

The Evolution of Immigration to the U.S.

Since its founding, the United States has been profoundly shaped by immigration. European colonization led to many other migration flows, largely out of the need for cheap labor in the “New World.” An estimated 12.5 million Africans were forcibly taken and shipped to the Americas to work as slaves in the production of sugar, tobacco, coffee, cotton and gold. In the latter half of the 19th century, slavery was replaced by indentured servitude, which was a common way for poor Europeans to migrate to the American colonies. The wealth that Europe accumulated from these labor migrants allowed it to industrialize, urbanize, and provide more opportunities, even for its poorest citizens, to afford passage across the Atlantic in search for a better life. Until the 1880s, migration to the U.S. was largely unregulated and became a cornerstone to the creation of the working class in the U.S.

After World War II, the face of immigration to the U.S. changed. As immigration from Europe declined, immigration from Latin America, the Caribbean, and Asia increased. Often, these new flows of immigrants were direct results of the U.S.'s own hegemonic political, military and economic actions: the creation of guestworker programs like the Mexican *Bracero* Program, military occupation in Asia, and military intervention in Central America. With the passing of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, in addition to the increasing demand for foreign labor, migration from these regions to the U.S. continued to increase over the second half of the 20th century.

Today, immigrants comprise almost 14 percent of the U.S. population, or more than 44 million people out of a total of about 327 million, according to the Census Bureau. Together, immigrants and their U.S.-born children make up about 28 percent of U.S. inhabitants. However, despite being a country profoundly shaped by immigration, in the U.S. the topic has been the source of many personal and political debates. Over the past few decades, immigration has become a highly politicized and securitized topic. The backlash against immigrants has been racially motivated and out of fear for losing what is perceived to be American identity and privileges. This growing sentiment has helped give rise to political figures such as Donald Trump, who promised major immigration reform, whether that be by building a wall on the U.S.-Mexican border, blocking funding for sanctuary cities, or implementing a “zero-tolerance” policy for illegal border crossings.

Immigration to the U.S, and specifically undocumented immigration, has become more criminalized—meaning that criminal penalties are imposed on individuals for acts of immigration. The criminalization of immigrants has led to an increase in strict enforcement and regulations of who enters the U.S. Although there is a history of restrictive and discriminatory immigration policy in the U.S (such as the use of quota systems of the 1986 Immigration and Reform Act) only recently have we seen the rising involvement and direct influence of the private prison industry in immigration enforcement. Incarceration of immigrants, which was once an anomaly in U.S. immigration enforcement, is now a highly utilized (and increasingly normalized) tactic to deter and punish immigrants. As we witness the prison abolition movement gain momentum alongside Black Lives Matter we may also find ourselves imagining how immigration imprisonment fits into a more general conversation about incarceration and justice in the U.S.

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Information gathered from Hein de Haas' *et al. The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World* (The Guilford Press, 2020); “Historical Overview of Immigration Policy,” Center for Immigration Studies (<https://cis.org/>) and “The U.S. Immigration Debate,” The Council on Foreign Relations (<https://www.cfr.org/>).