

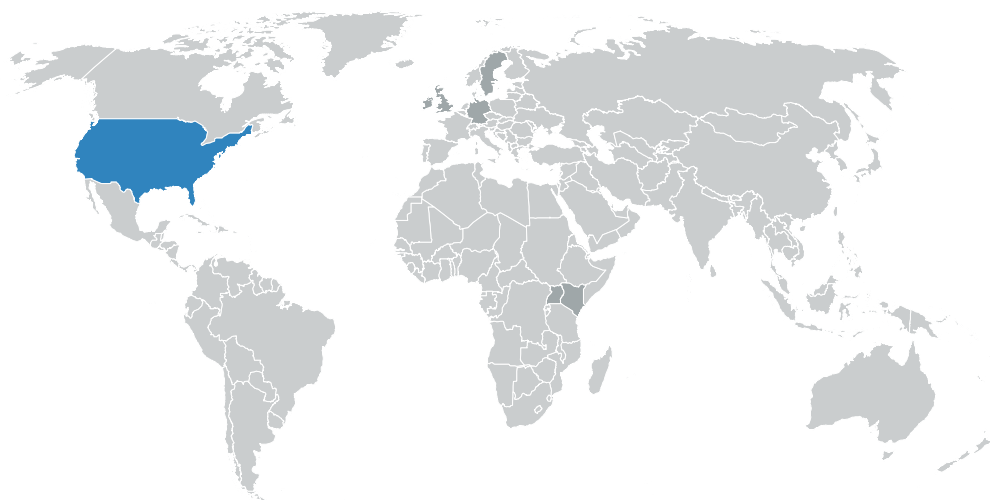


Public narratives and attitudes towards refugees and other migrants

US country profile

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Key messages

- **Most Americans consistently overestimate the number of unauthorised migrants in the US**, with a majority believing at least half of all immigrants are in the country without documentation. In reality, roughly 75% of immigrants in the US have legal status.
- In October 2019, **the US resettled no refugees for the first time since records began** on the back of highly restrictive policies since President Donald Trump's inauguration in January 2017.
- **Public narratives on refugees and other migrants are polarised and strongly linked with party politics.** Yet, 67% of Americans fall into an 'exhausted majority' who share a sense of fatigue with polarised national conversations.
- **By 2030 there will not be enough Americans of working age to support the country**, making hiring migrants and refugees essential to fill gaps in the economy. Businesses can play a key role in demonstrating the economic benefits of employing migrants and refugees.

This briefing presents an overview of the key features of migration and asylum policy in the US, recent trends in migration patterns, and public perceptions and political narratives on refugees and other migrants. It is part of a wider project supported by the IKEA Foundation aimed at supporting public and private investors interested in engaging with migration and displacement.

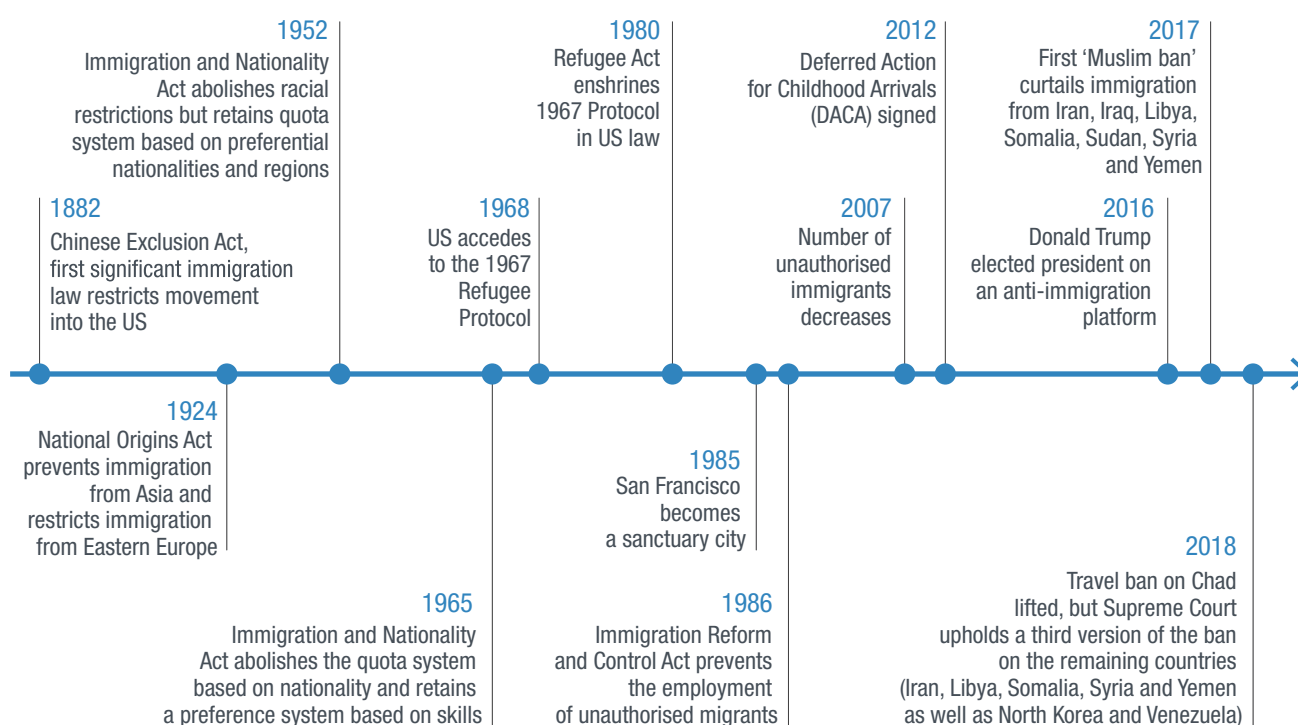
History of immigration in the US

The US was founded on immigration (see Figure 1). Yet once immigration policies started being enforced in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they were largely restrictive and exclusionary, targeting certain immigrant groups while giving preference to Europeans. The key immigration legislation driving today's policies is the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, which shifted American policy from quotas based on nationality to ones based on skills or family ties with people already in the US, without discrimination on the grounds of race, sex, nationality, place of birth or place of residence.

Historically, the US has seen higher levels of immigration than emigration (see Figure 2 for data on 1950–2015), with a peak in the late

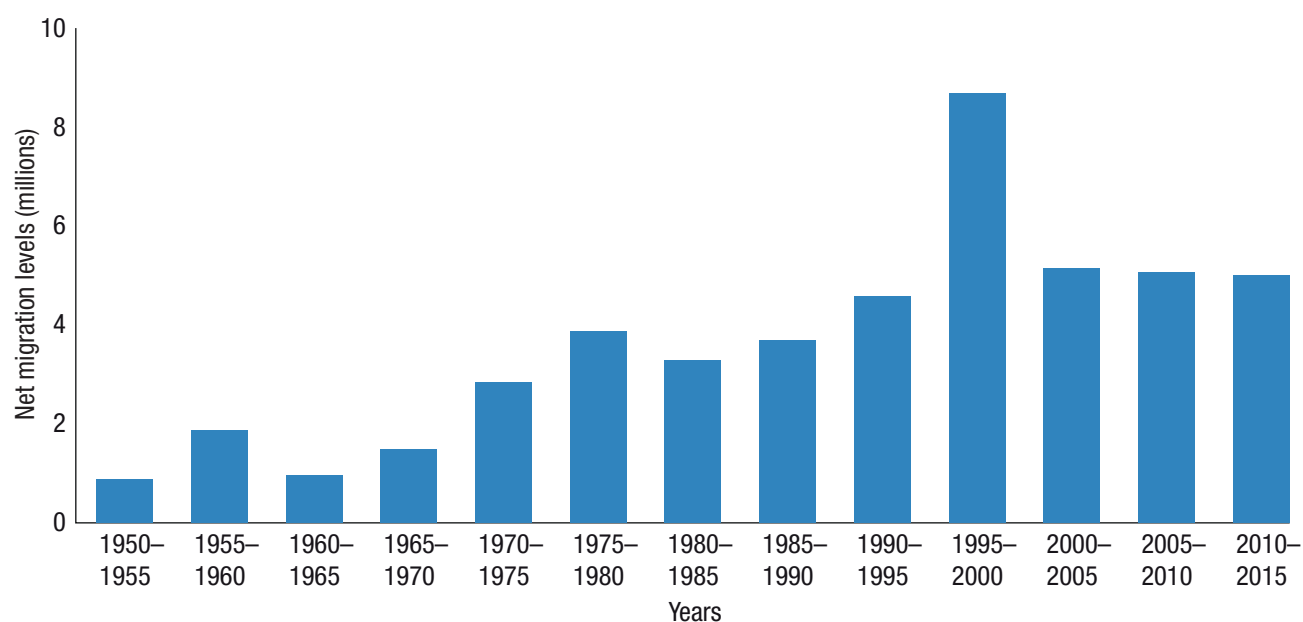
1990s due to rapid economic expansion, which declined as the economy slowed after 2001 (Pew Research Center, 2005). However, this may be changing. For example, in Mexico, which was responsible for half of all unauthorised migration to the US in 2007, more citizens returned to Mexico between 2009 and 2014 than arrived in the US (Passel and Cohn, 2018). Unauthorised migration, particularly from Central America, was a growing concern throughout the twentieth century, as outlined in Figure 3. However, it has since plateaued and started to decline following the 2007–2009 recession (ibid.). In 2017, refugees and other migrants made up an estimated 13.7% of the US population (with the percentage of foreign-born residents who had not yet gained citizenship at 6.9%) (US Census Bureau, 2017).

Figure 1 Timeline of US immigration



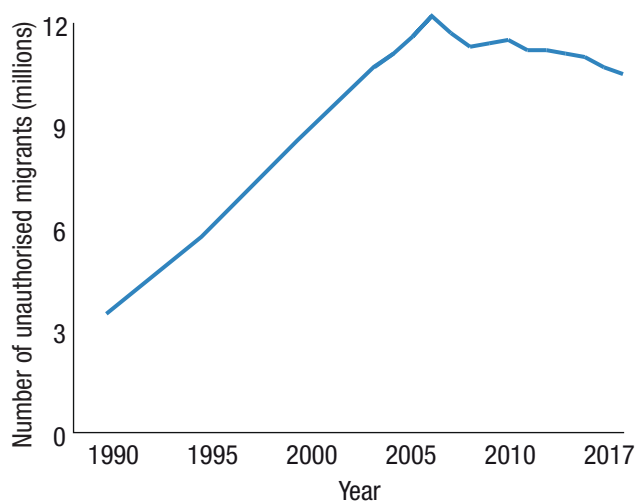
Note: see Appendix 1 for references

Figure 2 Long-term migration trends in the US



Source: Migration Policy Institute, 2015

Figure 3 Number of unauthorised migrants in the US



Source: Passel and Cohn, 2018

Box 1 Sanctuary cities

Sanctuary cities began to emerge in the 1980s, with ‘an important milestone’ in 1985 when San Francisco passed the City of Refuge resolution and stopped using city funds to support federal enforcement of immigration law (Bauder, 2017). In 2017, President Donald Trump signed an Executive Order restricting funding to sanctuary cities (Pierce, 2019). Although the most common phrase is ‘sanctuary city’, as of April 2019 jurisdictions offering sanctuary for unauthorised immigrants included nine states, 134 counties and 36 cities (Griffith and Vaughan, 2019).

Current US immigration system and approach

Current US immigration policy distinguishes between migrants, asylum-seekers and refugees seeking third-country resettlement. Migrants must have a visa to stay in the US longer than a few months. Since Trump’s inauguration, visa restrictions have been used to pressure countries that had previously been reluctant to receive back nationals who were to be deported from

the US (Pierce, 2019). Box 2 gives an overview of citizenship, asylum and refugee resettlement policies in the US.

Immigration has become increasingly politicised in recent years in the US, and was a dominant issue in the 2016 election, with Trump running on a platform that included reducing immigration and building a wall along the border with Mexico. There have been a number of key shifts in immigration policy under Trump’s administration.

‘Dreamers’ and unauthorised migration

DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) and unauthorised immigration remain key concerns in the US. After several failed attempts

to pass legislation that would allow ‘dreamers’ – children brought to the country to have pathways to citizenship (under the DREAM Act), the DACA Act was signed as an executive branch

Box 2 Overview of US immigration and asylum policies

Visas

Immigrants looking to move to the US can apply for either a family-based visa or an employment-based visa. Family-based visas, occasionally referred to as ‘chain migration’, are offered on an unlimited basis to immediate relatives (i.e. spouses, children under 21, parents), with a limited number offered to more distant relatives (i.e. children over 21 and their spouses and children, siblings and their spouses and children) (US Department of State, 2019b). Roughly 140,000 employment-based visas are available annually to people who qualify under one of five categories, most of whom are required to have a job offer prior to arrival. Under the Trump administration, all employment-based visa applicants are now required to undergo an interview process (Pierce, 2019).

US citizenship policy

To become a citizen of the US, generally a person must have had permanent residency for at least five years (or three years if their spouse is a US citizen); be at least 18 years old; be able to read, write and speak basic English; and be a person of good moral character. They also have to complete a 10-step naturalisation process, culminating in the US Naturalization Test and an interview (US Government, 2019).

Asylum policy

There are two main ways refugees can enter the US: by applying for asylum from within the US, or by applying for third-country resettlement as a refugee overseas.

US asylum requests from inside the US

Asylum is a form of protection offered to refugees who have suffered or fear they will suffer persecution due to their race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group or political opinion (US Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2019a).

Individuals seeking asylum in the US must apply within one year of arrival. The application is then either approved or denied by US Citizenship and Immigration Services. If the application is denied, the applicant can reapply as a defence against removal – the same process used by unauthorised immigrants who have been placed in removal proceedings after being caught in the US or at the border without proper legal documents (US Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2019b).

Refugee resettlement from outside the US

Refugees who wish to apply for third-country resettlement in the US must pass an ‘extensive screening and security clearance process’ and undergo a ‘rigorous interviewing process’ by US Citizenship and Immigration Services (American Immigration Council, 2019: 4). They must also fall into one of three categories: individuals recognised by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) or the US Government as a refugee; groups of ‘special concern’ based on their ethnic, religious or national identity; or relatives of refugees already in the US. Once a refugee has been conditionally accepted, a Resettlement Support Center located overseas works with the Refugee Processing Center in the US to obtain an assurance of placement, and with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) to arrange the refugee’s travel to the US, with travel costs reimbursed by the refugee six months after arrival. One year after arrival, the refugee can apply for Lawful Permanent Residence status. Then, five years after arrival, they may petition for naturalisation (ibid.). The number of refugees to be taken in by the US is set annually by the President, in consultation with Congress.

memorandum by President Barack Obama in 2012. DACA allows adults who were brought to the US as children to remain in the country and obtain a work permit, without fear of being deported for a two-year period, renewable contingent on good behaviour. The Trump administration tried to end DACA in 2017, and it is currently being debated in the Supreme Court, with a decision expected in 2020.

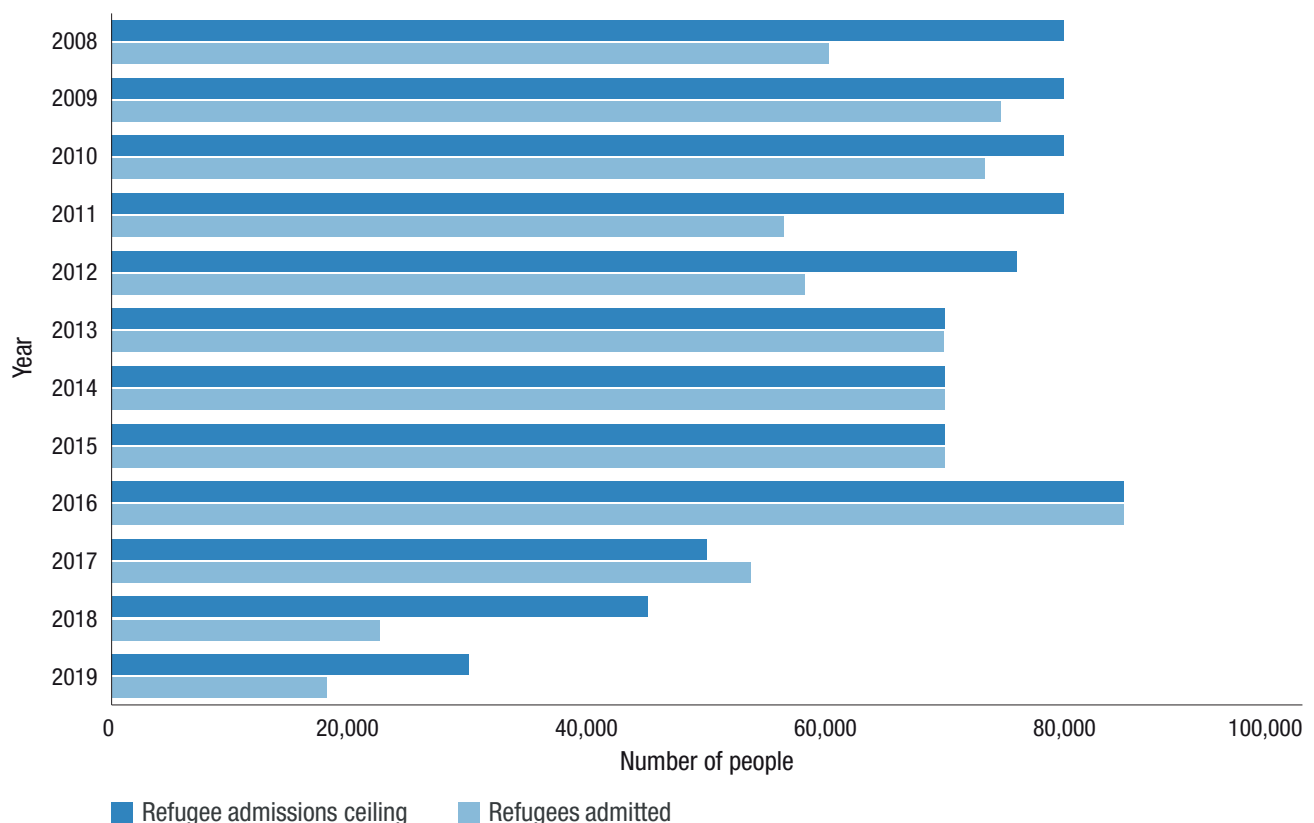
Blocking refugees: Trump's travel ban

A week after taking office in January 2017, Trump passed Executive Order 13769, 'Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States'. The order, which became known variously as the 'Muslim ban', 'travel ban' and/or 'refugee ban', blocked the entry of individuals from Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Yemen for at least 90 days; all refugees for 120 days; and all Syrian refugees indefinitely. When the ban was declared unconstitutional by the courts, Trump issued another executive order in March 2017 removing Iraq from the list of countries. When this was also declared unconstitutional, Trump

issued a presidential proclamation in September 2017 preventing citizens of Chad, Iran, Libya, North Korea, Somalia, Syria and Yemen, as well as some government officials from Venezuela, from obtaining visas for the US unless they procure a waiver. Unlike the previous two executive orders, this proclamation was allowed to go into full effect while being debated in the courts, and it was upheld by the Supreme Court in June 2018. It is accompanied by another 90-day ban on refugees from Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Libya, Mali, North Korea, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria and Yemen, which was also allowed to go into effect, resulting in a 91% decline in Muslim immigration into the US over the past two years (No Muslim Ban Ever, 2019).

The travel ban also lowered the refugee ceiling for 2017 to 50,000 (previously set at 110,000 by the Obama administration; see Figure 4). In 2018, Trump set the refugee ceiling at an all-time low of 45,000, and in 2019 reduced it even further, to 30,000. In neither year were these ceilings reached. Only 22,491 refugees settled in 2018 (American Immigration Council, 2019; see Figure 4), and

Figure 4 Refugee ceiling and refugees admitted, 2008–2019



Source: American Immigration Council, 2019

in October 2019 the US resettled no refugees for the first time since records on resettlement began (World Relief, 2019). In September 2019, Trump set the 2020 refugee ceiling at 18,000 (Shear and Kanno-Youngs, 2019).

Zero Tolerance: a move towards separation and detention

In April 2018, US Attorney General Jeff Sessions announced a new 'Zero-Tolerance' policy, vowing to prosecute anyone caught entering across the southern border without documentation (Pierce, 2019). News reports circulating shortly afterwards reported that unauthorised immigrant parents were being separated from their children as well as prosecuted. Around 3,000 children were separated from their parents between April and June, when Trump signed an executive

order halting family separation, though the 'Zero-Tolerance' policy remained in effect (HRW, 2018). The implementation of the 'Zero-Tolerance' policy, and indeed all immigration policies, falls to two main organisations: Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), which is responsible for enforcing immigration policies within the US, and Customs and Border Protection (CBP), which is responsible for immigration along the country's borders.

State-approved (or denied) entry to refugees

In September 2019, Trump announced, by executive order, that states and localities had to consent, in writing, to receiving refugees (The White House, 2019). Moreover, even when local areas are happy to accept refugees, they must still have the consent of their state government. As of January

Box 3 In focus: US agriculture and seasonal jobs

Certain industries in the US are highly reliant on immigration, particularly agriculture, construction, services and manufacturing. Overall, migrants, both lawful and unauthorised, comprise a small proportion of the workforce – 12.6% and 4.8% respectively in 2016. In the agriculture and construction industries, however, unauthorised migrants make up 15% and 13%, respectively (Passel and Cohn, 2018). As such, US food production is acutely vulnerable to the potential effects of decreased immigration, particularly unauthorised immigration.

Key trends

- **Reliance on seasonal workers.** The cyclical nature of agriculture creates a large reliance on seasonal workers, most of whom are immigrants. Although legally required to offer these jobs to American citizens first, most are filled by migrants because these are not jobs citizens can, or want, to do. In 2011, farmers in North Carolina advertised for 6,500 seasonal workers. Roughly 250 US citizens applied and just over 150 showed up for the first day of work, with the rest of the jobs being filled by immigrant labourers (Kenny, 2019).
- **Significant increase in the H-2A visa programme.** Many seasonal workers enter in the US on an H-2A visa, which allows foreign-born workers to come to the US for temporary or seasonal work. There is no cap on H-2A visas, and their use has increased from 32,000 in 2002 to 56,000 in 2010 and 196,000 in 2018 (Meissner and Gelatt, 2019). The H-2A visa requires employees to first attempt to recruit American workers, provide free housing for both foreign-born and American workers coming from other areas and ensure that the presence of H-2A workers does not 'adversely affect' US workers (Martin, 2017).
- **Automation and mechanisation of agriculture.** The introduction of machines, and the expected reduction in the number of farm workers, has had mixed success. Some crops have been successfully adapted to mechanised production, such as corn, soybeans, wheat, cotton and rice, as well as the dairy industry, but fresh fruits and vegetables continue to require harvesting by hand to avoid damage. Moreover, machines are a fixed cost whereas harvesters are paid for the exact amount of time they are needed – more in years of abundance and less when crop production is down. As a result, increased automation is unlikely to significantly reduce the number of foreign-born workers (Martin, 2017).

2020, roughly 40 states had consented to receiving refugees. However, Texas, one of the leading recipients of refugees over the past several years, has refused, even as ‘the leaders of every major Texas city have said they want to continue receiving refugees, and despite the fact that opting out of the program would cost the state millions of dollars in economic activity next year’ (Rampell, 2020). This struggle is likely to continue in the courts after a Maryland federal judge blocked Trump’s executive order on 15 January 2020, arguing that states cannot reject refugees (Narea, 2020).

Public attitudes towards refugees and other migrants: what do we know?

More in Common has used polling data in several countries across the globe to divide populations into ‘tribes’ linked by their attitude to migration rather than their demographic composition, including France, Germany, the Netherlands, Italy, Greece and the US.

Despite increasingly polarised narratives on immigration under the Trump administration, Americans’ views on migration are not extreme compared to the rest of the world: 35% of Americans polled thought immigration had a positive impact on their country. Although only a third of the population, this figure is still higher than for 18 of the 24 countries surveyed, and had risen from 18% since 2011 (Ipsos MORI, 2017).

Since 2001, the number of Americans who believe legal immigration should increase has exceeded the number who believe it should be reduced (Pew Research Center, 2018b). A majority of Americans also feel either very or somewhat sympathetic towards unauthorised immigrants (ibid.).

Moderate attitudes towards immigration in general do not, however, translate into compassion towards refugees, with half of Americans (49%) believing that refugees are not truly refugees, but rather want to enter the country for economic reasons or to take advantage of the welfare system (although this figure has dropped from 57% in 2017) (Ipsos MORI, 2017; 2019). Almost three-quarters (73%) of Americans believe that some terrorists pretend to be refugees to enter the US and carry out attacks (Ipsos MORI, 2017).

Furthermore, there are widespread misconceptions about the number of refugees and other migrants: most Americans overestimate the number of migrants and refugees who reside in the US illegally. Only 45% of Americans believe that most immigrants are in the US legally. In reality, almost 75% of all immigrants in the US are legal (Pew Research Center, 2019b).

Polarised narratives

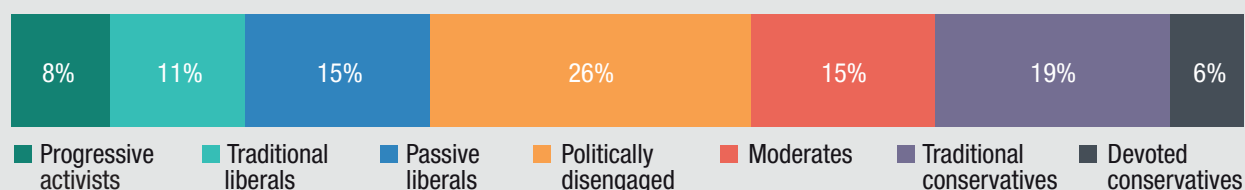
Current public discourse on immigration in the US is highly charged, particularly following Trump’s election. Although the loudest narrative – and the one used to great effect in the 2016 election – is that immigrants are overwhelming the US, this is not the dominant opinion of most Americans, as outlined above.

The discourse around migration can be divided into negative and positive narratives:

- **Positive narratives** centre on compassion, hospitality and fairness, particularly for immigrants who attempt to assimilate into American culture. For the two most liberal segments (Progressive Activists and Traditional Liberals), these narratives are told ‘through the lens of racism, human rights, refugee protection and the positive value of a diverse society’ (Hawkins et al., 2018).
- **Negative narratives**, particularly for the two most conservative segments (Traditional and Devoted Conservatives), revolve around immigrants as criminals and a perceived loss of sovereignty over US borders (ibid.).

Other narratives include the contribution of migrants to – or their drain on – the welfare system and the labour market. The percentage of Americans who worry about the impact of immigration on jobs is now less than half (45%), though it was as high as 60% in 2011 (Ipsos MORI, 2017). Undocumented immigrants are often singled out for their role in the labour market. The majority of Americans (71%) believe that undocumented immigrants perform work that other Americans would not do (Pew Research Center, 2018b).

Box 4 Segments or ‘tribes’ of US population by attitude to refugees and other migrants (2017)



Progressive activists (8%): people with strong ideological views, high levels of engagement with political issues, high levels of education and socioeconomic status.

Traditional liberals (11%): people with idealistic attitudes (though less ideological than Progressive Activists), strong humanitarian values, likely to say religion is important, willing to compromise and to trust American institutions.

Passive liberals (15%): people who are weakly engaged in social and political issues, with a modern outlook, liberal views on social issues and belief that circumstances are largely outside of their control.

Politically disengaged (26%): similar to Passive Liberals, with lower levels of income and education, though more anxious about external threats and less open in their attitudes towards difference; one of the least likely groups to participate in political rallies or vote in elections.

Moderates (15%): people who tend to be engaged in their communities, volunteer often and are interested in current affairs but feel uncomfortable with political divisions; socially conservative and religious; dislike activism and extremism among both progressives and conservatives; slow to embrace change.

Traditional conservatives (19%): people who value patriotism, Christianity, personal responsibility and self-reliance, and who believe too much emphasis is given to social issues.

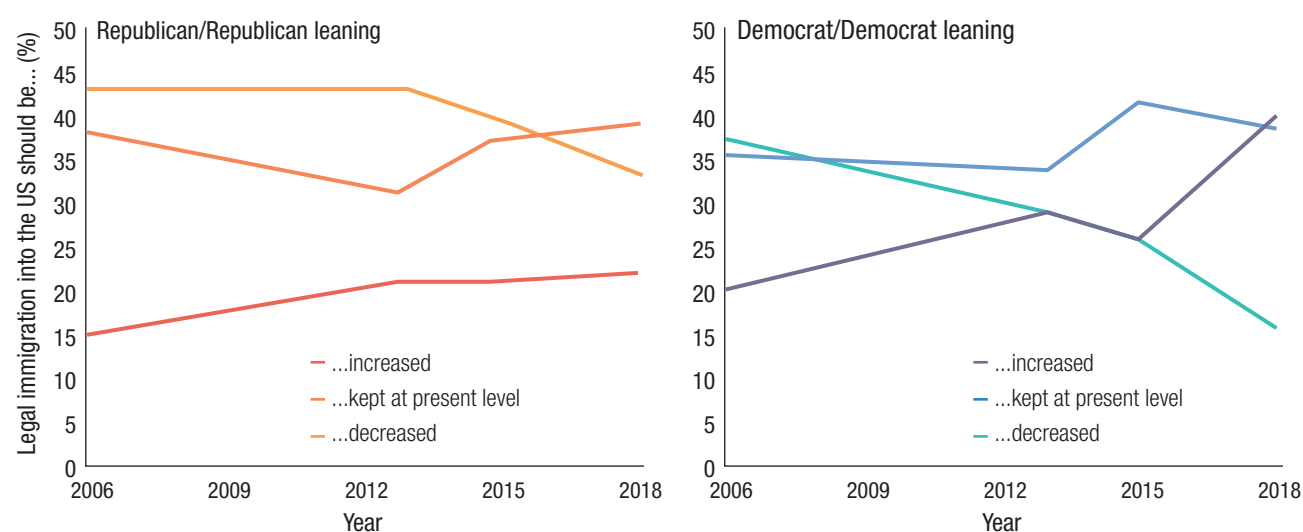
Devoted conservatives (6%): people who are highly engaged in social and political issues, who value patriotism and loyalty to the flag, who feel traditional values are under assault and being eroded rapidly; immigration is one of their main concerns.

Similar to political and media narratives on immigration, the *overall outlook of the American public towards refugees and other migrants is polarised, with roughly half of Americans holding positive views and half negative ones*. Almost all Progressive Activists (99%) and Traditional Liberals (85%) view immigration as good for the country, with a majority of Passive Liberals (72%) and Moderates (61%) also having positive views towards immigration. In contrast, a majority of Traditional Conservatives (64%) and Devoted Conservatives (81%) view immigration as a burden on the US. These two segments are much more likely to prioritise national security over other considerations. There is strong support among all groups (even 48% of Devoted Conservatives) for pathways to citizenship for unauthorised immigrants brought into the country as children.

Within these ‘tribes’, 67% of Americans fall into an ‘Exhausted Majority’, whose members do not conform to either partisan ideology. The ‘Exhausted Majority’ contains distinct groups of people with varying degrees of political understanding and activism, and includes the Traditional Liberals, Passive Liberals, Politically Disengaged and Moderates. They share a sense of fatigue with polarised national conversations, a willingness to be flexible in their political views and a lack of voice in the national conversation (Hawkins et al, 2018).

This analysis indicates that new and different ways to engage the public are needed to depoliticise the issue of immigration and bring it back to what matters to Americans, focusing on traditions of hospitality and compassion, as well as the economic benefits that migrants bring.

Figure 5 Changes in attitudes to legal immigration among Republican and Democrat supporters



Note: 'Don't know' responses are not shown.

Source: Survey of US adults conducted 5–12 June 2018 (Pew Research Center, 2018b)

The increasing polarisation following Trump's election also indicates that attitudes towards migration have become tied to a political identity, rather than based on personal beliefs or interaction with migrants themselves. This is not to say, however, that debates around immigration have become tied to policies. Instead, as Masters (2020) notes, the issue is about culture, identity and the future – all of which are intrinsically linked with individuals' political identities. For example, the increasing backlash against immigration since 2016 may have caused some who were previously ambivalent to become more positive in an attempt to counteract the more negative narratives that have appeared at the national level. This possibility becomes more likely when looking at the changing views of Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents, who are now much more likely to say that immigration should be increased rather than decreased compared to 2006 (see Figure 5).

For their part, Republicans are twice as likely to say immigration was the most important problem facing the country today (42%) compared to independents (20%) and Democrats (20%), though this question does not account for any nuance between immigration as a concern because of the desire to build a border wall and immigration as a concern due to overcrowded detention facilities or family

separations (Jones, 2019). Illegal immigration, by contrast, was ranked as a 'very big problem' by the largest proportion of Republicans (75%) and the smallest proportion of Democrats (19%) compared to the other problems surveyed in the lead-up to the 2018 mid-term elections (Pew Research Center, 2018a).

Implications for public and private investors

The US economy and US businesses are already benefitting from the work of refugees and migrants; there is substantial evidence that migrants have a positive effect on both businesses and the wider economy, with a 1% increase in the migrant share of the population creating a 2% increase in income per head (Legrain, 2018). Moreover, like many other countries with declining birth rates and ageing populations, by 2030 there will not be enough Americans of working age to support the country, making hiring migrants and refugees essential to fill gaps in the economy (Tent Foundation and Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, 2018).

Companies also stand to benefit from refugee recruitment as refugees have a lower turnover rate than other employees (Dyssegaard Kallick and Roldan, 2018). Unlike other countries, where refugees can struggle to find jobs, the

average refugee participation rate in the US workforce is 81.8%, compared to a national rate of 62%, and 40% of Fortune 500 companies were founded by refugees, immigrants or their children (Refugee Council USA, 2018). After eight years in the US, refugees contribute more to the economy through taxes than they receive through welfare (Evans and Fitzgerald, 2017).

Research has shown that companies in the US that support refugees increase their own brand awareness and attract consumer support, particularly among millennials, women and people of colour (Erdem et al., 2018). Given the positive effects of immigration on productivity and shared economic benefits, businesses and investors could do more to help foster social cohesion, expand employment opportunities for refugees and other migrants and combat the

dominant narrative that they take jobs away from American citizens.

Based on this analysis, there is scope for companies and investors to engage more and better to support refugees and other migrants in ways that are beneficial for their businesses as well as for local communities. Box 5 provides examples of good practice in businesses engaging with the integration of refugees and other migrants in the US.

Businesses and investors looking to change public attitudes towards migrants and refugees should seek partnerships which best reach those ‘segments’ of the US population open and susceptible to positive influence on the topic, while attempting to disentangle the issue of immigration from party politics. Key considerations should include:

Box 5 Examples of good business practice

- The **Tent Foundation and Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service** has published a guide for US employers looking to hire refugees. To ease the transition into the US workforce, the guide suggests that businesses provide on-the-job training, on-site English language courses, flexible time off for religious holidays and diversity training for the entire workforce.
- In 2017, **New American Economy** released a report providing a comprehensive analysis of the economic impact of refugees in the US. The report notes that refugees contribute to the economy as taxpayers and through disposable income, become entrepreneurs at high rates and take steps to lay down roots in their new country through obtaining citizenship and buying homes (New American Economy, 2017).
- **Airbnb’s ‘Open Homes’** scheme connects people with a free place to stay in times of need. The idea came from Airbnb hosts who offered their homes for free to neighbours forced to evacuate after Hurricane Sandy hit New York in 2012. Airbnb went on to adopt the scheme officially, and it has since expanded to include refugees and asylum-seekers. In 2016, the company also launched its ‘Belong Anywhere’ campaign, raising \$1.6 million towards buying aid for refugees, with another \$200,000 in travel credits going to non-profit organisations supporting refugees around the world.
- In 2018, **Lyft**, the ride-sharing company, provided transportation grants to 45 organisations across the US that ‘provide high-quality, hyper-local support to immigrants and refugees’. It has also set aside five grants specifically for organisations working to reunify families separated along the southern border of the US (Lyft, 2018). In 2019, Lyft asked its passengers to round up their payment and donate to RAICES (the Refugee and Immigrant Center for Education and Legal Services) and matched up to \$50,000-worth of donations made during July (Lyft, 2019).
- **Chobani Yogurt**, a company founded by a Turkish immigrant, Hamdi Ulukaya, supports immigrants and refugees by giving them jobs in its factories in upstate New York and Twin Falls, Idaho. Roughly 30% of the workforce is foreign-born (Alesci, 2018).
- **Upwardly Global** seeks to help migrants and refugees who have professional qualifications find jobs that match their skills. In 2018, Upwardly Global helped more than 900 immigrants and refugees obtain their first professional job in the US (Upwardly Global, 2018).

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1. **De-politicising immigration.** Businesses can help take the political heat out of immigration and address public fatigue around the issue by focusing on the economic benefits that employing migrants and refugees bring in order to engage the ‘exhausted majority’.
 2. **Tailoring messaging and engagement by US states and industry.** Personalise narratives by state, recognising the diversity of attitudes and the varied composition of the labour market across the US. For example, in states such as Idaho, which rely on agriculture, messaging could link migrants’ work in agriculture with the economic situation of potato exports, for which the state is well-known. State-specific messaging will become increasingly important now that states have been given the power to veto refugee resettlement (The White House, 2019).
 3. **Increase opportunities for Americans and immigrants to come together.** Contact theory suggests that acceptance of migrants increases with social interaction. Businesses and investors could do more to increase the diversity of their workforces to include both native-born US citizens and immigrants, and promote programmes that seek to build social cohesion within communities.
 4. **Businesses should explore opportunities to provide tangible opportunities for migrants and refugees,** even though current policies remain restrictive towards refugees and migrants. As seen with the issue of climate change and the Paris Agreement, the US government may have withdrawn its support, but businesses and investors can still stand together and take action. In states and localities that have agreed to accept refugees, businesses should work with local governments to ensure that jobs are available for those who are resettled there.

About the project

Public narratives and attitudes towards refugees and other migrants: implications for action is a two-year project led by ODI’s Human Mobility Initiative, funded by the IKEA Foundation. It aims to provide detailed and practical recommendations to help businesses and investors influence attitudes to migrants and refugees, with a focus on the UK and Germany and more in-depth studies of attitudes in the global south. Briefing papers will feed into broader events and roundtable discussions where practice, partnerships and policy can be developed and shared among businesses and sector experts.

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