

Survey of Expert Opinion on Future Level of Immigration to the U.S. in 2015 and 2025

Summary of Results

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International migration has historically been the most variable and therefore uncertain component of population change in the U.S. There is currently greater than usual uncertainty about the future course of U.S. immigration due to the steep decline in immigration seen since 2007.

In April 2011 the authors conducted a two-round Delphi-style survey of ten anonymous researchers in the field of immigration on their expectations for the number of immigrants to the U.S. in 2015 and 2025. Collective expert opinion was sought as a guide in selecting the migration input component for new projections of population for the U.S. and California. These projections are being developed by the California Demographic Futures project at the University of Southern California.

The mean preferred assumption of gross immigration to the U.S. in 2015 is 89 percent of the level in 2000 (1.55 million). The median is 90 percent, and the range is 73-103 percent. Five are clustered between 84 and 90 percent. None of the participants changed their response after in the second round of the survey after seeing the other first-round responses. The rationales offered for the estimates focused on expectations about the volume of unauthorized immigration from Mexico, which is seen as the most variable major inflow. Several noted that immigration will also be affected by the strength of the U.S. economy and labor market, but none expressed strong opinions about the pace of recovery from the Great Recession. The estimates are shown plotted in Figure 1 as well as in Table 1. The rationales can be found in Appendix 1.

The mean preferred assumption of gross immigration to the U.S. in 2025 is 97 percent of the level in 2000. The median is 100 percent, and the range is 73-110 percent. The distribution is bimodal, indicating a divergence of opinion not found for 2015. Seven of the estimates range between 97 and 110 percent and the other three range from 73 to 85 percent. Two participants with the highest estimates for 2025 lowered their estimates in the second round of the survey after seeing the other first-round responses. Those making higher estimates expressed skepticism about the effectiveness of enforcement efforts and belief in the anticipated demographic (labor demand) pull as the Baby Boom generation retires and the supply of migrants in sending countries (notably rural Mexico). Conversely, participants favoring lower estimates expressed skepticism about the pull of U.S. labor market factors and willing to

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consider the possibility that enforcement will become more effective. See Figure 1, Table 1, and Appendix 1.

The methodology of the survey is documented in Appendix 2.

Figure 1

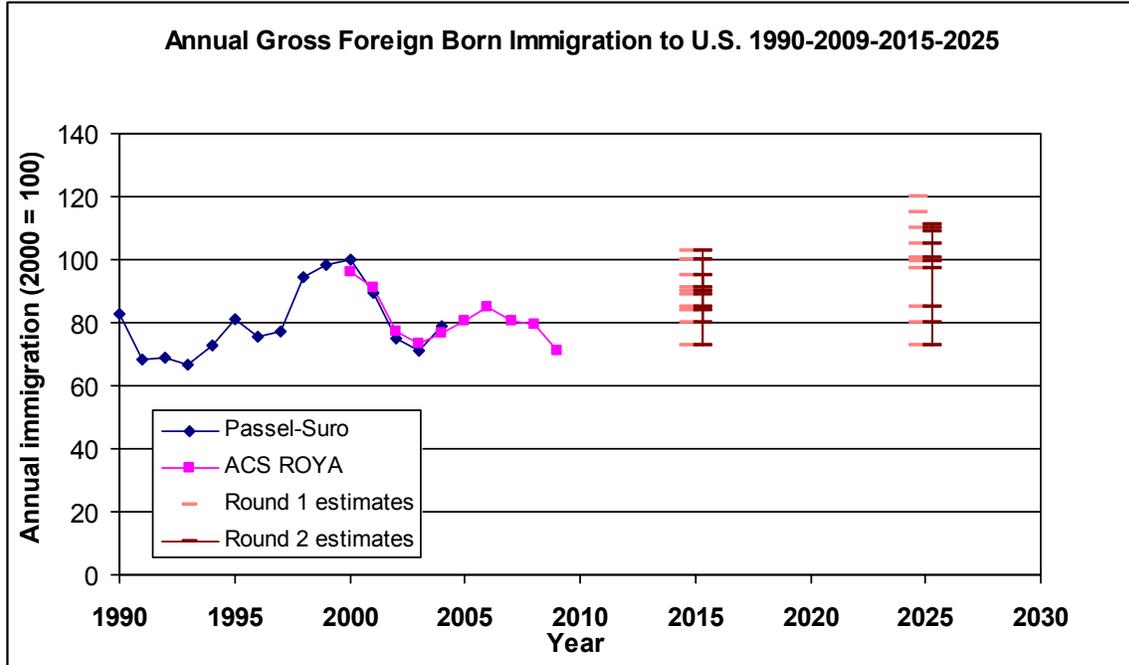


Table 1

Participants' Estimates of Future Immigration to the U.S. in 2015 and 2025 as a Percent of 2000 (1.55 million)

Participant	2015		2025	
	First round	Second round	First round	Second round
A	103	103	110	110
B	85	85	85	85
C	80	80	80	80
D	95	95	105	105
E	90	90	100	100
F	100	100	100	100
G	73	73	73	73
H	84	84	97	97
I	90	90	120	110
J	90	90	115	110
Mean	89	89	98.5	97
Minimum	73	73	73	73
Maximum	103	103	120	110
Range	30	30	47	37
Median	90	90	100	100

Appendix 1.

Reasons Cited for Estimates of Future Immigration to U.S. in 2015 and 2025

The following reasons were given in Round 1 unless noted as Round 2.

Estimates for 2015

Estimate: 73

Reason: *The components of demographic change should stabilize; 1-1.2 million is sort of the general trend for the recent period and represents around 25% of yearly births (around 4 million).*

Estimate: 80

Reason: *From the attached data it seems that 80 percent of the peak level is about 1.2 million a year, which is what the level was on average for years prior to the recession. Subtracting emigrants it's a little less than one million net.*

Estimate: 84

Reason: *... the drop in in-flows from the local peak (2006) appears to have stopped by 2010. Inflows for 2010 may even be a little bit higher than in 2009. ...a lot depends on the state of the US economy. Unauthorized immigration appears to be highly related to employment opportunities in the US. A "double-dip" recession could cause inflows to drop again. Conversely, a strong jobs-based recovery could lead to increased inflows over 2010 levels.*

Estimate: 85

Reason: *I see little reason to believe that the political process in the USA is capable of delivering a major cut in the levels of legal immigration, given the strength of ethnic and business interest groups, and the fact that the vast preponderance of anti-immigrant sentiment is directed against unauthorized immigrants. In terms of unauthorized migration, survey data that the Center for Comparative Immigration Studies at UCSD has collected in three different Mexican migrant sending communities and their U.S. satellites since 2005 suggests that U.S. border enforcement measures are doing little effective "immediate deterrence" - that is, preventing people who attempt to enter clandestinely from eventually succeeding. In our surveys, more than 90% eventually succeed even though they are being apprehended more often. However, there is evidence of some "remote deterrence"-- that is, a substantial number of people who would migrate illegally in the absence of border enforcement are afraid to ever leave their homes in the Mexican interior given the heightened risks and/or they do not have access to the \$2500 needed to pay a coyote given liquidity constraints in Mexico. I suspect that unauthorized migration from Mexico will remain substantially lower than it was in 2000, but that there will be an uptick from the current lows once jobs become more plentiful in the USA and relatives already in the USA are able to finance the trips of new clandestine entrants.*

Estimate: 90

Reason: *Every projection that I have made of migration or a migration-related factor has turned out to be too low and too low within a few years time. So while the recent trends and a bevy of factors impacting Mexican migration would lead me to think that we'll stay in a range of 80-90 percent of past migration my experience leads me to anticipate a stronger upside.*

..... Almost all of the downturn in numbers since 2000 has been due to changes in undocumented migration. The sum of Passel's net undocumented flow and that of newly admitted legal permanent residents is in the same trend and ballpark as the ACS figures since 2000. Your question essentially is (a) will undocumented migration increase/decrease/static; and (b) if there is legalization will the new LPR numbers likely otherwise to increase slightly or be static, increase sharply due to enhanced sponsorship (perhaps with a lag, Mexican migration visa sponsorship after IRCA more than doubled). I'm hazarding that undoc flows will increase slightly from the last couple of years thru 2015, there will be no legalization (or if there is the sponsorship effect will lag), and newly admitted LPRs will increase only slightly. You're flagging a presumption in the order of your questions that enforcement has an effect, it has slightly or will increasingly, but not enough by 2015 and a rebound in the economy will likely drive events.

Estimate: 90

Reason: *The economy will improve (there is no place to go but up at this point) and demand for labor will continue or increase. In the meantime, unauthorized migration will decline somewhat as enforcement technologies improve (like e-verify). On balance, these two will offset one another leading to levels of immigration that are similar but perhaps a bit higher than in 2010.*

Estimate: 90

Reason: *Econ recovery; distance from post-9/11 downturn.*

Estimate: 100

Reason: *I do not expect comprehensive immigration reform, but do expect an improved economy that will hold unauthorized in the US and perhaps attract more. I expect legal immigration to remain at roughly current levels. (Given in Round 2.)*

Estimates for 2025

Estimate: 73

Reason: *Mexican migration visa sponsorship after IRCA more than doubled). I'm hazarding that undoc flows will increase slightly from the last couple of years thru 2015 there will be no legalization (or if there is the sponsorship effect will lag) and newly admitted LPRs will increase only slightly. You're flagging a presumption in the order of your questions that enforcement has an effect it has slightly or will increasingly but not enough by 2015 and a rebound in the economy will likely drive events.*

Estimate: 85

Reason: *I don't think that the argument that the US needs more younger workers from abroad as the population ages will be politically persuasive. It has not been persuasive in countries that have a far more skewed demographic pyramid, such as Japan and Russia. (Given in Round 2. No change in estimate.)*

Estimate: 97

Reason: *I do wonder whether all of your respondents understood your metric. I think it might have been clearer to set the current value at 100. For example, one of the respondents picked values of 100 for both 2015 and 2025. This means he/she is expecting an increase of 40% between 2009 and 2015 -- this seems implausible and would seem to warrant an explanation. Not one of the 2015 values was as low as 2009 and the next smallest predicted increase over 2009 was 12% (Given in Round 2. No change in estimate.)*

Estimate: 97

Reason: *My "prediction" for 2020 assumes that there will be increased demand for low-skilled service-based labor to help support the burgeoning elderly population of 2025. I assume that there will be some demand-driven increase in inflows. ...I'll knock a little bit off [my previous] projection because of the possibility of some reduction from economic downturns.*

Estimate: 100

Reason: *Very hard to say much about 15 years out. However, I do expect continued but decreasing emigration pressure in esp rural Mexico. (Given in Round 2. No change in estimate.)*

Estimate: 100

Reason: *It's hard to imagine the population differentials, network and economic factors driving international migration will somehow lessen their impact. Despite causal assertions that the US has gotten more "restrictive," the numbers tell a different story (recent downturns are primarily driven by economics and the lagged effects of IRCA have worked themselves out). So shy a serious backlash and in anticipation of comprehensive reform, the best bet is for increased migration. Of course, anything can happen by 2025... no one would have predicted a continued drop after the 2001 dot.com recession.*

Estimate: 110 (Changed from 115 in Round 1.)

Reason: *Slight adjustment recognizing synthesized factors in views of others, and thus moving toward median. (Given in Round 2.)*

Estimate: 120

Reason: *By then, comprehensive immigration reform may have passed. Increases in the numbers of work visas available and increases in labor demand due to the mass retirement (and death) of baby boomers will enable the immigration of foreign labor.*

Appendix 2.
Survey Method and Procedures

Ten immigration researchers were recruited to participate in the survey. (The authors did not participate.) The survey was conducted by email.

The following first round of questions was sent to participants on April 19:

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Available measures of annual flows of immigration to the U.S. all indicate that the annual flow peaked in the years 1999 or 2000. Passel and Suro (2005) compiled consistent estimates for 1990-2004 from the Current Population Survey (CPS) and other data.

These track closely but not exactly with estimates from the American Community Survey (ACS) based on the question about residence one year ago (ROYA) for foreign-born persons, data that are now available through 2009. These two series are shown plotted in index form in a graph in the attached workbook. The ROYA estimates on average are slightly below those of Passel and Suro as well as parallel estimates from the ACS question on year of entry. For the sake of consistency over time, these ROYA estimates are all adjusted up by the ratio of the total immigration in the P-S series to the total in the ROYA series for 2000-2004. The raw data and calculations are shown in worksheet Data in the workbook.

FIRST ROUND SURVEY QUESTIONS

For purposes of projecting the future population, what do you consider the most reasonable assumption to make about the level of foreign-born immigration to the U.S. in 2015? In making this assessment, please take into account your knowledge of recent trends in immigration and factors that affect immigration, including enforcement of immigration laws, changes in these laws that you consider likely, the recovery from the worst effects of the Great Recession, and other economic conditions.

1. In your judgment what is most likely to be the level of foreign-born immigration to the U.S. in 2015? Please express your answer AS A PERCENT OF the 2000 peak level. As shown in the Background data graph, in 2009 the estimated level stood at 71 percent of the 2000 level. What would you anticipate for 2015? (We are not asking and do not expect you to resolve the differences among estimates of past immigration.)

In 2015 immigration will be _____ percent of the level in 2000.

1a. Please give a brief explanation for this assessment, if you want.

2. In your judgment what is most likely to be the level of foreign-born immigration to the U.S. in 2025? Please express your answer AS A PERCENT OF the 2000 peak level.

In 2025 immigration will be _____ percent of the level in 2000.

2a. Please give a brief explanation for this assessment, if you want.

Ten responses were received and summarized in the following second round of questions sent on April 26:

SUMMARY OF RESPONSES TO FIRST ROUND OF SURVEY

The mean preferred assumption of gross immigration to the U.S. in 2015 (n=10) is 89 percent of the level in 2000.

Your response was ___ percent.

The mean preferred assumption of gross immigration to the U.S. in 2025 (n=10) is 98.5 percent of the level in 2000.

Your response was ___ percent.

The individual responses are reported and plotted in the graph in the attached workbook. Not surprisingly, the range of responses for 2025 is substantially wider than for 2015. Several respondents foresee substantially higher immigration in 2025 than in 2015, others foresee no change, but none foresees a decline.

RATIONALES GIVEN FOR FIRST ROUND ESTIMATES FOR 2015

The factors cited as most affecting the level of immigration in 2015 are the amount of undocumented immigration, level and effectiveness of enforcement, and degree of recovery from the current recession.

The following is the rationale given for a 2015 estimate near the mean:

--Almost all of the downturn in numbers since 2000 has been due to changes in undocumented migration. The sum of Passel's net undocumented flow and that of newly admitted legal permanent residents is in the same trend and ballpark as the ACS figures since 2000. Your question essentially is (a) will undocumented migration increase/decrease/static; and (b) if there is legalization will the new LPR numbers, likely otherwise to increase slightly or be static, increase sharply due to enhanced sponsorship (perhaps with a lag, Mexican migration visa sponsorship after IRCA more than doubled). I'm hazarding that undoc flows will increase slightly from the last couple of years thru 2015, there will be no legalization (or if there is the sponsorship effect will lag), and newly admitted LPRs will increase only slightly. You're flagging a presumption in the order of your questions that enforcement has an effect, it has slightly or will increasingly, but not enough by 2015 and a rebound in the economy will likely drive events.

The following rationale was provided for one of the lower estimates for 2015:

--...there is evidence [in surveys conducted in Mexico] of some "remote deterrence"-- that is, a substantial number of people who would migrate illegally in the absence of border enforcement are afraid to ever leave their homes in the Mexican interior given the heightened risks and/or they do not have access to the \$2500 needed to pay a coyote given liquidity constraints in Mexico. I suspect that unauthorized migration from Mexico will remain substantially lower than it was in 2000, but that there will be an uptick from the current lows once jobs become more plentiful in the USA and relatives already in the USA are able to finance the trips of new clandestine entrants.

None of the higher estimates for 2015 was accompanied with an explanation.

RATIONALES GIVEN FOR SECOND ROUND ESTIMATES FOR 2025

Fewer participants offered explanations for their 2025 estimates. These tend to focus on the long term outlook for immigration reform and enforcement and the aging of the U.S. population and less on economic conditions.

The following rationale is given for a 2025 estimate near the mean:

--Despite casual assertions that the US has gotten more "restrictive," the numbers tell a different story (recent downturns are primarily driven by economics and the lagged effects of IRCA have worked themselves out). So shy a serious backlash and in anticipation of comprehensive reform, the best bet is for increased migration. No additional explanations were provided for the low estimates for 2025, the apparent implication being that the factors cited for 2015 would continue to operate without major change.

The following rationale was offered for one of the high estimates for 2025:

--By then, comprehensive immigration reform may have passed. Increases in the numbers of work visas available and increases in labor demand due to the mass retirement (and death) of baby boomers will enable the immigration of foreign labor.

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SECOND ROUND SURVEY QUESTIONS:

1. In Round 1 you said that 2015 immigration will be 80 percent of the level in 2000. Taking into account the information about other experts' responses as well as the background information provided with Round 1 (and repeated below), do you wish to revise your initial response regarding the level of immigration in 2015? (YES/NO)

1b. If YES, my revised response is that in 2015 immigration will be _____ percent of the level in 2000.

1c. Please give a brief explanation for this assessment, if you want.

2. In Round 1 you said that 2025 immigration will be 80 percent of the level in 2000. Taking into account the information about other experts' responses as well as the background information provided with Round 1 (and repeated below), do you wish to revise your initial response regarding the level of immigration in 2025? (YES/NO)

2b. If YES, my revised response is that in 2025 immigration will be _____ percent of the level in 2000.

2c. Please give a brief explanation for this assessment, if you want.

Eight participants responded to this second round of questions. The two nonrespondents are included Round 2 with estimates equal to those provided in Round 1.