

Trends in Migration to the U.S.

Philip Martin

(May 2014) Under the motto *e pluribus unum* (from many, one), U.S. presidents frequently remind Americans that they share the immigrant experience of beginning anew in the land of opportunity.¹ Immigration is widely considered to be in the national interest, since it permits individuals to better themselves as it strengthens the United States.

For its first 100 years, the United States facilitated immigration, welcoming foreigners to settle a vast country. Beginning in the 1880s, an era of qualitative immigration restrictions began as certain types of immigrants were barred: prostitutes, workers with contracts that tied them to a particular employer for several years, and Chinese. In the 1920s, quantitative restrictions or quotas set a ceiling on the number of immigrants accepted each year.²

Immigration law changed in 1965. Qualitative and quantitative restrictions were maintained, but national origin preferences that favored the entry of Europeans were dropped. U.S. immigration policy began to favor the entry of foreigners who had U.S. relatives and foreigners requested by U.S. employers. During the 1970s, the origins of most immigrants changed from Europe to Latin America and Asia: Between 2000 and 2009 over three-fourths of the 10 million immigrants admitted were from Latin America and Asia.

U.S. immigration has occurred in waves, with peaks followed by troughs (see figure). The first wave of immigrants, mostly English-speakers from the British Isles, arrived before records were kept beginning in 1820. The second wave, dominated by Irish and German Catholics in the 1840s and 1850s, challenged the dominance of the Protestant church and led to a backlash against Catholics, defused only when the Civil War practically stopped immigration in the 1860s.

The third wave, between 1880 and 1914, brought over 20 million European immigrants to the United States, an average of 650,000 a year at a time when the United States had 75 million residents. Most southern and eastern European immigrants arriving via New York's Ellis Island found factory jobs in Northeastern and Midwestern cities. Third-wave European immigration was slowed first by World War I and then by numerical quotas in the 1920s.

Between the 1920s and 1960s, immigration paused. Immigration was low during the Depression of the 1930s, and in some years more people left the United States than arrived. Immigration rose after World War II ended, as veterans returned with European spouses and Europeans migrated. The fourth wave began after 1965, and has been marked by rising numbers of immigrants from Latin America and Asia. The United States admitted an average 250,000 immigrants a year in the 1950s, 330,000 in the 1960s, 450,000 in the 1970s, 735,000 in the 1980s, and over 1 million a year since the 1990s.

Almost 110,000 foreigners enter the United States on a typical day. Three major entry doors exist: a front door for immigrants, a side door for temporary visitors, and a back door for the unauthorized. Almost 3,100 foreigners a day receive immigrant visas or green cards that allow them to live, work, and become naturalized U.S. citizens after five years. Over 105,000 tourist, business, and student visitors arrive; some stay only a few days, while others stay for several years.

Finally, over 1,500 unauthorized foreigners a day were settling in the United States until the 2008 recession reduced their number sharply. Half of the unauthorized eluded apprehension at the Mexico-U.S. border, while the others entered legally through the side door but violated the terms of their visitor visas by working or not departing.³

During the 1990s, contentious debates arose about the relationship of immigrants and their children to the U.S. educational, welfare, and political systems; and more broadly, whether the immigration system served U.S. national interests. Since then, the immigration debate has centered on preventing the entry of terrorists, controlling unauthorized migration, and dealing with U.S. employers who request foreigners to fill jobs.

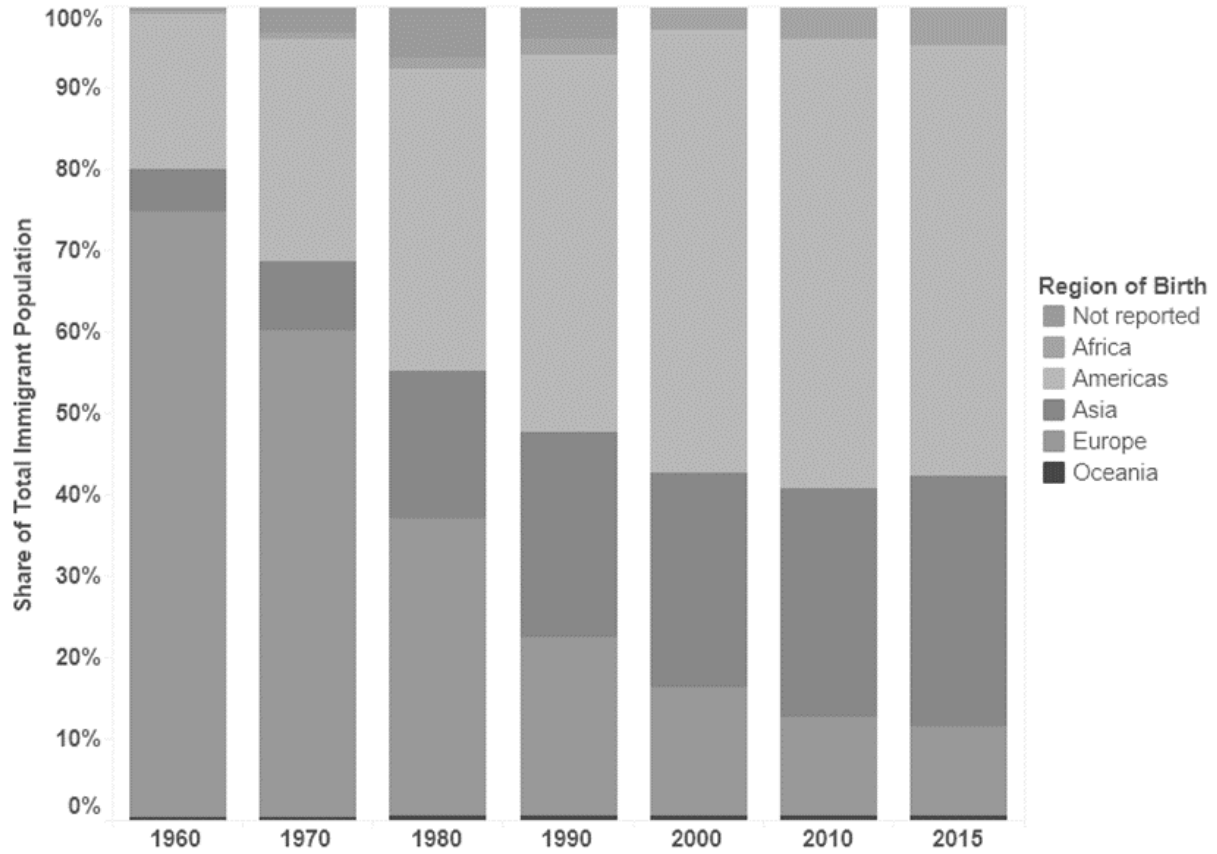
...

Philip Martin is a professor at the [University of California, Davis](#), chair of the UC Comparative Immigration & Integration Program, and editor of [Migration News](#) and [Rural Migration News](#).

References

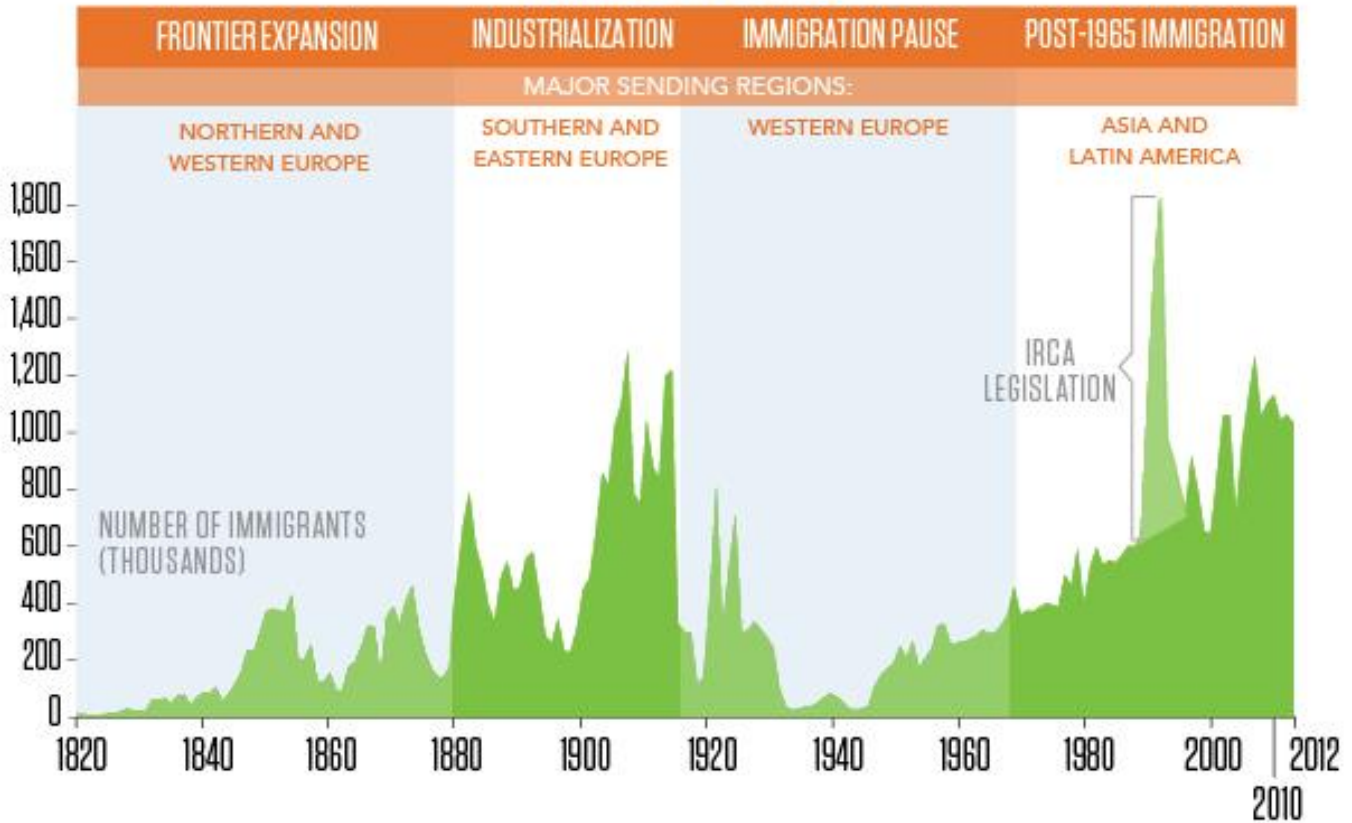
1. Exceptions are Native Americans, slaves, and those who became U.S. citizens by purchase or conquest, such as French nationals who became Americans with the Louisiana Purchase, Mexicans who became Americans with the end of the Mexican War, and Puerto Ricans who became U.S. citizens after the American victory over Spain in 1898.
2. Susan Martin, *A Nation of Immigrants* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
3. U.S. immigration statistics distinguish between Entries Without Inspection (EWIs) and overstayers, those who entered legally and violated the terms of their entry or did not depart. About 55 percent of the 11 million unauthorized foreigners in 2012 were EWIs.

U.S. Immigrant Population by World Region of Birth, 1960-2015



U.S. IMMIGRATION HAS OCCURRED IN WAVES, WITH PEAKS FOLLOWED BY TROUGHS

IMMIGRATION PHASE:



110k

NUMBER OF FOREIGNERS WHO ENTER THE UNITED STATES PER DAY

7.5 MILLION

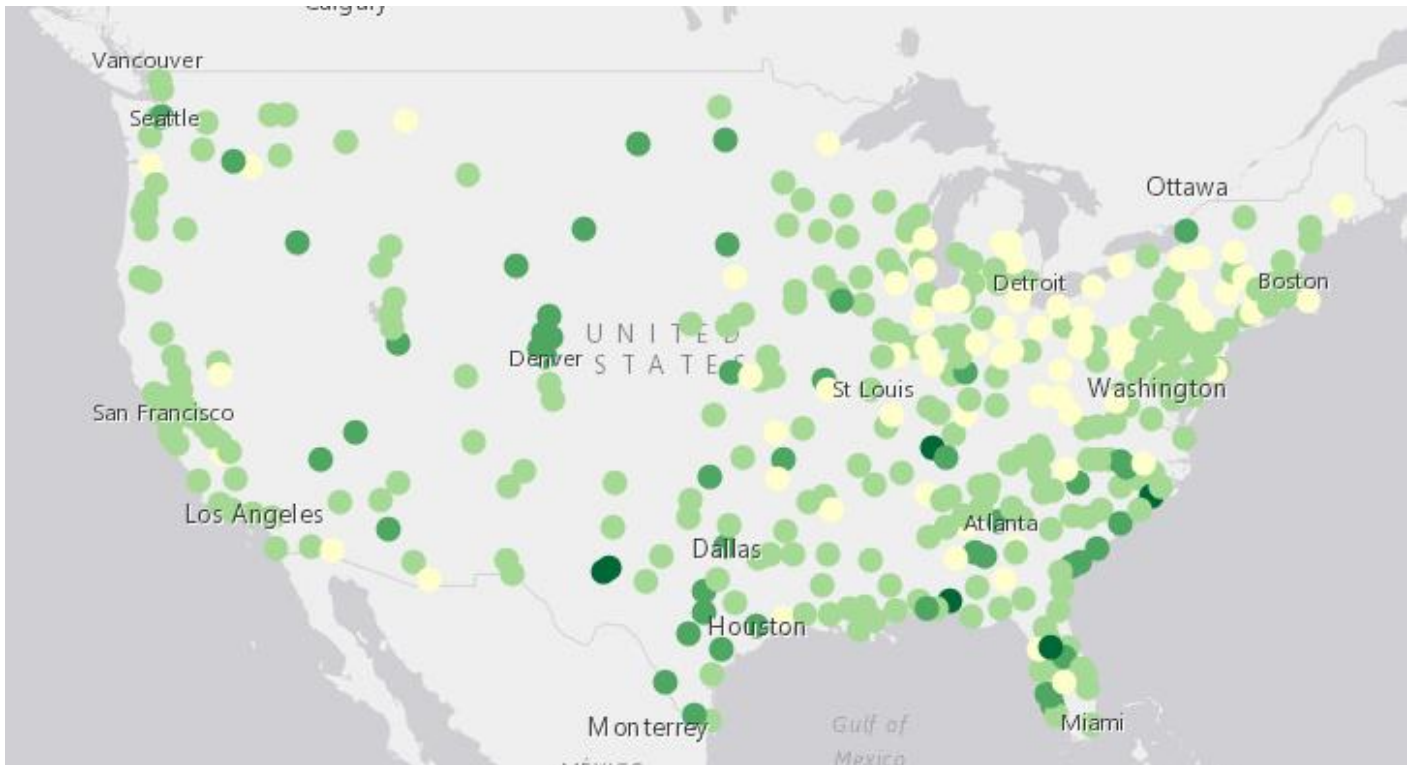
LEGAL IMMIGRANTS TO THE UNITED STATES FROM LATIN AMERICA AND ASIA, 2000-2009

12.2 MILLION

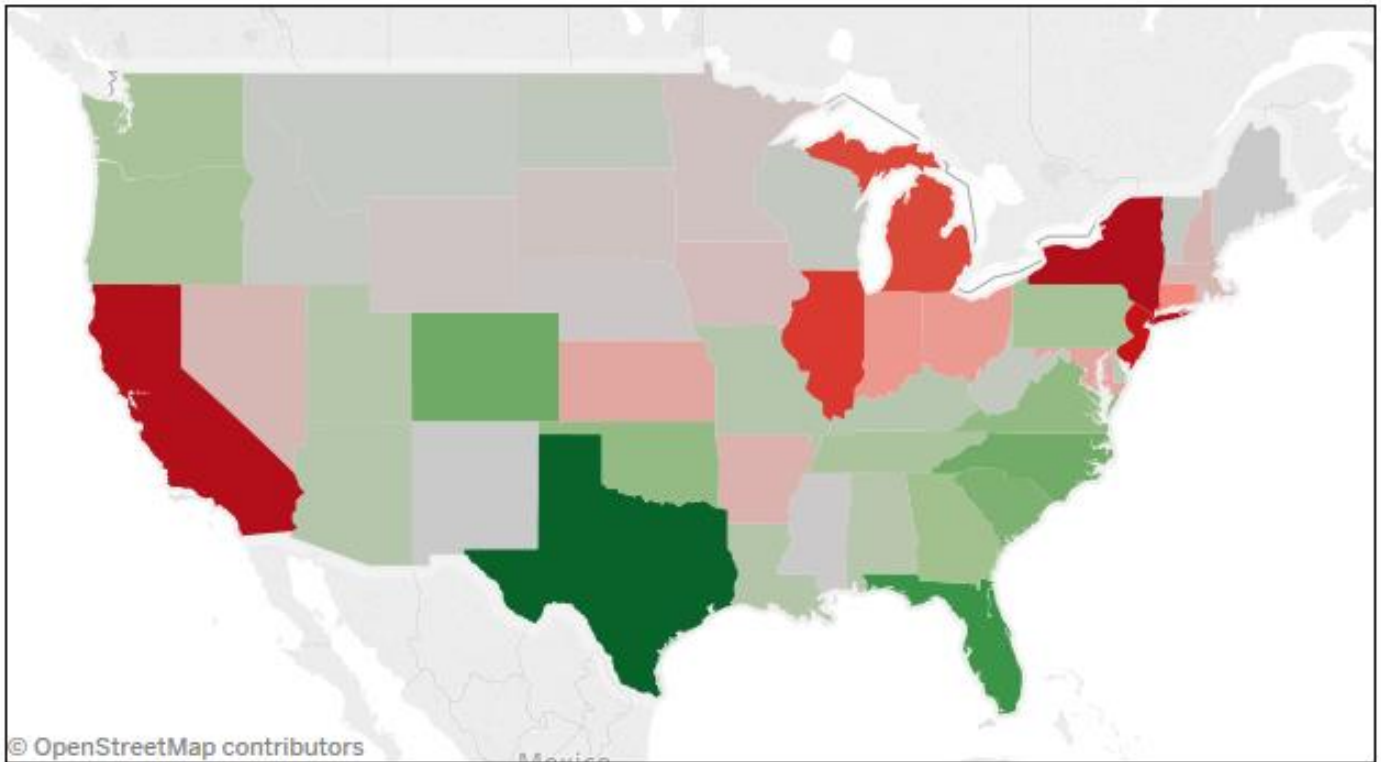
PEAK NUMBER OF UNAUTHORIZED IMMIGRANTS IN THE UNITED STATES, 2007

Note: IRCA adjustments refer to the amnesty provisions of the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, under which 2.7 million undocumented foreign U.S. residents obtained legal immigrant status.

Source: U.S. Department of Homeland Security, *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics* (Washington, DC: U.S. Dept. of Homeland Security, 2012).



Which cities are growing (green dots; darker = more growth)?
 Which cities are shrinking (yellow dots)?



Migration by state
 (not population growth)

Domestic Net Migration

