What happened to US immigration and the foreign-born population during the pandemic

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Today’s presentation

- **Immigration flows to the US dropped dramatically in 2020**
  - Flows are way down from historical levels
  - Recent data (OIS) show some upticks but still low (‘21)
  - Data from last several months of ‘22 point to increases
Estimated inflows from survey data show large drop in 2020

Estimated annual immigration inflows to the U.S., Total and from Mexico (in thousands)

Source: Pew Research Center estimates based on ACS, ASEC CPS and monthly CPS.
Slowest growth in US history for ‘20-'21

Components of population change, 2001-2021

Today’s presentation

• Immigration flows to the US dropped dramatically in 2020
  – Flows are way down from historical levels
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• Main data sources seriously compromised in 2020
  – Legal admissions data are fine (from Office of Immigration Statistics or OIS)
  – Current Population Survey (CPS -- labor force survey)
  – Monthly survey not usable for Mar.-Sep. ’20 & maybe into ’21
  – March supplement compromised for ‘20 and ‘21
  – American Community Survey (ACS) not usable for ‘20 but ‘21 is ok
  – Detailed 2020 census results not in current data

• How many immigrants live in the US?
  – Little growth in last 2 years → leveled off at 46-47+ million
  – Late ’22 monthly data (Sep-Nov) suggest higher numbers

• How many unauthorized immigrants live in the US
  – New Pew estimates for ’18-’19 → little change at ~ 10 million
  – ‘20-’21 ACS data show virtually no change
  – Monthly CPS from late ‘22 and border apprehensions imply possible growth
Lawful Immigrants (OIS, DHS)
Office of Immigration Statistics (OIS in DHS)

- Release quarterly statistics with minimal lag
  a. Trump administration innovation
  b. Green cards (LPR admissions)
  c. Refugee arrivals
  d. Naturalizations
  e. Nonimmigrant arrivals (lag one quarter)

- **Inflows way down from 3rd quarter FY20 (Apr ‘20)**
  a. “New arrival” green cards, refugees
  b. Legal temporary admissions (I-94)

- **Some recovery by 2nd quarter FY22 (Mar ‘22)**
  a. Green cards almost to pre-pandemic levels
  b. Naturalizations trending above pre-pandemic levels
  c. Legal temporary up but most at 50% of earlier inflows
Total green cards granted fell almost 75%.

FY22 is “low” but back to pre-pandemic levels.

Source: Office of Immigration Statistics (DHS), Legal Immigration and Adjustment of Status quarterly reports for 2016-2022q2
Temporary visas (major source of unauthorized) cratered initially (-97%), still 50% below normal.

Source: Office of Immigration Statistics (DHS), Legal Immigration and Adjustment of Status quarterly reports for 2016-2022q2
Immigrant Population in the US
Population data sources

- **Two (or three) major surveys**
  - American Community Survey (ACS) – 1% random sample (>1M HHs)
    - “Rolling” sample collected over 12 months
  - Monthly Current Population Survey (CPS) – 40K HHs
    - Overlapping, state-based design with clustering
  - March CPS ASEC – 60K HHs (oversamples for children & minorities)

- **Timing varies considerably**
  - Monthly CPS – month after data collection (timely!! but small sample)
  - March CPS – September of collection year
  - ACS – fall of year after reference date and data collection

- **Weighting determines size of immigrant population**
  - Weights assigned to agree with census-based population estimates
  - Weights use age, sex, race/Hispanic and geography mainly
  - None of the surveys use nativity in the weighting (!)
  - CPS uses short-term projections made before data collection
  - Current data DOES NOT use full 2020 Census results
Alternative estimates of foreign-born
“All over the place” – Inconsistent recently (“18+”)
Pandemic challenges

• In-person data collection stopped in mid-March 2020
  – 1st & 5th CPS monthly interviews are supposed to be in-person

• Mailing of materials was also halted
  – Census Mail Center (Jeffersonville, IN) closed in March 2020 for 6 months
  – Follow-ups were limited to telephone (and on-line)
  – At least 6 months of ACS & CPS data was severely compromised

• Non-response rates skyrocketed
  – Immigrants have higher non-response rates; more likely to need in-person interviews
  – Immigrants are underrepresented in the samples (and in follow-ups)
  – Regular weighting does not compensate

• Alternative weighting (Entropy Balance) applied to ASEC & ACS
  – Designed to “correct” over-reporting on income (and underreporting of poverty)
  – Incorporates administrative records into the weighting
  – Does not always use full weighting scheme

• Consistently LOWER immigrant populations with EB weights
  – 1st applied to March ‘20 ASEC; then March ‘21 ASEC and finally ‘20 ACS
  – For trending, EB weights for ‘17-’19 ASEC and ‘19 ACS
  – Monthly response patterns seem to have almost returned to normal
ACS shows leveling in 2022
Alternative weights for ‘20 (& ‘19) not usable

Entropy balance weights
Seriously understate Immigrant population
Do Not Use!!
Especially for trends

Source: Pew Research and Census Bureau alternative weights for many years, especially in the ’90s and ’00s. Contact author for more information.
ASEC (March CPS) levels off, but higher ‘20 & ‘21 Inadequate – Alternative weights not usable

Source: Pew Research and Census Bureau alternative weights for many years, especially in the ’90s and ’00s. Contact author for more information.
Monthly CPS (normally variable) is now more so
Mar. ’20 thru ‘21 is severely compromised
Because of the operational problems, there is no obvious fix

Source: Pew Research and Census Bureau alternative weights for many years, especially in the ’90s and ’00s.
Contact author for more information.
Monthly CPS thru August 2022 implies slow growth

*The apparent growth in Sep.-Dec. 2022 will need confirmation from 2023 data*

Monthly CPS – between March 2019 (45.8M) and January 2022 (46.6M) the foreign-born population changed by 730K. This represents a slow down in growth.

Slow growth in the immigrant population is broadly consistent with earlier trends and data on admissions, arrivals and emigration.

The four-month “surge” in the monthly data after August 2022 *may* represent a build-up from high border apprehensions or it may be random noise (which occurs elsewhere in the series). Confirmation must await further data.

Source: Pew Research and Census Bureau alternative weights for many years, especially in the ’90s and ’00s. Contact author for more information.
Rough trend of foreign-born population

Discounting ‘20-’21 data → trending to 46+ million

Source: Pew Research and Census Bureau alternative weights for many years, especially in the 1990s and 2000s. Contact author for more information.
What about unauthorized immigrants?
Pew estimates show large decline after ’07, Slow decline to ’15, then to ’17 at 10+ million

Unauthorized immigrants (millions)

Source: Pew Research Center estimates based on residual methodology, Passel & Cohn (2019).
2020-21 figures is *unlikely* to go up – Preliminary estimates point to 10 million or less

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Shaded area represents 90% confidence interval

Source: Pew Research Center estimates based on residual methodology, Passel & Cohn (2019).
Conclusions

- Survey data sources for immigration flows, pop. size & characteristics are seriously compromised for ‘20 and for some sources into ‘21
- Immigration inflows plunged in ‘20
- Inflows increased by ‘22 but have remained somewhat below pre-pandemic levels
- Immigrant population growth slowed through mid-’22
- Unauthorized population numbers dropped very slightly through ’21 since ‘17
- Monthly data from last 4 months of 2022 may imply possible increases in immigration inflows
Thank you!
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Race and Ethnicity