1.8 Million Immigrants Likely Arrived in 2016, Matching Highest Level in U.S. History

Numbers show 53 percent increase compared to low point in 2011

By Steven A. Camarota and Karen Zeigler

This analysis is based on newly released data from the Census Bureau. The analysis shows that 1.03 million immigrants (legal and illegal) settled in the United States in the first six months of 2016. Based on prior patterns, a total of 1.8 million immigrants likely came in all of 2016. The new data shows a dramatic rebound in immigration after 2011, when new arrivals fell after the Great Recession. Newly arrived immigrants include new green card holders (permanent residents) and long-term "temporary" visitors, such as guestworkers and foreign students, many of whom eventually become permanent residents. It also includes new asylum seekers, as well as new illegal immigrants who cross the border surreptitiously or overstay a temporary visa.

- More than one million new immigrants (legal and illegal) settled in the country in the first six months of 2016. This represents a 13 percent increase over the same period in 2015, a 21 percent increase over 2014, and a 53 percent increase over 2011, when new immigration reached a low point after the recession.
- The 1.03 million new immigrants who came in the first six months of 2016 is larger than the number of immigrants who came in all of 2011.
- Based on past patterns, it seems almost certain that when data becomes available for all of 2016 it will show 1.8 million new immigrants arrived in 2016, matching 1999 — the largest number of new immigration in a single year in American history.[1] (See Figure 1.)
- The data also shows that 1.6 million new immigrants settled in the country in 2015 — the most in 15 years.[2] (See Figure 1.)
- The 1.8 million immigrants who likely came in 2016 and the 1.6 million who came in 2015 are a continuation of a dramatic rebound in immigration since 2011. In 2014, 1.5 million came, in 2013 it was 1.3 million, in 2012 it was 1.2 million, and in 2011 1.1 million new immigrants settled in the country.
- Sending regions showing the most dramatic increase in new arrivals between 2011 and 2015 are Central America (up 132 percent), South America (up 114 percent), the Caribbean (up 64 percent), and the Middle East and South Asia (both up 52 percent). South Asia includes India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh.[3] (See Figure 2 and Table 1.)
- Mexico remains the top sending country, with 190,000 immigrants (legal and illegal) settling in the United States in 2015, and with 216,000 likely coming in all of 2016. While the number of new arrivals from Mexico has roughly doubled since 2011, the number coming remains well below the annual level that existed more than decade ago.[4] (See Figure 2 and Table 1.)
- The dramatic increase in new immigrants settling in the United States in recent years is primarily driven by the nation's generous legal immigration system for both long-term temporary visa holders (e.g. guestworkers and foreign students) and new permanent residents (green card holders).

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- There is evidence that the arrival of new illegal immigrants may have also rebounded in the last few years. The number of new, less-educated, younger immigrants arriving each year from Latin America roughly doubled from 2011 to 2016. However, the level remains well below what it was before the recession. (See Figure 4.)

- The decision to admit large numbers of unaccompanied minors, as well as minors traveling with adults, likely accounts for some of the increase in new illegal immigration, particularly from Central America.[5]

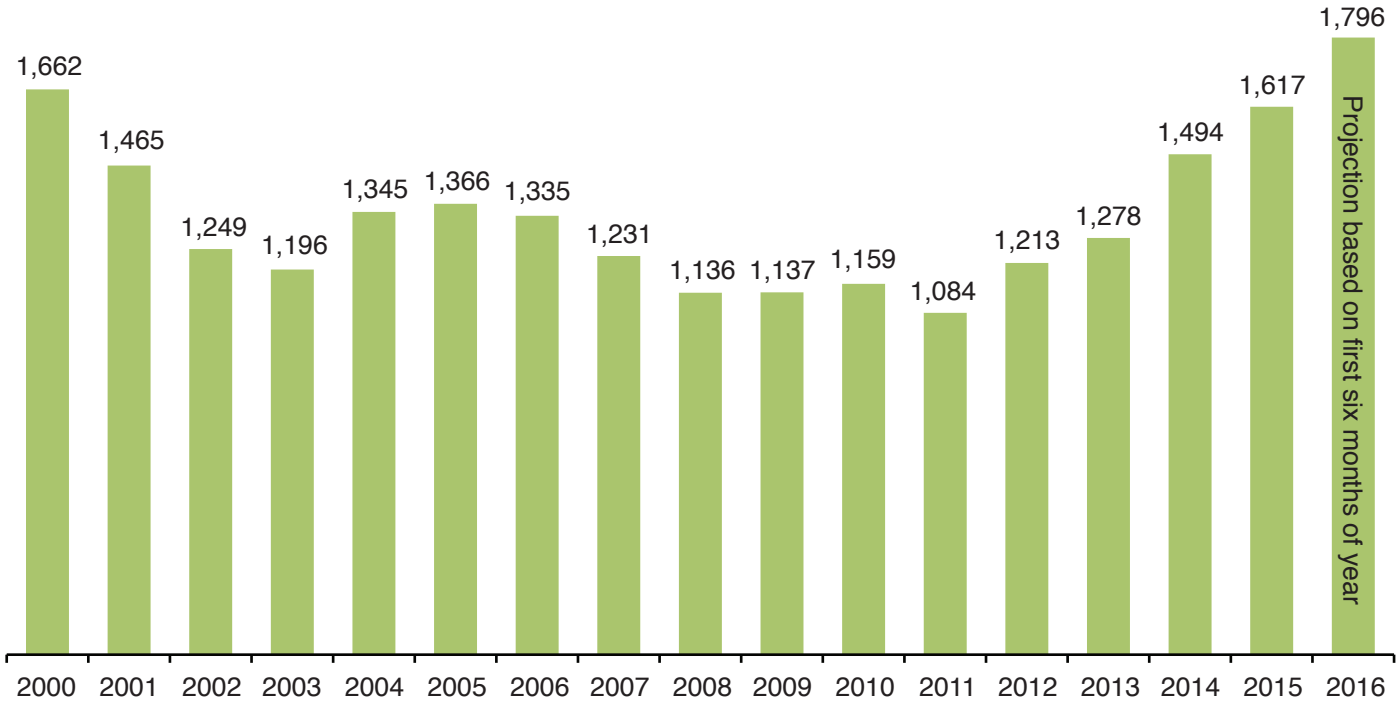
Data Source. In October 2017 the Census Bureau released the public-use data from the 2016 American Community Survey (ACS). The survey reflects the U.S. population as of July 1, 2016. The ACS is by far the largest survey taken by the federal government each year and includes over two million households.[6] In September, the Census Bureau posted some of the results from the ACS to its American FactFinder system. However, only by analyzing the public-use micro data from the ACS, not the tables generated from FactFinder, can we measure new arrivals, as shown in Figures 1 and 2. To measure the number of new arrivals, we use what is often referred to as the year-of-arrival question in the ACS. The survey asks respondents what year they came to the United States to live.

Immigrants, including recent arrivals, are typically referred to as the foreign-born by the Census Bureau. These are individuals who were not U.S. citizens at birth. It includes naturalized citizens, legal permanent residents (green card holders), temporary workers, and foreign students. It does not include those born to immigrants in the United States, including to illegal immigrant parents, or those born in outlying U.S. territories such as Puerto Rico. In addition, prior research by the Department of Homeland Security and others indicates that some 90 percent of illegal immigrants respond to the ACS.[7] Thus all the figures reported above are for both legal and illegal immigrants.

Newly arrived immigrants captured in the Census Bureau's ACS include the foreign-born as described above. It does not include those who come to the United State for short stays such as tourists or business travelers. The ACS uses a two-month rule to determine who will be included in the survey. That is, the survey counts anyone residing for at least two months at an address. While there are very few newly arrived immigrants in institutions, the ACS does include that population as well, which includes prisons and nursing homes.[8] Since the survey represents the population at mid-year, it is necessary to wait until next year's ACS is released to get a complete picture of the total number of immigrants for the year. So, for example, the total number of new arrivals in 2015 was available once the 2016 ACS was released.

However, the number of new arrivals in the first six months of the year is also available. Data from the first half of the year can be used to project the likely number of new arrivals for the full year based on prior patterns. Based on the first six months of data, CIS projected last year that once it was released the ACS would show 1.59 million new immigrants settled in the United States in 2015. As Figure 1 shows, the new ACS data shows that 1.62 million came in 2015 — a 2 percent difference from the CIS projection last year. Based on the 1.031 million who arrived in the first quarter of 2016, we project that new arrivals for all of 2016 will total 1.796 million, as shown in Figure 1.

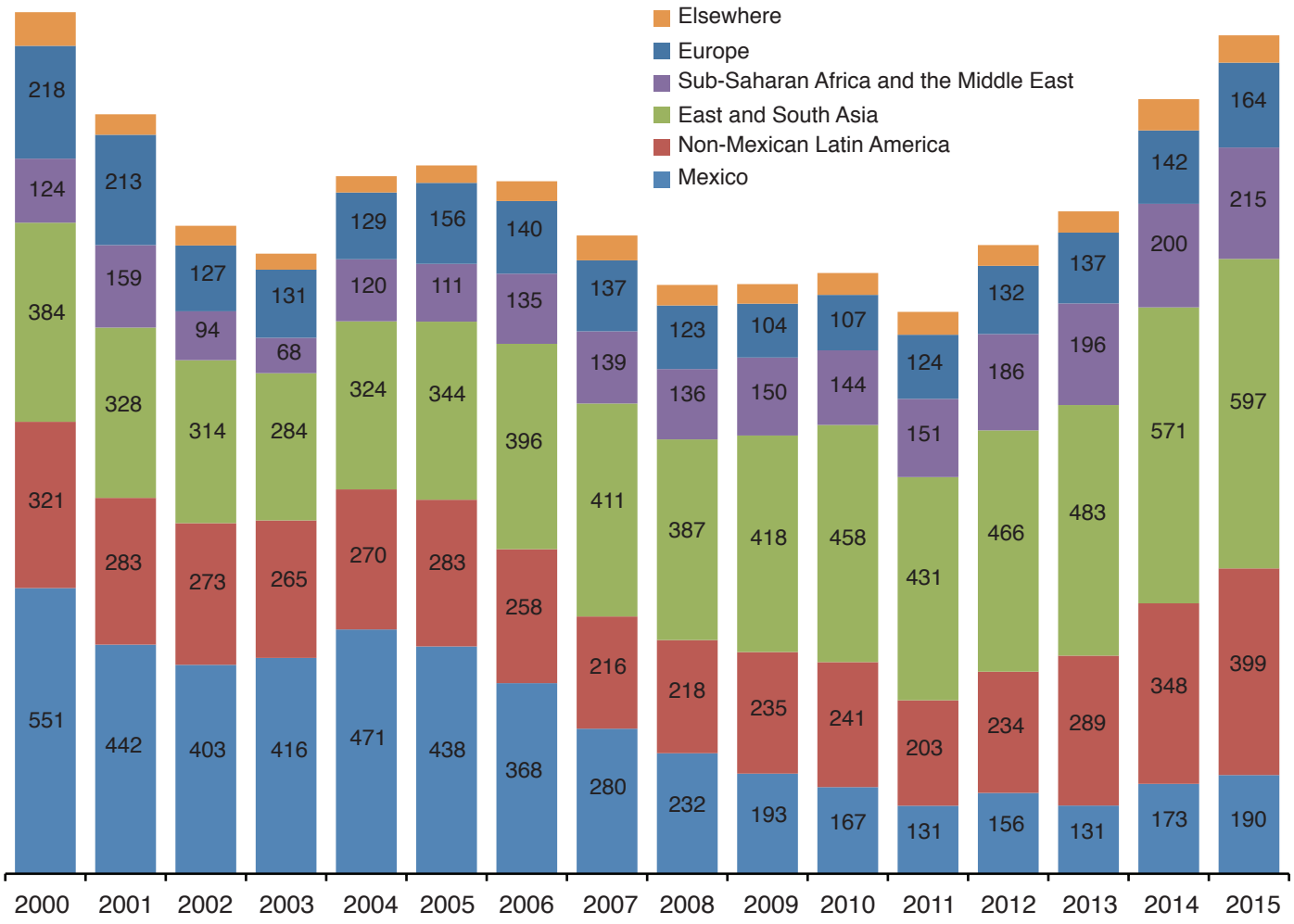
Figure 1. The number of new immigrants arriving each year rebounded dramatically after 2011. (thousands)



Source: 2001 to 2016 public-use files of the American Community Survey (ACS). Each year's survey provides a full year of arrival data for the prior calendar year, so data for 2015 comes from the 2016 ACS, data for 2014 is from 2015, and so on.
Table 3 reports confidence intervals for annual arrival data.

Figure 2. New Arrivals by region, 2000 to 2015

Latin America other than Mexico, the Middle East, Africa, East and South Asia account for most of the recent increase in new arrivals. (thousands)



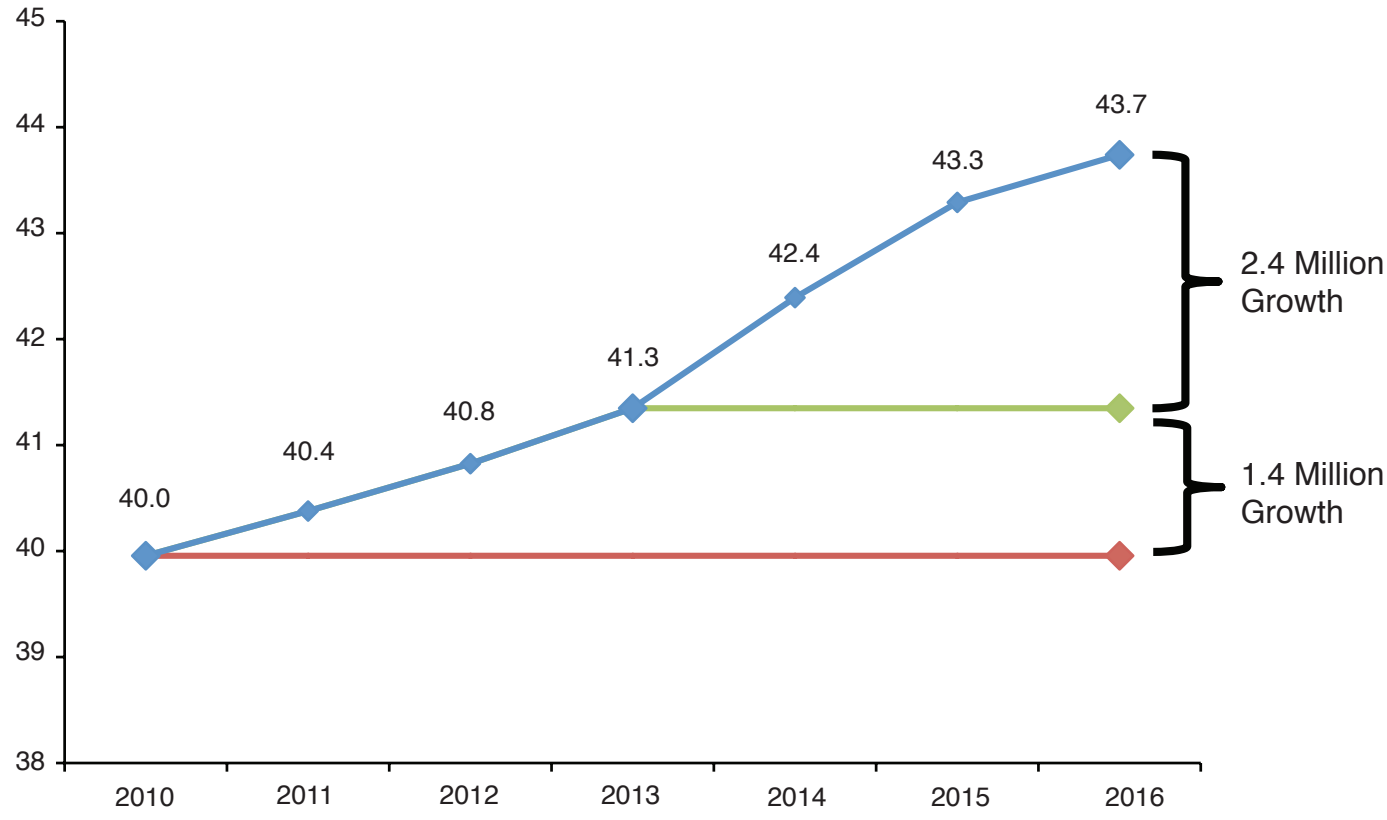
Source: 2001 to 2016 public-use files of the American Community Survey (ACS). Each year's survey provides a full year of arrival data for the prior calendar year, so data for 2015 comes from the 2016 ACS, data for 2014 is from 2015, and so on.
Regions are defined in end note 3.

Table 1. Newly Arrived Immigrants by Sending Region, Country and Year, 2000 to 2016 (thousands)

Region	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016*
Mexico	551	442	403	416	471	438	368	280	232	193	167	131	156	131	173	190	124
Central America	78	55	68	68	99	115	90	71	60	56	59	46	62	90	122	106	73
El Salvador	34	19	18	22	24	32	30	20	22	19	20	17	21	36	40	40	24
Guatemala	19	17	24	29	43	46	32	30	20	19	19	14	19	22	32	28	22
Caribbean	89	86	71	90	80	84	84	78	89	113	110	89	102	117	114	146	95
Cuba	31	23	17	23	28	21	31	21	30	31	34	29	37	42	39	55	41
Dominican Republic	10	19	10	27	21	21	19	17	25	34	30	25	29	34	37	43	26
South America	153	142	135	108	92	84	84	67	70	65	72	68	69	82	113	146	74
Venezuela	14	18	16	17	8	6	5	8	8	7	10	10	7	8	24	41	18
Europe	218	213	127	131	129	156	140	137	123	104	107	124	132	137	142	164	111
South Asia	149	97	90	70	91	103	113	130	131	114	143	158	174	189	239	240	152
India	120	74	63	58	70	86	90	111	103	86	111	117	127	142	194	189	126
East Asia	235	232	224	214	234	240	283	281	256	304	315	272	291	295	332	357	238
China	67	62	38	52	49	62	69	63	69	95	97	103	107	126	141	144	121
Philippines	38	45	41	37	50	46	64	65	48	54	59	42	46	43	51	56	30
Middle East	67	95	50	28	51	53	54	65	79	83	79	77	106	110	110	116	65
Sub-Saharan Africa	57	64	44	40	69	59	81	74	56	68	65	74	80	86	89	98	57
Canada	47	28	31	20	21	25	25	34	28	28	29	32	28	28	45	39	31
Oceania/Elsewhere	18	12	7	11	11	9	13	14	11	9	13	12	12	13	15	14	10
Total	1,662	1,465	1,250	1,196	1,346	1,366	1,336	1,231	1,136	1,137	1,159	1,084	1,213	1,278	1,494	1,617	1,031
Latin America	872	725	676	681	741	721	626	496	451	428	408	335	390	421	522	589	367
Latin America other than Mexico	321	283	273	265	270	283	258	216	218	235	241	203	234	289	348	399	243

Source: 2001 to 2016 public-use files of the American Community Survey (ACS). Each year's survey provides a full year of arrival data for the prior calendar year, so data for 2015 comes from the 2016 ACS, data for 2014 is from 2015 and so on. Data for the first six months of 2016 is from the 2016 ACS.
Regions are defined in end note 3.
* First six months of year.

Figure 3. The Immigrant population (legal and Illegal) is growing faster now than in the recent past. (millions)



Source: American Community Survey 2010 to 2016 from American FactFinder at census.gov.

Table 2. Immigrant Population in the U.S. by Country & Region 1990-2016

Region	1990	2000	2010	2015	2016	Growth 2010-2016	% Growth 2010-2016
Mexico	**4,298,014**	**9,177,487**	**11,711,103**	**11,643,298**	**11,573,680**	**(137,423)**	**-1%**
East Asia	**3,759,346**	**5,822,450**	**7,516,059**	**8,363,368**	**8,408,268**	**892,209**	**12%**
China	921,070	1,518,652	2,166,526	2,676,697	2,716,548	550,022	25%
Korea	568,397	864,125	1,100,422	1,060,019	1,041,727	(58,695)	-5%
Vietnam	543,262	988,174	1,240,542	1,300,515	1,352,760	112,218	9%
Philippines	912,674	1,369,070	1,777,588	1,982,369	1,941,665	164,077	9%
Burma	19,835	33,905	82,200	137,567	142,494	60,294	73%
Thailand	106,919	169,801	222,759	247,205	253,585	30,826	14%
South Asia	**579,993**	**1,341,323**	**2,346,637**	**3,171,613**	**3,236,515**	**889,878**	**38%**
India	450,406	1,022,552	1,780,322	2,389,639	2,434,524	654,202	37%
Pakistan	91,889	223,477	299,581	379,435	382,852	83,271	28%
Bangladesh	21,414	95,294	153,691	228,682	234,640	80,949	53%
Nepal	2,262	11,859	69,458	120,886	129,450	59,992	86%
Caribbean	**1,947,435**	**2,961,737**	**3,738,920**	**4,173,301**	**4,293,823**	**554,903**	**15%**
Cuba	736,971	872,716	1,104,679	1,210,674	1,271,618	166,939	15%
Dominican Republic	347,858	687,677	879,187	1,063,239	1,085,321	206,134	23%
Jamaica	334,140	553,827	659,771	711,134	736,303	76,532	12%
Haiti	225,393	419,317	587,149	675,546	668,223	81,074	14%
Central America	**1,133,978**	**2,026,150**	**3,052,509**	**3,384,629**	**3,455,293**	**402,784**	**13%**
El Salvador	465,433	817,336	1,214,049	1,352,357	1,387,022	172,973	14%
Guatemala	225,739	480,665	830,824	927,593	935,707	104,883	13%
Honduras	108,923	282,852	522,581	599,030	651,059	128,478	25%
South America	**1,037,497**	**1,930,271**	**2,729,831**	**2,918,029**	**2,979,491**	**249,660**	**9%**
Colombia	286,124	509,872	636,555	699,399	704,587	68,032	11%
Peru	144,199	278,186	428,547	445,921	427,445	(1,102)	0%
Ecuador	143,314	298,626	443,173	441,257	439,123	(4,050)	-1%
Brazil	82,489	212,428	339,613	361,374	409,595	69,982	21%
Venezuela	42,119	107,031	184,039	255,520	290,224	106,185	58%
Guyana	120,698	211,189	265,271	281,408	266,368	1,097	0%
Middle East	**728,682**	**1,187,692**	**1,611,897**	**1,973,813**	**2,082,926**	**471,029**	**29%**
Iran	210,941	283,226	356,756	394,223	386,073	29,317	8%
Iraq	44,916	89,892	159,800	215,193	221,587	61,787	39%
Egypt	66,313	113,396	137,799	185,872	181,677	43,878	32%
Israel	86,048	109,719	127,896	129,680	142,078	14,182	11%
Lebanon	86,369	105,910	121,000	119,613	128,608	7,608	6%
Saudi Arabia	12,632	21,881	45,016	96,783	99,849	54,833	122%
Syria	36,782	54,561	59,554	82,681	96,694	37,140	62%
Afghanistan	28,444	45,195	54,458	70,653	94,726	40,268	74%
Europe	**4,360,463**	**4,980,837**	**4,906,698**	**4,875,879**	**4,876,213**	**(30,485)**	**-1%**
United Kingdom	640,145	677,751	669,794	683,473	696,896	27,102	4%
Russia	n/a	340,177	383,166	386,529	397,236	14,070	4%
Italy	580,592	473,338	364,972	352,492	335,763	(29,209)	-8%
Ukraine	n/a	275,153	326,493	345,620	347,759	21,266	7%
Germany	711,929	706,704	604,616	585,298	563,985	(40,631)	-7%
Sub-Saharan Africa	**264,775**	**690,809**	**1,326,634**	**1,716,425**	**1,783,623**	**456,989**	**34%**
Nigeria	55,350	134,940	219,309	323,635	306,874	87,565	40%
Ethiopia	34,805	69,531	173,592	228,745	244,924	71,332	41%
Ghana	20,889	65,572	124,696	155,532	171,428	46,732	37%
Kenya	14,371	41,081	88,519	129,905	129,670	41,151	46%
Somalia	2,437	36,139	82,454	89,153	93,020	10,566	13%
Canada	**744,830**	**820,771**	**798,649**	**830,628**	**783,206**	**(15,443)**	**-2%**
Oceania/Elsewhere	**912,303**	**168,362**	**216,736**	**238,663**	**265,863**	**49,127**	**23%**
Total	**19,767,316**	**31,107,889**	**39,955,673**	**43,289,646**	**43,738,901**	**3,783,228**	**9%**
Predominantly Muslim Countries	**840,595**	**1,518,755**	**2,184,664**	**2,701,544**	**2,824,272**	**639,608**	**29%**
Latin America	**8,416,924**	**16,095,645**	**21,232,363**	**22,119,257**	**22,302,287**	**1,069,924**	**5%**
Latin America other than Mexico	**4,118,910**	**6,918,158**	**9,521,260**	**10,475,959**	**10,728,607**	**1,207,347**	**13%**

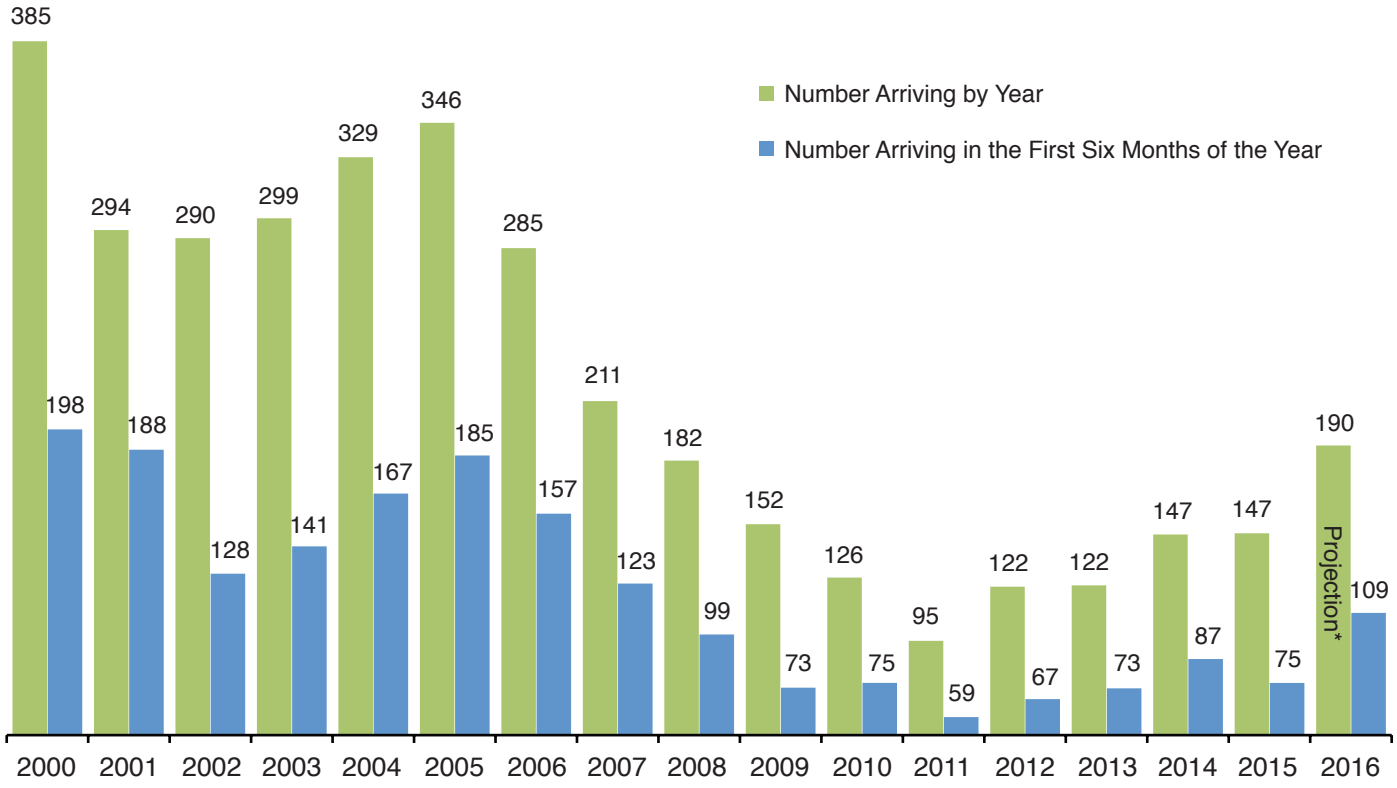
Source: Data for 1990 and 2000 is from the decennial census. Data for 2010, 2015, and 2016 is from the American Community Survey from American FactFinder at Census.gov. Figures for 1990 are from Table 3 here. Data for 2000 for Burma, Nepal, Saudi Arabia, Kenya, and Somalia are from the 2000 Decennial Census (5% sample) public-use data.
Regions are defined in end note 3.

Table 3. Immigrant Arrivals, 2000 to 2016* (thousands)

Year	Arrivals Full Year	90% Confidence Interval	Arrivals First 6 Mos.	90% Confidence Interval
2000	1,662	±71	911	±45
2001	1,465	±67	809	±50
2002	1,249	±62	670	±46
2003	1,196	±61	645	±45
2004	1,345	±41	700	±47
2005	1,366	±41	767	±31
2006	1,335	±41	752	±31
2007	1,231	±39	736	±31
2008	1,136	±34	696	±30
2009	1,137	±34	604	±25
2010	1,159	±35	697	±27
2011	1,084	±32	673	±27
2012	1,213	±34	681	±25
2013	1,278	±35	683	±25
2014	1,494	±37	849	±28
2015	1,617	±39	914	±29
2016	n/a	n/a	1,031	±31

Source: 2000 to 2016 public-use files of the American Community Survey (ACS). Each year's survey provides a full year of arrival data for the prior calendar year, so data for 2015 comes from the 2016 ACS, data for 2014 is from 2015 and so on. Data for the first six months is from each year's ACS.
*First six months of year only.

Figure 4. Number of Hispanic Immigrants (18-40) with a High School Degree or Less Arriving in the First Six Months and Annually Each Year (in thousands)



Source: 2000 to 2016 public-use files of the American Community Survey (ACS). Each year's survey provides a full year of arrival data for the prior calendar year, so data for 2015 comes from the 2016 ACS, data for 2014 is from 2015, and so on. Data for the first six months is from each year's ACS.

* To arrive at our projection for 2016 we simply average the ratio (2010 to 2015) of new arrivals for the first six months of each year to the number of new of arrivals for the full year once the full-year data is released.

End Notes

[1] The 2000 Census showed that 1.797 million new immigrants settled in the country in 1999. This almost exactly matches our full-year projection for 2016 of 1.796 million. We will have to wait until next year to confirm our projection. As the ACS was not collected nationally on an annual basis before 2000 and the decennial Census data is only available every 10 years, we cannot be certain of the annual number of new arrivals in the 1990s. (Note: 2000 was the last time a decennial census distinguished the foreign-born population.) So there is no way to directly measure the number of immigrants arriving in the 1990s by individual year. It is possible that new arrivals exceeded 1.8 million a year at some point between 1990 and 1998. That said, the decennial Census and arrival data in another, smaller Census Bureau survey called the Current Population Survey (CPS), which was collected from 1994 on, do not indicate that annual immigration (legal and illegal) ever reached 1.8 million before 1999. The individual year of arrival data from the 2000 census for 1990 to 1998 reflect out-migration and a small amount of mortality, reducing their size by the year 2000. In 2005, the Pew Research Center attempted to estimate individual year of arrival data from 1990 to 2004 by averaging results from the 2000 census, the ACS, and the CPS. After making allowances for out-migration and mortality, their research shows that, other than 1999, the highest year of new immigration was 1998, when 1.462 million immigrants arrived. Pew's findings confirm that new arrivals did not exceed 1.8 million at any point in the 1990s. See Table 1a in Jeffrey Passel and Roberto Suro, "Rise, Peak and Decline: Trends in U.S. Immigration 1992 – 2004", Pew Research Center, 2005.

In addition to Census Bureau data, there is also yearly admissions data on new legal immigrants going back to 1820, which shows that the largest number of new legal immigrants admitted in a single year in American history was 1.218 million in 1914. (It may be worth adding that during the IRCA legalizations in both 1990 and 1991 the number of new green cards issued each year was higher than 1.218 million, though these were illegal immigrants receiving amnesty, not new arrivals. The figures also include non-illegal immigrants receiving green cards who were adjusting status from within the United States, so they, too, were not new arrivals.) In short, if our projection for 2016 is correct, then the number of new arrivals (legal and illegal) in that year roughly matched the level in 1999, making 2016 and 1999 tied for the two highest years of immigration in American history.

[2] To arrive at our projection for 2016 we simply average the ratio of new arrivals for the first six months of each year to the number of new of arrivals for the full year once the full-year data is released (2010 to 2015). There were 1.742 new arrivals on average in the full-year data once it was released, compared to the half-year data released in the prior year. We simply multiply 1.742 by the 1.031 million who arrived in the first six months of 2016 to get our full-year projection of 1.796 million as shown in Figure 1.

[3] The regions in this report are defined in the following manner: Countries that can be identified in the public-use 2016 ACS file are coded as the following regions: **Mexico**; **Central America:** Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Panama; **South America:** Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Guyana, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay, Venezuela, and South America not specified; **Caribbean:** Bermuda, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Haiti, Jamaica, Antigua-Barbuda, Bahamas, Barbados, Dominica, Grenada, St. Lucia, St. Vincent, Trinidad and Tobago, and Caribbean and West Indies and Americas not specified; **South Asia:** India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, and Nepal; **East Asia:** China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, Korea, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam, Burma, Asia not specified; **Europe:** Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, England, Scotland, United Kingdom, Ireland, Belgium, France, Netherlands, Switzerland, Albania, Greece, Macedonia, Italy, Portugal, Azores, Spain, Austria, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Slovakia, Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Yugoslavia, Croatia, Bosnia, Serbia, Montenegro, Cyprus, Latvia, Lithuania, Byelorussia, Moldova, Ukraine, Armenia, Georgia, Russia, USSR not specified, and Europe not specified; **Middle East:** Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Iran, Iraq, Israel/Palestine, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Syria, Turkey, Yemen, Algeria, Egypt, Morocco, Libya, Sudan, and North Africa not specified; **Sub-Saharan Africa:** Cape Verde, Ghana, Guinea, Liberia, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, Tanzania, Uganda, Zimbabwe, Eritrea, Cameroon, South Africa, Zaire, Congo, Zambia, Togo, Gambia, and Africa and Western and Eastern Africa not specified; **Canada**; **Oceania/Elsewhere:** Australia, New Zealand, Fiji, Tonga, Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Elsewhere. The above list is for 2010 to 2016, in prior years several smaller sending countries cannot be identified individually in the ACS.

[4] To estimate the number from Mexico for all of 2016, we take the 124,000 Mexican immigrants who arrived in the first six months of that year (see Table 1) and multiply it by 1.742, as we did with the number for all immigrants.

[5] Additional analysis is necessary to confirm this tentative conclusion. However, Figure 4 shows the number of Hispanic immigrants ages 18-40 with only a high school education or less arriving each year based on the ACS. Based on prior research, about three-fourths of this population has traditionally been illegal immigrants. The figure shows that the number of such immigrants entering each year has roughly doubled since 2011, when it hit a low point after the Great Recession. This increase makes it very likely that new illegal immigration has increased somewhat in recent years and may again match the number arriving in 2008 or even 2007, though the level is still well below the number who came annually in earlier years. It should also be remembered that new arrivals are offset by those in the existing population of illegal immigrants who return home or get legal status each year. Thus, an increase in new arrivals may not translate into a larger illegal immigrant population in the country because the overall size of that population reflects both new arrivals and those leaving the illegal population each year.

[6] Detailed information on the survey methodology, questions, and other information on the American Community can be found here.

[7] The Department of Homeland Security uses the ACS as the basis for its estimates of illegal immigrants. See their most recent estimate of the unauthorized immigrant population: Bryan Baker and Nancy Rytina, "Estimates of the Unauthorized Immigrant Population Residing in the United States: January 2012", Department of Homeland Security, Office of Immigration Statistics, March 2013.

[8] The ACS began to include those in institutions in 2006.