



Immigration Continues to Surge

A look at arrival data from the American Community Survey

By Steven A. Camarota and Karen Zeigler

Newly released data show that 2016 tied with 1999 as the highest single year of immigration in U.S. history, with the arrival of 1.75 million new immigrants (both legal and illegal).¹ The new numbers represent a continuation of the dramatic rebound in new arrivals since 2011, when annual immigration bottomed out after the Great Recession. Newly arrived immigrants include new green card recipients (permanent residents) and long-term “temporary” visitors (e.g. guestworkers and foreign students), many of whom eventually become permanent residents. They also include new asylum seekers, as well as new illegal immigrants who sneak into the country or overstay a temporary visa.

Among the findings:

- The arrival of 1.75 million immigrants (legal and illegal) in 2016 continues the post-2011 surge in immigration. In 2011 it was 1.08 million; in 2012 it was 1.21 million; in 2013 it was 1.28 million; in 2014 it was 1.5 million; and in 2015 it was 1.62 million. (Figure 1)
- Half of the increase in new arrivals (legal and illegal) since 2011 has been from Latin America, which doubled from 335,000 in that year to 668,000 in 2016. (Figure 2, Table 1)
- Latin America surpassed Asia (East Asia and South Asia combined) as the top sending-region in 2016. Asia had been the top sending-region since 2010. (Figure 2, Table 1)
- Annual immigration from Central America alone has nearly tripled, from 46,000 in 2011 to 133,000 new arrivals in 2016. This reflects in part the dramatic increase in illegal immigrant families from Central America crossing the southern border. (Table 1)
- Compared to 2011, new immigration (legal and illegal) from South America is up by 250 percent, to 171,000 in 2016, and new arrivals from the Caribbean roughly doubled to 168,000 over the same time period. (Table 1)
- Other regions showing a large increase in new annual arrivals since 2011 are South Asia (Indian subcontinent), up 54 percent to 244,000 in 2016; East Asia, up 30 percent to 355,000 in 2016; and the Middle East, up 78 percent to 137,000.² (Table 1)
- Mexico and India are in a statistical tie as the top sending countries, with 196,000 and 194,000, respectively, arriving in 2016. China was third, with 171,000 new immigrants. (Table 1)
- While the number of new arrivals from Mexico has increased nearly 50 percent since 2011, the number coming remains well below the annual level of more than a decade ago, when 400,000 to 500,000 new arrivals (legal and illegal) came from our southern neighbor each year.
- The dramatic increase in new immigrants settling in the United States in recent years is primarily driven

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by the nation's generous legal immigration system, both long-term temporary visa holders (e.g. guest workers and foreign students) and new permanent residents (green cards).

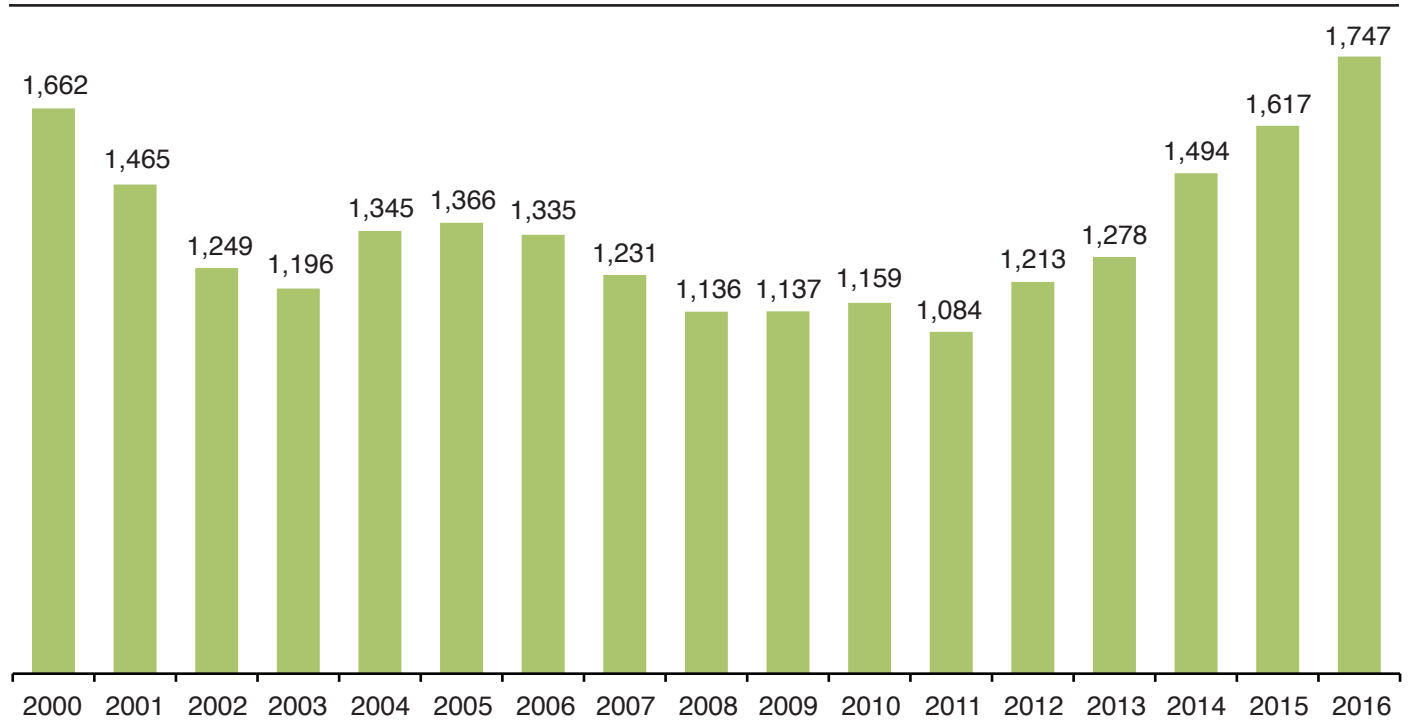
- There is evidence that the arrival of new illegal immigrants may also have rebounded in the last few years. The number of new less-educated Hispanic immigrants increased 76 percent between 2011 and 2016. However, the level remains well below what it was before the Great Recession.³ (Figure 4)
- The decision to admit large numbers of unaccompanied minors and families at the southern border likely accounts for some of the increase in new illegal immigration since 2011, particularly from Central America.
- While complete data for 2017 will not be released until next year, in the first six months of 2017, 930,000 new immigrants settled in the country. This is less than in the first six months of 2016, and may indicate that new immigration fell somewhat between 2016 and 2017. (Table 3)
- The falloff in arrivals in the first part of 2017 may reflect increased enforcement, lower refugee admissions, and more robust vetting of applicants undertaken by the Trump administration.
- Based on past patterns, when the data becomes available for all of 2017, it may show 1.61 million new immigrants arrived in all of 2017, though that projection is only preliminary. If correct, it would mean that new arrivals in 2017 were lower than in 2016, but still higher than any year since 2000, with the exception of 2016.⁴

Data Source. In October of this year, the Census Bureau released the public-use data from the 2017 American Community Survey (ACS). The survey reflects the U.S. population as of July 1, 2017. The ACS is by far the largest survey taken by the federal government each year and includes over two million households.⁵ The Census Bureau posted some of the results from the ACS in September 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 individual years of arrival, 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. They include naturalized citizens, legal permanent immigrants (green card holders), temporary workers, and foreign students. They do 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. Prior research by the Department of Homeland Security and others indicates that some 90 percent of illegal immigrants respond to the ACS.⁶ Thus, all of the figures reported above are for both legal and illegal immigrants.

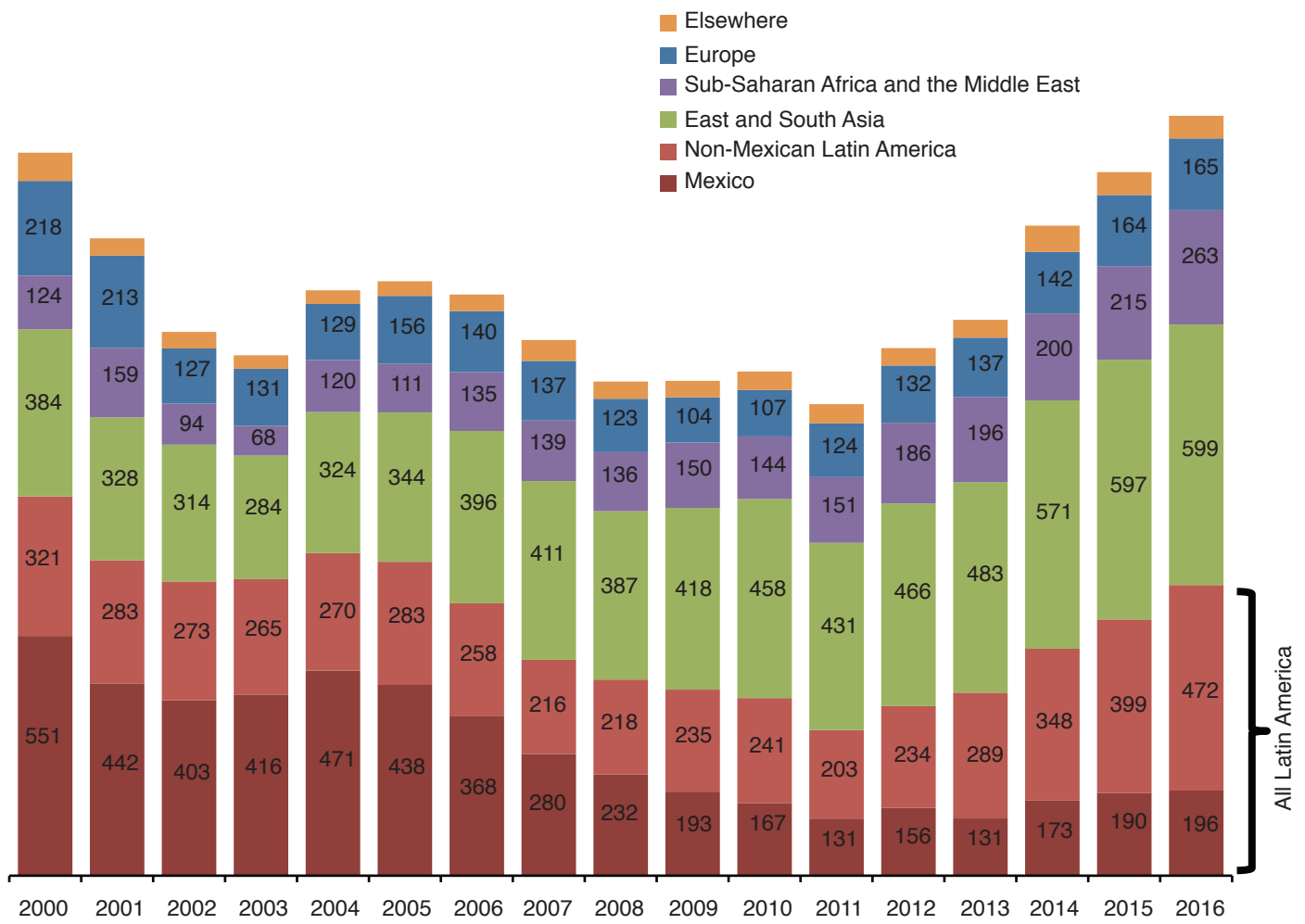
Newly arrived immigrants captured in the Census Bureau's ACS include the foreign-born as described above. It does not include those who come to the United States for short stays, such as tourists or business travelers. The ACS uses a two-month rule to determine who will be included in the survey. That 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 includes that population as well, which includes prisons and nursing homes.⁷ 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 in 2017. So, for example, the total number of new arrivals in 2016 only became available once the 2017 ACS was released in October 2018. However, the number of new arrivals in the first six months of the previous year is available when the new data is released.

Figure 1. The American Community Survey shows new arrivals have increased significantly the in last few years. (thousands)



Source: 2001 to 2017 public-use files of the American Community Survey (ACS).
Table 3 reports confidence intervals for annual arrival data.

Figure 2. New Arrivals by Region, 2000 to 2016 (thousands)



Source: 2001 to 2017 public-use files of the American Community Survey (ACS).
Regions are defined in end note 2.

Table 1. Newly Arrived Immigrants by Sending Region, Country and Year, 2000 to 2017 (thousands)

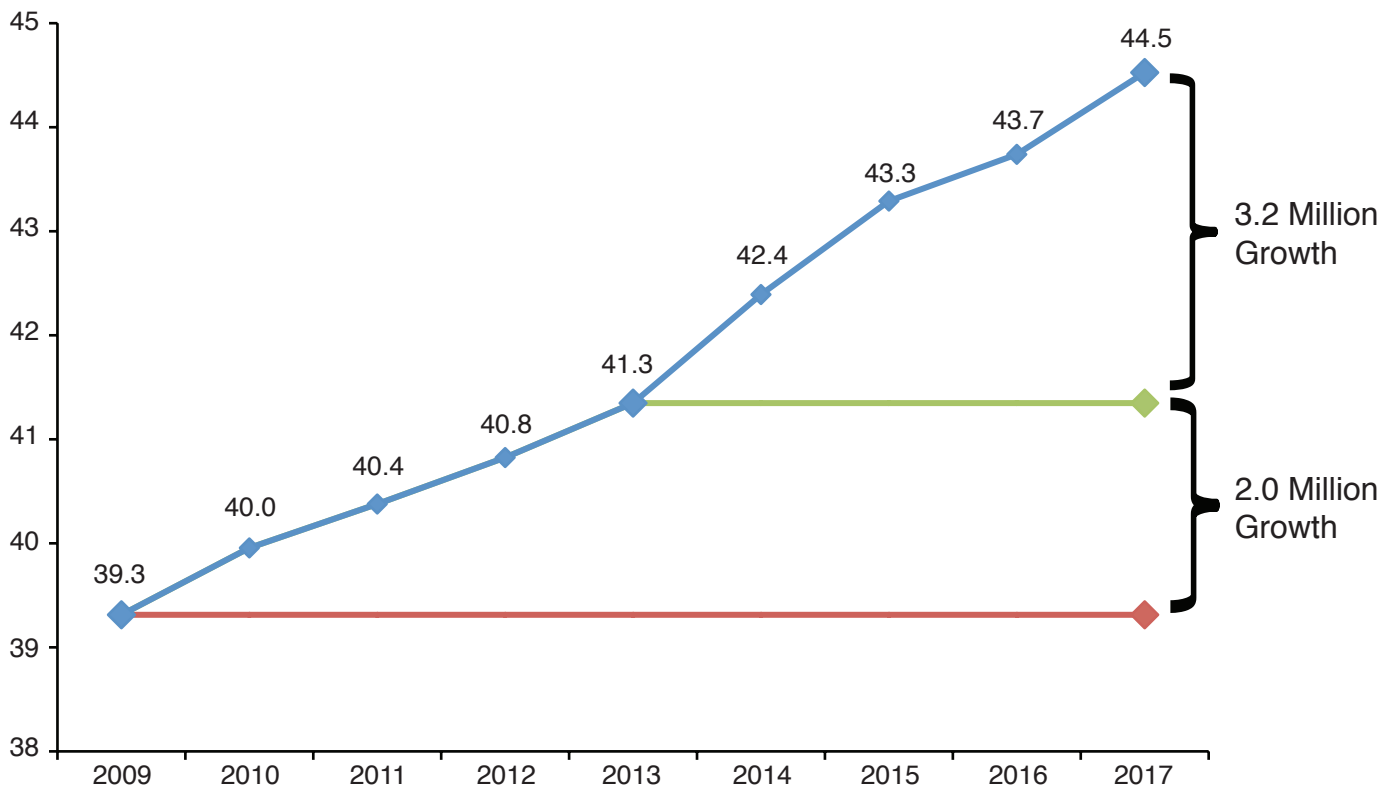
Region	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017*
Mexico	551	442	403	416	471	438	368	280	232	193	167	131	156	131	173	190	196	99
Central America	78	55	68	68	99	115	90	71	60	56	59	46	62	90	122	106	133	54
El Salvador	34	19	18	22	24	32	30	20	22	19	20	17	21	36	40	40	53	20
Guatemala	19	17	24	29	43	46	32	30	20	19	19	14	19	22	32	28	33	17
Honduras	9	10	13	10	22	24	19	14	12	12	13	9	15	27	40	29	40	12
Caribbean	89	86	71	90	80	84	84	78	89	113	110	89	102	117	114	146	168	61
Cuba	31	23	17	23	28	21	31	21	30	31	34	29	37	42	39	55	64	12
Dominican Republic	10	19	10	27	21	21	19	17	25	34	30	25	29	34	37	43	50	19
South America	153	142	135	108	92	84	84	67	70	65	72	68	69	82	113	146	171	94
Venezuela	14	18	16	17	8	6	5	8	8	7	10	10	7	8	24	41	63	20
Europe	218	213	127	131	129	156	140	137	123	104	107	124	132	137	142	164	165	103
South Asia	149	97	90	70	91	103	113	130	131	114	143	158	174	189	239	240	244	134
India	120	74	63	58	70	86	90	111	103	86	111	117	127	142	194	189	194	104
East Asia	235	232	224	214	234	240	283	281	256	304	315	272	291	295	332	357	355	218
China	67	62	38	52	49	62	69	63	69	95	97	103	107	126	141	144	171	110
Philippines	38	45	41	37	50	46	64	65	48	54	59	42	46	43	51	56	52	32
Middle East	67	95	50	28	51	53	54	65	79	83	79	77	106	110	110	116	137	66
Sub-Saharan Africa	57	64	44	40	69	59	81	74	56	68	65	74	80	86	89	98	126	60
Canada	47	28	31	20	21	25	25	34	28	28	29	32	28	28	45	39	38	32
Elsewhere	18	12	7	11	11	9	13	14	11	9	13	12	12	13	15	14	14	9
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	1,747	930
Latin America	872	725	676	681	741	721	626	496	451	428	408	335	390	421	522	589	668	308
Latin America, Not Mexico	321	283	273	265	270	283	258	216	218	235	241	203	234	289	348	399	472	209

Source: Source: 2001 to 2017 public-use files of the American Community Survey (ACS).

Regions are defined in end note 2.

* 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 2017 from American FactFinder at census.gov.
 Figure for 2009 reflects the re-weighting of the 2009 ACS by the Pew Research Center to reflect results from the 2010 Census.

Table 2. Immigrant Pop. in the U.S. by Country & Region 1990-2017

Region	1990	2000	2010	2017	Growth 2010-2017	% Growth 2010-2017
Mexico	4,298,014	9,177,487	11,711,103	11,269,913	(441,190)	-4%
East Asia	3,759,346	5,822,450	7,516,059	8,634,996	1,118,937	15%
China	921,070	1,518,652	2,166,526	2,843,838	677,312	31%
Korea	568,397	864,125	1,100,422	1,063,074	(37,348)	-3%
Vietnam	543,262	988,174	1,240,542	1,342,568	102,026	8%
Philippines	912,674	1,369,070	1,777,588	2,008,080	230,492	13%
Burma	19,835	33,905	82,200	160,275	78,075	95%
Thailand	106,919	169,801	222,759	256,136	33,377	15%
South Asia	579,993	1,341,323	2,346,637	3,453,010	1,106,373	47%
India	450,406	1,022,552	1,780,322	2,610,537	830,215	47%
Pakistan	91,889	223,477	299,581	391,976	92,395	31%
Bangladesh	21,414	95,294	153,691	248,696	95,005	62%
Nepal	2,262	11,859	69,458	152,685	83,227	120%
Caribbean	1,947,435	2,961,737	3,738,920	4,414,943	676,023	18%
Cuba	736,971	872,716	1,104,679	1,311,803	207,124	19%
Dominican Republic	347,858	687,677	879,187	1,162,568	283,381	32%
Jamaica	334,140	553,827	659,771	744,658	84,887	13%
Haiti	225,393	419,317	587,149	679,752	92,603	16%
Central America	1,133,978	2,026,150	3,052,509	3,527,013	474,504	16%
El Salvador	465,433	817,336	1,214,049	1,401,832	187,783	15%
Guatemala	225,739	480,665	830,824	958,842	128,018	15%
Honduras	108,923	282,852	522,581	655,362	132,781	25%
South America	1,037,497	1,930,271	2,729,831	3,213,187	483,356	18%
Colombia	286,124	509,872	636,555	783,032	146,477	23%
Peru	144,199	278,186	428,547	458,785	30,238	7%
Ecuador	143,314	298,626	443,173	454,178	11,005	2%
Brazil	82,489	212,428	339,613	451,084	111,471	33%
Venezuela	42,119	107,031	184,039	351,144	167,105	91%
Guyana	120,698	211,189	265,271	268,577	3,306	1%
Middle East	728,682	1,187,692	1,611,897	2,084,451	472,554	29%
Iran	210,941	283,226	356,756	395,429	38,673	11%
Iraq	44,916	89,892	159,800	232,418	72,618	45%
Egypt	66,313	113,396	137,799	184,359	46,560	34%
Israel	86,048	109,719	127,896	142,934	15,038	12%
Lebanon	86,369	105,910	121,000	124,847	3,847	3%
Saudi Arabia	12,632	21,881	45,016	82,201	37,185	83%
Syria	36,782	54,561	59,554	104,234	44,680	75%
Afghanistan	28,444	45,195	54,458	100,367	45,909	84%
Europe	4,360,463	4,980,837	4,906,698	4,913,608	6,910	0%
United Kingdom	640,145	677,751	669,794	702,567	32,773	5%
Russia	n/a	340,177	383,166	403,670	20,504	5%
Italy	580,592	473,338	364,972	333,911	(31,061)	-9%
Ukraine	n/a	275,153	326,493	354,494	28,001	9%
Germany	711,929	706,704	604,616	552,640	(51,976)	-9%
Sub-Saharan Africa	264,775	690,809	1,326,634	1,933,469	606,835	46%
Nigeria	55,350	134,940	219,309	344,979	125,670	57%
Ethiopia	34,805	69,531	173,592	249,991	76,399	44%
Ghana	20,889	65,572	124,696	164,610	39,914	32%
Kenya	14,371	41,081	88,519	138,150	49,631	56%
Somalia	2,437	36,139	82,454	106,525	24,071	29%
Canada	744,830	820,771	798,649	809,267	10,618	1%
Oceania/Elsewhere	912,303	168,362	216,736	271,601	54,865	25%
Total	19,767,316	31,107,889	39,955,673	44,525,458	4,569,785	11%
Predominantly Muslim Countries	840,595	1,518,755	2,184,664	2,864,397	679,733	31%
Latin America	8,416,924	16,095,645	21,232,363	22,425,056	1,192,693	6%
Latin America, Not Mexico	4,118,910	6,918,158	9,521,260	11,155,143	1,633,883	17%

Source: Data for 1990 and 2000 is from the decennial census. Data for 2010 and 2017 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 2.

Table 3. Immigrant Arrivals, 2000 to 2017* (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	1,747	±40	1,031	±31
2017	n/a	n/a	930	±30

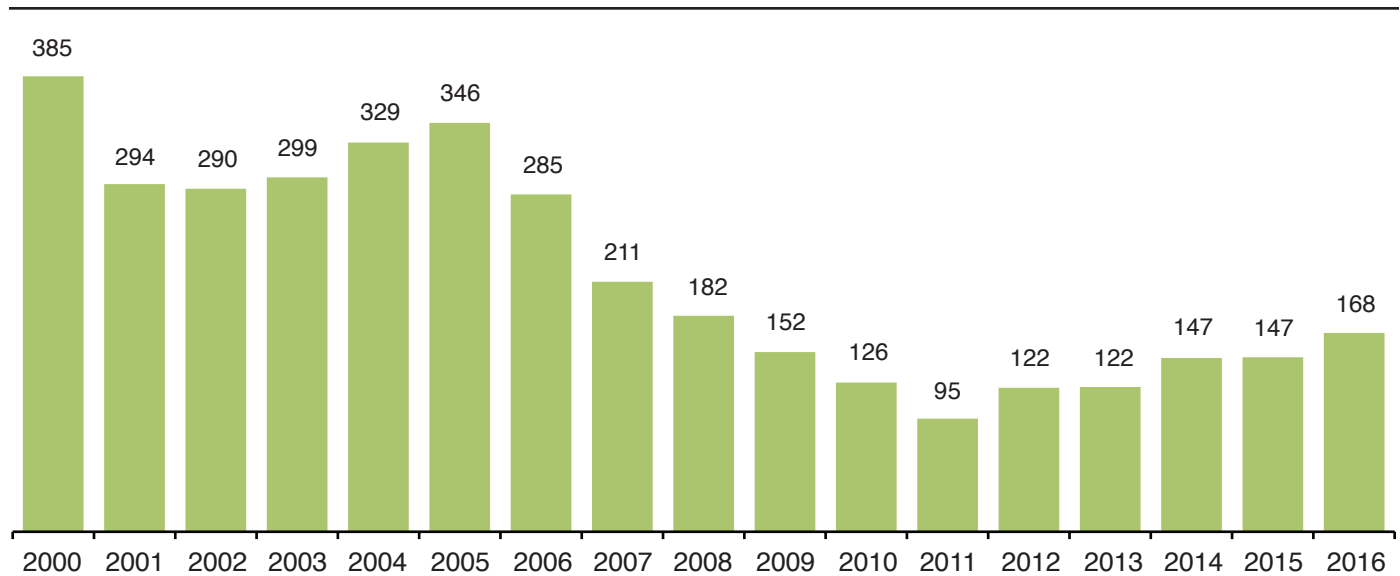
Source: 2001 to 2017 public-use files of the American Community Survey (ACS) and 2000 Decennial Census.
*First six months of year only.

Table 4. Total Immigrant Pop. Based on the ACS, 2000 to 2017

Year	Total Immigrant Population	90% Confidence Interval
2000	31,107,889	n/a
2001	31,482,280	n/a
2002	33,048,849	±172,094
2003	33,533,945	±132,522
2004	34,279,756	±149,140
2005	35,689,842	±131,480
2006	37,547,789	±125,642
2007	38,059,694	±119,489
2008	37,960,935	±122,968
2009	39,313,000	±118,061
2010	39,955,854	±115,157
2011	40,377,860	±125,123
2012	40,824,658	±111,594
2013	41,348,066	±129,154
2014	42,391,794	±130,122
2015	43,290,372	±122,466
2016	43,739,345	±129,849
2017	44,525,855	±135,763

Source: 2001 to 2017 American Community Survey (ACS) and 2000 Decennial Census.

Figure 4. Annual Number of Hispanic Immigrants (Legal and Illegal) Arriving, Ages 18 to 40, with No More than a High School Degree (thousands)



Source: 2001 to 2017 public-use files of the American Community Survey (ACS).

End Notes

¹ The 2000 Census showed that 1.797 million new immigrants settled in the country in 1999, compared to 1.747 million in 2016. The margin of error in the public-use ACS for new arrivals in 2016 is $\pm 40,000$ using a 90 percent confidence interval (see Table 3), so it is possible the number who came in that year was as high as 1.787. (Using a 95 percent confidence interval it would be $\pm 48,000$ for a possible high range of 1.795 million.) This range, coupled with the small margin of error in Census Long Form data from 2000, means that, statistically, 1999 and 2016 are the same. It must be pointed out that the ACS was not collected nationally on an annual basis before 2000 and the decennial census data is only available every 10 years so we cannot be certain of the annual number of new arrivals in 1990s. (Note: 2000 was the last time a decennial census distinguished the foreign-born population, including years of arrival.) 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, growth in the total foreign-born population between 1990 and 2000, based on the decennial census, as well as arrival data in another smaller survey collected by the Census Bureau called the Current Population Survey (CPS), does not indicate that annual immigration (legal and illegal) ever reached the 1999 or 2016 levels in the 1990s. 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 the 1999/2016 level at any point in the 1990s. See Table 1a in Jeffrey S. Passel and Roberto Suro, [“Rise, Peak, and Decline: Trends in U.S. Immigration 1992 – 2004, 2005”](#), Pew Hispanic Center, September 27, 2005.

In addition to Census Bureau data, there is also yearly admission 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 prior to 1999 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 each year was higher than 1.218 million, though these were illegal immigrants already here 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, the number of new arrivals for 2016 roughly matched the level in 1999, making it almost certain that 2016 and 1999 are tied for the two highest years of immigration in American history.

² The regions in this report are defined in the following manner: Countries that can be identified in the public-use 2017 ACS file are coded as the following regions: **Mexico:** Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Panama; **Central America:** Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Guyana, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay, Venezuela, and South America not specified; **South America:** 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, Mongolia, 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, Kyrgyzstan, 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, South Sudan, 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 2017, in prior years several smaller sending countries cannot be identified individually in the ACS.

³ Additional analysis is necessary to confirm this tentative conclusion. However, Figure 4 shows the number of Hispanic immigrants with only a high school education or less ages 18 to 40 arriving each year based on the ACS. Based on prior research, about three-fourths of this population has traditionally been illegal immigrants. (See Steven A. Camarota and Karen Zeigler, [“Homeward Bound: Recent Immigration Enforcement and the Decline in the Illegal Alien Population”](#), Center for Immigration Studies, July 30, 2008.) Figure 4 shows that the number of such immigrants entering each year has increased

by 76 percent 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.

⁴ This projection is based on the ratio of new arrivals for the first six months of each year from 2010 to 2016 to the number of new arrivals for the full year once the full-year data is released. In past years, that ratio has been 1.735 so we make the same assumption for 2017 — 930,000 new arrivals in the first half of 2017 multiplied by 1.735.

⁵ Detailed information on the survey methodology, questions, and other information on the American Community Survey can be found [here](#).

⁶ 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”](#), Office of Immigration Statistics, U.S. Department of Homeland Security, March 2013.

⁷ The ACS began to include those in institutions in 2006. See [“Group Quarters/Residence Rules”](#), U.S. Census Bureau, last updated May 12, 2016.