

IMMIGRATION WILL DRIVE U.S. POPULATION GROWTH THROUGHOUT THE 21ST CENTURY

An NPG Forum Paper by Edwin S. Rubenstein

The U.S. population is expected to reach a high of nearly 370 million in 2080 before edging down to 366 million in 2100, according to a Census report released in November. By 2100 the total resident population is expected to increase 9.7% from 2022, according to the middle (most likely) population scenario.

The report is essentially an update of the last Census population projections that were released in 2017. The current report extends population projections to 2100 — the first time since 2000 that government population projections have stretched that far into the future.

Sandra Johnson, a Census Bureau demographer, explains why an update was needed:

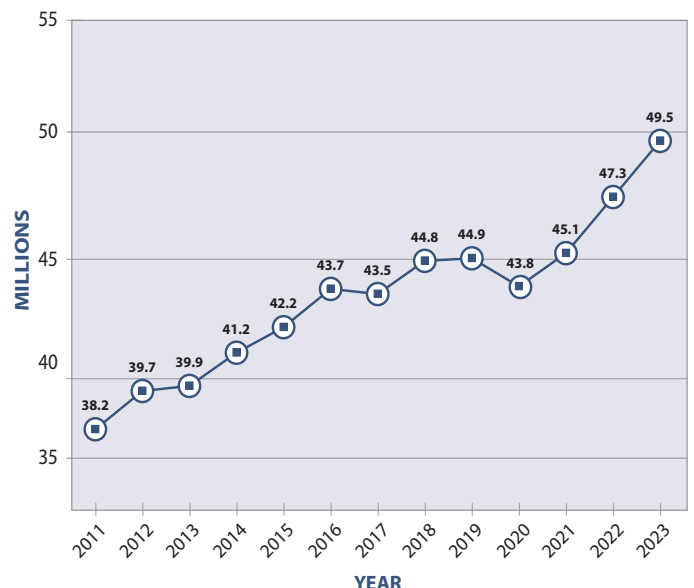
“The U.S. has experienced notable shifts in the components of population change over the last five years,” she says. “Some of these, like the increases in mortality caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, are expected to be short-term while others, including the declines in fertility that have persisted for decades, are likely to continue into the future. Incorporating additional years of data on births, deaths and international migration into our projections process resulted in a slower pace of population growth through 2060 than was previously projected.”¹

Ms. Johnson was right: U.S. population growth has slowed. But the number of immigrants, and their share of our population, is galloping ahead, seemingly without limit:

- The foreign-born population hit 47 million in 2022, a record high in American history.
- Immigrants now account for 14.3% of the population – one in seven residents. As recently as 1990 they were one in 13 residents.
- Since January 2021 the total foreign-born population has risen by about 4.4% – more than double the percentage rise in the native-born population.
- Illegal immigrants are estimated to have accounted for about two-thirds of growth in the foreign-born population since then.
- Taking a longer view, since 2000 the total immigrant population has grown by 50%; it’s doubled since 1990; tripled since 1980; and quadrupled since 1970.

FOREIGN-BORN POPULATION August 2011 to August 2023

(millions of people; Data Source: Monthly Current Population Survey)



Data Source: Camarota and Ziegler, Just Released Data: Foreign-Born Population Above 46 million in July 2022, CIS, September 22, 2023. <https://cis.org/Camarota/JustReleased-Data-ForeignBorn-Population-Above-46-million-July-2022>

NATURAL INCREASE

The “other” component of population growth is “natural increase” – the excess of births over deaths occurring in the U.S. The Federal government has never articulated a population control policy aimed explicitly at curbing natural increase. It hasn’t had to.

Fertility rates have been dropping for decades. Women in the U.S. have greater access to contraception, marry later, and have fewer children. Although immigrant women have higher fertility rates than their native-born counterparts, the gap is narrowing.

However, the sheer growth of the U.S. population projected in the latest Census release shows that lower fertility is no match for higher immigration.

IMMIGRATION DRIVES POPULATION

Four immigration scenarios – high, middle, low, and zero immigration – are presented in the latest report. In each case, except for the zero-immigration scenario, immigration is expected to be the major determinant of population growth:

High immigration: Population increases every year, reaching 435 million in 2100.

Middle immigration: Population peaks at 370 million in 2080, declining to 366 million in 2100.

Low immigration: Population peaks at 346 million in 2043, declining to 319 million in 2100.

Zero immigration: Population declines to 226 million in 2100, roughly 107 million below the 2022 estimate.

Reality check: *The new Census projections are already out of date.* They do not reflect the current debacle at the southern border. Since January 2021, 2.6 million illegal aliens were apprehended and released into the United States, while over the same period an additional 1.5 million border “got aways” were observed entering illegally but not stopped. Those figures exceed anything we’ve experienced in the last 20 years.²

Meanwhile, legal immigration has also rebounded since COVID.

Bottom line: the population projections in the latest report are too low. An update will be needed shortly.

TITLE 42 WORKED WELL... UNTIL IT DIDN'T

Title 42, the pandemic-era public health policy, had been used for more than three years to quickly deport migrants who tried to cross the border illegally. It was enacted by President Trump in March 2020, and expanded by the Biden Administration.

During its first two years, the Border Patrol expelled illegal migrants nearly 2.8 million times. Title 42 allowed for quick returns without repercussions, thereby encouraging some migrants to try again and again.

When the policy ended in May 2023, the Biden administration replaced it with a carrot – more legal pathways for entry, and a stick – harsher punishments for those crossing illegally.

The carrot prevailed in May and June: Apprehensions dropped as more migrants were using the legal pathways. But immigration experts say they never expected the drop to last – and they were right.

“Every time we see changes in the border policies, we see a sort of lull while everybody figures it out, and then we see increased numbers [of illegal crossers] after that,” says Denise Gilman, a professor and director at the University of Texas at Austin’s Immigration Clinic.³

“We have yet to see any restrictive border policy work in terms of actually keeping the numbers down at the border,” Gilman says. “It just doesn’t work that way....”⁴

Translation: Immigrants routinely circumvent U.S. border policy for their own benefit. It’s almost as if they themselves were writing the border policies.

SO, YOU THINK IMMIGRATION CAN FIX THE LABOR SHORTAGE? THINK AGAIN.

The Baby Boomers are aging out of the work force. Subsequent generations are smaller, not replicating as quickly, and retiring earlier. Many people believe the on-going influx of young, healthy immigrants is needed to slow the aging of the U.S. labor force and to prevent a chronic, economically devastating labor shortage.

Reality check: The costs of an immigration-based solution outweigh the benefits.

There are a number of reasons for this:

First, like everyone else, immigrants age over time. Second (as noted above), their fertility is not that much higher than native-born, and is declining. Third, immigrants arrive **at all ages**, and trigger, at best, a modest reduction in the average age of the work force. **In some cases, by the time the U.S.-born children of immigrants enter the labor force, their immigrant parents will have reached retirement age, adding to both the number of workers and retirees.**

Can immigration prevent the working-age share of population from falling? Technically, yes, it can – but at an enormous cost: **A Center for Immigration Studies analysis finds that it would require admitting five-times as many immigrants as are now coming, thereby growing the U.S. population to 706 million, which is more than twice its current size.**⁵

A more realistic proposal would be to raise the retirement age for Social Security by one year.

MIDDLE EAST TERRORISM VIA U.S. OPEN BORDERS?

In FY2023 the Border Patrol encountered 736 individuals on the terror watchlist — a new

record. Those are just the ones we know about. With more than 1 million “gotaways” crossing each year, many potential terrorists may have slipped through.

But the next fiscal year could be even worse: FY 2023 ended on September 30, 2023 — a week before one of the most brutal acts of terrorism in modern history. On November 1st FBI Director Christopher Wray, testifying before the Senate Homeland Security and Government Affairs Committee, stated:

“The reality is that the terrorism threat has been elevated throughout 2023, but the ongoing war in the Middle East has raised the threat of an attack against Americans in the United States to a whole other level.”⁶

Shortly after the attack President Biden sent an “urgent budget request” to Congress for additional aid for Israel and the Ukraine. That \$13.6 billion request, the President said, would be used to secure America’s own borders.

Reality check: Drilling down into the details of Mr. Biden’s request, the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR) found that most of the money would be used to fund his **“rapid processing and release program”** that has attracted millions to the borders and overwhelmed American cities with refugees.

Rather than curb illegal immigration, the added funds speed up work authorization benefits, support sanctuary cities and expedite the processing and transporting of illegal aliens along the southern border. Nearly \$5 billion of the funding would be funneled to nonprofits that provide shelter and services to illegal aliens.⁷

During the Obama years we often heard the refrain **“Never let a serious crisis go to waste.”** Apparently President Biden, attempting to leverage two major wars to push policies that diminish our border security, learned that lesson well.

SUMMARY

In 2022 NPG celebrated its 50th anniversary. Of all population-related issues, immigration was deemed by far the most important. At that time, we wrote:

“Our policy is simple. Total immigration numbers should be no more than 200,000 per year, including all refugees and asylees. Achieving that goal will balance out the number of U.S. citizens who leave the country each year. Without such a policy, U.S. population will continue to grow with no end in sight...”⁸

Fast forward to 2023: SW border apprehensions are currently running at over **200,000 per month, or more than 2.4 million per year.**

No end in sight?

Stay tuned.

NOTES

1. Census Bureau, *U.S. Population Projected to Begin Declining in Second Half of Century*, November 9, 2023.
2. Steven Camarota, *New Census Bureau Projections Show Immigration Drives Population Growth*, Center for Immigration Studies, November 9, 2023.
3. Ashley Wu, *Several Factors Add Up to Illegal Border Crossers Being at Sustained Highs*, New York Times, November 6, 2023.
4. Ibid.
5. Steven Camarota, *Immigration Cannot Undo Population Aging*, Center for Immigration Studies, November 10, 2022.
6. FAIR, *Administration Determined to Break All Records*, Immigration Report, November 2023.
7. Ibid.
8. NPG, *Celebrating Five Decades of Population Education*, 2022.



Edwin S. Rubenstein, president of ESR Research, is an experienced business researcher, financial analyst, and economics journalist. He has written extensively on federal tax policy, government waste, the Reagan legacy, and – most recently – on immigration. He is the author of two books: *The Right Data* (1994) and *From the Empire State to the Vampire State: New York in a Downward Transition* (with Herbert London, 1994). His essays on public policy have appeared in *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, *Harvard Business Review*, *Investor’s Business Daily*, *Newsday*, and *National Review*. His TV appearances include *Firing Line*, *Bill Moyers*, *McNeil-Lehr*, *CNBC*, and *Debates-Debates*. Mr. Rubenstein has a B.A. from Johns Hopkins and a graduate degree in economics from Columbia University.

NOTE: The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of NPG, Inc.



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