

IMMIGRATION

8

CHAPTER

TRUMP'S CAMPAIGN RHETORIC ON IMMIGRATION APPEALED TO MANY VOTERS, BUT IF HIS ADMINISTRATION CONTINUES TO CRACK DOWN ON UNDOCUMENTED IMMIGRANTS IT WILL FACE CHALLENGES ON BOTH THE LEFT AND RIGHT. THIS NATION OF IMMIGRANTS MUST NOW DETERMINE WHAT ROLE IT WANTS NEWCOMERS TO PLAY IN ITS CULTURE AND ECONOMY IN THE FUTURE.

When Donald Trump kicked off his 2016 election campaign, he told the crowd gathered at Trump Tower in New York City, "When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best. ... They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with [them]. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists." Although many gasped at their televisions when they watched the candidate's brash remarks on the nightly news, others cheered, happy to hear the newly minted politician speaking his mind.

Trump's rhetoric sparked a heated national debate on immigration. Liberals have hurled accusations of racism at Trump and his supporters, while conservatives have blamed liberals for allowing too many undocumented immigrants – especially criminals – into the country.

DEMOGRAPHIC SHIFTS

Every year approximately 1 million people move to the United States with a visa, adding to the country's foreign-born population of 43.3 million, 13.5 percent of the national population.¹





In addition to those documented immigrants, approximately 11 million undocumented people live in the United States.² Their number rose significantly throughout the 1990s and early 2000s but tapered off with the financial crisis of 2008 and has remained stable for the past decade. They come primarily from Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador and other Central American countries, though a small but growing number are arriving from China.³

“Most people think that the problem with the border is unauthorized migration,” says Josiah Heyman, director of the Center for Inter-American and Border Studies at the University of Texas at El Paso. “Unauthorized migration is important, but not only is it going down, ... it is going down quite a lot. But also, it doesn’t compare to the volume of everyday legal authorized crossings.”

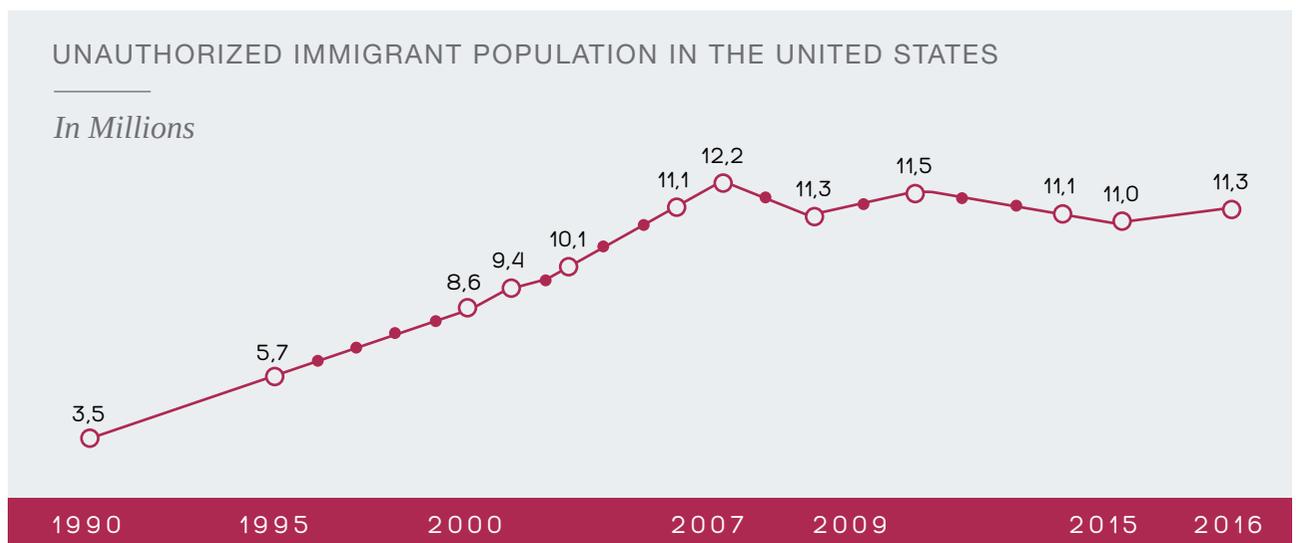
“Unauthorized migration is important, but not only is it going down, ... it is going down quite a lot. But also, it doesn’t compare to the volume of everyday legal authorized crossings.”

— Josiah Heyman

Although most immigration and border crossings to the United States are legal, for the purposes of family reunification and employment, undocumented immigration dominates the political discussion on the subject and will be the focus of this chapter.

OPEN BORDERS

Many conservatives say the Obama administration was lenient in enforcing immigration laws, which in turn,



Pew Research Center.

FACTS AND FIGURES

- » 1 million people move to the United States each year with a visa
- » 13.5 percent of the U.S. population is foreign-born
- » 11 million undocumented people live in the United States
- » 3.1 million undocumented people pay Social Security taxes

Trump said, allowed many dangerous people to enter the United States. “Countless Americans who have died in recent years would be alive today if not for the open border policies of [Obama’s] administration,”⁴ he declared in an August 2016 campaign speech. Conservatives’ perception that Obama’s negligence on border security endangered Americans has been fueled by coverage of the issue by right-leaning media such as Fox News.

In reality, undocumented immigrants are less likely to commit crimes than native-born U.S. citizens. A study by the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, found that the incarceration rate for undocumented immigrants is 0.85 percent, slightly more than half the 1.53 percent rate for U.S.-born Americans.⁵ Nevertheless, many Americans see their neighborhoods and communities changing because of immigration and worry about the consequences.

Race plays an important part in the national dialogue about immigration and American identity, even beyond the president’s racially charged remarks on the campaign trail. Coastal urbanites have been quick to dismiss Trump supporters and citizens who want to curtail undocumented immigration as racists, leading some on the right to feel they cannot air legitimate concerns on the subject. This topic will be addressed in Chapter 9.

Council member Kathy Dobash in Luzerne County, Pennsylvania, associates immigrants with unsettling changes in her hometown, although she does not blame them solely for a perceived uptick in local crime.

“I can’t blame it just on the immigrants coming to the

area, that would be unfair,” she says. “I don’t know what happened because that’s not the city I knew growing up. My mom had home invasions. These are big, big changes. I would never have imagined my city turning into this.” An epidemic of drug use, she acknowledges, is also a part of the problem.

“DO IT RIGHT”

Although undocumented immigrants are less likely to commit crimes than the average American, many conservatives point out that crossing the border without a visa or overstaying a visa is a crime itself. Sarah Emerson, an active Republican and law student at Samford University in Birmingham, Alabama, says, “I am a strong believer in that, if you’re going to come into the country, do it right, go through the process.”

“People say, ‘Well, why don’t these people come through the front door?’ There isn’t actually a front door.”

————— Siobhán Lyons



▲ Stephen A. Urban, Luzerne County, Pennsylvania

Stephen A. Urban, a colleague of Dobash on the Luzerne County Council, sees undocumented immigration as a question of fairness and offers a qualified endorsement of one of Trump’s most controversial campaign promises:

“Come here legally. Submit your paperwork like everyone else. I have friends who have come from other countries that are here and they had to go through a rigorous process through the immigration service in order to get documented. ... Then we have others that simply

walk into the country and don't follow the same rules. I think the rules ought to apply equally to everyone. If people [obeyed] the rules we wouldn't need a wall. But if people don't obey the rules, then maybe we do need a wall."

Voices on the left argue that opportunities for legal migration are so limited that it's nearly impossible for immigrants to come or stay legally. Siobhán Lyons, president and chief executive of the nonprofit Citizens Diplomacy International in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, came to the United States from Ireland and has first-hand experience with the immigration process. "I think the American immigration system is so broken," she says. "People say, 'Well, why don't these people come through the front door?' There isn't actually a front door."



Siobhán Lyons, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Lyons worries that the country's strict immigration policies prevent even highly educated people from entering the United States legally. "People really believe that immigrants are trying to hammer their way in [but they are not]. Educated people aren't coming here anymore. It's a problem," she says.

THE GOOD OLD DAYS?

The United States has often been described as a nation of immigrants. Imam Shafi of the Colorado Muslim Society argues that all Americans have their own immigration history. "America was built on refugees," he says. "Everybody has a history of how he got here." Originally from Kenya, Shafi has lived all over the world but considers the United States his home. He says when he hears people say Muslims should "go back to your country," he wonders, "Where do I go to? ... My wife was born in Texas, San Antonio. We have two children, twins, and another one is coming soon. ... So if you

want to kick me out of Denver, it's OK. I'm going to jump on a bus and I'm going to go to Texas."



Imam Shafi, Denver, Colorado

Perhaps because the immigrant story is at the center of so many people's American identities, many Americans believe there has been a deterioration in immigration standards since their ancestors arrived in the country. "Controlled immigration, that's fine. But when America was formed we had immigrants and they became Americans," says Woody Jacobs, mayor of Cullman, Alabama. "Now it seems that we have [immigrants] and they want to not assimilate into Americans." Cullman was founded by a German immigrant businessman in the 1870s as a settlement for other German expatriates. Although he acknowledges that the town's founder may not have encouraged settlers to speak English at the outset, he notes that immigrants' descendants no longer speak German. Jacobs says, "The heritage is still here, but everyone is American."

Many Americans think of their immigrant ancestors as more industrious and less coddled than those coming to the United States now. They see an immigration landscape that violates the unspoken contract – freedom and dignity in exchange for honesty and hard work – America has always had with its newcomers. Ken Isaksson, who works at a fish hatchery in Aberdeen, Washington, says he is not opposed to immigration but that newcomers should follow the same rules that his Swedish grandfather did:

"When he came in, people were required to have a job waiting for them or a sponsor. ... When he got here he started with nothing. He had to earn his money. ... The perception that I have of immigration now is if a person is able to get here, it seems that we have a lot of public programs, public assistance programs, and they're



“[Americans] come and work, maybe a day or two, but they won’t complete the season. ... The comment that [people] make is that these people are coming and taking away jobs. That’s not true.”

————— *Margie Diaz, Alamosa, Colorado*

automatically entered into it. I have no problem with immigration if people register as an immigrant and they go out and get a job and pay taxes into the system from which they benefit.”

THE MATH

A major concern about undocumented immigration, especially among conservatives, is that, since many are paid informally, they are benefiting from social investments, such as education and infrastructure, without helping to pay for it via taxes.

“I think that might be unfair to the people who are here legally who are paying taxes, paying for the schools, paying for the roads, paying for the infrastructure. Then we have others that are working on a cash basis who are not paying into the system but are using the services,” says Urban.

Citing his stint on the county’s prison board, Urban estimates that millions of dollars are spent “every year for housing undocumented illegals in our jails. And we only get reimbursed from the federal government about \$120,000 a year for that cost. So our local taxpayers are paying for the cost of people who are in this country

illegally because the prior administration didn’t take firm action against preventing them from being in this county ... or in deporting them in a timely way.”

Dobash, his fellow council member, agrees. She says undocumented immigrants are a “drain on ... every educational and government system, and the health care system in the area.”

“I think [undocumented immigration] might be unfair to the people who are here legally who are paying taxes, paying for the schools, paying for the roads, paying for the infrastructure.”

————— *Stephen A. Urban*

In fact, some undocumented immigrants do pay taxes. In 2013, the Social Security Administration estimated that there were “3.1 million unauthorized immigrants working and paying Social Security taxes in 2010,” and it predicted that number would rise.⁶ These unauthorized immigrants pay billions of dollars in taxes in a variety of ways, often buying fake Social Security numbers or documents in order to gain employment.

Whatever undocumented immigrants' tax status, both liberals and conservatives acknowledge that they fill important gaps in the U.S. labor market, doing low-wage jobs that Americans are often unwilling to do. Margie Diaz, a potato farmer in Alamosa, Colorado, struggles to find skilled and reliable workers. She uses a visa program that allows her to hire temporary agricultural workers from abroad but also requires her to employ U.S. citizens. American workers, she says, "come and work, maybe a day or two, but they won't complete the season. ... The comment that [people] make is that these people are coming and taking away jobs. That's not true. Because no one's taking away their job, a job that's available. Even in the warehouses, to just stand there and sort and stuff, [Americans are] not doing it."

With their meager wages, undocumented laborers have also been a boon to some employers and ultimately to U.S. consumers, helping to keep down the costs of food and countless other goods and services. Joie Meachem, a retiree in El Paso, Texas, sees her own community take advantage of the situation. "How many women just on my block hire illegals for their domestic use?" she says.

"The workers that come across the border fill a big void and I worry personally on the price of my food if these people ... go away."

————— *Hilda Lockhart*

Similarly, Hilda Lockhart, director of the International Trade Division at the Alabama Department of Commerce in Montgomery, Alabama, acknowledges that although she would like to see a shift toward legal immigration, she understands the value the undocumented immigrants add to the economy:

"I do know and realize that they ... do a lot of the labor and we also have food crops that are grown here that have to be picked and things like that. They fill a void in the construction industry. They fill a void in the food industry, the [agriculture] industry. ... The workers that come across the border fill a big void and I worry personally on the price of my food if these people ... go away. Somebody's got to do [these jobs]. And if we don't have someone to do that, the farmers will

suffer. It'll be a multiple effect on many industries and the consumer is going to suffer for it. That's just my personal opinion, but I also hear that from a lot of people I talk to."

THE WALL

One of Trump's central campaign promises was to build a wall on the U.S.-Mexican border, a powerful symbol of his tough stance on undocumented immigration. Bruce Bradley, a conservative retiree from El Paso, Texas, is among the 35 percent of Americans who support the idea.⁷ "The wall is not [there for] the legal people. There's a legal way to come across here. And a legal way to get our benefits," he says. "It's the illegal ones that it's going to keep out. If you're coming to this country legally, a wall's not going to make a difference. No difference whatsoever."



▲ Sandra, Huntsville, Alabama

Sandra, a conservative retiree from Huntsville, Alabama, who did not give her last name, has not made up her mind about the wall. "I'm not necessarily for a wall unless it is as effective as they think that it might be. I don't like walls, but if that's what it takes. ... I mean it's all the [drug] trafficking that is coming in, not just the people that are floating into this country," she says.

One major sticking point for conservatives is the wall's cost. A Department of Homeland Security report estimates it would cost \$21.6 billion, but Senate Democrats put the price tag at more than three times that, about \$70 billion.⁸ Maintenance would eat up another \$150 million per year.⁹ Trump has promised that he will make Mexico pay for the wall, threatening to levy taxes to ensure payment. Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto, however, insists that Mexico will not fund the wall.

Both conservatives and liberals question the efficacy of such a wall.



▲ Sarah Emerson, Birmingham, Alabama

“I don’t think the wall will stop people from coming into the country,” conservative law student Sarah Emerson says. “I think [the idea of the wall] was a good try. I don’t think that’s going to be the fix.”

Heyman, the University of Texas border studies expert, says, “As a practical measure, the wall doesn’t do a darn thing.” He calls it a “big ugly insulting symbol” that would make little headway against undocumented immigration, most of which results from people overstaying their visas, not crossing the border through the desert.

Fellow Texan Ruben Vogt, chief of staff to an El Paso County judge, is also critical of the president’s plan, arguing that a barrier on the border already exists:

“We have a big hideous metal, rusting wall across our border, which used to be a beautiful landscape. So I don’t know what the intent is, if it is to build a bigger wall, a taller wall. ... I think that our resources would be better spent in other avenues. Like ensuring that we have better technology in our ports, so that we can move people and goods in a safer manner, quicker manner, which helps our economy.”

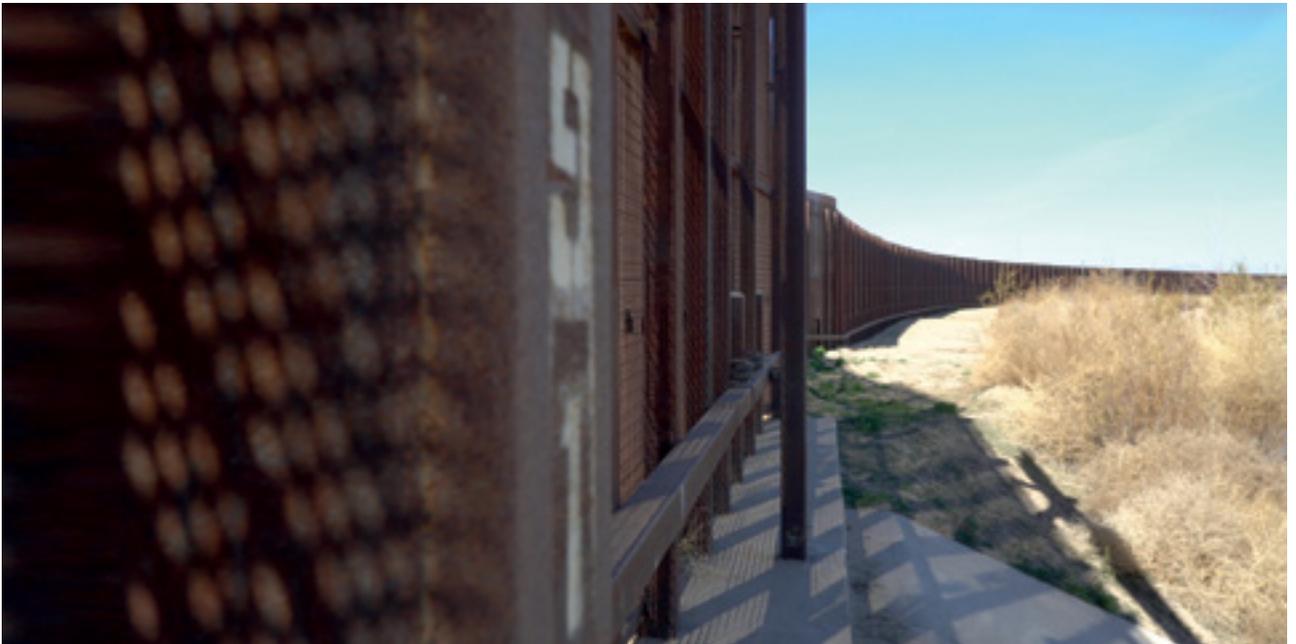


▲ Ruben Vogt, El Paso, Texas

Debate on the wall, of course, is less about its physical structure than about how open or restrictive, wise or unwise, the United States will be about controlling the flow of people coming in.

“As a practical measure, the wall doesn’t do a darn thing.”

————— Josiah Heyman



CIVIC TRUST

Trump's emphasis on cracking down on undocumented immigrants has sent shockwaves through the undocumented community. One young mother in Yakima, Washington, says she never worried much that her partner "doesn't have any papers." With the recent election, however, his status has become a constant anxiety for her family. "All this stuff that the president now is saying that he wants to do, or he's willing to do. ... I mean it's gonna be hard. We gotta start opening our eyes that this is happening," she says.

As eyes open, undocumented immigrants have become less willing to trust local authorities. Yakima functions as a de facto sanctuary city, meaning that local law enforcement does not ask residents about their immigration status and does not report to national law enforcement about the status of residents, unless they commit a serious crime. After Trump took office, however, it became difficult for local officials, including within the witness protection program, to work with undocumented residents.



 Mayor Kathy Coffey, Yakima, Washington

"The comments and the nature of our newly elected president ... [have] done a tremendous disservice to this community," Yakima Mayor Kathy Coffey says. "[His] comments regarding the deportation, and I'm only speaking for myself, [have] been very hurtful, frightening and ... [caused a] very disturbing concern for many of our ... community."

Even local nonprofits are feeling the effect. Christiano Sosa of the Denver Foundation in Colorado says undocumented immigrants are no longer coming to health clinics supported by the foundation for fear that Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents will be lying in wait to arrest them. "They're afraid to come in the doors," Sosa says.

"All this stuff that the president now is saying that he wants to do, or he's willing to do. ... I mean it's gonna be hard. We gotta start opening our eyes that this is happening."

————— Partner of undocumented immigrant,
Yakima, Washington

Critics say this lack of civic trust threatens the safety and fabric of some communities, as undocumented immigrants may be reluctant to go to the emergency room to get necessary medical care, to report to the police when they are victims of or witness to a crime, even to send their children to school.

SHOWDOWN AT THE BORDER

Trump's campaign rhetoric on immigration appealed to many voters, but if his administration continues to crack down on undocumented immigrants, ordering deportations and building a wall, it will face challenges on both the left and right.

From a humanitarian perspective, many worry that the uptick in deportations will prevent undocumented immigrants from living safely in the United States.

From an economic perspective, many question the efficacy and cost of Trump's proposals, particularly the construction of a wall. There is also bipartisan concern about a potential drought of undocumented workers, who fill an important role in the U.S. economy, from domestic help to agriculture. The Trump administration could address undocumented immigration by developing a system that either gives undocumented people a path to legal status or provides significantly more opportunities for legal immigration to the United States – although it has recently thrown its support behind a bill to reduce legal immigration.

Any significant overhaul of U.S. policy on undocumented immigration will need to address humanitarian as well as economic concerns in order to win widespread support. The debate on undocumented immigration should also take place as part of the larger debate on all immigration in the United States. This nation of immigrants must now determine what role it wants newcomers to play in its culture and economy in the future.

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