

## America's immigration woes

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September 30, 2017

**Donald Trump has scrapped rules protecting young illegal immigrants from deportation. Activists, business leaders and economists think he's wrong. Simon Wilson reports.**

### Is the US still a nation of immigrants?

Yes – more so now than for decades. The number of people migrating to America rose sharply from less than 100,000 a year before World War II to around 250,000 a year in the 1950s. It then grew steadily during the long postwar boom to around one million a year in the 1990s – the level where it remains today. So by 2015, the number of foreign-born people living in the US was estimated to be 43.3 million, out of a population of around 320 million. These first-generation immigrants live with 40.6 million American-born children who are US citizens – meaning that 81 million immigrants and their families make up around a quarter of the population.

### Why is this trend controversial?

For some, immigration is controversial because it means changes in the country in which they grew up. In the early 1960s, 5% of the population was born abroad. Now it's 13.5% (more if you include the children of immigrants), and many are from Latin America (in particular Mexico) rather than Europe. Still, the US has had even higher levels of immigration in the modern era – the foreign-born population was around 15% in the late 1800s and early 1900s – and mostly views itself as open to new arrivals: 72% of Americans see immigration as a good thing, according to a 2016 Gallup poll. The real controversy centres on the number in the US illegally, rather than the absolute level of immigration.

### How many people is that?

There are an estimated 11 million illegal immigrants in the US – a quarter of the foreign-born population. Many of them have been in the country for decades. Around one-third now have US-born children, who are American citizens by birth. Fixing this obviously unsatisfactory situation has long been a political nightmare. There is fairly strong backing for offering an amnesty to existing immigrants: the Gallup poll found that up to 84% of people support introducing a path to citizenship for those who meet certain conditions. But this would need to be paired with border-security measures aimed at reducing future immigration. Finding a compromise on these two points has proved impossible. In 2013, the Democrat-led Senate passed an immigration reform bill with support from many Republican senators – but it failed to get a vote in the Republican-controlled House of Representatives. What action is Donald Trump taking?

Much of Trump's base is strongly anti-immigration and he has tried to govern on that basis. This includes taking aim even at legal immigration: the president has backed a bill drawn up by two Republican senators that would cut annual legal immigration in half and prioritise education and skills rather than family ties in deciding who can enter. Trump believes that his proposal will "reduce poverty, increase wages and save billions and billions of dollars" – all assertions that are disputed by many economists. It's unclear whether this bill will make it to Congress, given Trump's other priorities such as tax reform.

### **What about illegal immigration?**

Trump has promised to speed up the deportations of undocumented migrants, and insists the US will build a vast border wall aimed at preventing illegal immigration from Mexico. Earlier this month, he reversed Barack Obama's Deferred Action on Childhood Arrivals (Daca) executive order from 2012, which protected from deportation those who were illegally brought into the US as children by their parents. Those covered by the order – known as the Dreamers – could apply for renewable permits letting them live legally in America, providing they have been in the country for five years and have no criminal record.

### **Who are the Dreamers?**

Around 800,000 young undocumented migrants (mostly Mexican) had applied for Daca. They are typically younger (average age 22), better educated and better paid than the typical immigrant (an average wage of \$17 per hour), according to an analysis by the Cato Institute, a right-leaning think tank. Of those aged 25 or over, more than 90% are in work, and they create new businesses at twice the rate of the general population. Overall, the Dreamers as a population are broadly similar to immigrants who hold H-1B visas for skilled workers. The think tank argues that forcing them to leave the country would be an act of economic self-harm that would cost \$215bn in lost economic output over ten years, \$60bn in lost taxes and \$7.5bn in deportation costs.

### **What happens now?**

Trump's decision means that new applications will no longer be accepted under Daca. Those covered at present will all lose their status by 2020, with the first permits expiring in March 2018, unless Congress passes legislation allowing them to stay. Immigration-rights activists are, of course, outraged, while corporate leaders from Facebook to Goldman Sachs have slammed the move as immoral and economically misconceived. Trump's defenders dispute whether Obama had a constitutional right to make his order on immigration and say that asking Congress to legislate rapidly is the right solution. Yet the chances of Congress doing this by February seem slim, given that it has had the least productive first eight months of any presidential term.