



A Somali immigrant
in St. Cloud, Minnesota,
makes a new friend, 2017

Coming to America

The share of the U.S. population that's foreign-born is higher than it's been in a century. Who are the new immigrants, and where are they coming from? **BY PATRICIA SMITH**

Look around your town, your neighborhood, or even your classroom. How many people do you know who were born in another country or are the children of people born somewhere else?

Chances are it's more than a few. According to the federal government, 13.7 percent of the United States population is foreign-born. That share is now greater than it's been since 1910, when immigrants seeking the American dream streamed into Ellis Island in New York Harbor.

It's not just that the immigrant population of the U.S. is bigger—it's changing too. For years, the biggest chunk of newcomers came from Latin America. But new census numbers

show that Asians are now the biggest group of new immigrants. The data also shows that these more recent immigrants are better educated than previous generations of immigrants. About 45 percent of them have college degrees, compared with 30 percent of native-born Americans.

"We think of immigrants as being low-skilled workers from Latin America, but for recent arrivals, that's much less the case," says William Frey, a demographer at the Brookings Institution who analyzed the new census data. "People from Asia have overtaken people from Latin America."

The new data comes as the nation's changing demography has become a flash point in American

politics. President Trump has sounded alarms about immigration. He's also suggested the government needs to restrict both the number and types of people coming into the country and obtaining citizenship.

Changing Immigration Laws

The last historic peak in immigration to the U.S. came around the turn of the 20th century. During that period, large numbers of Europeans fled poverty and violence in their home countries. Some of the largest numbers came from Germany, Italy, and Poland (*see charts, facing page*). That wave peaked in 1910, when the foreign-born population stood at nearly 15 percent.

However, Congress imposed quotas

in the 1920s that sharply restricted immigration. These quotas gave preference to Northern Europeans. As a result, the foreign-born population fell sharply in the middle of the 20th century. In fact, it eventually dipped to below 5 percent.

In 1965, a new immigration law did away with the quotas. This move radically changed the nation's immigration dynamic. The idea was to treat people from all countries equally. The law sought to give American citizens the ability to bring family members in their home countries to the U.S.

The 1965 law opened up the U.S. to a new wave of immigration. People immigrated from Latin America and countries like India, China, and the Philippines. And over time, the policy of allowing immigrants to bring their relatives to the U.S. began to change the country's demographics.

Consider the story of the Patel family.



Jagdish Patel came to America from India in 1968, when he was 23. He had a good education but little else. He got a job at a nuclear test site and built a home in Nevada. By the mid-1980s, he had brought his wife, his mother, five sisters, and a brother over from India.

Years later, Patel's siblings sponsored their own family members to come. Their clan in the U.S. now has more than 90 people. And it stretches from Nevada to Florida, New Jersey to Texas. "I am so glad that I came to

America," says Patel, now 72. "I brought everyone here, and we have provided valuable service to this country."

Patel's American-born children reaped the benefits of his hard work. His son is a venture capitalist in San Francisco. His daughter is an interior designer in Salt Lake City with 140,000 followers on Instagram.

More Acceptance?

Asian families like the Patels helped launch a demographic shift that has accelerated in recent years. For many years, Mexico was the single largest contributor of immigrants. But since 2010, the number of immigrants arriving from Mexico has declined. On the other hand, those from China and India have surged, the recent data shows.

Another interesting finding is where the new immigrants are settling. Some of the largest gains were in states with the smallest immigrant populations. This trend suggests that immigrants are spreading out across the country. In fact, the state with the biggest increase is North Dakota. In recent years, the state has taken in many refugees. They've come from countries like Iraq, Somalia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Now, North Dakota's 2017 foreign-born population of 31,000 is almost double what it was in 2010.

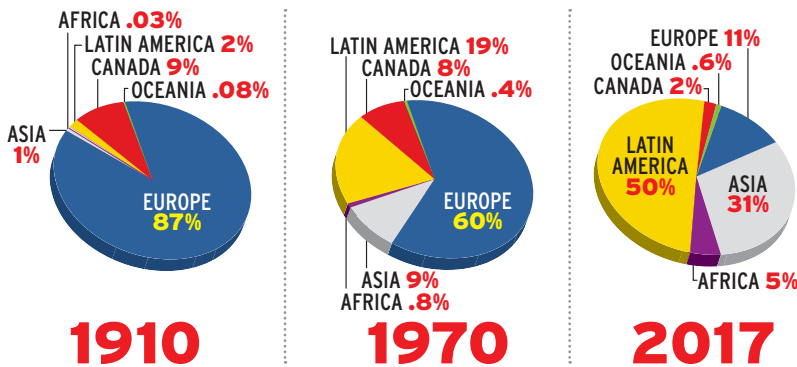
The fact that immigrants are moving to places they haven't traditionally gone could be behind some of the anxiety we're seeing nationally about immigration, says David Bier, an immigration expert at the Cato Institute in Washington, D.C. But it's also a reason to be hopeful.

"There's great evidence that when people are initially exposed to diversity, there's resistance and people react negatively," says Bier. "But familiarity does not breed contempt. It's the other way around: As Americans become more familiar with immigrants, they accept them." •

With reporting by Miriam Jordan and Sabrina Tavernise of The New York Times.

Where Immigrants Are From

Places of origin for the foreign-born in the U.S. There's been a big shift.



SOURCE: CENSUS BUREAU (NUMBERS MAY NOT ADD UP TO 100 BECAUSE OF ROUNDING.)

Places With the Biggest Jump in Foreign-Born Residents

(Change from 2010 to 2017)

1. North Dakota	86.7%	6. Minnesota	28.5%
2. Delaware	37.0%	7. Nebraska	27.8%
3. West Virginia	33.1%	8. District of Columbia	24.6%
4. South Dakota	32.2%	9 & 10. Pennsylvania & Utah	20.9%
5. Wyoming	29.5%		

SOURCE: WILLIAM FREY, THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION (ANALYSIS OF CENSUS DATA)