What is immigration’s impact on the U.S. population?

Immigration has played a strong role in determining the size and contours of the U.S. population throughout the nation’s history. Since the 1960s, immigration has accounted for just over half the country’s population growth and has reshaped its makeup. Future immigration will continue to have an impact on the American landscape.
The country’s first waves of immigrants were from Europe.

The United States had attracted a steady flow of immigrants since its founding, but a larger wave began in the mid-1800s, bringing more than 14 million immigrants, mainly from Germany, Ireland and other nations in Northern and Western Europe.

A second surge of immigration took place in the late 1800s and early 1900s, with the large majority of its 18 million arrivals coming from Russia, Italy and the rest of Eastern and Southern Europe. As a result, the share of immigrants in the U.S. population peaked at nearly 15% in the early 1900s.

Immigration plunged after restrictive quotas were imposed in the 1920s.

In response to changing immigration patterns in the late 1800s, there was a growing political movement to restrict certain types of immigrants. The U.S. enacted a series of restrictive immigration laws – including laws banning immigration from most Asian countries. In the 1920s, new laws put a cap on total immigration and imposed numerical quotas that favored Northern and Western European countries.

In the decades that followed, the immigrant percentage of the total population fell by two-thirds, and declined to a low point of 4.8% of the population in 1970.
Immigration is the main cause of U.S. population growth since 1965.

Immigrant numbers began rising again after passage of a sweeping 1965 law that rewrote U.S. immigration policy. The law replaced country quotas with a system that prioritized visas for family members of immigrants already in the U.S. and for skilled workers. More than 59 million new immigrants have come to the U.S. since then, pushing the country’s foreign-born share to a near record 14%.

Since 1965, more than half of total U.S. population growth has been due to new immigrants, their children and grandchildren. If current trends continue, immigration will be an even bigger factor in the future, responsible for nearly 90% of population growth, according to Pew Research Center projections to 2065.

Immigrants and their children are a growing share of the population.

Today, immigrants and their U.S.-born children are about a quarter of the total population. In 2065, they are projected to make up more than a third.

These projections come with an important caveat: They assume that recent immigration, birth and death trends continue into the future. Changes to those trends could alter the numbers.
Immigration is reshaping the nation’s racial and ethnic makeup.

Before 1965, the majority of U.S. immigrants were born in Europe. Among immigrants since then, three-quarters were born in Asia and Latin America.

Because of immigration and births to immigrants, the U.S. Hispanic and Asian populations are growing faster than the nation’s white and black populations. Since 1980, the share of Americans who are white has declined (to 61% in 2016) and the share who are black (12%) has stayed the same, while the shares who are Hispanic (18%) and Asian (5%) more than doubled.

The changes brought by immigration will mean that within a few decades, no U.S. racial or ethnic group will be in the majority. Whites will still be the largest segment of the total. Latinos will remain the second-largest group. Asians could equal or surpass blacks, the third-largest group, by 2065.

The makeup of immigrants also is projected to change.

There are now about twice as many immigrants from Latin America as from Asia. But that is changing, because Hispanic immigration has slowed in recent years, while Asian immigration has not. Within a few decades, Pew Research Center projects that there will be more Asian immigrants than Hispanic immigrants in the U.S.
Immigration will increase the number of working-age Americans.

Immigration has kept the U.S. slightly younger than it would have been, because immigrants have more children than people born in the U.S.

In the future, if the potential labor force grows, it will be because of immigration. The working-age population (173 million in 2015) is projected to grow to 183 million by 2035, assuming future immigrants and their children continue to arrive. Without future immigration, the number of Americans of prime working age – 25 to 64 – would decline to 166 million, according to Pew Research Center projections.

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