

EconoFact Chats: Immigration Enforcement in the U.S.

Tara Watson, The Brookings Institution

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I'm Michael Klein, executive editor of EconoFact, a non-partisan, web-based publication of The Fletcher School at Tufts University. At EconoFact, we bring key facts and incisive analysis to the national debate on economic and social policies, publishing work from leading economists across the country. You can learn more about us and see our work at www.econofact.org.

Michael Klein

Hi everyone, and welcome to this EconoFact Ask Me Anything Webinar. We're very pleased today to have with us Tara Watson of the Brookings Institution. Tara is an expert on immigration policy. She's the Director for Economic Security and Opportunity at Brookings, and is the John C. and Nancy D. Whitehead Chair. She's also a Senior Fellow in the Economic Studies Group at Brookings, and she's a Research Associate of the National Bureau of Economic Research. I've interviewed Tara before for EconoFact Chats, and she's contributed memos to the site. I was especially interested in her 2021 book, which was co-authored with the journalist Kaylee Thompson, called 'The Border Within: The Economics of Immigration in an Age of Fear.' Tara, thanks very much for joining us today and we're glad to be talking to you about this really vital issue, something that's at the top of people's concerns in many ways. So to start off, Tara, what has been happening to overall immigration flows in the United States? And if you could talk about not just over the last nine months, but in the years before that as well.

Tara Watson

Sure. So of course we had the COVID crisis, and that largely slowed down immigration flows to just a few hundred thousand immigrants coming into the country on net, which was much lower than we had seen throughout the 2010s. We were very early, around a million a year in terms of net migration. But as we came out of the COVID era, we had a really dramatic rebound of immigration, and even sort of surpassing what we would have expected as rebound activity into very high levels of immigration activity. Net migration was over 3 million in 2023. It was close to that and 2024. But in the second half of 2024 it started to slow down, due in part to some policy changes that the Biden administration had made to tighten up the border. And then once Trump took office, we see a really dramatic slowdown at the border, especially. So many fewer people coming across the border, and also fewer people but less dramatic changes coming in the regular way through ports of entry, and we also see more people leaving than otherwise we would have expected. So on net, what that means is that immigration this year will be much much lower than it has been for the past few years. My colleagues and I have predicted that it

could, in fact, be negative for the year, meaning that there are more people leaving the US than there are coming into the US.

Michael Klein

And I think that's been the Congressional Budget Office...looked at that as well, right? And they came to the same conclusion.

Tara Watson

They've greatly revised down their number. So back in December or January, they had a projection for the year that was around 2 million in net migration, and last week, they released a new report where they had lowered that to 400,000. So they're still in positive territory, but definitely much lower than what we were expecting this time last year, and also what's been the norm for the past couple of years.

Michael Klein

It would be rather striking if the population is declining or the workforce is declining. What are some of the economic consequences of that?

Tara Watson

So I think as a point of context for that question, it's important to understand that the US born population is not growing very quickly. As you know, we're an aging population, and we've had declining fertility. So what that means is that from US born people alone, we're not growing the labor force to any significant degree. So the counter point to that is that it means that almost all, or in some cases, all of our labor force growth is coming from the foreign born population or immigrants, and it's therefore really important to have immigrants coming in if we want to have the labor force growing. Why is it important to have the labor force growing? We know that having more people in the labor force means that they're creating more demand for goods and services, and they're also supplying goods and services by helping in production. And so keeping the economy growing overall really requires more bodies coming into the economy, and it's also important for things like our fiscal trajectory to have more people coming in, contributing to systems like Social Security, and working before they hit retirement age.

Michael Klein

So I'd like to unpack that a little bit. Tara. First off, with people coming in and contributing as workers, I guess that if you think about immigrants, there's a difference between what documented immigrants are doing...H1B people, or people come in with extraordinary ability, and what undocumented immigrants are doing. And so the industries that are being affected most would be quite distinct, but they're also, you know, are going to be greatly affected. So can you speak to that a little bit?

Tara Watson

Sure. So there is a...if you think about the distribution of education for immigrants, it's very heavily weighted towards the ends of the distribution. So immigrants are more likely to have PhD or other advanced degrees compared to the US born, but they're also more likely not to have a high school education. I don't think it necessarily lines up perfectly with the undocumented, documented categorization. Certainly the high end that I talked about is mostly documented immigrants, and that is a place the tech sector benefits from a lot. So we have a lot of representation from immigrants from around the world with a lot of technical skill, that are innovators, that have good know-how to make things happen. And we've been the primary destination for that global talent for quite some time, and because that group is largely documented, they're not being directly targeted by the enforcement activity that we're seeing, but they are certainly still affected by the overall climate and environment here, and so I do have some concerns that we may squander our position as the number one place that people want to go to do this very technical, skilled work. On the other side, of course, we all know that immigrants are just personally represented in some of our important industries, like construction, personal care, home health aides, restaurants, hotels, and that's a mix of documented and undocumented immigrants. Those that are directly impacted by the enforcement activity are of course potentially at risk of being removed from the labor force through deportation, but also, many people are rethinking what they want to do, how exposed they want to be, and even though many of the group that I just described have legal status, they may have family members or community members who are undocumented, and so their behavior may be directly affected by the enforcement activity as well.

Michael Klein

And what about not just people coming into the country, but out-migration?

Tara Watson

Yes, so out-migration is trickier to measure than in migration because we don't have great records and we never have, on the number of people leaving. Deportations have ramped up. It took the administration a little while to get going on that. But from what we can tell, based on the data we have available, which is imperfect, it appears that just in the past few months, things have really ramped up, and we're deporting more than 1,000 people a day. We also think, based on talking to people who work in these communities, that there are a lot of people choosing to leave, who may be undocumented, may have family members who were removed or deported, or who may have legal status, but just decide this isn't the place they want to settle long-term. The numbers on that are harder to measure, but I believe they're probably fairly sizable, and proportional to the degree of enforcement that we see. So if we do continue to see enforcement ramp up, which I think will happen, given the large influx of money that's coming into that effort, through the Big, Beautiful Bill Act, we will probably see more people who are voluntarily leaving as well.

Michael Klein

In the New York Times a few days ago, there's an article about the tensions within the administration, because business interests in certain sectors are being hard hit by this out-migration or lack of immigration, whereas the more nativist part of the administration is still supporting that. How do you see that playing out?

Tara Watson

I think it's tough to say. There's definitely a wing of the administration that is very committed to a nativist approach and excited about doing more deportation. And at the same time, there are specific business interests that are starting to be a bit more vocal about the cost that that entails for businesses and for the economy in general. It's possible that the administration will start to pull back, and you've seen some evidence of the President saying things like we're going to exclude this particular group from deportation. Efforts like hotel workers are going to be excluded, or they apologized about the raid they did on the Korean plant last week, but what I am not sure about is whether those are just one off pronouncements, or whether they'll actually change what's happening on the ground. It certainly seems like the overarching push towards a very aggressive enforcement strategy is well underway, and it's not really slowing down, even when there are these moments of pulling back in specific areas.

Michael Klein

So you mentioned hospitality, or I mentioned, I guess hospitality, agriculture, I guess health services is also important.

Tara Watson

Yes.

Michael Klein

Can you speak about those and perhaps any other sectors that will be particularly hard hit, and also, at the other end, maybe with tech. Are we seeing any effects on tech yet?

Tara Watson

Yeah, I don't think we've seen you can really see it in the numbers yet on the tech side, and even on the lower education profession side. You see some downturn in jobs in industries that employ a lot of unauthorized immigrants, for example. But it's hard to tell quite how far that's going based on the data we have so far. So it's going to take a little bit of time for all this to unwind. Certainly, agriculture is a big concern. I should have mentioned it in my list earlier. Roughly half of the people working in the fields are unauthorized. And we also see in the health sector, there's direct care workers who are very disproportionately immigrant or unauthorized immigrants, and also doctors and nurses are also heavily represented with immigrants. So we rely really in a lot of

different sectors on immigrant labor. And if we do see this sustained change in the number of immigrants that we have there will be some reorganization. So if you think about agriculture, for example, some industries just won't survive long-term without immigrant labor, and we'll start importing those particular fruits and vegetables, and maybe the agricultural industry will have to move towards things that are more automated, and less towards things that require people to do a lot of the work of actually harvesting the crops.

Michael Klein

So beyond harvesting, is also like meat packing, right...is something...and so I guess we could expect to see, if employers are finding it harder to find workers, we're going to see shortened supply, we're going to see higher prices and those kinds of things.

Tara Watson

Yeah, and you'd expect more offshoring. I think part of the goal of some of these efforts is to have more American workers, US born workers employed in these industries. Historically, that happens in some places, but not in places like meat packing, which is very dangerous and difficult work. There's just not a lot of supply of American workers who are interested in that. So you want to think about, can the industry be easily offshored? Are there a lot of American workers who are eager to do the work, and how quickly could this be automated? So those things in conjunction with each other, determine what's likely to happen in terms of prices and whether we will still have the industry in the US.

Michael Klein

Tara, do we know what's happening with deportations? Of course, President Trump came in saying, you know he's going to deport, what did he say, something like 15 million people or some very, very large number, and you pointed out in an earlier EconoFact memo how the deportations under President Trump in his first administration were actually lower than under President Obama. So do we know what's going on with deportations in the eight or nine months since President Trump has taken office?

Tara Watson

We have some information. Unfortunately, we don't have the kind of reliable data that we would really need to nail this down. The administration has leaked, or had some press calls where they've thrown around numbers where it's not quite clear what they are referring to as a deportation. It's actually a relatively complicated issue of who you count. Do you count someone who's just shown up at the border and has been formally removed? Are you only thinking about people who are living here? But we do have some data that we've been using, and this is a data source that The New York Times has also been drawing on, that seems to be reasonable. And based on that, it looks like the first half of the year or so, again it looked like deportations were

not increasing as much as we might have expected based on the rhetoric. But starting this summer, things really have picked up, and I attribute that to, it just took a little while for the machinery to get going. There is a challenge with...in order to deport someone, you usually need to have them in detention for a short time to do the processing. And there was limited capacity for that. We've now built a lot of temporary detention capacity, and so a lot more people are being detained. And I don't think this is the main thing that's happening, but there are, of course, some instances of the normal due process that would be happening that would slow down deportations, because people have, for the most part, some legal right to talk to a judge before they're removed. That's not always happening, and so that also facilitates some of this. So just in the past few months, it looks like things have ramped up to over 1,000 people a day, and I expect that will continue to ramp up. We have the new funds coming in from the budget bill, and so they'll be erecting more detention facilities. And of course, we know that they're directing more resources towards arresting people as well. And so all of that, I think, will lead to more deportations in the second half of the year and next year.

Michael Klein

Do we have any idea how many people are not being afforded due process?

Tara Watson

We don't have a good number on that. What I've heard about is mainly anecdotes and specific things that have been in the news. But I think in general, for the most part, the rules are being followed with some exceptions.

Michael Klein

So we're talking about numbers here. But one of the attendees asked whether there are any changes in the quality of the immigration data or access to the data makes us more uncertain. Of course, recently we've seen the issues of the Commissioner of the Bureau of Labor Statistics being fired because of numbers that came out about that, and there is great concern now about the quality of government data and statistics. Is this extending to the immigration numbers as well?

Tara Watson

Yeah, to some extent it is. So people who study immigration rely on various reports that the administration puts out, and some of those were paused at the beginning of the administration and have resumed. So we do have more information than we did say in March, but other things aren't being reported very reliably, and that includes those deportation numbers that I just mentioned. People are doing FOIA (Freedom of Information Act) requests to try to get better information, but things have been slow to come out, and I think part of it is that people within the administration are trying to be careful about releasing numbers that don't align with the

administration's priorities. So for example, if there was a slow start to deportations, they didn't necessarily want to make that widely known early in the administration. So yes, there are some data concerns, especially with regard to removals, and some of the visa numbers are just a little slower to come in, so things like that. We'll have to see. It's not clear whether this is just things being slow walked, or whether this is going to be an ongoing problem. Like I said, some things had been sort of paused and have now resumed. So that's heartening.

Michael Klein

Your book, as I mentioned, the title of your book is called “The Border Within.” What did you mean by that? How did that make the title, and what are the implications of “the border within?”

Tara Watson

So the book is mainly focused on interior enforcement. So there was a period during the Biden administration where the book that came out in 2021 seemed a little...bit seemed like the focus was not quite the right focus for the moment, but now that we're in this current moment, it's actually more relevant again, which is the fact that enforcement happens to a large degree, right now being a prime example of that, for people who are already living in the US, who have ties here. And so even though the border gets a lot of attention, there is also this sort of ‘border within,’ for lack of a better term, where people are on the outskirts of being fully integrated into society because of their legal status, and the risk of enforcement or removal.

Michael Klein

And so you pointed out that a lot of the deportations at the time you collected the data for the book were actually not people being turned back at the border, but a lot were people in the country being forced to leave. And I guess again, this is something that's becoming more and more true, right?

Tara Watson

Yes, definitely. And that is in large part because very few people are coming to the border now, and so even though most of them are being turned away and some of them are being formally removed in terms of the statistics, they're counting as a removal or deportation, because there are many fewer of them, much more of the enforcement activity is now in the interior. So it's completely changed from, say, 2023 where almost all of the enforcement activity was at the border.

Michael Klein

Moving into the legal sphere for a minute, refugees have a right to have their cases heard correct? And what's happening with that? And can you explain, what's the difference between a refugee and someone else who wants to enter the country?

Tara Watson

Sure. I would put it, maybe in three buckets. One is an asylum seeker, a second is a refugee, and a third is what you might think of as an economic migrant. And refugees are actually a relatively small group of people who are outside the US, who have been deemed by a third party to qualify for refugee status based on the fact that their safety is at risk if they are returned to their home country. They are vetted outside the country, and then they come through a formal program to the US. There are typically less than 100,000 official refugees who come in a given year, and the Trump administration has paused that program, so there have been very, very few refugees who have come since January.

Michael Klein

What's an example of a refugee? Somebody coming from, say, South Sudan or something?

Tara Watson

Yes, yes. And they would, they would typically be in some sort of camp, and have gone through an extensive vetting process before arriving, which is the main distinction between that and an asylum seeker. So according to our international treaty obligations, anyone who presents themselves on US soil with a valid, or potentially valid claim for fear of persecution in their home country, we are supposed to consider them as a potential asylee. And what determines who's an asylee is actually the same in terms of the language of who's a refugee. It's just that the asylee is starting on US soil. So a lot of people come across the southern border especially, with that in mind seeking asylum. And many of the people who came during the Biden years to the southern border claimed that they feared persecution in their home country, and the border officer or whoever encounters them, who's making this decision needs to make a quick determination about whether it's possible that they could succeed in this asylum claim, and if so, they're allowed to typically come into the country while that claim is being adjudicated, which, given long backlogs, could take a year or more. So we have many asylum seekers among the group who came across the border during the Biden era, and one major concern has been that some of those asylum seekers are...most of them, I would say, are probably also economic migrants. And there is a fear that sometimes the asylum category is being misused for what really should be economic migration reasons, and economic migration is subject to very particular rules with caps, and it's very hard for people without family ties here to come as an economic migrant unless they have specialized skills. So really, the only pathway available to a lot of people in the world is through this asylum seeking pathway. A lot of people have chosen to come through that pathway, and at the moment, that's been more or less paused despite the treaty obligation that we have. So very few people are able to come into the US on the grounds that they're seeking asylum.

Michael Klein

So Tara, as I said at the beginning, this is a really vital issue, and sort of at the center of a lot of things we talked about, and so it's really valuable to have somebody with your expertise talk about these issues, and make them more clear to the general public. So thank you very much for joining me today on this EconoFact Ask Me Anything Webinar, I really appreciate the time you took to do this.

Tara Watson

Happy to be here.

Michael Klein

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