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# Coming to America

## Who Should We Welcome, What Should We Do?

**F**or centuries, a steady influx of people from other countries has helped make the United States a nation comprised of immigrants. Today, many people are asking questions about the country's immigration policies—important questions that we need to consider together.

This issue advisory takes a step back from the policy debates in political circles and the media. Instead, it provides a framework for considering the kind of immigration policies we ought to have as a nation, how those policies affect our communities, and the kinds of values and goals we want to guide immigration decisions.

Different groups of people may be affected by changes in our approach to immigration:

- US citizens, including people born in the United States and those who have become citizens through naturalization;
- Newcomers who came to the country legally through our current system;
- Refugees escaping war or oppression;
- People now living in the United States who entered the country without documentation, many who arrived decades ago;
- People brought here as infants or children by parents who came into the country without permission.

Over the past two decades, the United States has admitted an average of one million green-card

holders, also known as Lawful Permanent Residents, a year. Roughly two-thirds were immediate relatives of, or sponsored by, US citizens. Of the remaining third, 14 percent were sponsored by an employer, 14 percent were granted political asylum, and 5 percent won a “diversity lottery,” which offers immigration opportunities to people coming from under-represented countries. In addition, approximately 10 million students, business travelers, and tourists were granted visas for temporary visits.

But these numbers don't tell the whole story. Some immigrants cross the border undetected or choose to stay on expired temporary visas. The exact number of such people is unknown, but there are now an estimated 11 million undocumented immigrants living in the United States. Never before has the nation had such a large population of immigrants living outside the law.

Most Americans agree that the nation's immigration policy needs an overhaul, but perceptions differ about what kind of solution the country needs.

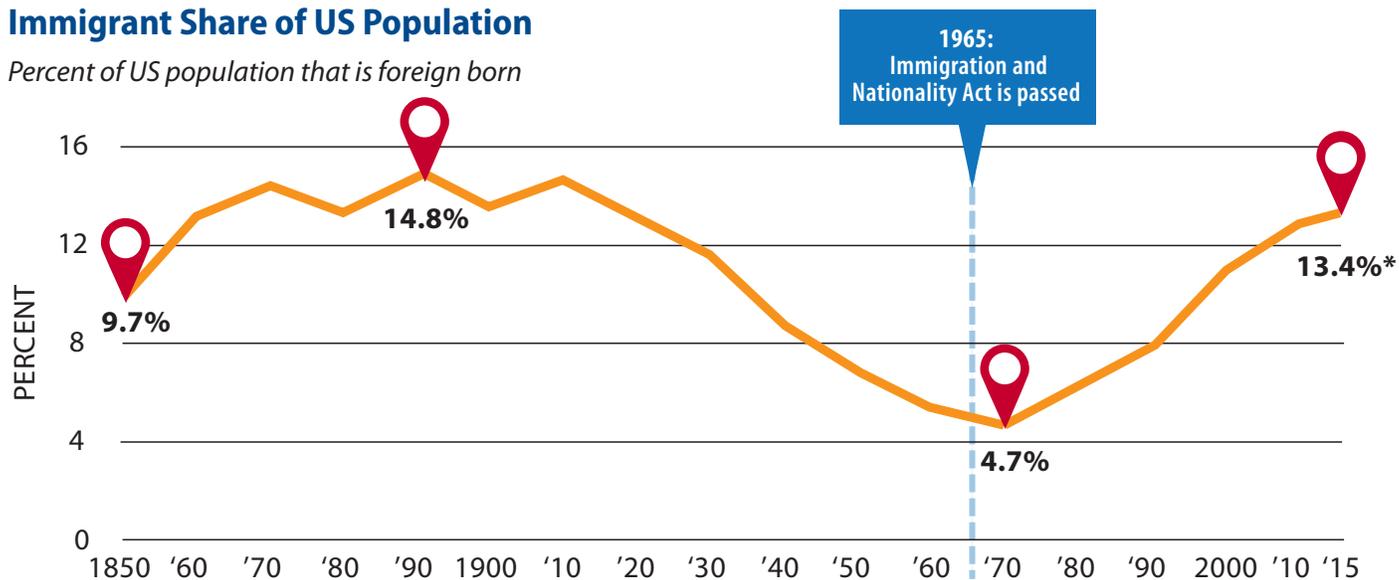
### How should the United States approach immigration?

This issue advisory presents three options for moving forward, each coming from a different perspective and each reflecting a different set of ideas about what should be done. Most people will find something to agree with in all three approaches, but each also has trade-offs, risks, or drawbacks that need to be taken into account and worked through. The options presented here are not ready-made solutions, but rather a starting point for weighing the options and reaching a sound judgment.

# Facts About US Immigration

## Immigrant Share of US Population

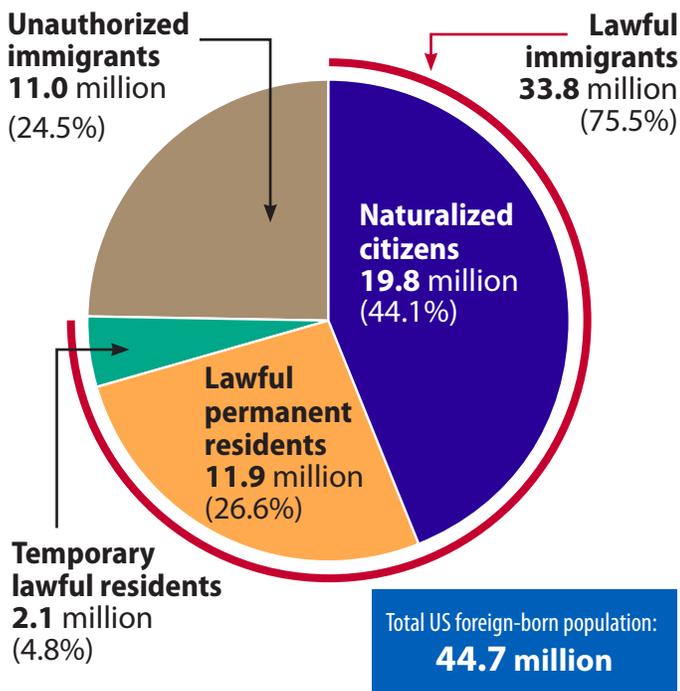
Percent of US population that is foreign born



Source: Pew Research Center, based on US Census Bureau, "Historical Census Statistics on the Foreign-Born Population of the United States: 1858-2000" and Pew Research Center tabulations of 2010 and 2015 American Community Survey (IPUMS).

## Status of Immigrants Living in the United States

Foreign-born population estimates, 2015

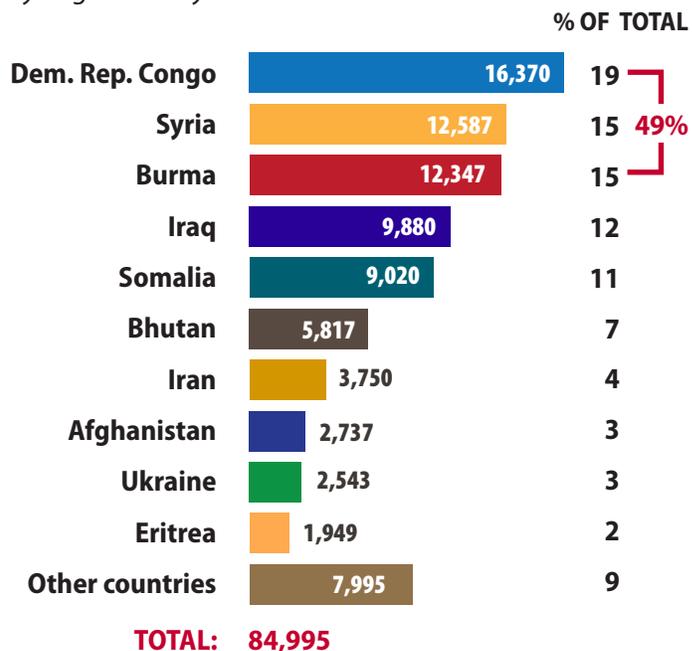


Note: All numbers are rounded independently and are not adjusted to sum to US total or other totals.

Source: Pew Research Center estimates for 2015 based on augmented American Community Survey (IPUMS)

## Refugees in the United States by Country of Origin

Number of refugees entering the United States in fiscal 2016, by origin country



Note: Data does not include special immigrant visas and certain humanitarian entrants.

Source: Pew Research Center, based on US State Department's Refugee Processing Center.

## Option One: Welcome Immigrants, Be a Beacon of Freedom

**This option says that immigration has helped make America what it is today—a dynamic and diverse culture, an engine of the global economy, and a beacon of freedom around the world.** We should develop an immigration policy that builds on that tradition, one that welcomes newcomers, helps immigrant families stay together, and protects those fleeing from war and oppression. Welcoming immigrants is not only the right thing to do; it benefits our culture and our economy. To remain competitive in a fast-changing global marketplace, the United States needs newcomers who are willing to contribute their talents to strengthening America’s culture of ingenuity and entrepreneurship.

### A Primary Drawback

**This option would add even more burdens to systems that are already overwhelmed by historically high levels of immigration.**

#### Actions

- Give those who entered the US without permission years ago a path to legal status. It’s time to forgive and welcome these people who have become part of our communities.
- Welcome immigrants who are willing to work, whether in low-skilled jobs many Americans do not want, or in high-skill jobs where there are shortages.
- Accept more refugees fleeing war and deprivation in countries like Syria. We have a moral obligation to help.
- Provide legal residency and the ability to apply for citizenship to undocumented immigrants who were brought to the United States as young children, sometimes called “DREAMers.”
- Allow all residents to vote in city elections, regardless of whether they are citizens or not.

#### Drawbacks

- This allows immigrants who violated our laws to “cut in front” of the thousands of people who are seeking to enter the United States legally.
- Millions of Americans are unemployed. We should focus on the training needed to employ our own citizens.
- There are Americans in need too, and it is difficult to vet people coming from such war-torn areas.
- It’s not fair to allow this group to benefit from the illegal actions of their families.
- This makes the word “citizen” meaningless.

**In 2016, there were more than four million applicants on the State Department’s waiting list for immigrant visas.**

*—US State Department*

## Option Two: Enforce the Law, Be Fair to Those Who Follow the Rules

**This option says we need a fair system, where the rules are clear and, above all, enforced. Ever since the nation's first immigration policies were put into place, the premise has been that welcoming newcomers should be done in an orderly way.** But with an estimated 11 million people living in the country illegally, our current system is unjust and uncontrolled. In fairness to the long lines of people who are waiting to come to America and stay here legally, we have an obligation to enforce our borders and deport people who entered the country without our permission and vetting. That is why we must strengthen our commitment to border security, crack down on visa overstays, and introduce more stringent measures to deal with immigrants living outside the law.

### A Primary Drawback

**This will harm millions of people now living in our communities and contributing to our society. It will spread fear in cities and towns nationwide.**

#### Actions

- Identify people who entered the country illegally and deport them. Require that they reapply for entry.
- Require police officers to check a person's immigration status if there is reasonable suspicion.
- Prosecute employers if they hire workers without legal papers.
- Cut off federal funds to "sanctuary cities" that refuse to cooperate with federal immigration agents seeking to locate and deport undocumented immigrants.
- Build a secure border wall, hire more patrol agents, and tighten security.

#### Drawbacks

- This will tear families and communities apart. The punishment far outweighs the crime and is impractical.
- This hampers law enforcement by making immigrants afraid of reporting crimes and talking to police. It also leads to racial profiling.
- This will create chaos in industries like agriculture and construction, and lead to higher prices for basic goods like food and housing.
- This would undermine local authority and police, and drive away many immigrants who contribute to society.
- This will cost billions of tax dollars and fails to address problems with people entering from Canada, through airports, or people over-staying temporary visas. It will make it much more difficult for lawful travelers to enter the United States.

**An estimated 11 million people in the United States are unauthorized immigrants.**

*—US Department of Homeland Security*

## Option Three: Slow Down and Rebuild Our Common Bonds

**This option recognizes that newcomers have strengthened American culture in the past. But the current levels of immigration are so high, and the country is now so diverse, that we must regain our sense of national purpose and identity.** We need to moderate the flow of immigrants and focus more on assisting newcomers as they join American society. We should have a measured immigration policy—one that reduces the rate of immigration and insures that immigrants become part of the American community. We need to find ways to accommodate newcomers without compromising our sense of national unity.

### A Primary Drawback

**This option would rob us of the energy and hard work people from around the world bring to the United States. In many cases, immigrants are more grateful for the freedoms and opportunities of this nation than the people who were born here.**

#### Actions

- Reduce the numbers of legal immigrants admitted to the United States each year.
- Give preference to immigrants who already speak English.
- Restrict family reunification to spouses and young children, and concentrate on admitting immigrants who will work in areas where we need them.
- Rather than focusing on providing bilingual school programs, schools should ramp up efforts to help newcomers learn English and enhance curricular efforts to learn about American culture and democratic values.
- Welcome refugees fleeing political and religious persecution while making sure they are not all resettled in the same place, which overburdens a community's ability to provide the help refugees need and makes it harder for refugees to become part of the larger community.

#### Drawbacks

- This undermines the longtime image of the United States as a welcoming land of freedom, and deprives us of the workers needed in key industries like agriculture and construction.
- This would place an undue burden on some immigrants—especially those who are willing to take on some of the back-breaking jobs most Americans do not want.
- This would split immigrant families apart, forcing people who come here to leave loved ones behind, sometimes in danger and poverty.
- Without bilingual education, students will be left at a disadvantage in today's global society.
- This would require more communities to accept and welcome newcomers.

**Together, immigrants and their US-born children make up about 26 percent of US inhabitants.**

—Pew Research Center

## About This Issue Advisory

THE IMMIGRATION ISSUE AFFECTS VIRTUALLY EVERY AMERICAN, directly or indirectly, often in deeply personal ways. This advisory is designed to help people deliberate together about how we should approach the issue. The three options presented here reflect different ways of understanding what is at stake and shed light on the critical tensions in what we hold most valuable.

The issue forces us to consider a number of difficult questions, and there are no easy answers. Should we strictly enforce the law and deport people who are here without permission, or would deporting millions of people outweigh their crime? Should we welcome more newcomers to build a more vibrant and diverse society, or does this pose too great a threat to national unity? Should we accept more of the growing numbers of refugees from war-torn regions, or should we avoid the risk of allowing in people whose backgrounds may not have been fully checked? Should our priority be to help

immigrants assimilate into our distinctively American way of life, including learning English, or should we instead celebrate a growing mosaic of different peoples?

### One effective way to structure forums on immigration:

1. Introduce the issue.
2. Ask people to describe how the issue has affected them or their families.
3. Consider each option, allowing equal time for each. Explore what is attractive about each option, and whether the drawbacks are acceptable.
4. Review the conversation as a group. What areas of common ground were apparent? Just as important: What tensions and trade-offs were most difficult?

This issue advisory was prepared for the National Issues Forums Institute (NIFI) in collaboration with the Kettering Foundation. National Issues Forums issue guides are used by civic and educational organizations interested in addressing public issues. These organizations use the guides in locally initiated forums convened each year in hundreds of communities. Recent topics have included US politics, safety and justice, America's role in the world, and the opioid crisis. For more information on the National Issues Forums, visit the website [www.nifi.org](http://www.nifi.org).

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