Immigration has been a major public policy topic since President Trump took office in early 2017. The new administration’s proposed changes in immigration policy have raised deep concerns among various civic organizations in Corpus Christi—a city with a Hispanic-majority population and a deep historical tie with Mexico.

To better understand how any change in U.S. immigration policy may affect the area and its economy, this article provides a snapshot of the local immigrant population by addressing some popular questions. The Census Bureau’s American Community Surveys are the major sources of local data.

How big is the immigrant population locally?
In the city of Corpus Christi, a total of 27,315 persons are immigrants, according to the latest Census of 2015. As in most research, the term “immigrants” refers to all individuals who were not born in the United States. These foreign-born individuals include legal and illegal, temporary and permanent residents, as well as naturalized citizens who once obtained the immigrant status.

In Corpus Christi, this group of local residents includes 11,546 naturalized citizens (3.6%), and 15,769 new arrivals (5%). Together, they make up 8.6% of the local population. Among those immigrants who are not naturalized citizens, an estimated total of 9,361 persons (60%) are staying in the area illegally either because they entered the U.S. illegally or their visas have expired.

Despite the perception in light of the share of the Hispanic population, the share of the immigrant population in Corpus Christi is only about half of that for Texas (16.7%) and even below the nation as a whole (13.5%). In Texas, immigrants are highly concentrated in metro areas and along the Mexico border.
For Texas and the nation as a whole, immigrant flows are highly correlated with changes in economic conditions domestically and overseas. This is especially true for illegal immigrants.

The Pew Research Center estimates that 11 million undocumented immigrants live in the U.S., down from a peak of 12.2 million in 2007. Mexicans make up about half of this immigrant population, but since 2016 they have no longer represented a majority. The reducing number of illegal immigrants is as a result of a slow recovery in the U.S. since the 2007-2009 recession but relatively stable economies in Mexico and Central American countries, and more recently a crackdown on undocumented immigrants and tighter security at the border.

Likewise, more people migrated into Corpus Christi when the areas’ economy was growing relatively faster than the nation or the rest of the world, such as the oil boom in recent years. Domestic migrants, or those moving from or to other states, dominated the migration flows historically. The number of people coming from overseas has been much more stable by comparison, averaging at roughly 500 people per year. The net international migration flow peaked recently at about 830 in 2015.

Where were they born?
As for Texas, the majority of local immigrants (60%) are from Mexico, followed by immigrants from Asia and other parts of Latin America. The Philippines (1,604) is the top country of origin from Asia, followed by Vietnam (719). Following Mexico (16,359), El Salvador (661) is the second most popular country of origin in Latin America.

The numbers of immigrants from India (596) and China (589) remain relatively small, but the total number of these Asian immigrants soared by 53% in the last decade.

Due to the increasing numbers of Asian immigrants, the share of Texas immigrants coming from Latin American countries dropped substantially from slightly below 70% in 2005 to below 45% today, whereas this share has reduced only by a small amount for Corpus Christi.

How do immigrants fare economically relative to natives?
One distinction of immigrant residents across the United States is their overall relatively lower education levels. Despite rising inflows of high-skilled immigrants in the nation, the foreign-born population especially in Texas is still disproportionately low-skilled. According to economists at the Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas, this can be explained by the state’s proximity to Mexico.

Orrenius and Zavodny (2011) also find that less-educated immigrants are more vulnerable to an economic downturn because many unemployed immigrants are ineligible for unemployment insurance benefits due to the program’s exclusions that disproportionately affect low-wage workers, who are more likely to be self-employed and hold part-time jobs. All undocumented immigrants are, of course, also categorically ineligible.

However, the two Dallas Fed economists also find that less-educated immigrants, particularly those do not have a college education, tend to be more likely to work and less likely to be unemployed than similarly educated natives. The opposite is true for college-educated immigrants.

While Texas immigrants overall do well in terms of employment and unemployment, they earn less than native Texans. Immigrants’ lower earnings are associated with their lower education levels and they tend to be less fluent in English. However, in Texas and the rest of the nation, immigrants...
with graduate degrees outearn similarly educated natives.

Like the rest of the nation, foreign-born workers in Corpus Christi are largely confined to the high and low ends of the workforce that might otherwise remain unfilled. They are 17% more likely to hold a graduate or professional degree than natives, and they are also more likely to have a less than a high school education.

**How do immigrants contribute to the workforce?**

Immigrants have historically been the backbone of the U.S. workforce. Overall they make up about 17% of the U.S. and Texas state workforce, according to the 2015 Census.

In Texas, immigrants who earn relatively more than their native peers can be explained by their occupations. Among occupations that require a college degree, immigrants are highly concentrated in STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) occupations, especially medical and computer software professionals. Nearly 25% of STEM workers in Texas are immigrants, and nearly half of all STEM Ph.D. students are foreign nationals. In healthcare, more than one in three of foreign-born workers, namely personal care services, farming, housekeeping, and textile. Immigrants account for over 60% of manicurists, pedicurists, and skin care specialists, and those who pick fruits and vegetables. Private household services, including maids, gardeners and nannies, is the single industry with the largest share of immigrant workers at 45%.

The center also finds that more Mexican immigrants have been leaving the U.S. than coming into this country, resulting in a severe shortage in farm workers. This has pushed up labor costs for American farmers, especially in California.

Similar to the rest of the state and the nation, the foreign-born workforce in Corpus Christi is heavily concentrated in the construction and service sectors, including household, landscape, and hospitality services.

**How about illegal immigrants in the workforce?**

According to estimates of the Pew Research Center, illegal immigrants make up 5% of the U.S. workforce. Texas is one of the states with the largest undocumented workforce at 8.5%, trailing only Nevada (10.4%) and California (9%). Most of the jobs filled by undocumented workers are low-paying and they do not require certifications.

The Pew Research Center reports industries with high concentrations of foreign-born workers, namely personal care services, farming, housekeeping, and textile. Immigrants account for over 60% of manicurists, pedicurists, and skin care specialists, and those who pick fruits and vegetables. Private household services, including maids, gardeners and nannies, is the single industry with the largest share of immigrant workers at 45%.

While the estimated size of this group in the overall workforce seems trivial, undocumented workers make up about half of the foreign-born workforce in the agricultural sector and housekeeping services. In construction, proportionally more undocumented workers are hired as drywall finishers, plasterers and stucco masons than legal immigrants. In Corpus Christi, an estimate of roughly one in three of foreign-born residents (9,361) are employed illegally.

**Is illegal immigration a drain on the local economy?**

While the role of immigration on the vibrancy and dynamism of our economy is indisputable, the net benefits of illegal immigrants are controversial. Robert Kaplan, the president of the Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas, notes that President Trump’s immigration crackdown on both legal and illegal immigration has already been hurting the national economy as immigrants fearful of deportation stay home and cut their spending.

Anecdotal evidence also suggests that many foreign-born entrepreneurs are now less likely to launch new businesses due to increased uncertainty about their legal status. A growing number of studies have provided justifications for why mass deportation of illegal immigrants would be an economic and fiscal disaster.

Immigrants’ contributions to the Texas economy are well documented by researchers at the Perryman Group, Texas Public Foundation, and the Dallas Fed, among others. In particular, the Perryman Group reports that undocumented workers in Texas generate a net gain of 3 million jobs and $32 billion in state and local tax revenues.
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