigrants contribute to the U.S. in a variety of ways. Immigrants bring with them diverse cultures, foods, and traditions that can enrich U.S. society. Immigrants enter the U.S. labor force, often taking jobs that are unwanted by U.S. citizens, and they boost the productivity of the economy. There are also less well-known ways that immigrants help the U.S. As of Dec. 2004, there were approximately 69,300 foreign born serving in the US armed forces, with 37.6 percent of these from Latin America and the Caribbean. The foreign born in the armed forces represent approximately five percent of the total on active duty. Even sixty years ago, in World War II, a significant number of Mexican-Americans served the country.

“The simple truth is clear: We must welcome the stranger, for in his or her face we see Christ. Sadly, the migration experience today, according to the bishops of both [the U.S. and Mexico], is far from the Kingdom of God that Jesus proclaimed. . . The church in the United States is very, very Hispanic and what a blessing that is. They (Hispanic immigrants) come with the values that are so needed in the United States today. When there is a moral issue that concerns so many of our people, we have to speak. This is a special moment in the history of the Catholic church and the history of migration.”

Cardinal Theodore McCarrick at the *Strangers No Longer: Together on a Journey of Hope* Conference in El Paso, June 24, 2005.



Undocumented Immigrants in the U.S.

How many undocumented immigrants live in the U.S.?

As of March 2006, there were 11.5 to 12 million undocumented immigrants living in the United States.

How many undocumented immigrants are male vs. female, and adult vs. children?

There were 5.4 million adult males in the unauthorized population in 2005, accounting for 49% of the total. There were 3.9 million adult females accounting for 35% of the population. There were 1.8 million children who were unauthorized, 16% of the total. In addition, there were 3.1 million children who are U.S. citizens by birth living in families in which the head of the family or a spouse was unauthorized.

What kind of work do undocumented immigrants do?

About 7.2 million unauthorized migrants were employed in March 2005, accounting for about 4.9% of the civilian labor force. They made up a large share of all workers in several occupational categories, including 24% of all workers employed in farming occupations, 17% in cleaning, 14% in construction and 12% in food preparation.

Are undocumented immigrants entitled to any federal government services?

While immigrants who are not here legally are ineligible for nearly all federal benefits, they are still eligible for certain very basic kinds of assistance, including: emergency Medicaid, immunizations, testing and treatment for the symptoms of communicable diseases, short-term non-cash disaster relief, school lunches and breakfasts, and certain other programs essential to public health and safety.

However, the Social Security Administration's (SSA) chief actuary estimates that three quarters of undocumented immigrants pay Social Security tax, an estimate that makes undocumented workers responsible for about 1.5% of total wages reported to the SSA. Taxes paid by undocumented immigrants go into the SSA's "suspense file," when the Social Security number does not match SSA's records. In 2002, the suspense file grew by \$56 billion in reported earnings, with about \$7 billion in Social Security tax and \$1.5 billion in Medicare tax paid. Most undocumented immigrants pay these taxes but will receive nothing back from them in the future, since undocumented immigrants are not eligible for Social Security or Medicare.

Do the millions of undocumented immigrants in this country pose a potential security threat? Should they be deported and U.S. borders sealed?

The economic implications of such a proposition, both in terms of the costs of undertaking such an effort and the ramifications of losing so many millions of workers for which our economy is dependent, make it infeasible. The Catholic bishops believe, however, that by offering undocumented immigrants a legal path to permanent residency, they will come forward and make themselves known to authorities. For security purposes, it would be much better to know who these individuals are and to provide them an opportunity to come out of the shadows.

The Catholic bishops have stated that closing U.S. borders is not a good solution. No border enforcement strategy will be effective in keeping determined people out unless it is combined with policy changes that address the push and pull factors that compel immigrants to come here. From 1993 to 2004, spending for border enforcement nearly quadrupled. Yet, the number of unauthorized arrivals increased. Moreover, U.S. border enforcement strategies have channeled migrants to more remote crossing points, resulting in increased fatalities, a growth in smugglers and traffickers, and reduced chances of apprehension.

Our nation's security concerns would be better met by having an immigration system that allows well-intentioned immigrants the opportunity to enter in a more timely fashion through legal means, thereby allowing enforcement resources to be focused on would-be terrorists, smugglers and other criminals who would try to circumvent and manipulate the system to gain entry.

Prayer for Our Nation of Immigrants

God, we are a nation of immigrants. We pray that you would make us more compassionate toward our sisters and brothers who come to the U.S. looking for a decent job and to be reunited with family members.

As people of faith, help us to call for immigration policies that better reflect the dignity of every person who crosses our borders. Amen.