

# GREAT DECISIONS

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MAY 2025

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# US IMMIGRATION



**THEN  
AND NOW**

**COMING TO  
AMERICA**

**BECOMING  
A CITIZEN**

**RECENT  
DIFFICULTIES**

BY SAM LIN-SOMMER

# AT HOME IN A NEW COUNTRY



In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, more than 12 million immigrants entered the US through Ellis Island in New York at a rate of up to 5,000 people per day.

**I**mmigration is as American as apple pie. In 2022, around 46.2 million Americans, or about 13.9% of the country's population, [were born in a foreign country](#). And the vast majority of people in this country are the descendants of those who left their homes for American soil.

Immigration to what is now the United States started in 1508, when Juan Ponce de León, a lieutenant for Christopher Columbus, founded a settlement on the island now called Puerto Rico. **Colonial** settlements in the US

were composed of Europeans, Africans, Asians, and **indigenous** Americans. Many newcomers entered under grotesque conditions—as slaves or indentured servants—but they played key roles in colonial society, and went on to form communities here. European settlers brought people from around the world to their American colonies as they were killing, enslaving, and chasing away the land's original inhabitants. Today, American Indian and Alaska Natives make up about 3% of the US population,

or 9.6 million people, according to the 2020 US **Census**.

For the first century after the Constitution was signed in 1882, the US had mostly open borders. The country needed the labor of immigrants to fuel its growing economy, and in 1850, immigrants represented almost 10% of the US population.

The turn of the twentieth century saw waves of newcomers seeking economic opportunity. These immigrants were sometimes met with **xenophobia**, or fear of foreigners. In 1882, anti-Asian

xenophobia led to the US government banning Chinese immigration entirely with the Chinese Exclusion Act, which would not be repealed until 1943. Similarly, the Immigration Act of 1924 severely reduced immigration from all regions besides Northern and Western Europe.

US lawmakers passed these bills with an argument that will sound familiar even today: that immigrants “steal American jobs.” The idea is a false one: scholars have found that banning Chinese immigration reduced the wages and number of jobs available for White workers, because American businesses couldn't easily replace immigrant workers, and because Chinese workers helped [develop the US economy](#).

Anti-Chinese beliefs in that era were rooted in xenophobia and racism, just as anti-immigrant sentiments are today. During times of instability, frustrated people tend to treat minority groups as **scapegoats**, people who take the blame for others.

In 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson ended the **quota** system that had restricted immigration from so many parts of the world. Newcomers have since arrived on American soil from every corner of the world, with the largest numbers from Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean. As a result, the US is far more racially diverse today than it was a century ago. In the 2020 census, 19.5% of the population identified as Latino, 13.7% as Black, 6.4% as Asian, 1.3% as American Indian and Alaska Native, and 3.1% as Multiracial. 58.4% of the population is White.

## HOW IMMIGRATION WORKS

According to a major [survey](#), most immigrants come to the US for better work and educational opportunities for themselves and their children, or for more rights and freedoms. A smaller but significant number come fleeing instability and violence in their home countries.

About 49% of all immigrants have gone through the long process of becoming naturalized citizens, meaning they enjoy the same rights and protections as people who were born here. About 24% are Legal Permanent Residents (LPRs), and about 23% don't have government authorization to be in the country. Another 4% are temporary lawful residents here for shorter periods of time, like international students or seasonal agricultural workers.

The main way the US allows people to start living here permanently is through Legal Permanent Residency, often called a “green card.” The US government only offers LPR status to a few narrow categories of people. One of these

categories is “high-skilled” workers, including scientists, professors, and athletes. Critics say calling other workers “low-skilled” is unfair because their jobs actually require significant skill, and that these roles should instead [be called “low-wage.”](#)

The largest category of people with LPR status is made up of the family members of US citizens. A smaller number of people qualify for humanitarian reasons, meaning that someone is fleeing harm in their country of origin.

Outside of those with LPR status, people fleeing persecution also come to the US as asylees or **refugees**. Refugees are granted admission outside of the US, while asylees flee to the US, then ask for **asylum**. People who are awarded refuge or asylum can later apply for LPR status.

Human rights law says that the US must [shelter people who are seeking asylum](#) while their cases still remain to be heard; however, the first Trump administration forced asylum seekers to wait in Mexico. Upon Trump's reelection

## THE DEBATE

### SHOULD ICE OFFICERS BE ALLOWED TO LOOK FOR UNDOCUMENTED STUDENTS IN SCHOOLS?

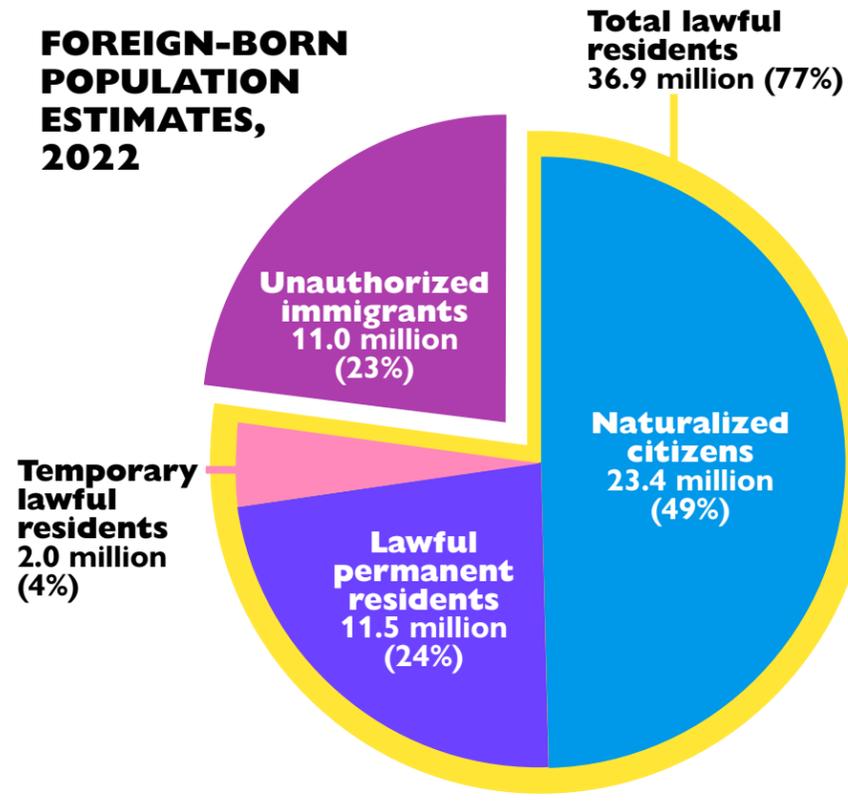
#### YES

- ✓ Children should be punished for living here without government authorization
- ✓ ICE officers should be able to use any resource to do their job
- ✓ Police officers are already allowed in some schools

#### NO

- ✗ It's cruel to deport children and separate families
- ✗ ICE raids are traumatic experiences that harm students and teachers
- ✗ Fear of ICE raids leads students to avoid going to school

## FOREIGN-BORN POPULATION ESTIMATES, 2022



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

in 2024, he [said he would restart this policy](#).

## UNDOCUMENTED IMMIGRATION

If you're not a highly educated professional, suffering from political persecution, or closely related to a US citizen, but you need to leave your home for a chance at a better life, what options do you have?

In the United States, your choices are limited. There is no LPR category for people who are poor and in need of economic opportunity. The US offers 5,000 green cards annually for so-called "low-skilled" workers, along with a limited number of visas for seasonal work.

Again, until about 100 years ago, the US had mostly open

borders. Many of the ancestors of today's American citizens came under the same conditions as today's undocumented immigrants—fleeing poverty—and wouldn't qualify for LPR status today. Many people argue that the poverty and instability that immigrants flee is often created by American policies. For example, the US backing of military dictatorships in countries like Guatemala and El Salvador helped create miserable conditions that many immigrants have tried to escape.

With such narrow categories for authorized immigration today, around 11 million people live in the US without papers. This means that they came here with a short-term visa or Border Crossing Card, and then stayed past their end date. The rest enter the country while evading immigration

authorities—a process that can be [expensive](#) and [dangerous](#).

It's not just immigrants who are desperate for work—businesses are desperate for labor, too. Scholars say that people who come here without authorization tend to work in jobs that [few Americans want](#). About half of [all hired field and crop workers](#) and 30% of workers in key agriculture and construction trades—like roofers, painters, and sorters of agricultural products—are [undocumented](#).

Undocumented immigrants don't only contribute by filling important jobs. In 2022, undocumented immigrants paid \$96.7 billion in taxes, and that number would be far higher if they were granted work authorization. They also purchase all types of goods and services, further strengthening the US economy.

Without any legal status, undocumented immigrants live a precarious existence and have trouble accessing well-paying jobs and public benefits, including healthcare. A majority of undocumented immigrants say they [live in fear of themselves or their loved ones being deported](#), or forcibly removed from the United States, by authorities like the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). This fear can lead people to avoid contacting the police, going to doctor's appointments, or even going to school.

Despite all of these challenges, undocumented immigrants had an employment rate of 95.8% in 2018. In 2014, almost 10% of working-age undocumented Americans started their own businesses, and currently and formerly

undocumented Americans have achieved success in fields ranging from [journalism](#) to [medicine](#).

In 2012, President Barack Obama established the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, which gives undocumented immigrants who came to the US as children before June 15, 2007, work authorization and protection from deportation. DACA is not currently granted to new recipients, but around 500,000 people currently live in the US with DACA status, which needs to be renewed every two years and is threatened by legal challenges.

And for decades now, legislators have proposed versions of the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act, which would provide protection and a pathway to citizenship for undocumented Americans who came to the US as children, often known as "Dreamers." There are currently three editions in Congress, each of which would grant work authorization and deportation protection to a new generation of Dreamers, as well as a pathway to LPR status and eventual naturalization for people protected under the DREAM Act.

## PATHWAYS TO CITIZENSHIP

US citizens enjoy the right to vote, access public benefits, travel freely, and live without fear of deportation.

To get citizenship, someone must have lived as an LPR for three or five years, depending on how they got LPR status. Once someone meets the continuous residency requirement, they must then pass an exam on US history and civics. In

### THE DEBATE

#### SHOULD NONCITIZENS WHO LIVE PERMANENTLY IN THE US BE ABLE TO VOTE?

<p><b>YES</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Noncitizens should have a say in policies that affect them</li> <li>✓ Noncitizens contribute just as much as citizens to the economy and society</li> <li>✓ The process of becoming a citizen is difficult and should not be a barrier to voting</li> </ul>	<p><b>NO</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✗ Immigrants should formally accept the responsibilities of citizenship before voting</li> <li>✗ The ability to vote could discourage people from pursuing citizenship</li> <li>✗ People won't fully understand how the US government works until they go through the process of becoming a citizen</li> </ul>
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addition, applicants need to demonstrate "good moral character" with documents that show their education, professionalism, good deeds, and connection to their community.

Many advocates argue that to support the US's immigrant population, the government should create a robust visa program for

workers, as well as grant LPR status and a pathway to citizenship for the millions of undocumented people currently in the country. The US did something [similar in 1986](#), awarding LPR status to 2.7 million long-term residents and creating more guestworker visas. Studies show that those who gained LPR



An immigrant signs the papers required to become a citizen at a US Citizenship and Immigration Services office in Newark, NJ.

John Moore/Getty Images



More than two-thirds of the workers hired to harvest crops on US farms are immigrants.

status subsequently earned higher wages, lived more secure lives, gained new skills, and contributed more money to their communities and the US tax system. Advocates say that giving undocumented Americans legal status would mean they would have more [resources for supporting their young children](#).

## IMMIGRATION IN RECENT YEARS

Last year, about [2.8 million new immigrants](#) came to the United States.

During that same time period, Donald Trump was elected to his second term in office on an anti-immigrant platform. Echoing xenophobic arguments made in past generations, he has called unauthorized immigration an “[invasion](#)” and promised large-scale deportation of undocumented immigrants. He has falsely claimed that most immigrants are criminals; in fact, unauthorized immigration is associated with a [drop in US crime rates](#).

Unfortunately, scapegoating has real effects on the lives of Americans. To advance his deportation goals, Trump has issued [executive orders that US district judges have tried to halt](#). The deportations, many of which have proceeded without trials, have separated families and sent people to prisons in countries that are not

their homes—like a maximum-security prison in El Salvador, where more than two hundred Venezuelan immigrants [are now being held](#). Among those who have been deported are multiple US citizens—a [violation of those people’s citizenship rights](#).

The deportations are devastating to those directly affected. They also could have serious effects on the US economy: the Immigration Council estimates that a mass deportation of the country’s undocumented population would cost the country hundreds of billions of dollars and shrink the US gross domestic product—an important economic measure—[by 4.2 to 6.8 percent](#).

## A NATION OF IMMIGRANTS

As the vast majority of Americans descend from immigrants, it’s impossible to imagine American culture without the influence of people from other countries. Rock music has its roots in a blend of

African and European musical traditions. There are more Chinese restaurants than McDonald’s in the United States. Entire sections of Los Angeles and New York are bilingual in English and Spanish or Mandarin, and have been for generations.

But most of all, immigrants are our friends and family, our neighbors and classmates. Immigration is in our country’s DNA.

## WHAT YOU CAN DO

- **Stay informed** about the latest immigration laws and the challenges immigrants face today. If you or people you know are immigrants, [be aware of your rights](#).
- **Support immigrant communities.** Be kind and welcoming to immigrants in your community, and volunteer at nonprofit organizations that

- offer important resources to immigrants.
- **Write or call elected officials** to let them know what you think about the way they are addressing immigration.
- **Vote when you are old enough.** In most cases, you can’t vote until you’re 18, but in many states you can register at 16 or 17, and you’ll be all set when 18 rolls around.

# TEEN TRAILBLAZERS



Courtesy of Ibraheem Razouki

**Ibraheem Razouki**  
Ibraheem Razouki, a 19-year-old studying computer science at Texas A&M University, knows what it’s like to start a new life in this country. Razouki was born in Baghdad during the Iraq war, and at six months old he and his family sought refuge in Jordan. When he was four, his family moved to the US. Razouki said that being immersed in a new culture, language, and environment was initially a challenge. The obstacles he faced inspired him to team up with a group of friends to start a nonprofit called [AIM to AID](#) that engages youth in assisting migrants. AIM

to AID volunteers teach English to immigrants, educate them about American society, and give them funds, clothing, and toys. Razouki and his friends also started a clothing brand that raises money for AIM to AID, as well as an app that provides refugees with tools for transitioning to life in America, like a built-in translator, lists of local nonprofit and government resources, and maps to mosques and halal markets. To other teens interested in helping immigrants, “The most important thing is to start,” Razouki said. “To find people that share the same passion and interests as you, and to see what you guys can accomplish.”

## Hector Hernández

This March, Hector Hernández, a 17-year old in Bakersfield, California, led students from three high schools to walk out of class to city hall to demand educational funding and safety for immigrants. It was the

second march that Hernández led; [the first one drew 700 supporters](#). Hernández spearheaded the march as part of Organizing for a Better Change, a group he helped found with [eight other students](#). “It’s like a big movement,” Hernández told KGET News. “We’re making history as students and this generation.” Bakersfield is a rural area home to a significant number of Latinx immigrant farmworkers, and the protests helped rally students who fear that the Trump administration will deport their undocumented family members.



Anairani Hernandez

### THE DEBATE

## SHOULD THE US PASS THE DREAM ACT?

YES

- ✓ Dreamers are just as “American” as US citizens and deserve support
- ✓ Immigrants benefit the US economy, so the DREAM Act will help the US prosper
- ✓ Deporting people and forcing others to live as second-class citizens is inhumane

NO

- ✗ Granting protections to Dreamers could encourage more unauthorized immigration
- ✗ Medicaid and in-state tuition for Dreamers will cost state and federal governments money
- ✗ People should be punished for not following official immigration procedures

Daniel Thornberg/Dreamstime.com

caglecartoons.com



"THEY SAY THEY'RE BUILDING A WALL BECAUSE TOO MANY OF US ENTER ILLEGALLY AND WON'T LEARN THEIR LANGUAGE OR ASSIMILATE INTO THEIR CULTURE..."

Jeff Parker/Cagle Cartoons/CartoonStock.com

## BORDER PATROL

1. What is this cartoon trying to say? Why do or don't you agree?
2. Which modern-day people are the Pilgrims in the cartoon meant to represent? Which modern-day people do the Native Americans represent?
3. How do we decide which people get to live in a country? Why is or isn't this fair?

## NOW IT'S YOUR TURN TO MAKE GREAT DECISIONS

1. Who are some well-known immigrants to the US? What have they contributed to the country?
2. What, if anything, should the government change about immigration laws?
3. **YOUR STORY:** Do you know anyone who is an immigrant to the US? What made them want to move here?

### KEY WORDS & TERMS

asylum	executive orders	refugees
census	immigration	scapagoats
colonial	indigenous	visas
deported	quota	xenophobia



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**Special thanks to:** Matt Barbari, MacDara King, Noel V. Lateef, Tonya Leigh, Ava Leigh Moriarty, Elliott Rebhun, Muhammed Sayed