

How should we manage immigration in our country?



Let's Talk, Marathon County

Throughout its history, the United States has been shaped by waves of immigrants who have brought their diverse backgrounds and traditions, contributing to the country's rich cultural heritage and economic growth.

In Marathon county, the recent arrival of refugees from countries such as Afghanistan, Syria and Congo, as well as unauthorized arrivals from the southern border, provide a local perspective on the national discussion over U.S. immigration policy.

This issue guide provides a framework for considering the kind of immigration policies we ought to have as a nation, how these policies affect our communities, and the values and goals we want to guide our decisions about immigration. Different groups of people may be affected by the changes in our approach to immigration. including:

- U.S. 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, including many who arrived decades ago;
- People who arrived here with valid visas but have overstayed; and
- People brought here as infants or children by parents who came into the country without permission.

In 2023, the U. S. reached a seven-year high in number of refugee arrivals, at just over 60,000, driven by global conflicts and humanitarian crises. More than 969,000 immigrants became U.S. citizens in 2022, the largest naturalization total since 2008. 140,000 immigrant visas are available each year for those seeking to immigrate based on job skills. In addition, 10.4 million students, business travelers, and tourists were granted visas for temporary visits in 2023.

But these numbers don't tell the whole story. Some immigrants cross the border undetected or choose to stay on expired temporary visas. An estimated 11 million unauthorized immigrants are now living in the United States. The current situation on our southern border began with the arrival of unprecedented numbers of families and children from Central and South America, many of them asking for asylum and overwhelming border facilities. Compounding the issue, border officials have separated thousands of children from their families.

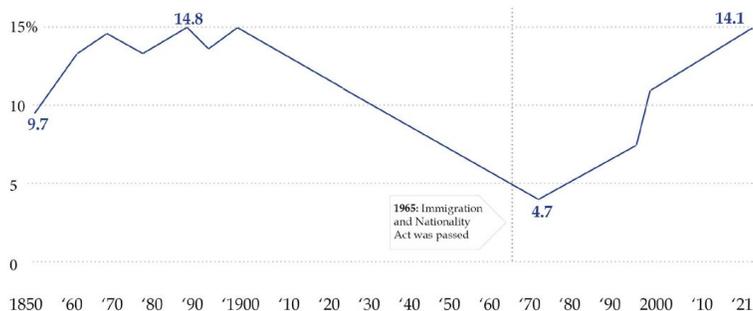
Most Americans agree that the nation's immigration policy needs an overhaul, but perceptions differ about what kind of solution the country needs.

How should the United States approach the issue of immigration?

This issue advisory presents three approaches to addressing immigration, 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 to be taken into account and worked through. The options presented here are not ready-made solutions, but rather a starting point for weighing alternatives and reaching a sound judgment.

Immigrant share of U.S. population nears historic high in 2021

Percentage of U.S. population that is foreign born

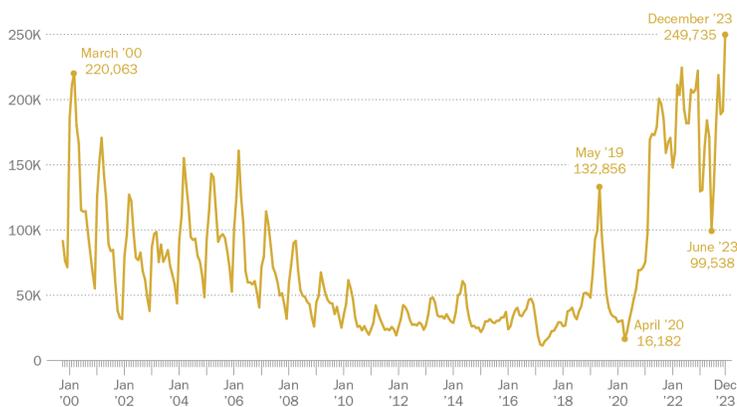


Note: All numbers are rounded independently and are not adjusted to sum to US total or other totals.

Source: PUS Census Bureau, "Historic Census Statistics on Foreign-Born Population of the United States: 1850-2021" and Pew Research Center tabulations of 2010-2021 American Community Survey (IPLUMS).

2023 ended with more migrant encounters at U.S.-Mexico border than any previous month on record

Monthly migrant encounters by U.S. Border Patrol at U.S.-Mexico border

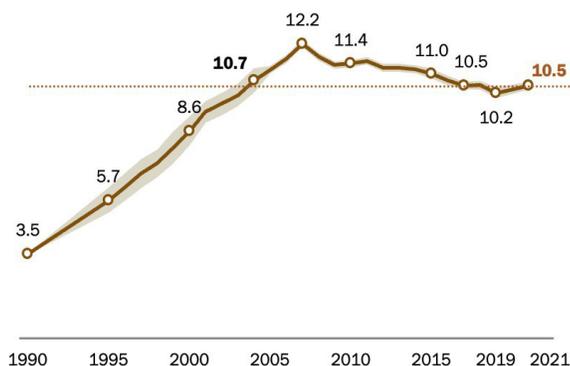


Note: Beginning in March 2020, monthly totals combine apprehensions and expulsions into a new category known as encounters. Monthly totals before March 2020 include all apprehensions only. Some migrants are encountered more than once.

Source: US Customs and Border Protection. Pew Research Center.

Unauthorized immigration remained mostly stable from 2017-2021

Unauthorized immigrant population, in millions

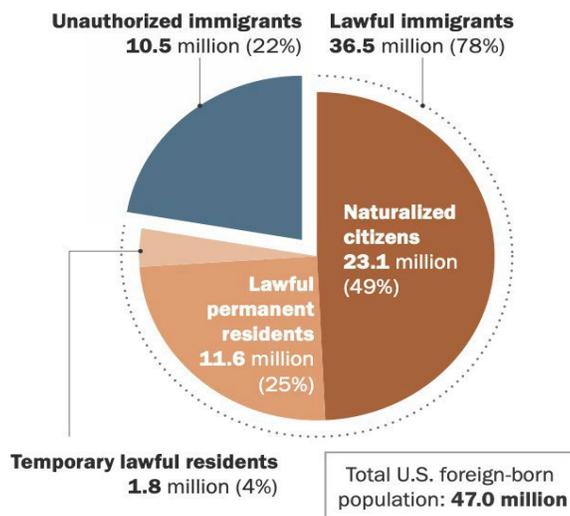


Note: Shading shows range of estimated 90% confidence interval.

Source: Pew Research Center estimates based on augmented US Census Bureau data

Status of immigrants in the U.S.

Foreign-born population estimates, 2021



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

Source: Pew Research Center estimates for 2021 based on augmented US Census Bureau data (IPLUMS).

Option One: Welcome Immigrants; Be a Beacon of Freedom

This option says that immigration has helped make the US 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 economy and counters falling US birth rates. To remain competitive in a fast-changing global marketplace, the United States needs newcomers who are willing to contribute their skills to strengthening our culture of ingenuity and entrepreneurship.

A Primary Drawback

This option would add even more burden to systems already overwhelmed by historically high levels of immigration.

Actions	Drawbacks
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 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.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• This allows immigrants who violated our laws to cut in front of the line of the thousands of people who are seeking to enter the United States legally.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Welcome immigrants who are willing to work, whether in low-skilled jobs many Americans do not want or in high-skilled jobs where there are shortages.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• This would detract from the focus on helping our own citizens get jobs.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Accept more refugees fleeing violence and deprivation in countries such as Syria, Ukraine, Afghanistan, El Salvador, and Guatemala. We have a moral obligation to help.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• There are US citizens in need, too, and it is difficult to vet people coming from such areas of upheaval.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provide legal residency and the ability to apply for citizenship to DREAMers, the term commonly used for undocumented immigrants who were brought to the United States as young children.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• It's not fair to allow this group to benefit from the illegal actions of their families.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Allow all residents to get driver's licenses, regardless of their immigration status and as long as they meet all licensing requirements, to make roads safer for all.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• This could make it easier for criminals and terrorists to get fake documents.

• Other options to consider....

As of 2021, 3.9% of Marathon County residents (5.32k people) were born outside of the U.S., which is lower than the national average of 13.6%.

—U.S. Census Bureau

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

This option says we need a fair system, in which 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 many people who are waiting to come to the US and stay here legally, we have an obligation to enforce our borders and deport people who enter the country without our permission. That is why we must strengthen our commitment to border security, crack down on those who overstay their visas, 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	Drawbacks
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Identify people who entered the country illegally and deport them. Require that they reapply for entry.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">This will tear up families—many of which include one or more US-born children. The punishment is not only impractical but far outweighs the crime.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Cut off federal funding to “sanctuary cities” that refuse to cooperate with federal immigration agents.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">This punishes entire communities over disputes that should be settled legislatively. It could mean underfunded police departments and schools in some places and deny aid at a time of dire need.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Prosecute employers if they hire workers without legal papers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">This will create chaos in industries such as construction and agriculture, including dairy farming, and lead to higher prices for basic goods such as food and housing when times are already tough.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Build a secure southern border wall.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">This will cost billions of tax dollars. Plus, migrants already go around, climb over or cut through the existing walls.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Detain all adults who enter the country illegally, even if this means separating families	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Such a “zero tolerance” policy traumatizes children who had no say in their parents’ decisions and invites international condemnation.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Other options to consider...	

In 2022, some 708,000 foreign visitors to the United States, whose visas required them to depart by the end of the year, did not leave.

—US Department of Homeland Security

Option Three: Slow Down Immigration and Focus on Common Bonds

This option recognizes that newcomers have strengthened our culture in the past. But the number of foreign-born residents has reached 48.2 million, or 14.1 percent of the population. Fifty years ago, the foreign-born share of our population was 4.7 percent. We need to moderate the flow of immigrants and focus more on helping newcomers integrate into US society. We should have a measured immigration policy—one that reduces the rate of immigration and ensures that immigrants become part of the US 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 much of the energy and hard work people from around the world bring to the United States. The coronavirus pandemic only underscored how many of our “essential workers”—serving in hospitals, staffing grocery stores, and producing food—are immigrants.

Actions	Drawbacks
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Reduce the number of authorized immigrants admitted to the United States each year.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">This deprives us of the workers needed in key industries such as agriculture and construction and could threaten the economy by lowering birthrates.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Give preference to immigrants who already speak English.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">This would place an undue burden on some immigrants—especially those who are willing to take on some of the back-breaking jobs most US citizens do not want.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Restrict family reunification to spouses and young children, and concentrate on admitting immigrants who will work in areas where we need them.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">This would split immigrant families apart, forcing people who come here to leave loved ones behind, sometimes in danger or poverty.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Schools should require English immersion programs so newcomers learn the language as quickly as possible and absorb US culture and democratic values.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Special language programs take needed time and funds away from other important subjects. Besides, teaching classes in both languages would better prepare students to participate in today's global economy.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Reform the country's immigration policy so that the path to citizenship is clear, affordable and more concise than the current policy.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">This would require a significant and expensive investment in personnel - judges, lawyers, and other officials - to expedite the process.

- Other actions to consider...

Together, immigrants and their US-born children make up about 28 percent of US inhabitants.

—Pew Research Center

About This Issue Guide

THE IMMIGRATION ISSUE AFFECTS VIRTUALLY EVERY AMERICAN, directly or indirectly, often in deeply personal ways. This guide 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 distinctive way of life—by insisting they learn English, for example—or should we instead celebrate a growing mosaic of different peoples?

Ground Rules

- **Focus on the options and actions we can take nationally and in our communities.**
- **Consider all options fairly.**
- **Listening is just as important as speaking.**
- **Let others finish their thoughts before sharing yours.**
- **No one or two individuals should dominate.**
- **Maintain an open and respectful atmosphere.**
- **Everyone is encouraged to participate.**

Holding a Deliberative Forum

1. Introduction

- **Review the ground rules.**
- **Introduce the issue.**

2. Connect to Issue

- **What concerns you about the issue or how does it affect you or people you know?**

3. Consider Each Option

- **What concerns Consider each option one at a time. Allow equal time for each.**

- **What is attractive?**
- **What about the potential drawbacks?**

4. Review and Reflect

- **Review the conversation as a group.**
- **What areas of common ground were apparent?**
- **What tensions and trade-offs were most difficult?**
- **Who else do we need to hear from?**

This issue guide was originally created by the National Issues Forums (NIF) in collaboration with the Kettering Foundation (ISBN: 978-1-946206-54-1). National Issues Forums issue guides are used by civic and educational organizations interested in addressing public issues. The original issue guide on immigration has been modified by the Wisconsin Institute for Public Policy and Service (WIPPS). It is common for local communities and organizations to adapt NIF issue guides to local conditions. If you desire to access the original NIF issue guide on immigration, please visit www.nifi.org.



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