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# The Foreign Born Share and Number at Record Highs in February 2024

A look at the size and growth of the immigrant population in the United States

By Steven A. Camarota and Karen Zeigler on March 26, 2024

Data of the Census Bureau's Current Population Survey (CPS) show that the total foreign-born or immigrant population in the United States was a record 53.3 million in February 2024, the most recent month for which data are available. The foreign-born share of the population was also a record 15.9 percent. The foreign-born population increased by 2.7 million over the last 12 months, the equivalent of a population the size of Kansas City, Missouri. The foreign-born population actually rose by 2.8 million, which is almost 200,000 more than the illegal alien population. The remaining difference is accounted for by the fact that the CPS does not count illegal aliens living in group quarters, such as those in prisons or jails, or those who are homeless, or those who live in remote areas.

Among the findings:

- In February 2024, the foreign-born population in the United States hit a new high of 53.4 million and 15.9 percent of the population, the highest share since the 1890 Census.
- The foreign-born share of the US population has risen from Census lows of 5.0% nearly decades ago to the current record high in just over three decades.
- Since President Biden took office in January 2021, the foreign-born population has grown by 6 million — more than the total population of Kansas.
- Growth in the foreign-born population during Biden's presidency has been driven by immigrants who have arrived since January 2021, not by those who arrived before. The number of immigrants who have arrived since January 2021 has increased significantly. Now, immigrants from the Indian subcontinent (up 41 percent) and from the Middle East (up 31 percent) are growing rapidly.
- In 2023 alone, 1.4 million immigrants from the Indian subcontinent and 1.1 million from the Middle East (including 300,000 average monthly increase under Trump) before Covid-19 hit and doubts the 90,000 average under Biden.
- The 2.7 million increase in the foreign-born population over the last 12 months is the equivalent of the entire US population by the end of a second Biden term — both figures would be without any precedent in American history.
- The foreign-born share of the population is now 15.9 percent, which is the highest share since the 1890 Census (the population since January 1850 is likely due to illegal immigration. If adjusted for those known to be illegal, it would be higher still).
- The 6 million increase in the foreign-born population during Biden's first three years is the equivalent of the entire Kansas. The number of new arrivals was higher, but year offset by outmigration and natural mortality, resulting in a net increase of 6 million.

Illegal alien data from the Census Bureau's Current Population Survey show that the illegal alien population has grown by 2.8 million since January 2021, the equivalent of the population of Kansas. The foreign-born population has increased by 6 million, the equivalent of the entire state of Kansas. The remaining difference is accounted for by the fact that the CPS does not count illegal aliens living in group quarters, such as those in prisons or jails, or those who are homeless, or those who live in remote areas. The Census Bureau does not publish data on the number of illegal aliens living in group quarters, but it does publish data on the number of foreign-born living in group quarters. The Census Bureau does publish data on the number of foreign-born living in group quarters, but it does not publish data on the number of illegal aliens

analysis.[24] Figure A1 compares the foreign-born population in the ACS to a combined three-month sample (June, July, August) of the monthly CPS. Using the summer months allows us to roughly match the July control date of the ACS, and using three months creates more statistically robust CPS estimates. The ACS consistently produced much larger estimates of the foreign-born population than the summer CPS until 2018. This is expected because the ACS includes the institutionalized. However, from 2018 to 2021, the results of the surveys were similar, which is surprising. Results for 2020 should probably be ignored because the Census Bureau reports significant problems collecting the 2020 ACS due to the pandemic and, as already discussed, it is likely that the CPS also undercounted the foreign-born that year. In 2022, the summer months of the CPS show a foreign-born population that is nearly one million larger than in the ACS — a statistically significant difference. Why the relative measurement of the foreign-born in the two surveys changed is unclear.

Figure A1. The ACS once produced higher estimates of the foreign-born than the monthly CPS, but that has generally not been the case since 2018. The monthly CPS also shows very dramatic growth between 2021 and 2022, the ACS much less so.

**Source:** American Community Survey, which reflects the population in July, and Center for Immigration Studies analysis of a combined sample of the June, July, and August public-use Current Population Survey.

Table A1 examines sub-populations of the foreign-born using the 2021 and 2022 ACS, with the institutionalized population removed so that it matches the CPS. In 2021, the two surveys produced very similar overall numbers with the ACS (institutionalized removed), showing only about 142,000 more immigrants than the summer CPS, which is well within the margin of error. Interestingly, the Latin American population was much larger in the CPS, while the non-Latin American population was much larger in the 2021 ACS. This was primarily due to a much larger population of Mexicans in the CPS. However, as we have seen in Table 1, Mexican immigration is not what is driving the recent growth in the CPS. Table A1 shows that, between 2021 and 2022, the Latin American immigrant population from countries other than Mexico grew by nearly 900,000 in the CPS in one year, while it increased 616,000 in the ACS. The number of immigrants from non-Latin American countries grew by 932,000, from 2021 to 2022 in the CPS, more than three times the increase in the ACS. It is simply not clear why the CPS shows so much more growth for both Latin American and non-Latin American immigrants than does the ACS.

**Is the CPS Better?** Given the unprecedented nature of the current immigration influx, it is possible that, because the CPS requires an initial in-person interview, it better captures the foreign-born when the roster of household members is first established at the time of the first interview, at least in 2022.[25] By that time, the border crisis should have shown up in the data, whereas in July 2021 it had just begun. Moreover, those taking part in the CPS are told when they join that they will be in the survey for four months, leave for eight months, and then rejoin for four additional months. Knowing they will have seven future interactions with the government may make them more likely to tell the bureau about foreign-born individuals in the household. Repeated interviews also create a relationship with Census employees that could increase the probability that respondents will let the bureau know when a person joins the household. In contrast, ACS respondents are surveyed only once, and most participants do so on paper or online. How all the methodological differences between the CPS and ACS impact what they show on the foreign-born, especially during the ongoing border crisis, is difficult to say. What is clear is that the CPS provides the most up-to-date picture of the rapidly evolving immigration situation.

## End Notes

[1] The primary purpose of the survey is to collect information about the U.S. labor market, such as the unemployment rate, but starting in 1994 questions about citizenship, country of birth, and year of arrival were added.

[2] The term "immigrant" has a specific meaning in U.S. immigration law, which is all those inspected and admitted as lawful permanent residents. In this analysis, we use the term "immigrant" in the non-technical sense to mean all those who were not U.S. citizens at birth.

[3] The margins of error shown in Figure 2 or reported elsewhere in the analysis are based on standard errors calculated using parameter estimates and an adjustment for foreign-born respondents, which reflects the survey's complex design. To the best of our knowledge, neither the BLS nor the Census Bureau has provided parameter estimates or an adjustment specifically for the foreign-born that applies to the general population in the monthly CPS. For this reason, we use the parameter estimates and foreign-born adjustment provided by the government for the labor force.

[4] Since the monthly CPS first asked about citizenship on a regular basis in 1994, there has never been a 38-month period that witnessed this kind of growth.

[5] The average increase for Obama's first term reflects growth in the foreign-born population between January 2009 and December 2012 of 2.76 million, divided by 47 months to reflect the changes that occurred after January 2009 when he took office. (Although each presidential term lasts 48 months, there are only 47 monthly changes in the data in a single term, unless a month-to-month change from the December before an administration begins to January of the next year when they take office.) The average increase for Obama's second term reflects growth in the foreign-born population between January 2013 and December 2016 of 3.56 million divided by 47 months. For Trump's term before Covid, the average increase reflects growth in the foreign-born population between January 2017 and February 2020 (before Covid-19) of 1.57 million divided by 37 months. We chose February 2020 to reflect pre-Covid growth in the foreign-born population because Covid lockdowns did not begin until March of that year. For Biden, the average reflects growth in the foreign-born population between January 2021 and February 2024 of 6.38 million divided by 37 months. Of course, adding one additional month to each presidency would produce very similar results for each administration. So, for example, if we divided by 48 months for each of Obama's terms it would show 57,000 for his first term and 74,000 for his second, which is very similar to the 59,000 and 76,000 when we divide by 47 months for each term. If we divide Trump's pre-Covid time in office by 38 months we get average growth per month of 41,000 compared to 42,000 if we divided by 37 months. For President Biden, if we divide by 38 months we get an average monthly increase of 164,000 rather than 172,000 if we use 37 months.

[6] At 4.7 million, the number of newcomers in February 2024 is not only higher than in any similar period in the CPS, it is also much higher than annual immigration measured by the ACS through 2021. However, as high as this number is, it does not line up with the enormous increase in the foreign-born from January 2022 to February 2024, which was 4.8 million. As already discussed, new arrivals should exceed growth in the foreign-born because newcomers are offset by outmigration and deaths among the existing foreign-born. However, several factors likely account for this difference. First and foremost, there are margins of error around all of these numbers. The margin of error for the 4.7 million arrivals 2022 to 2024 is 300,000, using a 90 percent confidence level. Moreover, the margin of error around the total foreign-born of 51.4 million in February 2024 is ±572,000 and it was ±554,000 for the 46.6 million in January 2022. Equally important, capturing newly arrived immigrants is difficult, so the undercount in the CPS is likely heavily concentrated among the newest immigrants. Finally, people who had lived in the United States previously and returned in 2022 to 2024 might have told the Census Bureau they came to the United States during their prior stay and not the most recent year they arrived. As a result, they add to the overall foreign-born population but do not show up as new arrivals. All of these factors likely explain why the arrivals data 2022 to 2024, though very high, seems low relative to growth in the immigrant population. The total foreign-born population in the CPS is a much more statistically robust number because it is based on a larger sample of all immigrants, not the smaller share who are newcomers. One other factor to keep in mind is that the figure for new arrivals does not include those who came in 2022 or 2023 and left the country or passed away before February 2024. The 4.7 million represents only those who were in the country in February 2024 and came in the prior 25 months.

[7] We define regions in the following manner: **Central America:** Belize/British Honduras, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panama, Central America NS.; **Caribbean:** Cuba, Dominican Republic, Haiti, Jamaica, The Bahamas, Barbados, Dominica, Grenada, Trinidad and Tobago, Antigua and Barbuda, St. Kitts-Nevis, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, and the Caribbean NS; **South America:** Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Guyana/British Guiana, Peru, Uruguay, Venezuela, Paraguay, and South America NS; **East Asia:** China, Japan, Korea, Mongolia, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam, Burma, Asia NEC/NS (not elsewhere classified or not specified); **Indian Subcontinent:** India, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal; **Middle East:** Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Turkey, Kuwait, Yemen, United Arab Emirates, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Northern Africa, Egypt, Morocco, Algeria, Sudan, Libya, and Middle East NS; **Sub-Saharan Africa:** Ghana, Nigeria, Cameroon, Cape Verde, Liberia, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Togo, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, Tanzania, Uganda, Zimbabwe, South Africa, Zaire, Congo, Zambia, and Africa NS/NEC. Unless otherwise specified; **Europe:** Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, United Kingdom, Ireland, Belgium, France, Netherlands, Switzerland, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Azores, Spain, Austria, Czechoslovakia, Slovakia, Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, Albania, Yugoslavia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Serbia, Kosovo, Montenegro, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Other USSR/Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, USSR NS, Cyprus, Armenia, Georgia, and Europe NS; **Oceania/Elsewhere:** Australia, New Zealand, Pacific Islands, Fiji, Tonga, Samoa, Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Other, NEC, North America NS, Americas NS/NEC and unknown; **Majority Muslim:** the Middle East (excluding Israel) as well as Bangladesh, Pakistan, Somalia, Indonesia, and Malaysia. Mexico is included in the Latin America total. Canada is not included in any other region.

[8] The Migration Policy Institute's estimates of illegal immigrants by country can be found here. Pew Research's estimates by country can be found here. Estimates by the Department of Homeland Security can be found here. Those from the Center for Migration Studies by country can be found here.

[9] The CPS does not include the institutionalized population, which is included in the decennial census and American Community Survey (ACS). The institutionalized are primarily those in nursing homes and prisons. We can gauge the impact of including the institutionalized when calculating the foreign-born percentage by looking at the public-use 2022 ACS, which shows that when those in institutions are included it lowers the foreign-born share of the population by less than one-tenth of 1 percent. This is because immigrants are a somewhat smaller share of the institutionalized than they are of the non-institutionalized. However, the institutionalized share is not a very large relative to the overall population, so it makes very little difference to the foreign-born share of the total population. Also, the distribution of immigrants in the institutionalized and non-institutionalized population changes very little from year to year. The bottom line is that the inclusion of the institutionalized in February 2024 might have reduced the foreign-born share of the overall population by about one-tenth of 1 percent. A one-tenth of a percentage point reduction in the 15.5 percent share would still be a new record high. Also, the margin of error for the foreign-born share of the population is ± 0.2 percent assuming a 90 percent confidence level. But even the lower bound of the confidence interval would still place the foreign-born share well above the 14.77 percent in 1890, which also likely had some error that is lost to history. The bottom line is we can say with confidence that at 15.5 percent in February 2024 the foreign-born share is the highest share ever recorded by any U.S. government census or survey.

[10] When considering the impact of immigration on the country, the foreign-born share may seem like the only factor that matters. While percentages are important, the absolute size matters as well. For example, when thinking about the successful integration of immigrants, 500,000 foreign-language speakers may be enough to create linguistic and cultural enclaves, whether this 500,000 constitutes 10 percent of an urban area or 30 percent.

[11] "Nationwide Encounters", U.S. Customs and Border Protection.

[12] See Table 2b in the "Border Security Metrics Report: 2022", U.S. Department of Homeland Security, July 3, 2023.

[13] See Figure 20 on p. 26 in "ICE Annual Report Fiscal Year 2023".

[14] "Fiscal Year 2022 Entry/Exit Overstay Report", Department of Homeland Security, June 2022.

[15] For FY2021 and FY2022, figures for adjustments can be found here. For FY2023 they can be found here.

[16] The State Department's Bureau of Consular Affairs website on "Monthly Immigrant Visa Issuance Statistics" shows that the number of new legal immigrants issued a visa abroad quickly returned to pre-pandemic levels and now exceeds those levels. The Refugee Processing Center's website shows the same thing.

[17] This includes an adjustment down from the actual legal immigrant population because of undercount in the survey.

[18] The foreign-born who arrived before 1980 should contain virtually no illegal immigrants because the IRCA amnesty should have legalized them and the passage of time further reduces the illegal immigrant population that came in this time period. Also, because of special provisions in the law that allow Cuban immigrants to adjust to legal status, it is very difficult for them to be in the country illegally, so they are excluded from this population.

[19] For a detailed discussion of how we estimate the size of the total illegal immigrant population, see Steven A. Camarota and Karen Zeigler, "Estimating the Illegal Immigrant Population Using the Current Population Survey", Center for Immigration Studies, March 29, 2022. The key administrative data necessary for updating our prior estimate of the legal immigrant population comes from the State Department's Bureau of Consular Affairs website at "Monthly Immigrant Visa Issuance Statistics"; the Department of Homeland Security website for "Legal Immigration and Adjustment of Status Report Fiscal Year", for FY2021 and FY2022 and for FY2023; the Refugee Processing Center's website; and the Executive Office for Immigration Review's Adjudication Statistics.

[20] Steven A. Camarota and Karen Zeigler, "Estimating the Illegal Immigrant Population Using the Current Population Survey: Data shows number fell from 2019 to 2021 but rebounded by more than one million by early 2022", Center for Immigration Studies, March 29, 2022. See Table 1 in the Methodology section for the unadjusted illegal immigrant population in prior Current Population Surveys.

[21] While many new immigrants from Latin America entered since 1982 over the time period shown in Figure 8, these new arrivals were offset in part by out-migration and natural mortality. In addition, large numbers of legal immigrants from this region have naturalized over the years and thereby "left" the non-citizen population. It should be noted that in prior analyses we looked at non-citizen Latin Americans who arrived in 1980 or later, not 1982 or later when looking for indirect evidence of trends in illegal immigration. We think that 1982 or later makes somewhat more sense; however, the inclusion or exclusion of those who arrived in the first few years of 1980s make no difference to the recent trend.

[22] The Migration Policy Institute has figures from all of these organizations as part of its latest estimates.

[23] The population estimates reflect the population in July of each year and are issued at the end of the same calendar year. Thus, the ACS weights, which also reflect the population in July of each year, match the population estimates for that year. However, because the monthly CPS is available almost immediately each month starting in January, it must be weighted based on what are, in effect, preliminary population estimates that are then carried forward until the following January, when the data is readjusted.

[24] In a 2019 publication, we compared the CPS Annual Social and Economic Supplement (CPS ASEC) to the ACS. The CPS ASEC, or simply ASEC, includes the March CPS and an oversample of minorities. It also asks many additional questions and is the source for poverty rates and health insurance coverage. Unfortunately, like the ACS, there is a significant delay in the release in the ASEC, which comes out about half a year after it is collected. Like the monthly CPS, the ASEC consistently produces lower foreign-born estimates than the ACS until 2018. Since then it has generally produced higher estimates, even though, like the monthly CPS, it does not include the institutionalized and so should produce a slightly lower number than the ACS. The ASEC should also show a slightly lower foreign-born population because it reflects the population in March of each year, not July like the ACS. Although we outline some of the most important methodological differences between the ASEC and the ACS in our 2019 discussion, then as now we are not able to explain why the ACS stopped producing larger estimates of immigrants relative to the ASEC or the monthly CPS.

[25] Respondents can be confused about who is supposed to be considered part of the household, particularly if someone just arrived or is expected to stay only for a short time. Speaking with a survey taker may help clear up any confusion, who will also reassure the respondent that all their answers are kept confidential.

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