

AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE

How the Immigration Crackdown Threatens Massachusetts'
Labor Force

JUNE 2026



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Boston Indicators is the research center at the Boston Foundation, working to advance a thriving Greater Boston for all residents across all neighborhoods. We do this by analyzing key indicators of well-being and by researching promising ideas for making our region more prosperous, equitable and just. To ensure that our work informs active efforts to improve our region, we work in deep partnership with community groups, civic leaders and Greater Boston's civic data community to produce special reports and host public convenings.

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The MassINC Policy Center (MPC) generates research to frame pressing issues, identify actionable solutions, and monitor progress. The Center favors a collaborative approach, engaging with state and local officials and civic leaders to investigate problems and collaboratively develop strategies to address them. MPC strives to produce timely and accurate information that leaders can rely on when tasked with making difficult choices.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We are grateful to the employers, organizational leaders, and workforce practitioners who generously shared their time and insights in interviews, and to the immigration policy experts whose thoughtful review strengthened this report.

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AUTHORS

Boston Indicators

Luc Schuster
Kimberly Goulart
Kelly Harrington

MassINC Policy Center

Ben Forman

EDITORS

The Boston Foundation

Sandy Kendall

DESIGN

Isidor Studio

Mel Isidor

**B O S T O N
INDICATORS**

MassINC
Policy Center

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The second Trump administration has made restricting immigration a central priority, pursuing an agenda designed to reduce the nation's foreign-born population across nearly every dimension. While much attention has rightly focused on the human impact of the crackdown, this report examines its economic implications for Massachusetts, particularly its effects on labor force dynamics within three key industries. This comes at a precarious moment for the local economy, as other federal actions, including cuts to research funding and reductions in the social safety net, compound the stress of the immigration crackdown.

The report combines demographic and labor market analysis with interviews conducted with people working in life sciences, healthcare support, and construction. Particular attention is given to the state's Gateway Cities, where large numbers of immigrants have settled in recent years.

Key findings from this work include:

Immigrants have become central to the state's economic growth.

Massachusetts faces strong demographic headwinds, including low birth rates, domestic outmigration, and an aging population. Fortunately, immigrants have provided an offset.

- Massachusetts has the second lowest native-born birth rate in the country.
- Immigrants now make up roughly one-quarter of the Massachusetts labor force, playing essential roles across all sectors of the economy, from research laboratories and universities to hospitals, construction sites, restaurants, and Main Street small businesses.
- We estimate the state will need at least 60,000 net new immigrants annually by 2030 just to maintain the current size of its working-age population. Without immigration at something close to this scale, Massachusetts risks economic contraction.

Immigration has already slowed significantly.

While conditions are changing quickly, and we are less than a year and a half into the second Trump term, national and state data already show compounding declines in immigration flows.

- After historically large increases during the Biden administration, net immigration to the United States has swung even more quickly in the opposite direction during the first year and a half of President Trump's second term.
- The Census Bureau estimates that net immigration fell 54 percent from mid-2024 to mid-2025, and projects that immigration could decline nearly 90 percent from its 2024 peak by mid-2026.
- Separate Brookings Institution estimates suggest the country could experience a net loss of close to one million immigrants by the close of 2026.
- State-level estimates suggest net international migration to Massachusetts also fell by more than half during the first six months of Trump's second term.

At the same time, the slowdown in net immigration is not yet translating into a large labor market collapse. Deportations remain relatively small compared to the total labor force; some federal policies are tied up in court; and certain immigration pathways have slowed rather than fully stopped. But small changes can compound quickly, and the medium-term outlook is considerably more concerning.

Several Massachusetts industries appear particularly vulnerable.

The labor force impacts are uneven across industries, but several sectors that are central to the Massachusetts economy appear particularly vulnerable.

HIGHER EDUCATION AND RESEARCH

- If current international student declines continue, Massachusetts could lose more than \$1.4 billion in economic contributions in 2026/27.
- During President Trump's first term, his administration was five times more likely to deny high-skilled visas (H-1B) to Massachusetts companies, compared to Biden and Obama. If history repeats itself, these denials could lead to thousands of jobs being offshored from Massachusetts.

HEALTHCARE SUPPORT

- The uncertainty surrounding Temporary Protected Status (TPS), especially for Haitian workers, has emerged as one of the clearest short-term labor force risks cited by industry representatives. Many TPS holders provide direct care in nursing homes, hospitals, and work as home health aides. The Massachusetts Senior Care Association estimates that 40 percent of nursing facility workers in Massachusetts are foreign-born, including roughly 2,000 frontline workers with Haitian TPS status.

CONSTRUCTION

- Immigrant workers, many of whom are undocumented, play key frontline roles building new housing in a state already facing severe housing shortages. Homebuilders described growing workforce instability and project delays resulting in large part from fear of ICE activity. While projects have not fully shut down due to the immigration crackdown, employers repeatedly warned that gradual labor force erosion can lead to delays and added costs that compound over time, particularly when combined with high interest rates and rising materials costs.

Gateway Cities, home to significant shares of immigrants and our future workforce, face challenges from immigration policy upheavals.

Gateway Cities increasingly serve as population hubs for immigrants, who are the foundation of the state's future labor force. This means these cities are likely to feel most acutely the pressures created by rapid swings in immigration trends—whether toward expansion or contraction.

- Gateway Cities are home to 25 percent of the state's population, but to 40 percent of its foreign-born residents and over half of new arrivals.
- We project that over the next decade, current children in immigrant families will make up at least one-third of all new labor force entrants in 17 of the state's 26 Gateway Cities. In eight Gateway Cities, immigration will account for more than half of all new labor force entrants.
- Rapid immigration increases from 2022 to 2024 created real pressures around housing availability and school capacity in many Gateway Cities, particularly those already facing constrained housing supply and limited fiscal capacity. Our analysis suggests immigrant housing demand was a modest factor in housing cost inflation, and the significant increase in resources the state has provided for English Language Learners has been critical aid to Gateway City school districts receiving these students. To continue welcoming large numbers of new Americans without creating large imbalances in housing and labor markets, Gateway Cities and other receiving communities will need more focused investment, including state and federal support in the future.

INTRODUCTION

At the outset of his second term, President Trump made reducing immigration a top priority, pursuing an agenda designed to limit the foreign-born population across nearly every dimension: cracking down on undocumented immigrants; curtailing legal pathways, such as student visas and the H-1B program; and targeting sanctuary cities. The administration promised to deport one million immigrants a year, an extraordinary pace that would require 3,000 apprehensions and removals a day.¹

These actions have included detaining not only undocumented immigrants, but also lawful permanent residents and, in some cases, U.S. citizens. Massachusetts was the target of two major ICE crackdowns, Operation Patriot 1 and 2, which resulted in nearly 3,000 arrests, many of whom were immigrants from Brazil, the Dominican Republic, and Haiti.²

In March 2025, Tufts University graduate student Rümese Öztürk, lawfully here on a student visa, was apprehended by ICE agents while walking in Somerville. She was not undocumented. Video of Öztürk’s arrest spread widely and drew national attention. After a long legal battle and a traumatic experience in a detention center, Öztürk left the U.S. and returned to her home country.

In November, witnesses described ICE agents arresting workers at a local car wash, and the workers later described the physical and psychological harm they experienced. Some characterized these ICE arrests as “kidnappings” because several detainees had legal documents at the worksite, which they were not allowed to retrieve.³

This broad-based immigration crackdown arrives at a precarious moment for the Massachusetts economy, coinciding with a series of other federal actions that create deep uncertainty. Federal cuts to the social safety net are increasing financial strain on lower-income families.

The pullback of federal research funding is uniquely threatening to our region, given the state’s historic reliance on universities, hospitals, biotech firms, and research institutions as core drivers of economic activity. Massachusetts receives more federal research and development dollars per capita than almost any other state. According to the UMass Donahue Institute, this funding supports 81,300 jobs and more than \$16 billion in total economic activity, with every research dollar generating nearly twice that amount in broader economic benefit.⁴

The pullback of federal research funding is uniquely threatening to our region, given the state’s historic reliance on universities, hospitals, biotech firms, and research institutions as core drivers of economic activity.

Massachusetts already risks losing its competitive edge in recruiting highly sought-after scientists and engineers. A recent MassINC Polling Group survey found, for instance, that 42 percent of Massachusetts scientists reported that researchers in their labs had relocated to other countries over the past year as a direct result of Trump administration policies.⁵

And so, as part of the Boston Foundation’s Meeting the Moment effort, this report examines the extent to which the federal anti-immigrant policy is shrinking the local labor force and estimates the aftershocks that might ripple through our economy.

Boston Indicators partnered with the MassINC Policy Center to bring particular attention to the state’s Gateway Cities, whose long-term economic health, like that of Massachusetts overall, is deeply tied to immigration. These communities can face acute short-term pressures when immigration flows shift unpredictably, when low-wage workers lack bargaining power to advocate for higher wages, when housing production fails to keep pace with population growth, or when schools and workforce systems lack sufficient resources to support newcomers and help residents gain footing in a changing economy.

42 percent of Massachusetts scientists reported that **researchers in their labs had relocated** to other countries over the past year as a direct result of Trump administration policies, according to a recent MassINC Polling Group survey.

National Estimates of the Immigration Slowdown

Because state-level data on the immigrant labor force lag federal data by roughly 12 to 18 months, we look first at national immigration estimates to provide a backdrop for what may be playing out in Massachusetts.

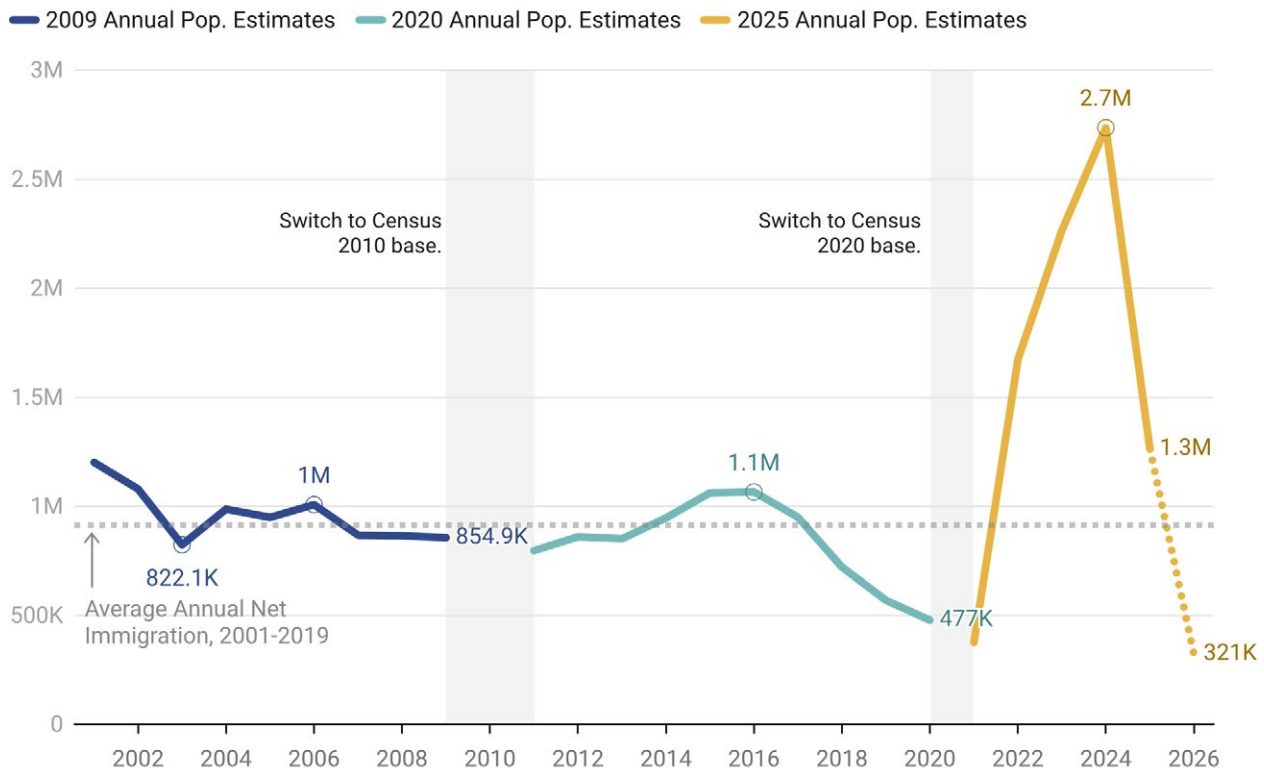
The Census Bureau’s Population Estimates Program shows a dramatic slowdown during the first portion of President Trump’s second term. From a high point of 2.7 million in July 2024, the Census Bureau estimates that net international migration to the United States fell to 1.3 million by June 2025, a 54 percent decline. The Census Bureau also projects that, based on these trends, net immigration could fall nearly 90 percent from the July 2024 peak by July 2026.

Graphing these trends all the way back to 2001 helps contextualize the increase that occurred under Biden, followed by a stark fall under Trump. Annual net migration averaged around 900,000 from 2001 to 2019. In 2024 (covering the net change from July 2023 to June 2024) the level spiked to 2.7 million, roughly three times higher than the previous trend. And if we hit the census projection for 2026, net immigration would fall back down to 321,000, which is less than half of the 2001 to 2019 trend and would be the lowest level in more than 20 years.⁶

For states like Massachusetts, the 2022 to 2024 spike created a mix of benefits and challenges. The influx helped ease labor shortages, boost employment, and offset domestic outmigration. But the speed of the increase created strains to local housing markets and schools in some communities, particularly Gateway Cities. We return to this later in the report.

Net international migration to the United States.

The three lines use different Census Bureau data vintages, benchmarked to different decennial censuses, so they are not directly comparable. Estimates are for annual net change as of July 1 of each respective year.



Note: 2026 data are from a projection courtesy of U.S. Population Growth Slows Due to Historic Decline in Net International Migration," U.S. Census Bureau.

But now the pendulum is swinging even more sharply in the opposite direction. The Brookings Institution has produced separate national estimates for calendar year 2025 that point to an even steeper contraction. Under their estimates, net migration for calendar year 2025 likely ranged between negative 10,000 and negative 295,000 nationwide. And for 2026, Brookings projects that net migration could be as low as negative 925,000.⁷

Taken together, Census and Brookings projections suggest that, even at the high end, net migration to the United States in 2026 will be far below pre-Biden levels, which had been in the +600,000 to +1 million range annually.

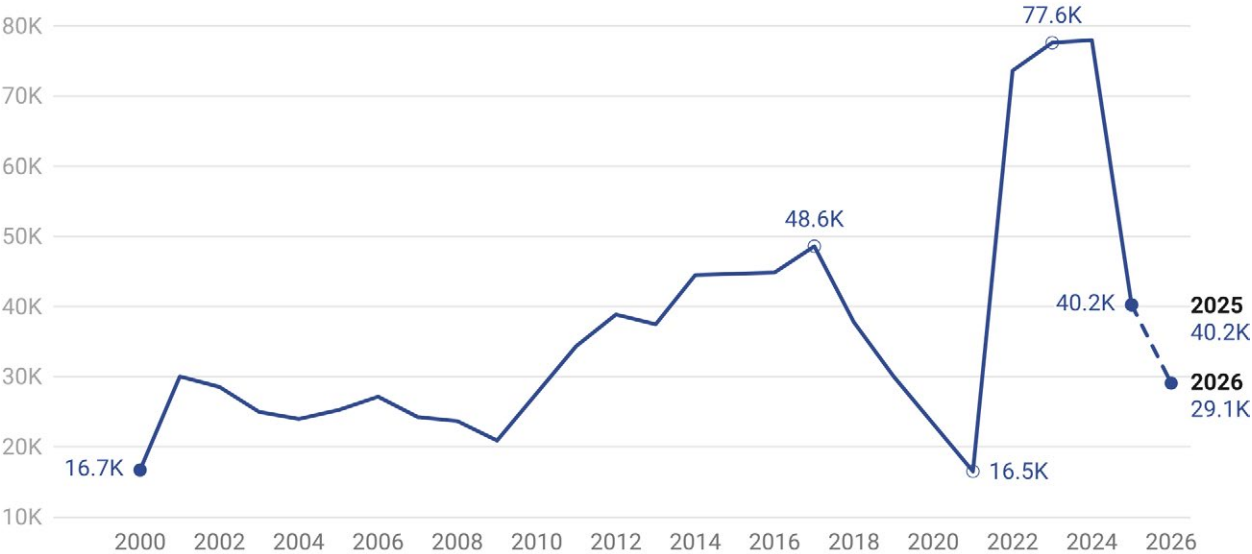
If the more pessimistic scenarios prove correct, the United States could be on the cusp of its first year of negative net migration in at least half a century. Even the less severe scenarios imply migration levels far below what would be needed to offset aging demographics, low birth rates, and retirements among the Baby Boom generation.

IMMIGRATION AND THE MASSACHUSETTS ECONOMY

Immigration has been central to the prosperity of the United States. This is especially true in Massachusetts, where successive waves of immigrants have helped power the Commonwealth’s economy for generations.⁸ French-Canadian and German immigrants helped drive the textile sector in places like Holyoke. Portuguese and Brazilian immigrants worked the fishing industry off the coast of Gloucester. Haitian immigrants now play a major role in supporting the state’s healthcare system. Each wave has reshaped and contributed to the Massachusetts economy in different ways.

Immigration has become especially important in recent years, as our state faces severe demographic headwinds. After Vermont, Massachusetts has the second lowest native-born birth rate in the country (40 births per 1,000 women age 15 to 50) and has experienced persistent domestic outmigration to other parts of the United States, driven in large part by the state’s high cost of living.⁹ Without immigration, Massachusetts likely would have experienced outright population decline over much of the past quarter century.

Net international migration to Massachusetts.



Note: The 2026 value is a local extrapolation of national projections calculated by the Census Bureau.

Chart: Boston Indicators • Source: UMass Donahue Institute, U.S. Census Bureau Population Division • Created with Datawrapper

In recent years, Massachusetts relied on the second-highest rate of international in-migration in the country, trailing only Florida, to offset births that remain well below replacement levels.¹⁰ In the graph above, we estimate that by the end of 2026, assuming we follow the national trend, our net international migration to Massachusetts could fall to 29,000. This is a drop of more than two-thirds from 2025.

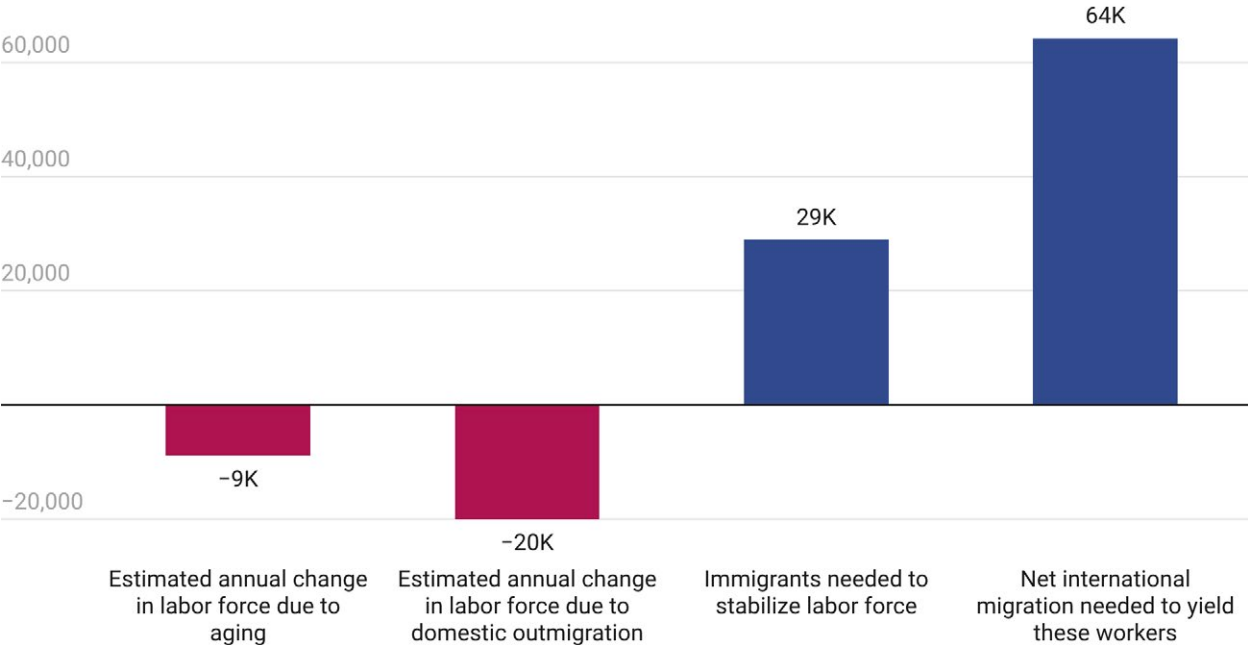
To put this number into context, we estimated how many immigrants the Commonwealth will need to attract in the coming years simply to maintain the size of its current labor force.

As illustrated in the graph below, our analysis suggests Massachusetts will need about 64,000 immigrants entering Massachusetts annually between 2026 and 2030 to prevent the labor force from contracting. That level of immigration would yield at least 29,000 workers, given the age structure and labor force participation rates of recent immigrants to Massachusetts.

To arrive at this estimate, we consider that the Massachusetts labor force is aging at rate that will create a potential supply gap. We estimate that the gap between those leaving the labor force (i.e., retiring) and those entering is about 9,000 workers. Domestic outmigration adds up to about 20,000 residents between the ages of 20 and 64. If we take these two populations together, the state needs 29,000 immigrant workers annually to keep the labor force stable.

Without these newcomers, Massachusetts will face not only slower population growth, but an outright contraction in the number of working-age residents available to support the broader economy.

Massachusetts needs at least 60,000 immigrants annually to sustain its labor force at the current size.



Note: The sample includes those between the ages of 20 to 64.
Chart: MassINC Policy Center • Source: Author's estimate based on data from the 2024 American Community Survey Public Use Microdata • Created with Datawrapper

Against this backdrop, the recent slowdown in immigration poses a significant risk. These risks are economically significant because immigrant households are deeply woven into the state economy. Consumer spending accounts for roughly one-third of national GDP. To generate a state-level estimate of what this means in Massachusetts, we adapted a consumer spending model from the American Immigration Council and updated it for 2024.¹¹ Our estimates show that foreign-born heads of households in Massachusetts had approximately \$50.5 billion in spending power in 2024. On top of that, these households contributed about \$7.4 billion in state and local taxes and more than \$23 billion in federal taxes. For more detail on this model, see the Methods section of this report.

Immigrants in Massachusetts had about **\$50.5 billion** in spending power in 2024. On top of that, these households contributed about **\$7.4 billion** in state and local taxes and more than **\$23 billion** in federal taxes.

Labor Force Impacts of the Immigration Slowdown in 2025 and 2026

Net population flows are not the same thing as direct labor force impacts, since not all people work. It is possible that the members of a household most likely to leave the country first are those who are not working. Immigration slowdowns will inevitably affect the labor market, though. It can just take some time, and magnitudes can vary. Many have likely left the country completely, and limited real-time data just have not captured this yet, while others may remain in the country but have stopped working due to fears related to ICE enforcement.¹²

While we are seeing clear sharp drops in immigration inflows, our research has not yet found comparably large drops in the immigrant labor force in Massachusetts. Nevertheless, we do see some reductions, and we are less than a year and a half into the second Trump administration. Any reduction to our immigrant labor force is concerning, as various industries have long warned of labor shortages independent of this current shock.

Our research instead points to a broad and gradual slowing of new arrivals on various visa pathways, alongside a few specific immigration enforcement changes that appear particularly likely to produce future declines in the labor force.

Last year, the Trump administration sought to end Temporary Protective Status (TPS) for many immigrants who are living and working in the US. Many of these workers in Massachusetts are Haitian immigrants. Massachusetts is home to nearly 37,000 TPS holders, including roughly 23,000 Haitians who are currently caught in legal limbo amid ongoing court challenges.¹³

Total deportations over the last year and a half are also higher than in previous years at about 3,000. Although this number is relatively small in the context of the Commonwealth's total immigrant population, other immigrants in Massachusetts have been arrested and apprehended, who now face prolonged legal battles to confirm their status. These court proceedings require workers to miss days of work to attend various hearings, hire and pay for immigration attorneys, not to mention the mental toll it takes on immigrant families and communities.

The Trump administration has also pushed through efforts to reduce legal immigration, essentially throwing sand into the gears of our immigration system. For instance, as of September 2025, there is a hefty fee of \$100,000 for all H-1B visa applications for new workers not currently living the U.S.¹⁴ To potentially deter international students from studying here, the federal government has attempted to withdraw federal funding for groundbreaking research.¹⁵

Building on travel bans imposed during his first term, Trump has now prohibited entry to the U.S. for residents in 39 countries. U.S. Customs and Immigration Services has also added new vetting requirements for green card, asylum, and naturalization applicants, including broader use of social media screening and shorter document validity periods that force applicants to refile paperwork more often.¹⁶ The administration has even made it harder for people already on the path to citizenship, by adding questions to the citizenship test.¹⁷

EXAMPLES OF PRESIDENT TRUMP'S EFFORTS TO REDUCE IMMIGRATION

- New \$100,000 fee for new H-1B visa applicants living abroad.
- Expanded the Travel Ban list to 39 countries.
- Increased vetting screening for green card, asylum and naturalization applicants.
- Added questions to the Citizenship Test.

FOCUS ON SECTORS WITH LARGE IMMIGRANT WORKFORCES

The Commonwealth’s economy depends heavily on immigrant workers across several industries, especially in healthcare, construction, higher education, and the broader knowledge economy. While immigrants make up about 20 percent of the Commonwealth’s population, they account for 24 percent of the labor force. The Migration Policy Institute’s latest estimates suggest that about 357,000 of the labor force¹ are undocumented.¹⁸

When we look at specific sectors, we see that immigrants are over-represented in industries like healthcare and social assistance, comprising 25 percent of jobs. In construction, immigrants account for 30 percent of all workers. And in the transportation sector, over a third of workers are foreign-born.

What makes Massachusetts unique, though, is not just the size of its immigrant labor force, but also its distribution. At the top end, Massachusetts universities, hospitals, research institutions, and technology firms draw highly educated workers from around the world.

At the other end of the labor market, immigrants are key to many of the jobs that keep the broader economy functioning day to day, such as waste management, transportation, and healthcare support.

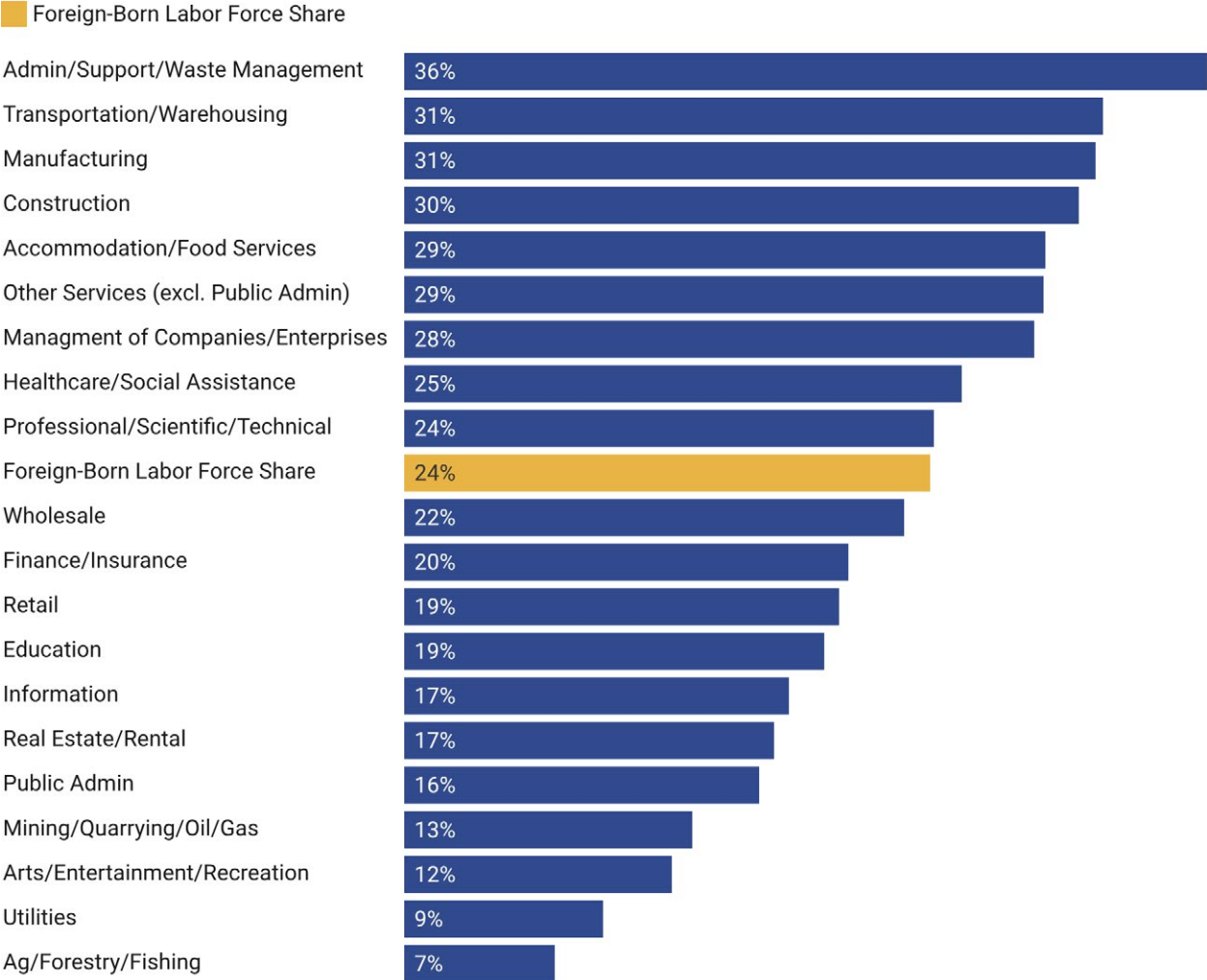
The educational spread of immigrants in Massachusetts creates a “U-shaped” distribution. Nearly one-third of immigrants in the state labor force have a master’s degree or more, compared to roughly one-fifth of native-born residents. And more than one-third of immigrant workers in Massachusetts have only a high school diploma or less.

While immigrants make up about 20 percent of the Commonwealth’s population, they account for **24 percent of the labor force.**

1. MPI defines labor force as those ages 16 and up.

Industries in Massachusetts by immigrant share.

Foreign-born share of Massachusetts workforce. 2024

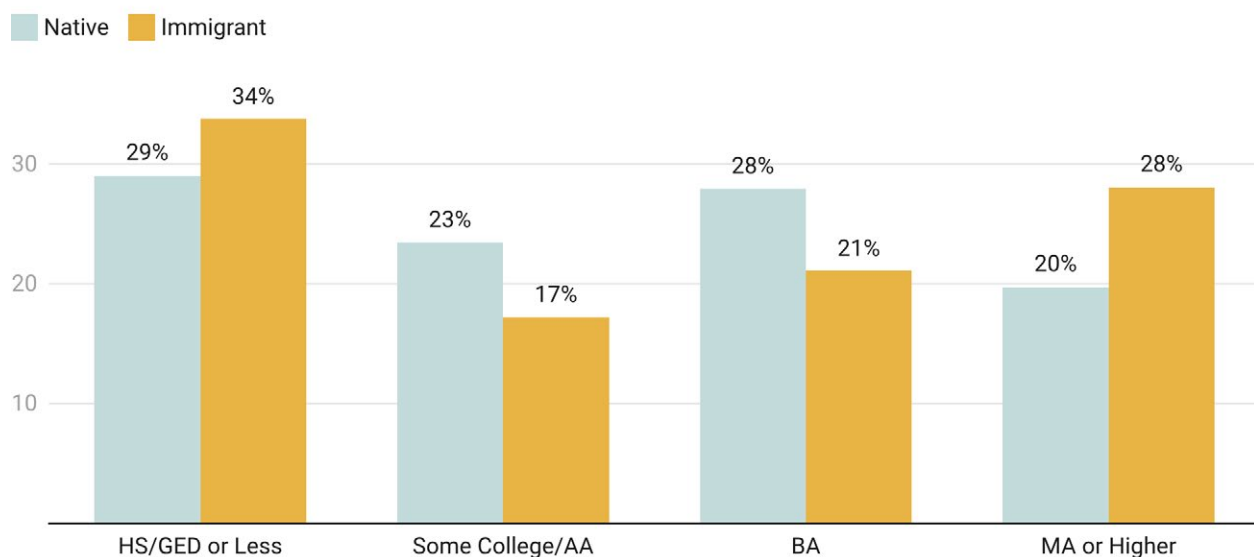


Note: Sample includes only working age adults (16-64)

Chart: Boston Indicators • Source: IPUMS: American Community Survey, 2024 1-Year Estimates • Created with Datawrapper

The U-shaped distribution of immigrant workers in Massachusetts.

Share of Massachusetts native-born and foreign-born workers by education level. 2024.



Note: Sample is limited to working age adults (16-64)

Chart: Boston Indicators • Source: IPUMS: American Community Survey, 2024 1-Year Estimates • Created with Datawrapper

Higher Education and the Knowledge Economy

The U-shaped educational distribution in Massachusetts results in a labor force where immigrants simultaneously staff the research labs driving the state’s innovation economy and the construction sites, care facilities, restaurants, and service-sector jobs that support daily life across the Commonwealth.

To better understand how the immigration crackdown is affecting these workers and sectors on the ground in Massachusetts, we conducted interviews with employers, industry associations, workforce organizations, and service providers in healthcare, construction, life sciences, and the broader research economy. We selected these sectors because they combine large immigrant labor force shares with strategic importance to the Massachusetts economy, while also spanning both ends of the labor market’s immigrant-heavy “U-shaped” distribution, from lower-wage service and trades work to highly skilled research roles.

Across industries, one theme surfaced repeatedly: Fear and uncertainty are functioning as economic disruptors in their own right. Immigrant workers have heightened concerns about arrest and deportation, and employers described growing difficulty planning for the future due to an unstable labor force amid compliance changes and shifting work authorization processes.

Across industries, one theme surfaced repeatedly: **Fear and uncertainty** are functioning as economic disruptors in their own right.

Our state’s knowledge economy, anchored by universities, hospitals, biotech firms, and other research institutions, depends heavily on global talent. International students, foreign-born researchers, and high-skilled workers are critical to the state’s innovation ecosystem, from university labs to early-stage biotech startups.

International students contribute to the local economy directly through tuition payments, but also indirectly through spending on housing, food, transportation, and other local services. Massachusetts has the largest international student population in the country as a share of total higher education enrollment, and the fourth largest by total number of students, behind only California, New York, and Texas.¹⁹

NAFSA, a nonprofit association that promotes international education and exchange, has a useful tool to quantify the monetary contribution that international students bring to local economies. Furthermore, NAFSA predicts that current anti-immigration tactics could depress foreign student enrollment by 30 to 40 percent.²⁰

To estimate the potential negative effects of a smaller international student population, we adapt the NAFSA economic contribution model to Massachusetts. We find that international students contributed roughly \$5.7 billion to the Massachusetts economy during the 2024–2025 academic year. However, if NAFSA’s predictions come to fruition, a 30 percent drop in our international enrollment could result in a loss of more than \$1.7 billion annually.

International students contribute more than \$5 billion to the state economy.

Annual estimates of the financial contribution that international students add to the Massachusetts economy.

Fall Year ▲	International Undergraduate Students	International Graduate Students	Total Contribution	Difference
2024-25	\$2.41B	\$3.25B	\$5.67B	NA
2025-26	\$2.51B	\$3.2B	\$5.71B	\$40.05M
2026-27 (backfilled)	\$1.88B	\$2.4B	\$4.28B	-\$1.42B

Note: These estimates are calculated using an adapted model by NAFSA: Association of International Educators. The 2026-27 (backfilled) estimates are based on an assumption that schools with an acceptance rate of 20% or lower can backfill international enrollment declines with domestic students.

Table: Boston Indicators • Source: Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) and Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) • Created with Datawrapper

In the table above, we assume that some highly selective institutions might offset those losses by enrolling more domestic students, but even then, we find that the economic hit to Massachusetts would likely still exceed \$1.4 billion. Even if these institutions could backfill any enrollment drops, international students, on average, still pay more to study than domestic students.

Many international students hope to remain in Massachusetts after graduation, often transitioning onto H-1B visas that allow employers to sponsor highly skilled workers in fields like life sciences, engineering, healthcare, and technology. For Massachusetts, this pipeline from local colleges to the H-1B program has been an important mechanism for recruiting and retaining global talent.

To reduce the number of new immigrants coming to the U.S. on an H-1B visa, the administration imposed a \$100,000 fee on new H-1B applications for workers living outside the United States, effective as of September 2025. Previously the filing fees, not including attorney fees, could add up to about \$5,000.²¹

We have yet to see clear evidence of a large drop in new H-1B applications so far, but in our interviews with life sciences representatives, the new H-1B fee was of concern. This fee could be cost-prohibitive for many early-stage companies that are facing tight financial conditions due to venture capital disinvestment and cuts to federal grants, including NIH funding cuts. As a life sciences industry association representative put it, “For young companies working off venture capital dollars that have no revenue...\$100,000 is a hell of a lot of money.”

Interviewees explained that employers are not broadly avoiding immigrant workers. Rather, companies are being more selective in a softer labor market. When necessary, firms will still sponsor highly specialized talent but are increasingly reluctant to navigate uncertain authorization processes for less specialized roles. Some firms are reportedly moving employees or future hiring plans to satellite offices abroad because they no longer trust the stability or predictability of the U.S. immigration system.

While proponents of the fee claim that this will force firms to hire locally, research finds that firms are more likely to send jobs offshore²² or close altogether.²³ For example, one study found that for every 10 H-1B visas denied, four jobs were offshored.

During Trump’s first term, denial rates for new H-1B applicants rose sharply relative to the Obama and Biden years, raising the likelihood that more denials are on the horizon. In reviewing the total number of denials each year during the Obama and Biden terms, we found that the first Trump administration was five times more likely to deny new H-1B applicants.²⁴

—
“For young companies working off venture capital dollars that have no revenue...\$100,000 is a hell of a lot of money.”

— A life sciences industry association representative

We estimate that if history repeats itself, the Trump administration could deny upwards of 7,000 visas in Massachusetts over the second term, which could lead to nearly 3,000 jobs being offshored, along with the salaries and economic activity they generate. This is a conservative estimate, since a drop in new applications might also force firms to offshore operations altogether.

Our interviewees also described barriers when hiring entry-level employees with more complex work authorization processes. In some cases, foreign-born workers complete training programs for roles like lab operations and biomanufacturing and secure job offers, but they remain unable to start work due to government processing delays. Community college workforce development staff described work authorization complexity as one of the largest barriers to successful job placement.

At the same time, demand for entry-level life sciences jobs has softened due to layoffs and industry contraction. A representative at a life sciences workforce training program reported smaller class sizes and increased competition for entry-level roles from candidates with bachelor's and master's degrees. In that environment, factors like work authorization and English language proficiency increasingly function as informal screening criteria.

These trends matter not only for today's labor market but for Massachusetts' long-term innovation economy. A quasi-public economic development agency we interviewed expects hiring demand to rebound, citing that more companies are applying for job creation tax incentives than in 2025. But whether the Commonwealth will continue attracting and retaining the global talent pipeline that fueled its growth over the last several decades is an open question.

Healthcare Support

The state's healthcare system depends heavily on immigrant workers across the occupational spectrum, from physicians, surgeons, researchers, to frontline caregivers working in nursing homes, hospitals, and home healthcare. We focus mostly on frontline care roles—home healthcare workers, certified nursing assistants (CNAs), housekeeping staff and nurses—where immigrant workers are highly concentrated and where workforce instability is already having effects.

Massachusetts Senior Care Association estimates that 40 percent of Massachusetts nursing facility workers are foreign-born and around 2,000 frontline workers are Haitian TPS recipients. Industry representatives described the uncertainty surrounding TPS as one of the most immediate threats facing the healthcare workforce. Nursing homes are particularly vulnerable because they already operate with thin margins and chronic staffing shortages. According to Massachusetts Senior Care Association, nursing facilities in the state currently face vacancy rates in direct care roles of around 13 percent, even before accounting for potential immigration-related workforce losses.

According to Massachusetts Senior Care Association, nursing facilities in the state currently **face vacancy rates in direct care roles of around 13 percent**, even before accounting for potential immigration-related workforce losses.

Several healthcare organizations reported that labor force losses are already under way due to other policy changes, including the termination of the Biden-era humanitarian parole program for Cubans, Haitians, Nicaraguans, and Venezuelans (CHNV program), along with the rollback of automatic work authorization renewals. After the CHNV program was terminated in a single federal action on March 25, 2025, an interviewee at one long-term care organization described suddenly losing approximately 50 workers; most were CNAs. Another long-term care organization also reported losing a significant number of workers that one day, stating, “This is an impossible way to operate a business.” JVS Boston staff estimated that roughly 200 clients moved from work-eligible to ineligible over a single day due to federal changes. Massachusetts Senior Care Association representatives reported similar losses across their member facilities. Employers described scrambling to replace workers through overtime, per diem pools, sign-on bonuses, and internal training programs.

At the same time, federal processing delays and shorter work authorization periods are creating additional instability. Healthcare representatives described workers losing eligibility not because they were denied status, but because renewals had not been processed in time.

The consequences can ripple throughout the healthcare system. Nursing homes operating below staffing targets are forced to limit admissions, leaving patients stuck in hospitals longer and worsening emergency room bottlenecks. As a representative from Massachusetts Senior Care Association explained, more than 1,000 patients may be waiting on a given day for discharge into post-acute settings that lack sufficient staffing capacity to accept them.

Industry leaders also emphasized that the effects extend beyond immigrant workers themselves. When CNAs or aides lose work authorization and leave, nurses and remaining staff must absorb additional direct-care responsibilities, increasing burnout and turnover pressures across the broader industry. And because these are client-facing roles—aides who care for patients every day—it takes a toll on patient care too.

Employers described repeated cycles of emergency workforce planning as TPS deadlines are announced, delayed by courts, and then threatened again. JVS Boston also reported seeing a growing, though illegal, tendency among some employers—in healthcare and other fields—to avoid hiring workers with temporary or uncertain work authorization for fears that the workers may lose eligibility in the future.

At the same time, many employers are going to considerable lengths to retain workers. Some facilities described helping employees connect with immigration attorneys and allowing workers temporary leave periods while they sought renewed authorization.

Healthcare organizations also reported that workers are not the only ones affected by anti-immigrant policies. Besides experiencing potential lapses in care from overstressed staff, several interviewees said immigrant patients are increasingly skipping appointments or delaying care out of fear of ICE enforcement. This in turn leads to more severe health issues and more expensive emergency treatment later.

These workforce pressures are arriving simultaneously with federal Medicaid cuts and rising labor costs, leaving providers squeezed from multiple directions at once. As one industry representative summarized, “The only certainty is uncertainty.”

Construction

Construction is another sector where immigrant labor plays an outsized role. Contractors and developers repeatedly described immigrant workers, particularly from Brazil and Latin America, as essential to the functioning of Greater Boston's construction industry.

According to the Joint Center for Housing Studies at Harvard University, the U.S. construction industry has faced persistent labor shortages since the mid-2000s, when the Great Recession eliminated nearly one million construction jobs.²⁵ The construction industry never fully recovered. Massachusetts already faced difficulty recruiting enough domestic workers into these trades before President Trump took office.

The Statewide Housing Plan for 2025 to 2029 identifies construction labor as a constraint to meeting the state's housing production goals.²⁶ It reports that despite 43 percent growth in residential construction employment and 53 percent growth in specialty trade contractors between 2012 to 2023, residential construction employment is only modestly above pre-pandemic levels and remains insufficient to meet demand.²⁷

The Statewide Housing Plan for 2025 to 2029 identifies construction labor as a **constraint to meeting the state's housing production goals.**

Industry representatives described fear of immigration enforcement as the most immediate source of disruption. While at this point, these disruptions don't appear to be stopping construction altogether or leading to abandoned projects, they introduce inefficiencies, extend project timelines, and add costs. Even rumors of ICE activity near job sites can cause workers, including workers with legal authorization, to stop showing up. One developer recounted how reports of ICE activity in East Boston effectively halted subcontracted work across multiple projects for an entire day.

Contractors also described workers self-deporting or leaving the U.S. voluntarily because of the increasingly hostile climate. In one case, a subcontractor lost four foremen at once. Another HVAC subcontractor lost its lead foreman when he returned to Brazil, forcing the company owner to personally manage site operations instead of running the business.

These disruptions are especially damaging because experienced construction crews function through accumulated institutional knowledge and coordination. When crews disappear mid-project, replacing them is costly and inefficient.

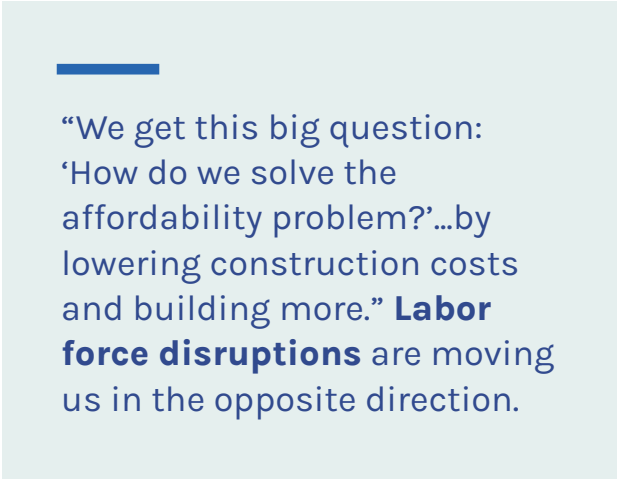
Subcontractors appear to be absorbing the greatest strain. Subcontracted trades like framing, concrete, and painting rely most heavily on immigrant labor and are losing workers in real time. One general contractor reported that replacing a subcontractor mid-project often costs at least 10 percent more than the original contract amount, while delays create additional carrying costs for developers through continued mortgage payments, insurance, taxes, and financing expenses. One contractor described workers becoming reluctant to travel to projects outside dense urban areas because of fears about being stopped by ICE while driving through suburban or rural areas.

Developers emphasized that these immigration-related disruptions are arriving alongside other severe cost pressures, including high interest rates and tariffs on construction materials. Several described a growing inability to predict project costs with confidence.

Affordable housing developers may be especially vulnerable because they have little financial flexibility to absorb delays and overruns. One affordable housing organization described a project being delayed for several months because of inconsistent subcontractor attendance, forcing them to requalify tenants and seek additional funding to cover carrying costs.

The consequences extend beyond the construction firms themselves. Delays in housing production mean fewer units delivered into an already constrained housing market, prolonging housing instability for households waiting on affordable units or competing in the broader market.

As one contractor put it: “We get this big question: ‘How do we solve the affordability problem?’...by lowering construction costs and building more.” Labor force disruptions are moving us in the opposite direction.



“We get this big question: ‘How do we solve the affordability problem?’...by lowering construction costs and building more.” **Labor force disruptions** are moving us in the opposite direction.

GATEWAY CITIES AS INCUBATORS FOR OUR FUTURE LABOR FORCE

Gateway Cities are home to roughly 25 percent of Massachusetts residents, but they contain 40 percent of the state’s foreign-born population and more than half of newly arrived immigrants. Many of these former mill cities experienced decades of economic decline, population loss, disinvestment, and weakening commercial districts following deindustrialization in the mid-to-late 20th century. Fortunately, over the past two decades, immigrant workers, families, and entrepreneurs have significantly revitalized these communities by reactivating their commercial corridors. Immigration has also had an important stabilizing effect on Gateway City housing markets.

These urban areas are no longer primarily manufacturing centers, and even if domestic production were to return to Massachusetts, it is unlikely that they would ever house many modern factories, given their density and lack of available land. Today, Gateway Cities contribute to their regional and statewide economies primarily through the development of human capital. To continue serving as large and relatively youthful population centers, they depend heavily on a steady stream of new Americans.

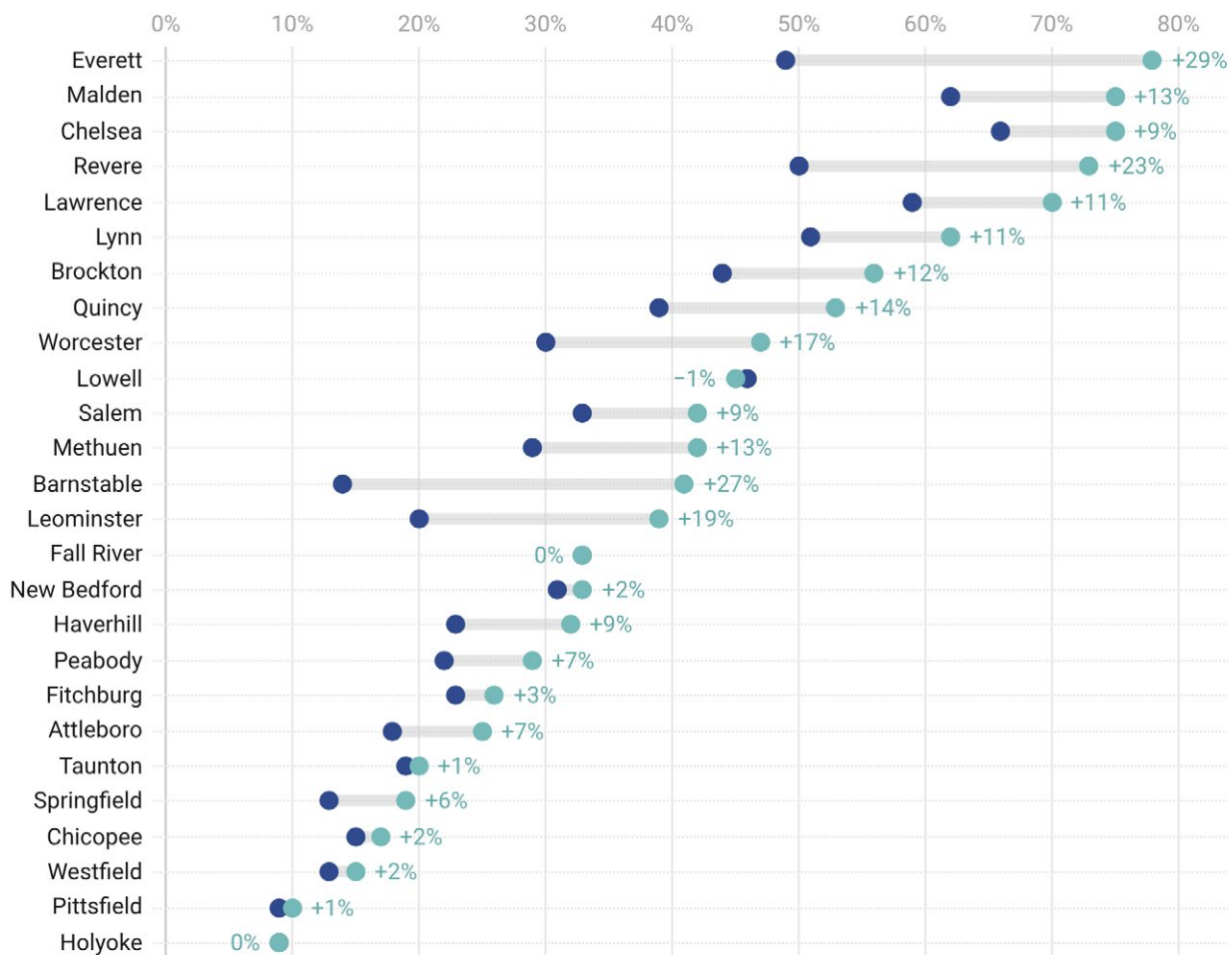
Gateway Cities are home to roughly 25 percent of Massachusetts residents, but they contain **40 percent of the state’s foreign-born population** and more than half of newly arrived immigrants.

The graph below shows the percentage point change in children ages six to 17 with at least one immigrant parent between 2010 and 2024. This group of children will enter the labor force over the next 10 years. Blue dots show the proportion with immigrant parentage in 2010 and green dots in 2024. With the exception of Holyoke and Lowell, the share has increased in every Gateway City.

Over the next decade, the offspring of immigrants as a share of new workers will increase dramatically in Everett (29 percentage points), Malden (13 percentage points), and Revere (23 percentage points). Further from Boston, there will also be especially sharp growth in Barnstable (27 percentage points), Leominster (19 percentage points), and Methuen (13 percentage points).

Immigration is generating an increasingly large share of future labor force entrants in Gateway Cities.

Percentage point change 2010 to 2024 in kids 6 to 17 y.o. w/ at least one foreign-born parent.



Source: American Community Survey • Created with Datawrapper

In 17 of the 26 Gateway Cities, children with at least one immigrant parent now make up one-third or more of the future labor force. In eight Gateway Cities, immigration will be responsible for more than half of new labor force entrants.

Given Massachusetts' increasing dependence on immigration to sustain its labor force, the ability of Gateway Cities to continue receiving immigrants and preparing their children to thrive in the state's economy is critical. The challenge extends far beyond the current crackdown. The absence of sound immigration policy at the federal level makes it difficult for these communities to perform this function. While Gateway City residents have generally taken great pride in their cultural diversity, the stress imposed by uncertainty and the lack of federal assistance to destination communities could erode local support and make it more difficult for them to welcome newcomers in the future.

The pressures that Gateway Cities have felt over the past few years may help explain part of the political backlash that emerged in 2024. Large numbers of voters in these communities supported President Trump, including in Fall River, where residents backed the Republican presidential candidate for the first time in a century.

The fast pace and scale of arrivals during 2022, 2023, and 2024 created short-term challenges in many Gateway Cities, including around housing availability and school capacity. With rising costs outpacing earnings for lower-wage workers, it may have also bred concern about an excess labor supply.

For many Gateway City residents, both immigrant and native, rapidly rising housing costs are the foremost problem. Immigration can increase demand for homes, and housing supply has not risen to match demand. This is particularly acute in Gateway City real estate markets because large gaps often loom between the cost of building new housing units and the amount of financing that rents can support at current levels. While housing production in Gateway Cities has increased over the past several years, construction continues to lag household growth, and prices in many of these communities have been climbing much faster than state averages.

Studies with robust controls have found that immigration can significantly increase housing costs in receiving cities, independent of other factors, especially in places where housing supply is inelastic.²⁸ However, it is important to recognize that immigration is likely only responsible for a modest portion of the sharp housing cost increases Gateway City residents have endured in recent years.

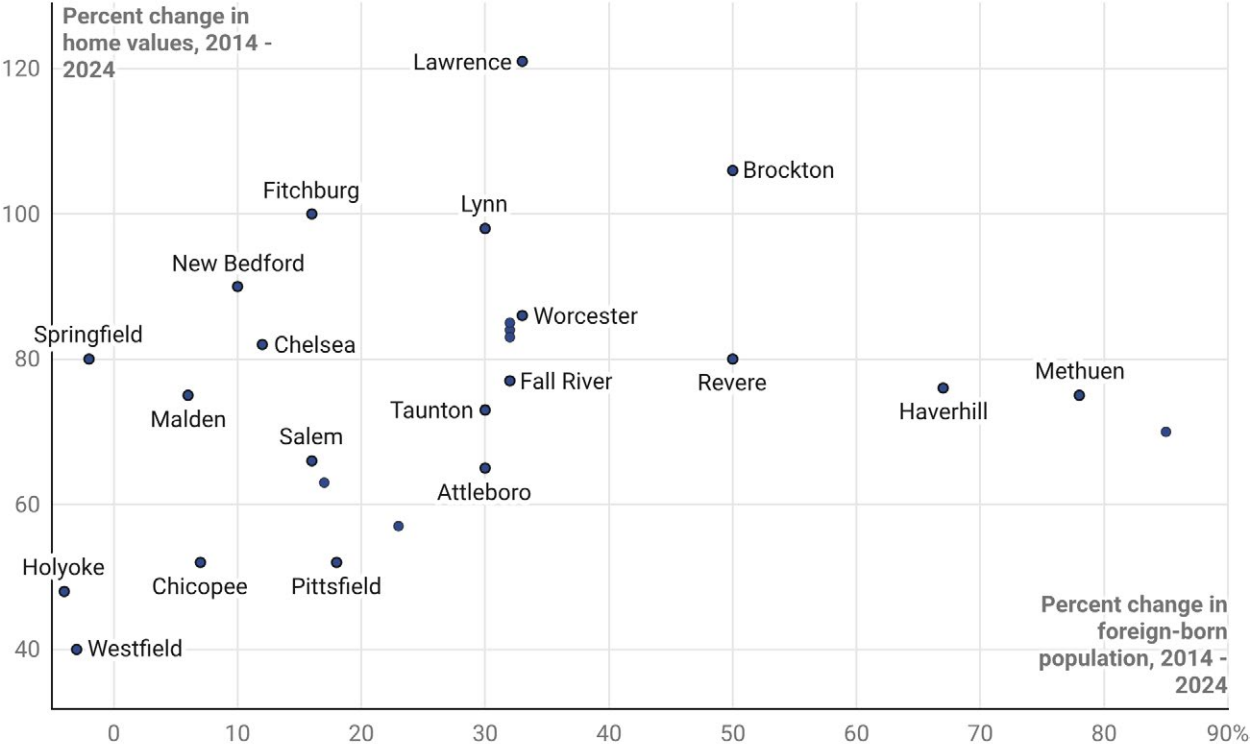
The graph below shows the relationship between home prices and immigration in each of the 26 Gateway Cities between 2014 and 2024. Home values increased just as rapidly in Springfield as in Revere, even though Springfield experienced a decline in its foreign-born population, while Revere's foreign-born population grew by roughly 50 percent over this period.

Moreover, immigration has been key to reducing vacancy and the threat to neighborhoods posed by blighted and abandoned property—not that long ago many of these communities were struggling from high levels of vacancy brought about by the Great Recession era foreclosure crisis.

There is general agreement that local, state, and federal policy change is needed to boost housing production, and there should be extra focus on providing additional support to communities that are playing an outsized role welcoming new Americans.

While housing production in Gateway Cities has increased over the past several years, **construction continues to lag household growth**, and prices in many of these communities have been climbing much faster than state averages.

Increases in Gateway City home values do not correlate closely with increases in their foreign-born populations.



Source: American Community Survey (five-year sample) and Zillow • Created with Datawrapper

Another adjustment concern is the notion that immigrants are taking jobs, suppressing wages, or reducing job quality for longer-standing residents. Particularly in places with weaker regional economies and lower-income workers, the economy can feel deeply zero-sum. And when lower-skilled workers have difficulty earning sufficient income to support a family, it has real impacts on their children and the productivity of the future labor force.

Researchers have examined this issue for decades. The broad consensus is that immigration has relatively small effects on the wages and labor force participation of native-born workers overall. Some studies have found lower-skilled native workers are somewhat more likely to experience negative short-term labor market effects from a sharp increase in immigration, but even in these instances, the impact is likely to be very modest.²⁹

Our simple correlations show the growth in the foreign-born low-skilled labor force in Gateway Cities is largely uncorrelated with earnings growth for lower-skilled workers over the past decade. This suggests immigrants have been moving to cities and regions where there is unmet demand for lower-skilled workers. If matching supply and demand becomes more difficult with tighter housing markets, this could be more difficult in the future, which reinforces the need for greater effort to support housing production in cities with growing immigrant populations.

A final concern for Gateway Cities and the state's future labor force is the impact of large immigration flows on school performance. Many Gateway City school districts have seen dramatic growth in numbers of students with limited English over the past 10 years. On average, English Language Learner (ELL) enrollment has increased by 40 percent across the 26 Gateway Cities combined. The upticks have been especially large in Fall River (213 percent), Taunton (210 percent), Everett (163 percent), and Lynn (144 percent).³⁰

In schools with large numbers of students with limited English, teachers may slow the pace of instruction and lower academic expectations. Meeting the needs of newcomers may also reduce resource availability on a per-pupil basis. Several studies have explored these issues in other cities and states, yielding mixed results. Some researchers find that the arrival of more foreign-born students benefits non-native English speakers without reducing outcomes for native-born students. Others have found that schools experiencing rapid growth in foreign-born enrollment lose resources, with negative effects for Black and Hispanic native-born students.³¹

It is difficult to generalize these findings directly to Gateway Cities because Massachusetts provides significant additional funding to school districts for ELL students on a per-pupil basis. It has also provided emergency resources to help school districts respond to unexpected events, such as welcoming displaced students in the aftermath of Puerto Rico's 2017 Hurricane Maria.

In our assessment, test score patterns across Gateway Cities do not show a strong relationship between growth in non-native-English-speaking enrollment and changes in performance among native-English-speaking students. But many factors drive variation in student achievement across schools that simple correlations will obscure. Given the large implications of declining student achievement, and the considerable investment Massachusetts has made to support newcomers, further analysis is warranted to better understand how well receiving schools are serving all students.

Test score patterns across Gateway Cities do not show a strong relationship between **growth in ELL enrollment** and changes in performance among native-English-speaking students.

FROM RAPID GROWTH TO SUDDEN CONTRACTION

A rapid contraction in our immigrant population could prove even more destabilizing than the latest increase in new arrivals. If Massachusetts loses a large portion of its immigrant population, or these residents pull back from spending and public life out of fear or economic uncertainty, the effects will ripple well beyond immigrant communities. The Commonwealth could lose billions of dollars in economic activity each year. And Gateway Cities are uniquely vulnerable, with many still working to regain their footing after decades of post-industrial decline.

Furthermore, a leak in our talent pipeline could prove especially damaging to the “eds-and-meds” economy that has been resilient and serves as a competitive advantage for the Commonwealth. MIT, for instance, has led all U.S. universities in patents granted for 10 straight years.³² But MIT President Sally Kornbluth recently warned that policy changes are already discouraging “extremely talented individuals from applying to join our community,” while graduate enrollments outside a few programs are projected to fall by nearly 20 percent next year.³³ Uncertainty about research funding, rising immigration fees, and the perception of a hostile federal government could chill the flow of international talent that makes that record possible. This is not just a loss to the Commonwealth and the region, but to the nation.

And while population growth has put new pressures on state and local governments to provide adequate housing and education support, it has also boosted tax bases and filled gaps in industries facing chronic labor shortages. Previous decades of inaction by both political parties at the federal level have resulted in ad hoc immigration policies that fail to support new immigrants and their communities. Too often, state and local policymakers, businesses, and community leaders have had to step up and fill the gap. With a government in the White House that is hostile to immigrants, Massachusetts leaders need to stay vigilant. They need to pursue policies that can adjust to federal volatility, support local cities and towns so that they can plan and invest with new immigrants in mind, and combat hateful narratives that discourage new immigrants from coming here.

The challenge now is a new phase of uncertainty and potentially rapid outmigration. Real-time data on these shifts remain limited but reports of slowed business activity from Main Street business owners, declining school enrollments, and stories of families and communities living in fear signal that changes may already be under way. Nevertheless, uncertainty is never a good reason for complacency.

APPENDIX

Methods

NUMBER OF WORKERS THE COMMONWEALTH WOULD HAVE TO ATTRACT

Our analysis estimates the number of immigrants that Massachusetts will need each year between 2026 and 2030 to maintain the labor force at current levels. We start with a simplified cohort-aging model, assuming no migration. Younger age groups transition fully into older age cohorts and participate in the labor force at the current participation rates for workers in each of these age cohorts. To project the impact of domestic outmigration, we average domestic outmigration levels between 2022 and 2024. We estimate the share of these domestic outmigrants who are between the ages 20 to 64 in Massachusetts using the 2024 American Community Survey Public Use Microsample (five-year estimates). Similarly, to estimate the total number of immigrants needed to yield a sufficient number of replacements, we estimate the share of foreign-born residents in Massachusetts arriving from 2020 to 2024 who are labor force participants ages 20 to 64.

ECONOMIC CONTRIBUTION OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

We adapt the NAFSA model to estimate the total economic contribution that international students make to the local economy. Using the U.S. Department of Education's National Center of Educational Statistics Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), we estimate the total undergraduate and graduate costs, weighted by total international student enrollment numbers, using data from 2024. We include housing, tuition, fees, books and other school supplies, and other expenses for those living on campus for our undergraduate estimate. For graduate students, we use the same variables, but instead assume graduate students are more likely to live off campus and thus use a different variable that sums up the total expenses incurred by students who live off campus.

We estimate that highly competitive institutions could backfill their student enrollment with domestic students. We rerun the estimates assigning a "highly competitive" tag to any school that has an acceptance rate of 20 percent or lower and assume these schools will backfill any losses 100 percent.

This estimate only calculates the economic contribution of the international student. We recognize that many graduate students come over with their spouses, who also can contribute to the economy, but due to data limitations, we do not estimate the contributions of spouses.

H-1B OFFSHORING ESTIMATE

Because the H-1B application cycle lines up with the federal fiscal year, rather than the calendar year, we estimate the rate of yearly denials using only the three full fiscal years for Obama and Biden terms and exclude fiscal years with overlapping presidential administrations. We then take the yearly number of denials during the Obama and Biden terms as the baseline, which was 431 denials each year. In Trump's first term, denials were 2,245 above the baseline per year. To estimate the potential risk of jobs being offshored in Massachusetts, we multiple the total estimated denials during Trump's first term by 0.4.

QUALITATIVE

We conducted 19 semi-structured interviews with employers, industry associations, workforce and social service organizations, including eight in healthcare, six in construction, and five in life sciences. Interviews were conducted by video or phone and were recorded and transcribed with participant consent or documented through detailed notes. Several participants requested anonymity, and we were unable to interview certain key roles, notably subcontractors, despite repeated outreach. We believe both trends reflect the heightened climate of fear surrounding federal immigration enforcement. Interviews were analyzed thematically, with assistance from Claude, an AI-assisted research tool. All findings and editorial judgments are the authors' own.

SPENDING POWER

To estimate spending power, we use a similar method as the American Immigration Council and the New Economy. They define spending power as the disposable income left after subtracting state, local and federal taxes. We limit our sample to only foreign-born heads of households. To estimate the state and local taxes rates, we use ITEP's "Who Pays? 7th Edition." We use the Congressional Research Services' report for 2024 to estimate the federal tax rates.

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