

Immigrant Population Growth in the U.S. Slows to a Trickle

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The United States population gained immigrants at the slowest pace in a decade last year, according to an analysis of new census data, a notable slowdown that experts said was quite likely linked to a more restrictive approach by the Trump administration.

The net increase of immigrants in the American population dropped to about 200,000 people in 2018, a decline of more than 70 percent from the year before, according to William Frey, chief demographer at the Brookings Institution, who conducted the analysis.

“It’s remarkable,” said David Bier, an immigration expert at the Cato Institute, of the 2018 numbers. “This is something that really hasn’t happened since the Great Recession. This should be very concerning to the administration that its policies are scaring people away.”

An administration official said it was impossible to comment without seeing the details of the analysis.

The numbers were released on Thursday as part of the Census Bureau’s American Community Survey, a kind of annual mini-census it started in 2005. The net immigration figure, made up of all foreign-born people who came to the United States, minus those who left and those who died, gives demographers a picture of how the United States population has changed over the past year.

The largest declines were among people from Latin America and Asia who were not United States citizens, Mr. Frey found. In all, about 45 million foreign-born people lived in the United States in 2018. About half of those were citizens, nearly a quarter were undocumented and the remaining quarter were legal residents. Immigrants as a share of the country’s population remained flat at 13.7 percent, the highest share since 1910.

Such a sharp drop in immigrant flows is unusual during times of economic expansion, when jobs are plentiful and people tend to want to stay and work. The last time the pace slowed so much was during the financial crisis in 2008, when the flow actually declined.

Experts said much of last year’s drop was probably an indirect effect of President Trump’s approach to immigration policy. Congress sets most limits on immigration, but a president’s policies can also have an effect. Mr. Trump’s ban on travel from several majority-Muslim countries in 2017 has stranded thousands of immigrants abroad. He has cut the number of refugees and created new procedures that make processing visa applications more onerous.

“It’s probably no one factor,” said Randy Capps, director of United States research for the Migration Policy Institute. “It’s probably a number of small factors, a lot of which are related to policy changes and to the general effect of Trump being president.”

He added, “It’s what you would expect if it became more difficult for some immigrants to get to the U.S. and others found the country less welcoming.”

The biggest decline was among people from Latin America who were not United States citizens. The Census Bureau does not designate what portion of noncitizens are in the country illegally, but Mr. Frey said it was possible that some of the decline was among those people. In all, noncitizens declined by about 478,000 people; more than half were people from Latin America.

For many years, Mexico was the largest contributor of immigrants. But since 2010, the number of immigrants arriving from Mexico has declined, while the number coming from China and India have surged. But in 2018, the number of people from Asia who lived in the United States but were not American citizens declined. Mr. Bier said that could reflect people working or studying in the United States who had giving up on waiting for immigration status.

“The difference is so large that it’s more likely that people who are waiting or hoping for legal permanent residence felt that the arrival of the Trump administration was the writing on the wall,” he said. “That goes for people in all sorts of statuses.”

Another decline appears to be happening among students from China. The Associated Press reported this week that American universities are reporting steep declines in Chinese students, which is cutting into tuition revenue. Several universities have reported drops of one-fifth or more this fall, according to the report, which quoted university administrators blaming rising tensions between the two countries.

Mr. Frey also spotted political patterns. Of the 14 states with the lowest concentrations of foreign-born people, 12 voted for Mr. Trump. In half of those 12 states, Asians dominated recent immigrant gains. In 10 of those states, immigrants are more likely than native-born residents to hold bachelor’s degrees, Mr. Frey found.

Two states — New York and Illinois — had measurable declines in their foreign-born populations, while 11 had increases, including Florida, Texas and Arizona.