

What America might look like with zero immigration



Diners eat at Norbu, a Nepalese restaurant in Lancaster, Pa., on Dec. 26. The Trump administration's efforts to reduce the foreign-born population are being felt in hospitals and soccer leagues and on Main Streets across the country, with hints of what's to come. RACHEL WISNIEWSKI — THE NEW YORK TIMES

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MARSHALLTOWN, Iowa>> Across the United States, someone is missing.

One year into President Donald Trump's immigration crackdown, construction firms in Louisiana are scrambling to find carpenters. Hospitals in West Virginia have lost out on doctors and nurses who were planning to come from overseas. A neighborhood soccer league in Memphis, Tennessee, cannot field enough teams because immigrant children have stopped showing up.

America is closing its doors to the world, sealing the border, squeezing the legal avenues to entry and sending new arrivals and longtime residents to the exits.

Visa fees have been jacked up, refugee admissions are almost zero and international student admissions have dropped. The rollback of temporary legal statuses granted under the Biden administration has rendered hundreds of thousands more people

newly vulnerable to removal at any time. The administration says it has already expelled more than 600,000 people. Note

Shrinking the foreign-born population won't happen overnight. Oxford Economics estimates that net immigration is running at about 450,000 people a year under current policies. That is well below the 2 million to 3 million a year who came in under the Biden administration. The share of the country's population that is foreign born hit 14.8% in 2024, a high not seen since 1890. *

But White House officials have made clear they are aiming for something closer to the immigration shutdown of the 1920s, when Congress, at the crest of a decades-long surge in nativism, barred entry of people from half of the world and brought net immigration down to zero. The share of the foreign-born population bottomed out at 4.7% in 1970. Stephen Miller, a top adviser to Trump, has extolled those decades of low immigration as the last time the United States was "an undisputed global superpower."

Whether or not restrictions will restore some of what Miller views as a midcentury idyll, there's little doubt that major changes are in store. Immigration has woven itself so tightly through the country's fabric — in classrooms and hospital wards, city parks and concert halls, corporate boardrooms and factory floors — that walling off the country now will profoundly alter daily life for millions of Americans.

Grocery stores and churches are quieter in immigrant neighborhoods. Fewer students show up in Los Angeles and New York City. In South Florida, Billo's Caracas Boys, a Venezuelan orchestra, puts on an annual holiday concert where generations of families come to dance salsas and paso dobles. This season, the orchestra announced at the last minute that it was canceling the show because so many people are nervous about leaving home.

The changes will also be felt hundreds of miles from any ocean or national border, even in the snow-washed streets of Marshalltown, Iowa, a city of 28,000 about an hour's drive northeast of Des Moines.

First Mexicans, some living in the country illegally, came to Marshalltown in the 1990s to work at the pork processing plant. After a high-profile immigration raid there in 2006, refugees with more solid legal status arrived from Myanmar, Haiti and Congo.

Now, Mexican, Chinese and Vietnamese restaurants dot the blocks around the grand, 19th-century courthouse. The population is 19% foreign born, and some 50 dialects are spoken in the public schools. The pews at the Spanish-language Mass at the local Catholic church overflow on Sundays, and, in 2021, a Burmese religious society built a towering statue of Buddha on the outskirts of town.

"You have more energy in the community," said Michael Ladehoff, Marshalltown's mayor-elect. "If you stay stagnant, and you don't have new people coming to your community, you start aging out."

But with Trump's crackdown on immigration gaining strength, local festivals are more thinly attended. Parents pull their children out of school when they hear about people being detained. The supervisor overseeing the construction of a high school sports stadium received a deportation letter, creating a conspicuous absence as the work finished up. The pork plant has let workers go as their work permits have expired.

An echo of the past

It's not clear yet what these changes will mean for America. But a past era of immigration crackdowns contains some lessons.

Over the country's first century, immigration was essentially unrestricted at the federal level. This began to change in the late 1800s, with the "great wave" of immigrants fleeing political oppression or seeking work. Starting in the 1870s and over the decades that followed, Congress barred criminals, anarchists, the indigent and all Chinese laborers.

By the turn of the 20th century, anti-immigrant sentiment was rampant. Lawyer and eugenicist Madison Grant wrote in his 1916 book, "The Passing of the Great Race," that foreign countries were taking advantage of America's openness by unloading "the sweepings of their jails and asylums" and that the "whole tone of American life, social, moral and political has been lowered and vulgarized by them."

Grant was consulted as an expert when Congress began crafting the Immigration Act of 1924, which, along with companion legislation, barred nearly all immigration from Asia, created the U.S. Border Patrol and established quotas from eastern and southern European countries. Net immigration — which accounts for people leaving as well as those coming in — plummeted. Note

Today's language echoes that time. Trump characterizes people from Somalia, Haiti and Afghanistan as coming from "hellholes" and accuses other countries of "emptying out their prisons and their mental institutions into the United States of America."

The broader debate in the 1920s would be familiar to contemporary ears, too: fears about crime; anxiety about the falling fertility rates of the native born; suspicion about the politics of newcomers; hopes that restrictions would mean higher wages for U.S.-born workers; disputes about assimilation.

Today, some proponents of halting immigration — including Vice President JD Vance — argue that it would help the country absorb those who were already here, decrease competition for scarce goods like housing and strengthen job opportunities for young men who had dropped out of the workforce. Reihan Salam, president of the conservative Manhattan Institute, wrote in his 2018 book "Melting Pot or Civil War?" that a large and constantly growing population of low-skilled immigrants, many living in working-class ethnic enclaves, risks creating a "permanent underclass."

The restrictions passed in the 1920s governed U.S. immigration until international competition in the Cold War, the Civil Rights Movement and a shift in organized labor's stance led to the end of national origins quotas in 1965.

Although the effects of the 1924 immigration restrictions are difficult to untangle from other developments — wars, technological advancements, the baby boom — wages rose for U.S.-born workers in places affected by the immigrant restrictions. But only briefly. Employers avoided paying more by hiring workers from Mexico and Canada, countries not subject to immigration caps; American-born workers from small towns migrated to urban areas and alleviated shortages. Farms turned to automation to replace the missing labor. The coal mining industry, which was powered by immigrants now barred from entry, shrank.

And today? Construction wages have been rising, even as homebuilding has been sluggish — a potential indication that deportations in the immigrant-heavy industry are bidding up salaries. The union representing workers in the pork processing industry sees an upside, too, even though it opposes deportations and won wage increases after President Joe Biden's immigration surge.

"I will certainly bring it up at the bargaining table that the way to solve a labor shortage is to pay more money," said Mark Lauritsen, head of the meatpacking division at the United Food and Commercial Workers Union International.

The same is true in landscaping. Immigrant crews, working outside, were an easy deportation target over the summer. Come spring, said Kim Hartmann, an executive at a Chicago-area landscaping firm, the labor force could be 10% to 20% smaller.

"It's going to be much more competitive to find that individual who's been a foreman or a supervisor and has years of experience," Hartmann said. "We know that drives costs up."

But there are limits to how much customers will pay for decorative shrubs, and they may opt to go without. One 2022 study examined the expulsion of tens of thousands of Mexicans from the United States in the early 1930s. Contrary to the policy's intent, unemployment rose and wages were depressed for native-born workers, possibly because sectors that depended on immigrant labor — agriculture, construction and manufacturing — suffered so much that they contracted.

The lesson of the last period of intense restriction is that employers have an array of ways to adjust, said Leah Boustan, an economics professor at Yale who studies the history of immigration.

"The menu is other sources of labor, and machinery," she said. "It's not obvious that you're going to pick the guy down the street relative to these alternatives."

Where hands still matter

Today, that menu has expanded. Companies can outsource jobs to other countries. Artificial intelligence is replacing some types of work, and other countries, like Japan, have shown the possibilities of robotics. But many services still require humans, in person.

"If you're an obstetrician, delivering a baby right in the moment, you need hands to lay on the patient," said David Goldberg, a vice president of Vandalia Health, a network of hospitals and medical offices in West Virginia. "It's not the same as a banker, or someone creating code."

Nearly a fifth of nursing positions are currently vacant in West Virginia — a state that is older, sicker and poorer than most — and the state faces a serious shortage of physicians in the coming years. The answer has been to look abroad. A third of West Virginia's physicians graduated from medical schools overseas. Now that option is narrowing.

"We lost two cardiologists because of their concern that they wouldn't get their visa and, if they did, that they would not be able to stay here permanently," Goldberg said. "They went elsewhere."

Similarly, nobody has figured out how to harvest delicate crops with machines. During the low-immigration 1970s, some crops, like green onions, disappeared from shelves or were imported instead.

"It's not going to hop from the ground into a package without somebody's hands being involved somewhere along the way," said Luke Brubaker, who runs a dairy farm with his sons and a grandson in Pennsylvania. To milk cows, feed them and deliver calves, he relies on more than a dozen foreign-born workers, most of them Mexican. He is not optimistic that he will be able to replace them.

"You can put an ad in the paper," he said. "Maybe you would have one American-born applying for that job if you need 10 people. And that's a maybe."

Land of opportunity?

Dan Simpson, the CEO of Taziki's, a fast casual Mediterranean restaurant chain based in the Southeast, has been losing employees since the beginning of 2025. These were not only dishwashers and cooks but also managers and assistant managers, who had come to the United States with advanced degrees.

While he worries about the effect on his own business, he believes that the damage could be much greater.

"If you zoom back, the bigger problem is that we're tarnishing the brand of America," Simpson said. Even if the United States opens up again, he said, "we're going to need a campaign to fix the idea that America is not the land of opportunity."

International students pay full-freight tuition that helps fund new programs and basic costs at many U.S. colleges. As international enrollment has dropped, many schools are facing budget holes.

Nearly half of the immigrants who legally came to the United States from 2018 to 2022 were college educated, according to the Migration Policy Institute, a nonpartisan think tank. Immigrants are far more likely than U.S. citizens to start businesses; nearly half of last year's Fortune 500 companies were founded by immigrants or the children of immigrants.

Several studies have found a decline in the number of patents issued for U.S. inventions after the immigration laws of the 1920s.

"You have an economy that is smaller, less dynamic and less diversified," said Exequiel Hernandez, a professor at the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania.