

GREAT DECISIONS

1918 • FOREIGN POLICY ASSOCIATION

HIGH SCHOOL

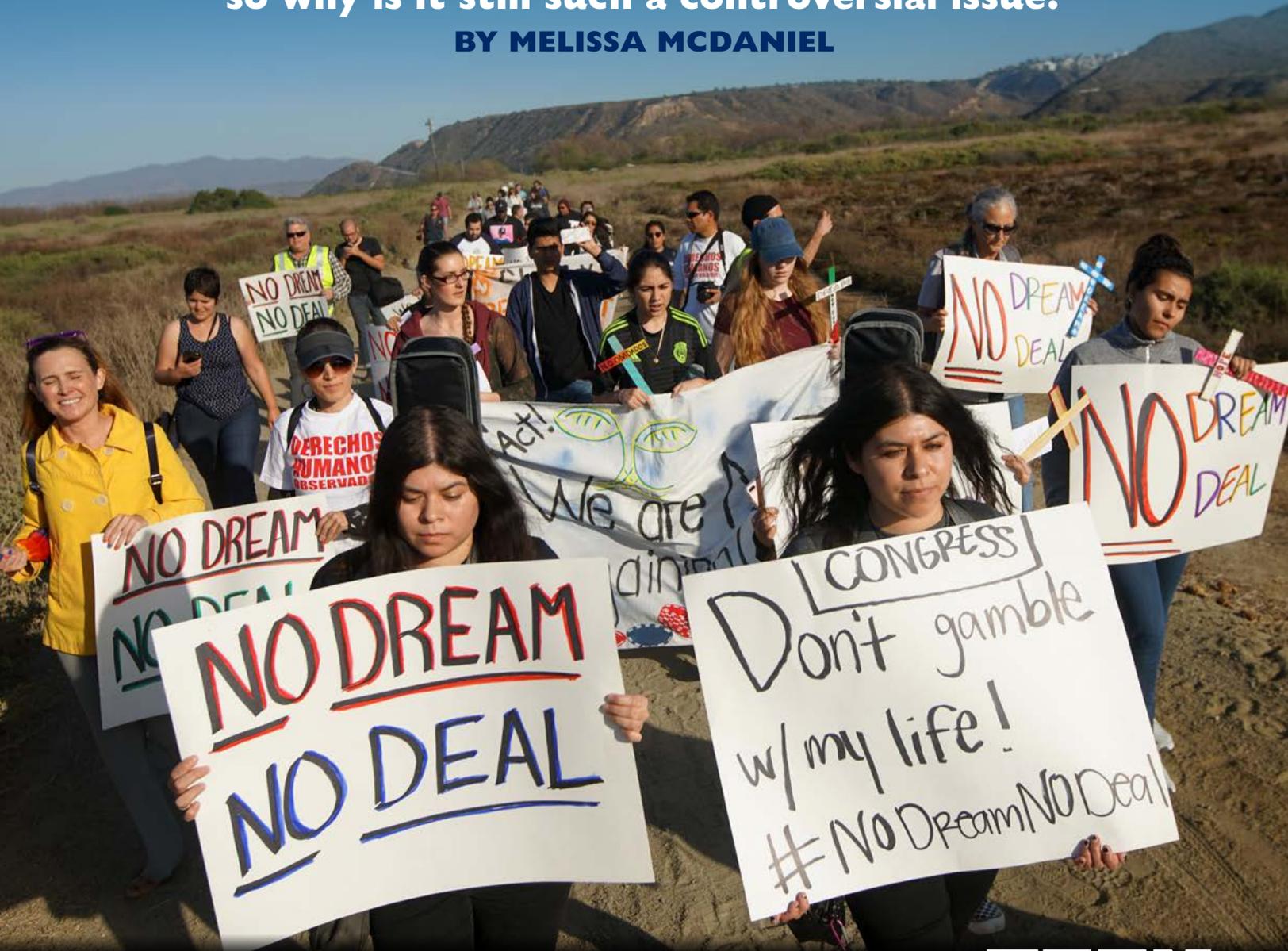
JUNE 2021

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IMMIGRATION

The United States wouldn't exist without immigration—
so why is it still such a controversial issue?

BY MELISSA MCDANIEL



**A DIFFICULT
JOURNEY**

**COMING TO
AMERICA...
AND WHY**

**STEPS YOU
CAN TAKE**

**TEEN
TRAIL-
BLAZERS**

A NATION OF IMMIGRANTS



Immigrants are sworn in as new U.S. citizens at a ceremony in Los Angeles in 2019.

Lucy Nicholson/Reuters/Newscom

A 16-year-old boy named Garcia arrives home at six o'clock in the morning after working all night in a food-processing plant. An hour later, he is out the door, on his way to high school. It's a grueling routine, but he has no choice. Garcia came to the U.S. on his own from Guatemala at age 15. After getting caught crossing the border, he was sent to live with his aunt and uncle in Illinois while his **asylum** case wound through the courts. They struggle financially, so he must work to help pay for food and rent. He also has to repay the \$3,000 his parents borrowed to hire a smuggler

to take him across the border.

Garcia fled Guatemala to escape the violent gangs, to get an education, and to help support his family back home. He is one of approximately 10.5 million unauthorized immigrants in the U.S. The nation is home to another 35 million legal immigrants. Many have become citizens, while others have **green cards**, which allow them to live and work here legally.

Immigration has always been central to the American story. Unless you're Native American, you or your ancestors came from somewhere else. For much of his story, immigration to the U.S. was

mostly unrestricted. If you showed up, you could stay. By 1890, nearly 15% of the U.S. population was foreign born. But even then, some racist laws, such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, banned people from specific countries. Laws limiting how many people could immigrate were enacted for the first time in the 1920s. Americans have been arguing over how many people to let in, and from where, ever since.

[Some people believe that the U.S. should allow less immigration because the newcomers take jobs from people who are already here](#) . Many recently arrived

A Timeline of U.S. Immigration

1500

1565

Spain establishes the first permanent European settlement in what is now the U.S. in St. Augustine, Florida.

1600

1600s

England establishes colonies along the East Coast.

1700

1619

The first enslaved Africans are brought to Virginia Colony.

1800

1882

The Chinese Exclusion Act bars Chinese laborers from entering the U.S.

1900

1890

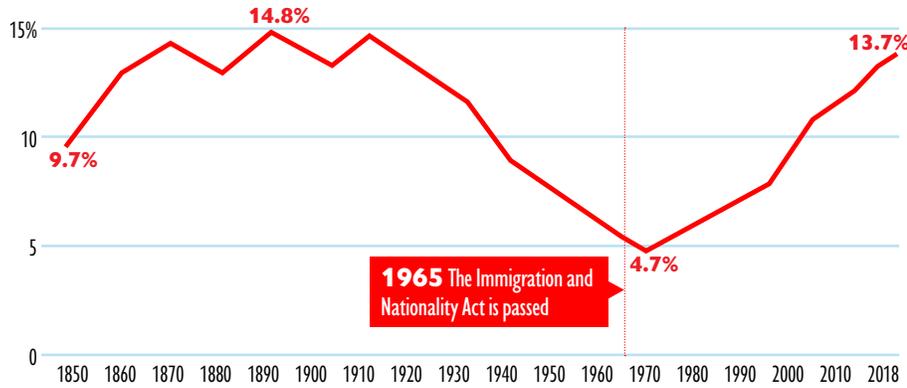
The U.S. foreign-born population peaks at 14.8%.



Late 1800s–early 1900s

Large numbers of immigrants arrive from southern and eastern Europe.

Percent of U.S. Population That Is Foreign-Born



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, "Historical Census Statistics on the Foreign-Born Population of the United States: 1850–2000" and Pew Research Center tabulations of 2010–2018 American Community Survey (IPUMS).

immigrants work in tech jobs and other skilled professions. Many unauthorized immigrants, on the other hand, work in manual labor jobs that few native-born Americans want. They might work in food processing plants, picking vegetables in fields, or as construction laborers. People who favor immigration maintain that all immigrants, regardless of their economic status, contribute to the economy and help the U.S. grow and thrive.

COMING TO AMERICA

If you want to immigrate to the U.S., some legal options exist. One option is to apply for a green card. However, these are very limited, and the process for getting one can be slow. For some people, it can take decades.

Another way to enter the

country legally is through work visas. Some people with unique talents are given green cards so they can stay in the U.S. permanently. Far more come on temporary work visas. The U.S.

offers temporary work visas for some agricultural workers and other seasonal jobs, such as resort workers and landscapers. The H1-B visa program allows American companies to sponsor foreign workers who have specialized skills, such as computer programming, engineering, or medicine. If a worker leaves the job, they must find another company that will sponsor them or leave the U.S. Some people argue that this program is a way for companies to hire foreign workers at lower wages than they would have to pay American workers. The companies claim that there are not enough U.S. workers with the necessary technical skills.

THE DEBATE

SHOULD THE U.S. DECREASE THE NUMBER OF WORK VISAS?

YES

- ✓ There are plenty of American workers who can fill the jobs.
- ✓ When companies bring in cheaper foreign labor, it can drive down other workers' pay.
- ✓ Managers often treat the foreign workers worse than they do American workers because the visa-holders do not have the option of leaving for another company.

NO

- ✗ Companies cannot always find the skilled workers they need in the U.S.
- ✗ Tech companies hiring the best workers from around the world helps them innovate and thrive.
- ✗ Work visas encourage companies to keep jobs in the U.S., rather than hiring people overseas. This is good for the U.S. economy as a whole.

Timeline left to right: From a painting by William H. Powell, Discovery of the Mississippi by De Soto/Photograph courtesy Architect of the Capitol; Lewis Hine/Everett Collection/Newscom; Bettmann/Getty Images; Jeff Malet/Newscom

2000

1920s

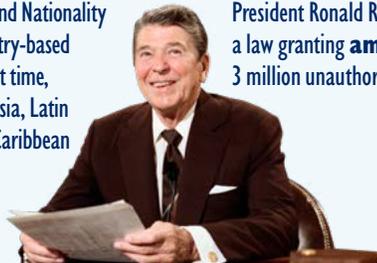
Laws such as the Emergency Quota Act and the Immigration Act are passed to limit immigration based on national origin, so that most immigrants are from western and northern Europe.

1965

The Immigration and Nationality Act abolishes country-based quotas. For the first time, immigrants from Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean outnumber those from Europe.

1986

President Ronald Reagan signs a law granting **amnesty** to 3 million unauthorized immigrants.



2012

The Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (**DACA**) shields some people who came to the U.S. as minors from **deportation**.



Coyotes use an inflatable raft to smuggle immigrants from Mexico to Texas across the Rio Grande in 2021.



ED JONES/AFP/Getty Images

FINDING A NEW HOME

[Every year around the world, war, famine, genocide, and climate disasters force millions of people from their homes](#) . People flee to other countries, and some live for years in vast **refugee** camps. Children grow up there, going to school and playing in the dusty paths among the tents or simple houses. Their parents, meanwhile, wonder if it will ever be safe to go home again. Some people who cannot go home and are also in danger in their country of asylum are permanently resettled in distant countries.

The number of refugees the U.S. accepts changes from year to year. Refugee resettlement declined during Donald Trump's presidency, but usually the nation resettles around 60,000 people a year. In recent years, the most refugees to

They make the long, dangerous trip because they have no hope left at home.

the U.S. have come from Congo, Myanmar, and Ukraine.

The adjustment for the refugees is massive. Everything is new. Resettlement agencies arrange for housing, food, and clothing that's appropriate for the climate. Many refugees from Somalia, a warm country in Africa, were resettled in Minnesota, one of the coldest U.S. states. The agencies help get kids enrolled in school and get adults signed up for social security cards so they can get jobs.

CROSSING THE BORDER

Many unauthorized immigrants in the U.S. cross the southern border. Some come from Mexico. Others have walked 2,500 miles from Central America. People who decide to make this journey have complex motivations. Many are fleeing ruthless gangs, drug cartels, and sexual violence. These same people are also looking for economic opportunity, to reunite with family, and to give their kids better lives. They make the long, dangerous trip because they have no hope left at home.

Some migrants borrow money to pay human smugglers, called "**coyotes**," thousands of dollars to help them make the trip. The coyotes arrange for transportation and shelter on the journey north. They might ferry people across the Rio Grande into Texas, lead them across the desert into Arizona, or hide them in a truck for the journey into California.

Recently, the number of people attempting to cross the border has surged. When the migrants reach the border, many are caught and turned back. Children who cross by themselves are allowed to stay. Some parents, after being turned back as a family, send their children on by themselves. They might have the phone number of an uncle who lives in the United States written on their T-shirt in magic marker. Families with very young children are usually allowed to stay.

When minors cross alone, the U.S. government must find sponsors for them to live with. [If they are under 18, these unaccompanied minors cannot be left alone](#) . Often, family members in the U.S. can take the

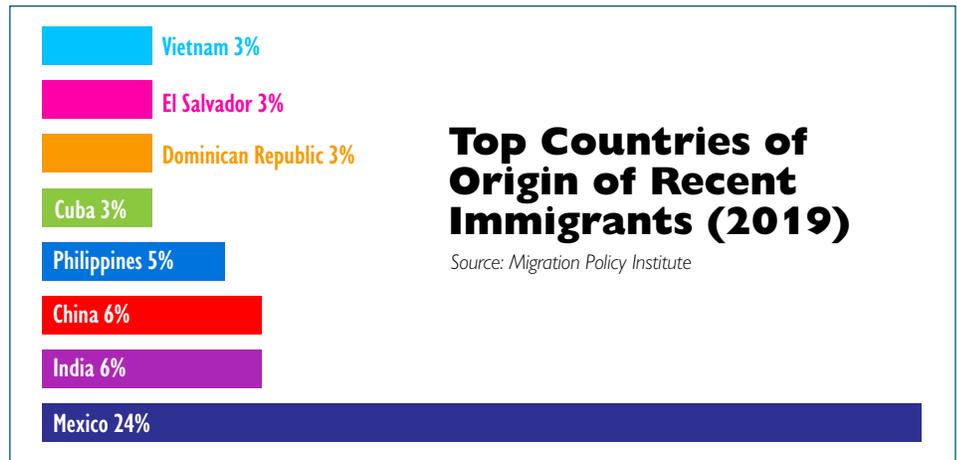
children in. Other times, they are placed in shelters or foster homes. Although they are only supposed to be kept at the border for a few days, during surges of migration it sometimes takes longer to process them and find a safe place for them to live.

Many people who arrive at the U.S. border request asylum based upon a fear of persecution if they returned to their home country. The COVID-19 pandemic caused the U.S. to dramatically slow its processing of asylum claims. Though the applications are being processed more quickly again, a huge backlog remains. Having their asylum applications processed does not always make things better for the immigrants. In recent years, most claims made by people from Mexico and Central America have been denied. Many are then deported.

LIFE IN THE SHADOWS

Immigrants who make it across the border, or who stay in the U.S. after arriving on a tourist visa, live life in the shadows. Most unauthorized immigrants are employed. Some work for cash. Others use fake IDs, including fake social security numbers, so they can gain regular employment. It is estimated that between half and three-quarters of unauthorized workers pay taxes using fake social security numbers.

Some work in dangerous chicken-processing plants or other factories. Many work as laborers on construction sites, or as house cleaners and nannies. Some are employed as migrant



agricultural workers, picking fruit or vegetables in the hot sun on one farm before moving on to another when the harvest is done. About half of California's 2 million farmworkers are unauthorized. In the eastern part of the country, many families start the year in Florida picking citrus crops. In the spring, they might move to North Carolina, and then by summer they're in Michigan picking apples and other fruit.

The children of migrant workers change schools frequently, which makes learning difficult. Special programs give

them extra help and provide them internet access. When the students are in high school, they are often on the move before the end of the term, so they don't complete classes and don't have enough credits to graduate. Some programs help the students complete classes online, so they are able to get full credit for them.

Unauthorized immigrants live with the threat of deportation hanging over their head. Government agents sometimes raid factories where many immigrants work and check everyone's immigration status. Children

THE DEBATE

SHOULD UNAUTHORIZED IMMIGRANTS HAVE ACCESS TO SOCIAL SERVICES?

YES

- ✓ Many unauthorized immigrants have faced dire circumstances and they need help.
- ✓ All people should have food, shelter, and health care, regardless of their immigration status.
- ✓ Unauthorized immigrants play a large role in the U.S. economy and society, so they are entitled to services.

NO

- ✗ Providing financial assistance encourages more people to come.
- ✗ The U.S. government has a large deficit, so it can't afford to support unauthorized immigrants.
- ✗ People shouldn't be rewarded for illegal acts.



FREDERIC J. BROWN/AP/Getty Images



Dario Lopez-Mills - Pool/Getty Images

Unaccompanied children are held at a Texas detention facility in 2021 after crossing the border from Mexico.

who were born in the U.S. are American citizens. If the parents are being deported, they must then make the difficult decision of whether to leave their kids in the U.S. with other family or friends, or bring them back to a country where they have a bleaker future.

TOWARD CITIZENSHIP

Every year many thousands of people bring their children with them as they cross the border into the U.S. without a visa. It was the parents who decided to come to the U.S., not the children. Yet as the children grow up and go to college or work, they continue to live under the specter of deportation. In 2012, the U.S. began a program called the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), which protected about 700,000 young people from deportation. It did not, however, offer them citizenship.

Many people argue that there

should be a pathway to citizenship, both for those who were brought to the U.S. as children and for adults who have built their lives here. President Joe Biden has suggested that, after passing background

checks, unauthorized immigrants be given legal residency and work permits. They would later be able to become permanent residents and then citizens. Some people argue that this is unfair to those who

THE DEBATE

SHOULD THERE BE A PATHWAY TO CITIZENSHIP FOR UNAUTHORIZED IMMIGRANTS?

YES

- ✓ It will keep families together, so that parents will not be deported, leaving behind their American children.
- ✓ People who have lived and worked in the U.S. for years and made it their home should not be treated as second-class citizens.
- ✓ It will benefit the economy, since unauthorized immigrants will be paying taxes instead of working in a shadow economy.

NO

- ✗ Unauthorized immigrants should wait their turn behind other people who applied for legal immigration.
- ✗ Many unauthorized immigrants are low-income, and they might receive more money in government benefits than they would pay in taxes.
- ✗ The big influx of legal workers will depress wages.



Mel1800/CC BY-SA 4.0

went through legal channels for immigration and would encourage more unauthorized immigration. But the majority of the American public supports the idea.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Immigration is the responsibility of the U.S. government. But there are many things that you can do to help people in need.

- **Get informed.** Immigration is a complex topic, and people have many conflicting opinions about it. Read reliable news sources to learn why people come to the U.S., what happens to those detained at the border, and what proposals are being suggested for citizenship for unauthorized immigrants.
- **Write or call your elected officials** to let them know what you think. The number of calls and letters they get also gives them indication of how important the issue is to people in their district.
- **Volunteer** at local organizations that provide services to immigrants. You might distribute food, help immigrants gain access to social services, work as a translator, or help immigrants learn English.
- **Talk** to your friends and family about what they can do to help people in need. Go with them to protests or rallies so that others can see how important the issues are to you.
- **Vote, when you are old enough!** In most cases, you can't vote until you're 18, but in many states you can register at 16 or 17, and you'll be all set when 18 rolls around.

TEEN TRAILBLAZERS



Christina Jiménez

Theresa Scarborough/Alamy

Christina Jiménez

Cristina Jiménez was 13 when she came to the U.S. from Ecuador. As a teenager in New York, Cristina learned English and navigated high school. She also attended college and went on to cofound [United We Dream](#), an organization dedicated to helping young unauthorized immigrants. The members of United We Dream told about their lives, despite their fear of being deported. By standing up and making themselves visible, Cristina and others put a human face on the struggles of unauthorized immigrants. United We Dream was instrumental in convincing President Barack Obama to create DACA.

Hamdia Ahmed

Hamdia Ahmed was a refugee from the day she was born. Her mother, nine months pregnant, was fleeing a civil war in Somalia. In the middle of the 370-mile walk to a refugee camp in Kenya, she gave birth. Hamdia spent the first seven years of her life in the camp, with [UNICEF](#) providing food and medical care. The family was eventually resettled in the U.S., ending up in Maine. Many people were

welcoming, but others were hostile. As she grew older, Hamdia became an activist, trying to ensure that her adopted country was welcoming to other refugees. When President Donald Trump instituted a ban on people traveling to the U.S. from several Muslim countries, she organized a large protest. She has also become a UNICEF USA advocate, speaking out for the rights of refugees around the world.

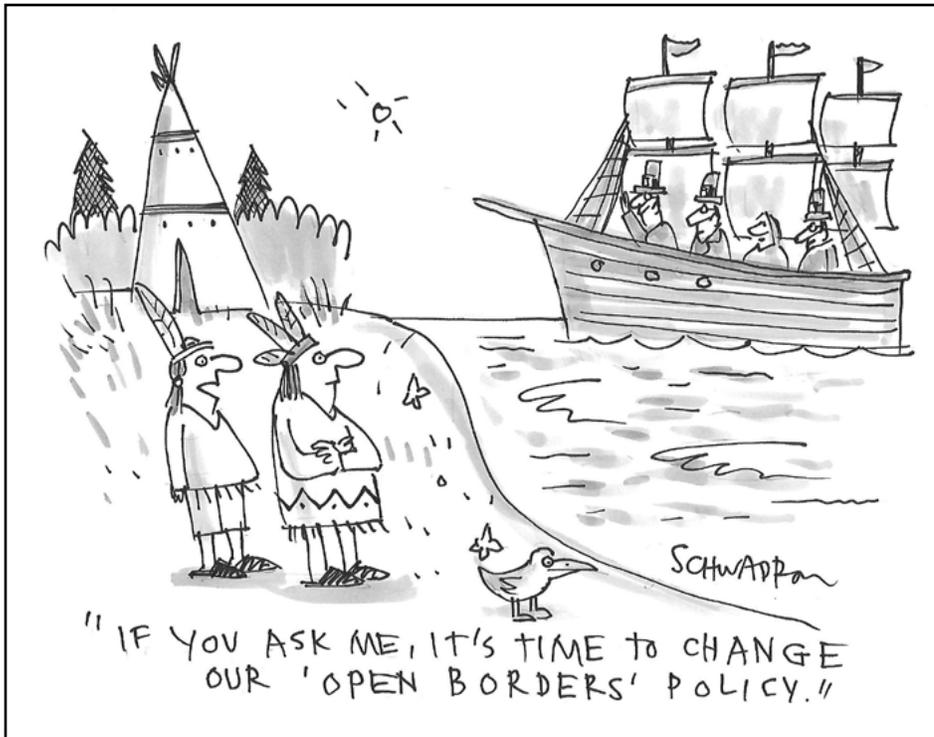
Daniela Murguia

In the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, Daniela Murguia's mother was forced to close her hair salon because Washington State was under a stay-at-home order. Unlike many other people, however, Daniela's mother could not get financial assistance because she is an unauthorized immigrant. Daniela is part of a group of young immigrants called the [Washington Dream Coalition](#) who advocate on behalf of unauthorized immigrants. They quickly raised more than \$5 million to help immigrants who were not getting government relief. "Community always provides, especially when government fails," says Daniela.



Hamdia Ahmed

Courtesy Hamdia Ahmed



THE FIRST IMMIGRANTS

1. How do you think Native Americans felt about the earliest immigrants from Europe? What effects did the arrival of Europeans have on them?
2. What are the differences between early European settlers and modern-day immigrants? What are their goals and reasons for coming to America?
3. What positive changes have immigrants brought to America? If you see any downsides, what are they?

NOW IT'S YOUR TURN TO MAKE GREAT DECISIONS

1. Who should and shouldn't be allowed to move to the U.S., and why?
2. What kinds of regulations could improve the way immigration works in the U.S.?
3. **YOUR STORY:** Did you or someone you know immigrate to the U.S.? What motivated the journey? Has it worked out well?

KEY WORDS & TERMS

amnesty	genocide
asylum	green cards
coyotes	refugee
DACA	unaccompanied minors
deportation	visas



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Thanks for reading!

We'll be back in fall with all-new topics for the new school year. Until then, have a great summer!

GREAT DECISIONS IMMIGRATION

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