

Wave of Immigrants to U.S. Resurges

By Neil Shah

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A strengthening U.S. economy has spurred the largest pickup in immigration since before the recession, driven by Asian newcomers and a gain in Hispanic arrivals.

The number of foreign-born people in the U.S. grew by 523,400 last year, according to the Census Bureau. That beat the previous year's net gain of roughly 446,800 and is the biggest official jump since 2006. The numbers don't distinguish between authorized and unauthorized immigrants.

Asian immigrants, including Chinese students and highly skilled workers from India, fueled many of the gains.

Demand among U.S. employers for visas for skilled foreign workers—the so-called H-1B visas dominated by Indian workers—has rebounded. Businesses reached the federal cap on applications in less than a week this year; in 2012, it took three months, and in 2011, eight months, to fill all the slots.

Nidhin Patel, 25 years old, left India for Los Angeles a year ago. Deciding he wanted to learn about film direction, he enrolled in a master's program at California State University, Los Angeles and is studying and teaching on a student visa. He hopes to work in the U.S. once his program ends.

Indian students and engineers are coming in droves, Mr. Patel said, despite the strict visa caps. The Internet and social media are making it much easier to settle in the U.S. while staying connected with family back home.

"I never had any kind of culture shock," Mr. Patel said. Often, Indians are "already settled [in the U.S.] before they come" thanks to Internet research.

Meanwhile, Hispanic immigration is picking up, after slowing to a trickle in recent years as weak job and home-construction markets prompted many workers—often less-educated and in the U.S. illegally—to return home.

Fully 27% of last year's new immigrants were Hispanic, compared with about 10% in 2012 and less than 1% in 2011, census figures show. More Mexicans came to the U.S. last year than left—a notable shift after several years in which the opposite happened.

The current year's numbers will be skewed higher by the tens of thousands of child migrants from Central America who entered the U.S. unaccompanied this spring and summer, a surge that has subsided.

With construction work perking up, Texas has seen a “real rise” in Hispanic immigrants, said Cristina Tzintzún, executive director of the Workers Defense Project, a Austin group that trains and advocates for low-wage workers.

Amarildo González, 27, is among them. Despite working for 10 years in his native Guatemala picking fruit, he was barely making enough to support his girlfriend and their three young children—\$150 every 15 days, he said.

Last year, he paid a group over \$3,000 to help him cross the Texas border illegally. He found work the day after arriving in Dallas. He now has two jobs, despite his illegal immigration status, in construction and in a furniture store in a mall.

“We are all used to working, since we’re young, for little money,” he said. “When we come here, we find we can make \$80 a day.”

Annual growth in the U.S. foreign-born population remains lower than the 800,000 or so average of a decade ago. Tighter borders, along with declining fertility and increased economic opportunities in Mexico, make it unlikely Hispanic immigration will surge the way it did in the 1990s—leaving Asians the dominant force.

But the census data show that six years after the recession began, America is restoring its reputation as an economic beacon among immigrants, even as other nations, including in Asia, become more attractive. If demand for high-skilled workers grows and Hispanic immigration revives, that could also mean U.S. businesses are feeling more bullish about the economy’s prospects.

“Some of the things limiting immigration in recent years—a bad job market, less demand for workers—is easing,” said demographer William Frey of the Brookings Institution, who analyzed the census data.

America’s Mexico-born population marks the biggest wave of immigration from a single country in U.S. history, but the recession helped bring that to a halt.

Now there are signs of a shift: The Mexico-born population grew by nearly 22,000 last year, on net, after shrinking about 109,000 in 2012 as more Mexicans left the U.S. than came, Mr. Frey said.

Roughly 1.4 million Mexicans and their children left the U.S. for Mexico between 2005 and 2010, according to Pew Research Center, a think tank.

Another sign of the stronger U.S. economy: Money sent by Mexicans abroad to individuals back home has bounced back. More than \$2 billion in such remittances flowed into Mexico in August, the vast majority from the U.S., up from \$1.9 billion a year earlier and \$1.3 billion in January 2010, figures from Mexico’s central bank show.

On Monday, the World Bank said remittances to Latin America and the Caribbean could grow 5% this year, also largely from the U.S., up from a weak 1% in 2013.

Pew estimates there were 11.3 million unauthorized immigrants living in the U.S. as of March 2013, compared to 11.2 million in 2012, an increase that isn't statistically significant.

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