

A common thread between the 1940 and 2020 census: reduced immigration

As we emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic, updating our immigration system to facilitate movement of labor and people will be critical in reestablishing the U.S. as a global leader in the 21st-century economy.

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With the recent release of preliminary 2020 census data, there was one data point that stood out to most demographers: low population growth. Looking at the numbers, the 2020 census revealed markedly modest U.S. population growth of only 7.4% since 2010. This was the second slowest rate of population growth in the history of the U.S. census and was only slightly higher than the lowest rate recorded in the 1940 census of 7.3% population growth between 1930 and 1940.

There are several factors that explain the low rate of population growth recorded in the 2020 census. Birth rates have decreased over the past 10 years because of student loan debt and other financial pressures faced by millennials in their childbearing years. It is also likely there was some undercounting because the census happened to fall on the same year we were battling a global pandemic. However, there is another key factor that explains our decreased population growth: reduced rates of immigration.

Isolationist policies of the 1920s

This is not the first time reductions in immigration have led to stagnant U.S. population growth. Indeed, the last time our country saw a similarly low rate of population growth, the 1930s, it was preceded by passage of the 1924 Johnson-Reed Act, a law that dramatically decreased legal immigration to the U.S. by placing low quotas on the number of individuals allowed to immigrate to the U.S. each year. The impact of the Johnson-Reed Act and resulting low rates of immigration was clearly seen in the 1940 census, when the foreign-born share of the U.S. population decreased from 11.3% in 1930 to 8.8% in 1940. With the benefit of distance, many historians now view the isolationist policies of the 1920s, including limiting legal immigration under the Johnson-Reed Act, as major contributing factors that caused and worsened the Great Depression of the 1930s.

Moving back to the present, the decade between 2010 and 2020 saw similar decreases in immigration to the U.S. According to data from the Pew Institute, after reaching a peak of 12.2 million in 2007, by 2017 the estimated number of undocumented immigrants in the U.S. had decreased to 10.5 million. Experts attribute this decrease to a number of factors, including

increased immigration enforcement within the U.S. and at the border, economic conditions following the great recession and anti-immigrant attitudes within the U.S.

Additionally, actions by the Trump administration — including various travel bans, public charge regulations and increased denials of immigration petitions — significantly reduced legal immigration to the U.S. between 2016 and 2020. According to data from the Cato Institute, during President Donald Trump's time in office, there was an 18% decline in the total number granted lawful permanent resident (green card) status and an 28% reduction in approved temporary visas to enter as a tourist, student or for temporary employment. This decrease was even more dramatic in 2020 when closure of consular posts abroad and various COVID-19 travel bans led to a 90% reduction of approved applications for permanent residence and a 93% decline in temporary visas issued abroad.

Time to update our immigration system

Now that preliminary census data has been released, we should learn our lessons from the past to avoid making similar mistakes. Preliminary analysis of 2020 census data by the Brookings Institution projects that as our population continues to age over the next decade, we may see even sharper drops in population growth if we do not significantly increase immigration. In addition to tempering decreased population growth, modernizing our legal immigration system will help our country fill needs in all sectors of the economy.

As we emerge from the economic and public health catastrophe of the COVID-19 pandemic, updating our immigration system to facilitate movement of labor and people will be critical in reestablishing the U.S. as a global leader in the 21st-century economy.

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