



A Citizens'  
Solutions Guide

# Immigration

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# Where Things Stand

Immigration may be one of America's oldest public issues. The United States was founded and enriched by immigrants, and many still strive to come here for opportunity and freedom. Nevertheless, immigration policy remains hotly debated.

The United States is currently experiencing one of the biggest waves of immigration in its history. According to [Gallup](#), Americans generally agree that immigration is a good thing for the country. This attitude crosses party lines, and is shared by Republicans and Democrats alike. In polls from [Fox News](#) and [Pew](#), Americans also express support for programs that provide unauthorized<sup>2</sup> immigrants an easier path to legal work status or even citizenship.

However, many are frustrated by the numbers of people who enter the country illegally and firmly believe that our immigration policy is in serious need of an overhaul in order to guarantee fairness for native-born residents and those who are here or trying to come here legally. They also worry that lax enforcement and ineffective laws may affect our safety.

Given the economy, many argue that we just don't have the capacity to admit more people—authorized or not. Budgets are strained, unemployment is high, job creation has leveled off, and states are laying off workers. Many worry that the country can't afford to absorb more people looking for jobs.

It is, of course, important to remember as we consider immigration reform and its tradeoffs that the issue concerns real people, the vast majority of whom come to this country for many legitimate and positive reasons—a better life, freedom from persecution, a good education, and a trustworthy legal system among them.

## A Political Impasse

For the past decade, Congress has been gridlocked and unable to reform immigration in any substantial or workable way, instead repeatedly trying and failing to implement significant change. The legislature has taken up comprehensive immigration reform bills, including, recently, the DREAM Act, which would provide conditional permanent residency to some categories of unauthorized residents.

However, these have never made it to see a president's signature, often due to partisan bickering. In fact, pretty much the only bipartisan immigration reform success over the past decade was the Secure Fence Act, which led to the controversial construction of a 700-mile fence along the 2000-mile U.S.-Mexico border.

President Obama recently issued an executive order halting deportation and granting work permits for certain unauthorized immigrants under the age of thirty who were brought to the United States as children, but this could easily be undone by a change of leadership.

In place of comprehensive reform, we have a patchwork of laws, including a number enacted piecemeal by states, such as beefing up border security, enacting tougher sanctions for employers who knowingly hire illegal immigrants, or making it a crime for immigrants to not carry immigration papers. While some of these changes seem to be reducing the number of people who enter the country without permission or overstay tourist or student visas, some measures are also controversial, and their effectiveness is in dispute.

Meanwhile, Americans are frustrated by this impasse and eager for change, with many viewing our current immigration policy as broken and antiquated. In a 2010 [CBS News/New York Times poll](#), half of Americans said current immigration policy needs to be completely rebuilt, and another 41 percent supported fundamental changes to the system. But before we can build common ground on how to reform our immigration system, we must first understand the complexities of the issue and disentangle fact from fiction.

<sup>2</sup>Throughout this guide, we use "unauthorized" to describe those individuals who entered the country illegally or overstayed legal temporary visas. This is the neutral term used by the U.S. government.

## The Terms of the Debate

When we talk about immigration, we need to recognize that there are at least two sides to the story—authorized immigration and unauthorized immigration—and the two are sometimes mixed together in ways that can cloud and confuse the conversation.

There are currently about 38 million immigrants living in the U.S., and nearly 13 percent of the U.S. population is foreign-born. Just over 1 million individuals obtained legal permanent resident status in 2011.

Immigrants enter the country legally for a variety of reasons. The vast majority of these individuals enter the country to reunite with family members. Others enter as refugees or due to their employment skills. A small number enter through a lottery system, and others enter on temporary work or student visas.

An estimated two thirds of current immigrants are legal. The remaining third or so—approximately 11.5 million individuals—either entered the country illegally or overstayed legal temporary visas.

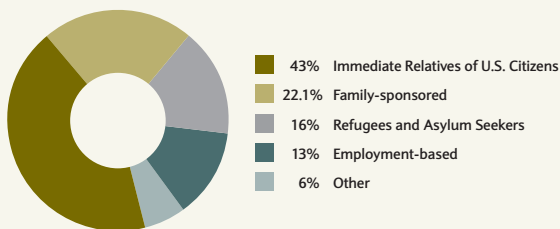
While unauthorized immigration has tripled since 1990, after a peak in 2007, it has slowed in recent years. The Pew Hispanic Center suggests that this may be due mostly to a decrease in immigration from Mexico. It's possible that some reform measures—sanctions for employers, increased border patrol—may have contributed to this decrease. Other factors, such as a high unemployment rate in the U.S. and changes in economic conditions in home countries, may also deter individuals from entering the country illegally.

Here are some other important key facts about immigration:

- More than half of immigrants settle in just four “gateway” states: California, Florida, New York and Texas, meaning immigration’s effect on the nation’s social and economic fabric varies widely. Increasingly, however, immigrants are moving to areas of the country with very little history of immigration.
- Nearly 16 percent of U.S. workers are foreign born. Unauthorized immigrants made up 5.2 percent of the nation’s labor force in March 2010.
- Major employers, especially those in technology fields, repeatedly ask for the country to permit larger numbers of highly-skilled foreign-born workers with specific skills.

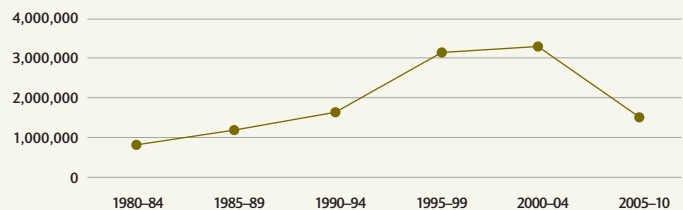
## Reason for Admission

Immigrant admission by major category, fiscal year 2011. Note: Immediate relatives includes spouses, unmarried minors and parents over 21 years old. Family-sponsored includes unmarried children of U.S. citizens, spouses of legal residents and siblings of U.S. citizens. Source: “U.S. Legal Permanent Residents: 2011,” April 2012, U.S. Department of Homeland Security



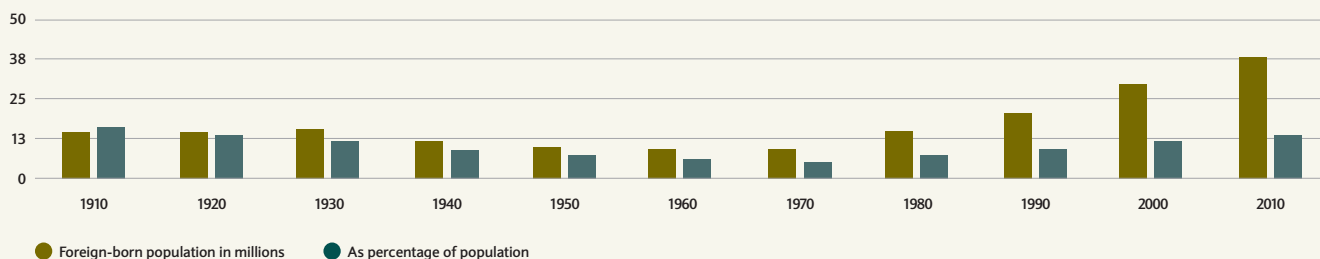
## Unauthorized Immigrant Population

Unauthorized immigrant population by period of entry. Note: The unauthorized immigrant population totaled 11.5 million in 2011. Source: “Estimates of the Unauthorized Immigrant Population Residing in the United States: January 2011,” March 2012, U.S. Dept. of Homeland Security



## Foreign-born Population

Foreign-born population, in millions and as a percentage of the total U.S. population, 1910–2010. Source: “The Foreign-Born Population in the United States: 2010,” May 2012, U.S. Census Bureau



- More than 11 percent of immigrants have advanced degrees—slightly more than native-born Americans. On the other hand, around 30 percent of immigrants have less than a high school diploma—nearly four times the same figure for native-born Americans.
- Immigrants are 30 percent more likely than native-born Americans to form a new business, and three times more likely to file patents.
- A 2010 study suggested that immigrants cost the health care system less per person than native-born citizens. The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act excludes unauthorized immigrants from federal coverage, and provides limited coverage to authorized immigrants.

## The Economics of Immigration

Much of the debate over immigration—both legal and unauthorized—revolves around economic impact. Does the U.S. economy benefit from the talents and spending power of immigrants? Do immigrants take jobs away from citizens, or does immigration actually create jobs? What benefits should authorized immigrants receive once they're here?

When it comes to unauthorized immigration, the economic issues revolve mainly around whether unauthorized workers bring down wages for American workers by giving employers a steady stream of people who will accept very low wages and poor working conditions. Many Americans also argue that individuals here illegally are using government benefits, which costs taxpayers money and could strain tight budgets.

Most experts argue that, overall, immigration is a boon to the economy. Immigrants—authorized or not—aren't only seeking jobs or using benefits; they're also consuming, producing, innovating and, often even in the case

of unauthorized immigrants, paying taxes. The National Research Council found in 1997 that immigrants add up to \$10 billion to the economy each year.

From a national perspective, there are pluses to having a large, flexible work force and younger immigrants to offset an aging population. Most research suggests that the negative impact of immigration on the job market is small and, often, temporary. Many also argue that lower-skilled immigrant workers are taking the jobs that Americans don't want, and there's evidence this may be the case. Furthermore, high-skilled immigrants have made vast contributions to business and science—they've helped launch Yahoo!, Google and eBay, and they've given us the theory of relativity.

On the other hand, there are studies that suggest that immigration does indeed hurt lower-skilled, less-educated native-born workers and could potentially drive down their wages, up to as much as 4 percent. The impact of immigration on high-skilled workers is also not very well researched, and it's unclear if unintended consequences exist.

What about budgetary strain? Analysis by the Congressional Budget Office found that taxes paid by immigrants—both authorized and unauthorized—exceed the costs of services they use. On the other hand, budgetary costs aren't equal across states and local governments. Some states with concentrated high immigration, like California, New Mexico and Arizona, bear a heavier burden of costs that may take a while to make back—or may never be recovered at all.

## Other Common Concerns

The immigration debate goes far beyond economics. Many Americans hold deep-seated concerns over considerations around culture and safety. As immigrants more and more

move to parts of the country with very little history of immigration, will they join the American mainstream? Will they encounter discrimination or animosity?

Studies show that the majority of immigrants in the U.S. have been here for a decade, and the longer immigrants reside in the U.S., the more likely they are to own a home and learn English. In a 2009 study from Public Agenda, immigrants themselves reported that, for them, learning English and pursuing citizenship are practical steps toward fitting in and getting a job. More than three-quarters said it took fewer than 5 years to “feel comfortable here and part of the community.” Nearly half said it took fewer than two.

For many, unauthorized immigration also raises questions about national security and whether terrorists and criminals might take advantage of the easy access and lax laws. Others meanwhile worry that an overemphasis on such issues could lead to racial profiling or a curtailing of civil liberties.

## Where Do We Go From Here?

While Americans share a general consensus that the current immigration system is broken, they lack common ground on how to move forward. Meanwhile, politicians tend to play to the extremes on this issue, because it's the hard core believers on each side who are the most vocal. Such a strategy can only lead to further stalemate.

As part of breaking out of this cycle of gridlock, the nation's citizens have a responsibility. They will need to face up to the tradeoffs inherent in immigration reform, weigh the choices and judge: what is our most workable pathway to a sustainable solution?



# Approach One

## Dramatically strengthen the enforcement of current laws and reduce the level of legal immigration.

Our immigration system is unsustainable. With about 11.5 million unauthorized immigrants living in the United States and over 300,000 arriving each year, the current system undercuts American workers and risks allowing dangerous criminals and terrorists into the U.S. It's also just wrong to tolerate the widespread breaking of the law.

It's economically unfeasible—and logistically impossible—to round up 11.5 million individuals and deport them. We should instead strengthen and strictly enforce current laws, thereby encouraging unauthorized immigrants to leave of their own accord as it becomes more difficult to make a living. Meanwhile, we should reduce levels of legal immigration to make sure employment opportunities are going to the millions of Americans currently out of work.

### Arguments for:

- It is dangerous and wrong to make it so easy to enter the country illegally. While it's been over a decade since the 9/11 attacks, we can't slip into apathy. The 9/11 Commission Report noted that several of the September 11th hijackers could have been detected and removed if immigration officials had enforced routine immigration checks.
- We've let immigration get out of control, and we need to establish a system where our laws will be respected and people who violate them will not benefit from their law-breaking.
- Millions of Americans are currently unemployed, and there are more than 3 unemployed individuals competing for every job opening. It's not fair that they are losing access to employment or facing artificial wage deflation because of unauthorized workers willing to accept lower pay. Cracking down on employers who hire illegal immigrants, whether they are large companies or private individuals, will remove the economic incentive for immigrants to come here for jobs and encourage fair compensation.

### This should be done by:

- Employing more Border Patrol agents, building high-tech barriers along the border and making unauthorized immigration a felony.
- Pursuing and punishing employers who hire undocumented workers and requiring that they check the status of all new and current workers in a government database. Employers who do not fire workers without valid Social Security numbers should face very serious fines.
- Requiring that unauthorized immigrants already here pay stiff fines, learn English and apply for citizenship. If they are unwilling to do this, they should be deported. We cannot round up and deport 11.5 million people, but we can make sure that those who stay here have a genuine commitment to this country.
- Giving notice that all future visa violators and other illegal immigrants will be prosecuted and deported.
- Reducing the level of legal immigration until we get a better handle on its impact on the economy or until the economy improves substantially.

### Arguments against:

- Many business leaders, including Bill Gates and NYC Mayor Michael Bloomberg, agree that immigration is an engine for economic recovery. Employers rely on well-educated immigrants for scientific and technical help and on less-educated immigrants to do jobs that Americans won't take. Drastically cutting the number of immigrants will derail our economic recovery.
- Immigration levels adjust naturally during times of high unemployment and the concern that immigrants will over-saturate the competition for available jobs is inflated. During the period since the Great Recession, immigration has slowed as the country isn't able to offer the high level of economic opportunity that it used to.
- The vast majority of people entering this country are here to improve their lives, not to commit crimes or abuse government benefits. They see America as a land of opportunity and freedom, and many endure perilous journeys or hurdles and red tape to be here. This is something we should be proud of, not fight against.

# Approach Two

## Match immigration policy to the needs of the economy.

Immigrants have contributed enormously to our nation's economy, which simply won't function well without them. Almost a fifth of U.S. workers are foreign born. Immigrants not only bring a diverse set of skills to the workforce; they are also entrepreneurs that start companies (and employ Americans), inventors and innovators, and powerful consumers. The spending power of Hispanic Americans alone, 40 percent of whom are born outside the U.S., is projected to top \$1.5 trillion in 2015.

We should harness this potential while also focusing on adjusting the system to the needs of our economy, bringing in the people who can help us most. Workforce needs should drive who we let in, how many, and for how long. We should also provide the means for those unauthorized individuals who have been contributing to our nation's economy to do so legally.

### Arguments for:

- If U.S. companies like Microsoft, GE and IBM can't get the highly-skilled engineers and specialists they need domestically, we simply have to bring them in from abroad. Our ability to stay competitive in the global economy depends on it.
- The truth is that most Americans do not want the tough, low-wage jobs that immigrants fill. The best way to address this is to invite low-skilled immigrants here through a guest worker program.
- Immigrants who come here to work—even those who are not here permanently—pay taxes that are vital to keeping our government programs like Social Security strong.
- American university graduate programs—especially in engineering and the sciences—are full of foreign students. We should make it easier for these talented and technically-skilled individuals to remain in the country after receiving their degree.

### This should be done by:

- Creating a guest worker program, so that employers who need agricultural and other low-skilled workers can bring them into the U.S. in a legal, but temporary, way.
- Adjusting the number of legal immigrants allowed into the country annually to fit the existing job market. Set levels of legal immigration for both low- and high-skilled workers that meet our demand for labor, and then enforce them at the border and the worksite. The number would be increased or decreased each year depending on the jobs available.
- Bringing in more highly-skilled science and technology workers, as long as employers say they need them. Our schools are just not producing enough people who are prepared and want to go into these fields, so these immigrants would give our economy a competitive edge.
- Providing green cards for top foreign graduate students at U.S. colleges and a visa specifically for entrepreneurs.

### Arguments against:

- Many Americans are struggling economically. The government should not make things worse by inviting millions of immigrants to work for low wages and no benefits, as a guest worker program would do. It would be better to raise the minimum wage and guarantee benefits for all.
- Unless we really crack down on enforcement and border control, unauthorized immigration will continue to flourish, threatening our economy and our safety. This approach does almost nothing to address this problem.
- If our companies are lacking highly-skilled workers, the solution is to invest in and examine our education system so that it better matches the needs of our evolving job market.
- Focusing our immigration policy solely on economic needs means that fewer people will be able to enter through family reunification rules—which will be hard on immigrant families.

# Approach Three

## Reform the system to take advantage of the enormous social and economic contributions of immigrants.

The United States is a nation of immigrants, and we should be proud to be citizens of a country where so many people want to live. Our whole society benefits from having a human policy that recognizes the vast majority of unauthorized workers have become valued members of our culture and economy. Plus, the country basically allowed illegal entry for decades. To suddenly pull the rug out from under people who have built good lives here is just wrong.

### Arguments for:

- For more than a hundred years, immigrants have come here and aspired to build a better life for their families. We pride ourselves on shared values of freedom and equality. How can we turn our backs on those principles and deny to others the opportunity that brought our own families here?
- Finding a legal way for millions of immigrant workers to continue contributing to our economy will only benefit us. Many experts from across the political spectrum agree that immigration is good for the economy and drives wages for native-born workers up. A program of legalization has the potential of contributing to our overall economic recovery by increasing the incomes of native-born workers and households.
- Legal immigrants pay taxes and contribute to Social Security. Because of immigration, the U.S. is substantially better off than many European countries where the population is aging so dramatically.
- Most immigrants show a genuine appreciation for this country and want to be part of it. Often, immigrants understand the true value of freedom and opportunity better than many native-born Americans.

We should offer those unauthorized immigrants of any age, as long as they have committed no crimes and are in good standing, not only access to legal work, but an opportunity for improvement and a clear pathway to citizenship.

### This should be done by:

- Passing a compassionate and fair-minded amnesty program that gives unauthorized residents without a criminal record the opportunity to legalize their status. These individuals should pay fines, learn English and wait in line to become legal residents
- Increasing the number of slots for legal immigration so that foreigners will not be so tempted to enter illegally.
- Providing driver's licenses and identity cards for all those who enter the country for more than six months so that we can strengthen security and law enforcement.
- Ensuring that legal immigrants receive educational benefits – including real opportunities to learn English – and have good access to health care and other basic rights.

### Arguments against:

- Providing immigrants with basically an open-door policy and generous public services will turn the U.S. into a magnet for the world's poor.
- This choice does almost nothing to address lax border enforcement. The threat of terrorism is unfortunately a reality, and we can't risk providing easy access for individuals who want to hurt this country's citizens.
- We aren't even taking good care of the educational and health care needs of our own citizens, our economic recovery is tenuous at best, and our federal budget is bursting at the seams. We just cannot afford to help everyone who wants to come here.
- Amnesty programs have been tried before and only encourage more unauthorized immigration. What message are we sending when we reward people for breaking the law? Is it fair to those people who have followed the rules and are still waiting their turn to get here?

## Resources to learn (and do!) more:

### Government Websites:

**Bureau of the Census, Immigration Statistics:** The U.S. Census Bureau collects international migration data through surveys and censuses.  
<http://www.census.gov/population/intmigration/>

**“Yearbook of Immigration Statistics,” U.S. Department of Homeland Security:** This annual compendium, released each August, provides data on legal immigration and immigration law enforcement actions.  
<http://www.dhs.gov/yearbook-immigration-statistics>

### Understanding Immigration:

**Center for Immigration Studies:** An independent, nonprofit research and education organization. CIS promotes a low-immigration approach and examines the consequences of immigration on the U.S.  
<http://www.cis.org>

**Immigration Policy Center:** From the American Immigration Council, IPC conducts research and analysis to shape a rational conversation on immigration and immigrant integration.  
<http://immigrationpolicy.org/>

**“Now That I’m Here: What America’s Immigrants Have to Say About Life in the U.S. Today,” Public Agenda:** Public Agenda’s groundbreaking 2002 survey of immigrants regarding their experiences in the U.S.  
[http://publicagenda.org/files/pdf/now\\_that\\_im\\_here.pdf](http://publicagenda.org/files/pdf/now_that_im_here.pdf)

**“A Place to Call Home: What Immigrants Say Now About Life in America,” Public Agenda:** The 2009 update to “Now That I’m Here” extends its sampling to gain a more detailed view of Hispanics and Muslim Americans.

<http://www.publicagenda.org/pages/immigrants>

**Visualizing immigration:** Check out Public Agenda’s Pinterest board on immigration for some interesting infographics illustrating the issue.  
<http://pinterest.com/publicagenda/immigration/>

### An International View:

**Canadian Immigration Facts and Statistics:** See how the U.S. compares to its northern neighbor when it comes to immigration and immigration policy.  
<http://www.canadafaq.ca/canadian-immigration-facts.php>

**2010 Global Migration:** An interactive and hand-made pie chart illustrating data from the World Bank’s “Migration and Remittances Factbook 2011,” showing where and how people are migrating internationally.

<http://www.ixycreativity.ro/data-visualization-and-infographics/2010-global-migration-double-paper-pie-chart/>

### Tools to Act and Interact:

**US Census 2010 Interactive Population Map:** Find out who U.S. residents are and where they live, and compare your community to others.  
<http://2010.census.gov/2010census/popmap/>

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### About the Citizens’ Solutions Guides:

Public Agenda’s Citizens’ Solutions Guides are nonpartisan, unbiased resources to help you think through a difficult issue in alternative ways, weighing and evaluating values, priorities, pros, cons and tradeoffs. The Guides can also be used as discussion starters for community and group conversations and in classes. Note that the Citizens’ Solutions Guides are meant to help people start thinking and talking about an issue in productive ways — they are not meant to rigidly restrict thinking or dialogue. The perspectives described are not the only ways of dealing with the problem, nor are the viewpoints mutually exclusive in every respect. You can mix and match from different perspectives, or add additional related ideas.

“Immigration: A Citizens’ Solutions Guide” was written by [Allison Rizzolo](#) of Public Agenda. For more information on the sources for this material, please refer to the Citizens’ Solutions Guides online at <http://www.publicagenda.org/pages/citizens-solutions-guides>

### About Public Agenda:

Public Agenda is a national, nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to strengthening democracy and improving people’s lives. Through research and public engagement, we help leaders, citizens and stakeholders build common ground on solutions to tough public problems like education reform, the environment and healthcare. Public Agenda was founded in 1975 by the social scientist and public opinion expert Dan Yankelovich and former Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, and is based in New York City.

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