

Unauthorized Indians in the United States: Trends and Developments

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Overview

Until recently, the issue of unauthorized Indian migrants in the United States has largely been overlooked by both the public and policymakers alike. This is largely due to the perception of the foreign-born Indian population as a predominantly high-skilled immigrant group, with most initially entering the country on work or education or family sponsored visas. However, the recent surge in encounters of Indian nationals at the U.S. border has drawn new attention to this previously neglected segment of the Indian immigrant population in the U.S. This paper examines data on the unauthorized Indian immigrant population in the U.S., its size, composition, modes of entry and location and changes over time.

To preview our findings—while the flow of unauthorized Indian migrant apprehensions have surged since 2020, the overall stock has fallen according to official government estimates (but not according to other estimates). However, regardless of the measure used, Indian migrants continue to make up only a small share of the overall unauthorized migrant population in the U.S.

Due to the processes in place within the U.S. immigration system, which enable some individuals who have crossed the U.S. border to seek legal protection through the court system, asylum applications often rise alongside increases in border apprehensions. This pattern is clearly evident when observing the growing number of Indian asylum applications in the U.S. Data collected by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) found that the total number of new asylum requests involving Indian nationals in the U.S. have grown tenfold in just two years, rising from about 5,000 in 2021 to over 51,000 in 2023.

Researchers cannot know with certainty the exact demographics of Indians who are requesting asylum status, such as their state of origin or religion. However, available information on the languages spoken by asylum seekers can provide some evidence to this puzzle. Data from Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse (TRAC) has shown that since 2001, Punjabi speakers have consistently been the largest group among immigrants who speak Indo-Aryan or Dravidian languages involved in asylum claims and U.S. Immigration Court proceedings. This strongly suggests that individuals from India's Punjab region constitute the primary group of Indian migrants encountered at the U.S. border.

Despite this notable increase in border encounters and asylum requests, the most up-to-date official numbers provide inconclusive evidence of a systematic rise in the unauthorized Indian population in the country. Paradoxically, the Department of Homeland Security's most recent estimate from 2022 shows a 60% *decline* in the population since its peak in 2016, from 560,000 to 220,000. A major caveat is that the 2022 population estimate predates the 2023 surge in Indians encountered at U.S. borders, and therefore does not account for the full extent of recent developments within the population. Altogether, DHS's 2022 estimate implies that roughly 7% of the entire Indian foreign-born population¹ in the U.S. was unauthorized during that year.

¹ Foreign-born Indian refers to any individual in the American Community Survey who identifies as Asian Indian, whether alone or in combination with other race categories, and who were born outside the United States or its territories.

Analysis of other data sources frequently observed by researchers to signal trends in unauthorized population numbers in the U.S.—namely visa overstay rates among Indian visa holders, active Indian DACA recipients, and removals of Indian nationals—similarly offer inconclusive evidence of a definitive increase in the number of unauthorized Indian migrants in the country. Estimated rates of Indian visa holders who have unlawfully remained in the country has held steady since 2016, at just around 1.5% on average. Meanwhile the estimated number of active Indian recipients under the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program (DACA) have slowly fallen since 2017, from about 2,600 in 2017 to just 1,600 in 2024.

Finally, in terms of migrant removals, the number of Indian nationals repatriated from the U.S. by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) rose significantly between FY 2023 and 2024. However, the peak of removals actually occurred in 2020 at nearly 2,300 thousand, a year prior to the surge in Indians apprehended at the border. Altogether, the total number of deported Indians was around 16,000 between 2009-2024, roughly a thousand annually, according to the Indian Ministry of External Affairs (about 750 annually on average during the Obama presidency years, 1,550 during the Trump presidency, and 900 during the Biden presidency)².

This paper will examine trends in the unauthorized Indian immigrant population in the U.S. It first establishes topline estimates of the unauthorized Indian population in the country from government and research institutions. The second section will discuss trends in Indian nationals apprehended at U.S. borders. This will be followed by an examination of asylum requests by Indian nationals in the U.S., along with a breakdown of languages spoken by Indian immigrants who are involved in asylum claims in U.S. Immigration Court. The last three sections will study data on Indian immigrants who were subject to ICE removals, those suspected of overstaying their temporary visas, and those currently active under DACA. The paper will conclude by providing a brief summary and discussion of the findings.

Population Estimates of Unauthorized Indian Immigrants in the United States

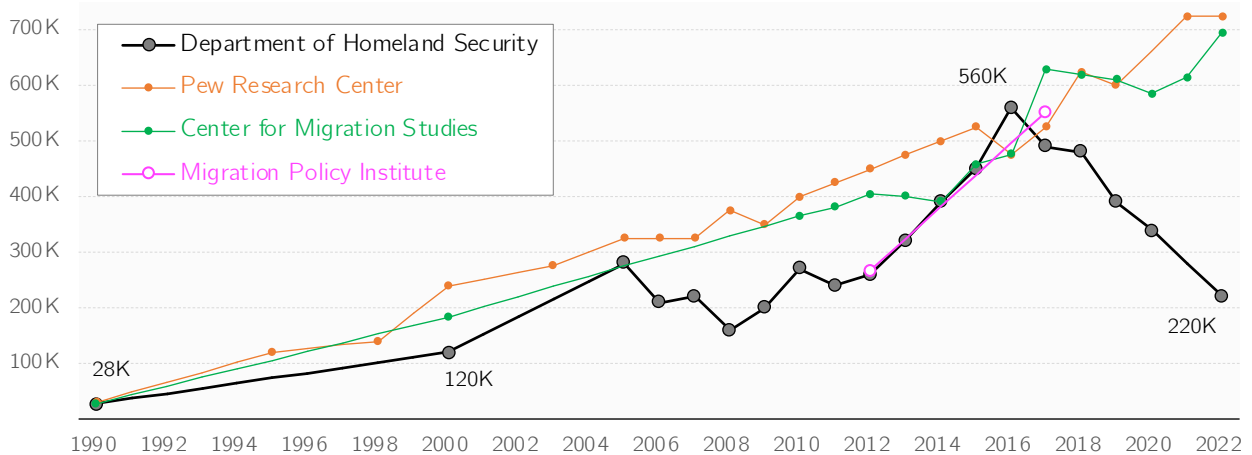
The Office of Homeland Security Statistics (OHSS), the statistical arm of the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS), is the designated federal agency responsible for publishing annual estimates of the nation's unauthorized immigrant population. Recognized as the official statistic of the U.S. government, the DHS's estimates will serve as the primary point of reference for this paper's analysis of unauthorized Indian immigrants. Aside from the DHS, three other research institutions—the Pew Research Center (PRC), the Center for Migration Studies of New York (CMS), and the Migration Policy Institute (MPI)—also produce population estimates of unauthorized immigrants in the U.S. that are acknowledged by the OHSS as credible sources of data.

All four aforementioned institutions that produce population estimates of the unauthorized immigrant population in the U.S. primarily base their calculations on the American Community Survey (ACS), a nationally representative household survey from the U.S. Census Bureau, and utilized what is coined the “residual method” to obtain their estimates. Each organization applies its own unique variation of the residual method, incorporating different statistical adjustments and controls. While these differences result in each institution producing different population estimates, their figures for the *overall* unauthorized immigrant population in the country consistently fall within the same ballpark. However, this concordance in population estimates is absent for their estimates of the unauthorized *Indian* immigrant population, particularly in the figures published in recent years. Since 2019, a clear divergence has emerged between

² [Statement](#) by External Affairs Minister, Dr. S Jaishankar in Rajya Sabha (February 6, 2025)

the estimates of the population provided by DHS and those by non-governmental sources, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Population of unauthorized Indians in the U.S., by source of estimates
1990 – 2022



Source and note: Estimated population of unauthorized Indian immigrants in the U.S. produced by the Department of Homeland Security (official statistic), the Pew Research Center, the Center for Migration Studies of New York, and the Migration Policy Institute.

From 1990 to 2016, all institutions produced estimates of the unauthorized Indian immigrant population that generally followed a similar trend (MPI has only ever published estimates for 2010-2014 and 2015-2019). A notable gap is evident from 2005 to 2012 in the figures produced by the DHS versus PRC and CMS, but this gap largely converged between 2014 and 2017. Nonetheless, a bifurcation in estimates notably began in 2019, and the gap has continued to expand since. By 2022, the most recent year with available data, PRC and CMS published figures that are *more than three times larger* than those estimated by DHS—approximately 700,000 compared to 220,000.

Understanding how each institution applied the residual method may shed light on the significant gap in these estimates. While a detailed explanation of the statistical procedure is beyond the scope of this paper, a brief overview of the calculation is included under Appendix I to clarify the method’s scope and limitations. In the simplest terms, the most likely explanation for the significant disparity lies in how each institution calculates point-in-time estimates for the *legal* foreign-born population in the U.S., a crucial component of the residual method’s calculation.

The authorized foreign-born population is made up of two groups, 1) naturalized citizens and permanent residents, and 2) temporary migrants. While estimating the number of individuals who are naturalized citizens or green card holders is relatively more straightforward, estimating the population of legal temporary migrants – in particular those with a F-1 student visa or the H-1B specialty occupation visa – pose greater challenges. Consequently, estimates of the overall Indian unauthorized population is heavily sensitive to

Figure 2.1 Share Indian among all unauthorized immigrants in the U.S.

1990 – 2022, based on official DHS unauthorized population estimates

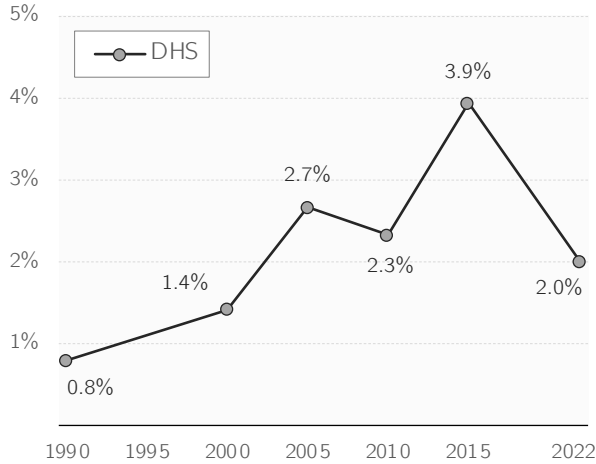
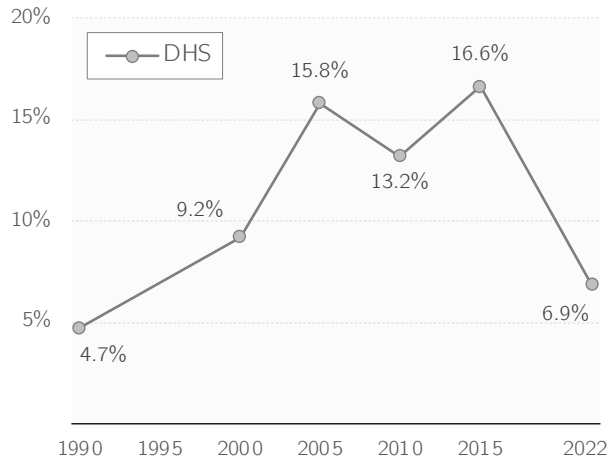


Figure 2.2 Share unauthorized among Indian immigrants in the U.S.

1990 – 2022, based on official DHS unauthorized population estimates



Source and note: Based on analysis of the estimated population of unauthorized Indian immigrants in the U.S. produced by the Department of Homeland Security, and the foreign-born Indian population in the U.S. obtained from the Census Bureau's American Community Survey, and decennial censuses obtained from IPUMS. Immigrant Indian is defined as individuals who identify as Asian Indian (Asian alone or in combination with other race) and were born in any country outside of the U.S. and its territories.

how this temporary migrant subgroup is accounted for. With this caveat in mind, we simply report estimates of the unauthorized Indian population from the four sources mentioned earlier. However, the remaining analysis will primarily rely on official U.S. government data from the DHS.

There are several ways we can think about a population, in this case the unauthorized Indian migrant population in the United States.

1. *Absolute Size*

Indian immigrants have been one of the fastest growing immigrant populations in the U.S., increasing more than six-fold, from 0.6 million in 1990 to 3.2 million in 2022. We should therefore expect the unauthorized population to also increase, which is indeed the case. According to DHS estimates, the unauthorized Indian immigrant population increased from 28,000 in 1990 to 120,000 in 2000, and further to 270,000 in 2010. It then peaked at 560,000 in 2016 before sharply declining to 220,000 in 2022 (Figure 1).

2. *Relative size: Relative to all unauthorized immigrants*

Not only did the Indian unauthorized population increase in absolute numbers, but it also increased relative to the overall unauthorized migrant population in the U.S., from 0.8% in 1990 to 3.9 percent in 2015, but then declining sharply to 2% in 2022 (Figure 2.1).

3. *Relative size: Relative to all Indian immigrants*

If the estimates of Pew Research Center and the Center for Migration Studies are to be believed, then nearly one of every four Indian immigrants in the U.S. is unauthorized. Given what we know of the history of Indian migration to the United States this is highly improbable.³ The official DHS estimates put roughly 7% of all foreign-born Indians in the U.S as unauthorized in 2022, a decline from approximately 17% in 2015, and around 9% in 2000 (Figure 2.2).

Overall, Indians account for a small portion of the total unauthorized immigrant population in the U.S., comprising just 2% in 2022, down from nearly 4% in 2015. Since the share Indians in the overall U.S. foreign-born population in 2022 was 7%, this indicates that Indians are substantially underrepresented in the unauthorized immigrant population. Although this data predates the 2023 surge in Indians encountered at U.S. borders, that would not change this finding significantly.

State-level Estimates of the Unauthorized Indian Population in the U.S.

Unsurprisingly, the states with the largest overall foreign-born Indian populations—California (112,000), Texas (61,000), New Jersey (55,000), New York (43,000), and Illinois (31,000)—also account for the highest numbers of unauthorized Indian immigrants, each occupying the top five positions on both lists.⁴ Meanwhile, among states with estimated unauthorized Indian migrant populations exceeding 5,000, Indians accounted for more than 10% of the *total* unauthorized population in Ohio (16%), Michigan (14%), New

³ See for instance see Sanjoy Chakravorty, Devesh Kapur and Nirvikar Singh, *The Other One Percent: Indians in America* (Oxford University Press, 2017).

⁴ The state-level estimates are from MPI which uses a pooled 5-year sample of the ACS survey. The larger sample size allows MPI to provide state-level estimates of the unauthorized population's largest origin groups. MPI's most recent state-level estimates of the unauthorized Indian immigrant population is from 2015–2019.

Jersey (12%), and Pennsylvania (11%). Finally, among states with the highest proportions of unauthorized immigrants within their overall Indian immigrant populations, Tennessee (33%), Indiana (27%), Georgia (21%), Wisconsin (21%), and California (20%) rank in the top five, with one-fifth or more of their Indian immigrant residents being unauthorized, per MPI estimates and our own tabulations of the ACS.

Apprehensions and Encounters of Indian Nationals at U.S. Borders

Figure 3.1 Indians encountered at the U.S. Border

FY 2007 – 2024

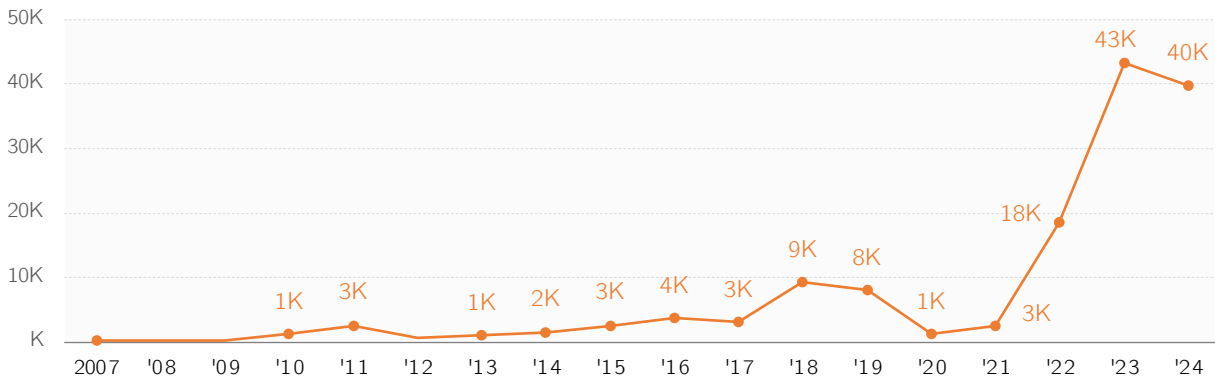
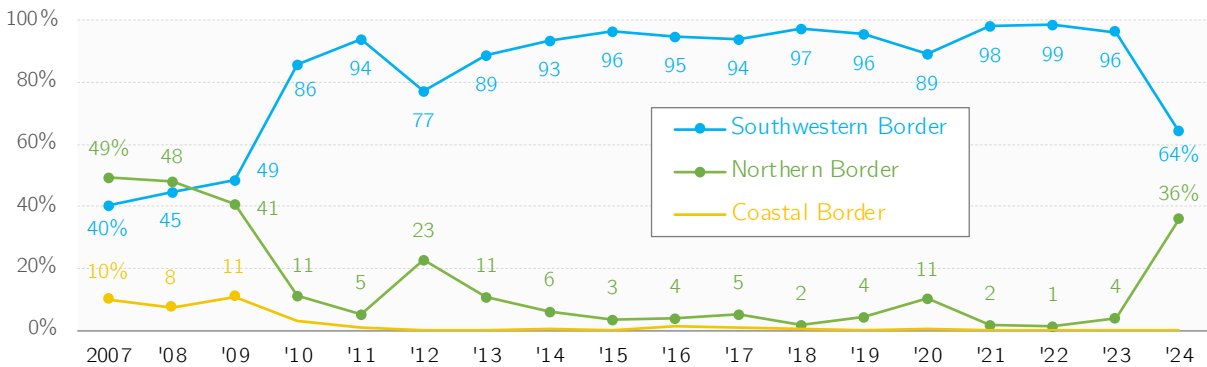


Figure 3.2 Indians encountered at the U.S. Border, by border location shares

FY 2007 – 2024



Source and note: U.S. Customs and Border Protection Nationwide Encounters data. In this analysis, “encounters” only include those processed under Title 8 (“apprehensions”) and Title 42 provisions at U.S. border locations, and does not include “inadmissibles” processed at official U.S. ports of entry or *Office of Field Operations* (OFO).

The U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) divides the country’s borders into three broad administrative subgroups based on geographic location. The first is the Southwestern border (the U.S. states of Arizona, California, New Mexico, and Texas) bordering Mexico and accounts for by far the highest number of migrant crossings nationwide. The second is the Northern U.S.–Canada border, covering 11 northern U.S. states. The final and least frequently crossed is the Coastal Border, comprising the coastline, ports, and waterways in southeastern U.S. states, as well as U.S. territories in the Caribbean.

The sudden surge in apprehensions and encounters of Indian nationals at U.S. borders—rising from just 1,000 in fiscal year 2020 to a peak of 43,000 in 2023, before slightly decreasing to 40,000 in 2024—brought the issue of unauthorized Indian immigrants into the international spotlight (Figure 3.1). The 2023 peak significantly exceeded the previous high recorded in 2018, when 9,000 Indian nationals were apprehended crossing the border.

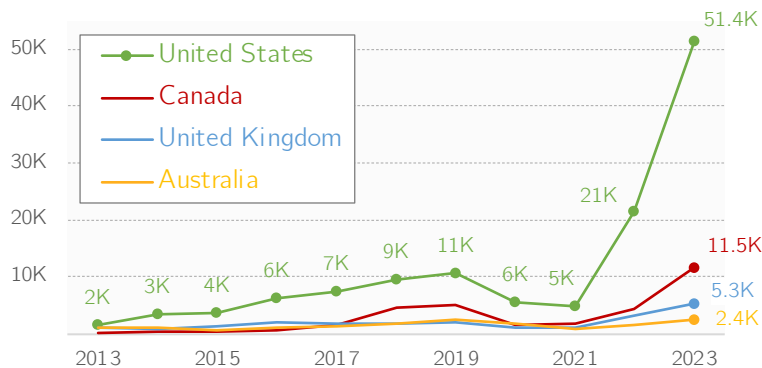
Prior to 2010, the total number of Indian border encounters was minor, never exceeding 1,000. Between 2007 (the first year country-level apprehension data became publicly available) and 2009, the distribution of apprehensions between the Northern and Southwestern borders was relatively balanced, with each accounting for approximately 40-50% of the total. Since 2010, encounters of Indian nationals were almost exclusively along the Southwestern U.S.-Mexico border. However, in fiscal year 2024, apprehension records involving Indians at the Northern U.S.-Canada border increased significantly. During that year, crossings at the Northern border accounted for over one-third (36%) of all Indian apprehensions—a sharp rise from the previous year, where it only represented 4% of all crossings (Figure 3.2).

As for the Coastal border, the number and proportion of Indians apprehended at that location’s sectors have consistently remained low. Even at its peak in 2018, CBP reported encountering only 55 Indian nationals at the Coastal border (Figure 3.1).

Asylum Requests by Indian Nationals in the U.S.

The U.S. immigration system allows foreign nationals apprehended at the border who express a fear of persecution or harm in their home countries to undergo a *credible fear screening* conducted by an asylum officer to assess the validity of their claims. Those who pass this initial screening are permitted to present their asylum case in immigration court. As a result of this legal provision, asylum applications often increase in tandem with rising border apprehensions—a pattern clearly reflected in the recent surge of Indian asylum applications in the U.S.

Figure 4. New asylum requests by Indian nationals in major destination countries
CY 2013 – 2023



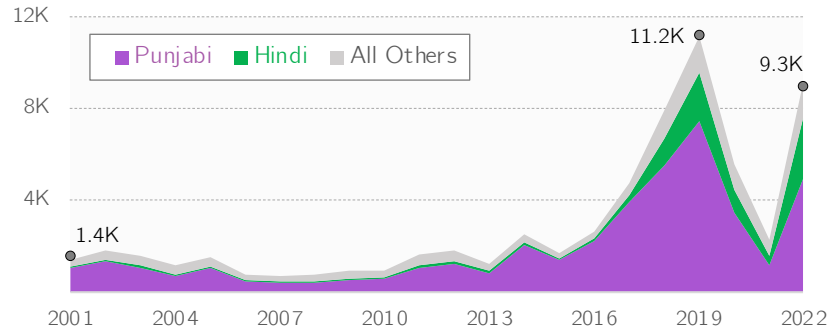
Source and note: OECD International Migration Outlook 2024.

Cross-national data from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) reveals an eight-times increase in the number new asylum requests from Indian nationals in the U.S. since

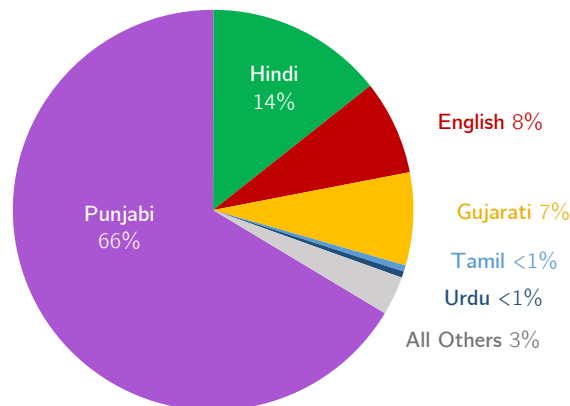
the turn of the decade, rising from approximately 6,000 in 2020 to over 51,000 in 2023). Though this sharp growth in asylum requests is by far the most notable in the U.S., the trend also evident in four other developed countries where Indians constitute one of the largest origin groups among all asylum seekers, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia (Figure 4).

Figure 5. Asylum filings, by Indian migrants' spoken language

FY 2001 – 2022 (labels show totals)



Cumulative total, Oct 2001 – Nov 2022



Source and note: Immigration Court records from agencies including Customs and Border Protection (CBP), Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), and the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) obtained by Transnational Records Access Clearinghouse (TRAC).

In the coming years, it is almost certain that far fewer asylum requests will be entertained under Donald Trump's second presidency in the U.S. Within the first week of his new administration, the CBP One app—a tool that has been instrumental in helping migrants navigate the U.S. asylum system—was discontinued and removed from major app stores. According to [media reports](#), this shutdown effectively canceled nearly 300,000 pending migrant appointments, including asylum cases already in the pipeline.

Limitations in administrative data prevent researchers from deciphering the exact demographics or geographic origins among those from India who requested asylum status in the U.S. Nevertheless, court data, which contains data on the spoken language of the individual involved in immigration cases, can shed some light on to this puzzle.

Data collected through Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests by the Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse (TRAC) indicate that Punjabi speakers have consistently represented the largest group among Indian immigrants involved in asylum claims since 2001. Between FY 2001 and 2022, two-thirds (66%) of asylum cases involving Indian nationals were filed by Punjabi speakers. This strongly suggests that individuals from Punjab (and Haryana) are the primary group of Indian migrants encountered at the U.S. border and filing asylum requests. Following Punjabi, the other common languages spoken by Indian asylum requesters were Hindi (14%), English (8%), and Gujarati (7%) during that same time period. TRAC data also indicates a significant increase in the number of Hindi speakers in recent years, rising from just 6% of all Indian cases in FY 2017 to nearly 30% in 2022 (Figure 5).

Aside from being the largest group among Indian asylum filers, Punjabi speakers were also the most likely to have their asylum requests approved in U.S. immigration courts compared to speakers of other Indian languages. According to TRAC data, 63% of cases involving Punjabi speakers were granted asylum. Similarly, a majority of cases (58%) involving Hindi speakers also saw approval. In contrast, only 25% of cases involving Gujarati speakers were approved.

These findings on linguistic disparities among Indian asylum seekers are particularly striking when viewed in conjunction with economic data from the census, which also contains information on the languages spoken by immigrants at home. Data from the 2019-2022 American Community Survey (ACS) shows that among *all* foreign-born Indians in the U.S., those who report speaking Punjabi at home report the lowest average personal earnings (\$48K), followed by those who report speaking Gujarati (\$58K), which also has significant representation in asylum court filings.

The vast majority of asylum seekers are economic migrants who face limited economic opportunities at home and thus seek employment opportunities abroad. We can be confident of this claim since we see very little evidence of India's poor marginalized communities or those from regions with ongoing anti-militancy operations by the government among asylum seekers. Indeed, the financial costs of coming to the U.S, whether through the arduous journey through Latin and Central America to Mexico, or as "fake" international students to Canada, are 30 to 100 times India's per capita income, so only those with assets that can be pledged or sold (especially land) can afford to make the journey.⁵ Notably, two top origin states among unauthorized Indians, Punjab and Gujarat, are among India's richer states with land values far in excess of the economic returns in agriculture. Even illegality takes a lot of money to pursue.

Removals of Indian Nationals from the U.S.

Removals refer to the expulsion of foreign-born individuals found to be in violation of U.S. immigration laws. While commonly referred to as "deportations" in public discourse, the correct terminology "removals" is broader, encompassing various types of deportations and other related processes, which include but are not limited to repatriations, expedited removals, as well as voluntary departures.

The topic of migrant deportations took center stage with the start of Donald Trump's second presidency. Trump prominently campaigned on a hardline immigration stance, pledging sweeping mass deportations of unauthorized immigrants residing in the U.S.—framing the issue as a critical matter of national security. Recently, the Indian government has announced its willingness to collaborate with the new administration

⁵ Deeptiman Tiwari, "[4,300 Indians under probe for illegally immigrating to US from 2021-24: ED](#)", *Indian Express*, February 7, 2025.

in this endeavor and has explicitly agreed to help repatriate 18,000 unauthorized Indians immigrants residing in the U.S. back to India.

Figure 6.1 Indians removed from the U.S. by ICE, by original arresting agency
FY 2003 – 2024

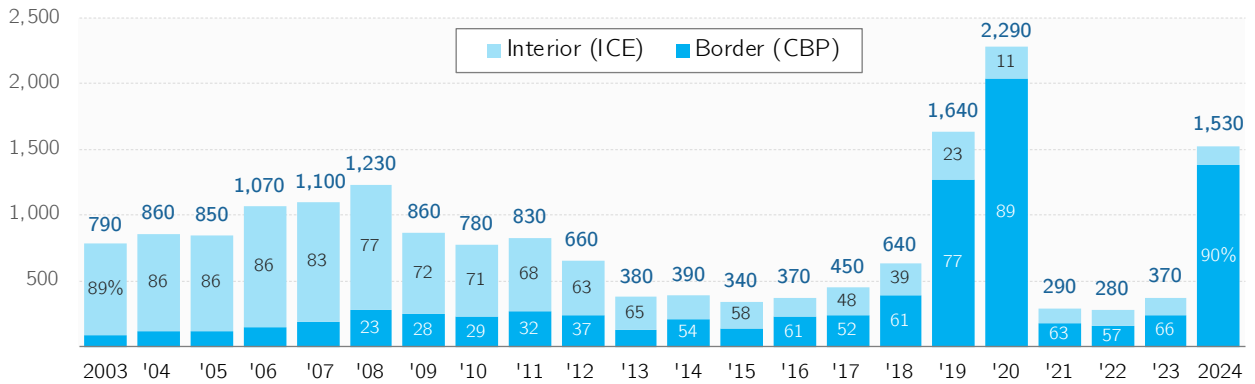
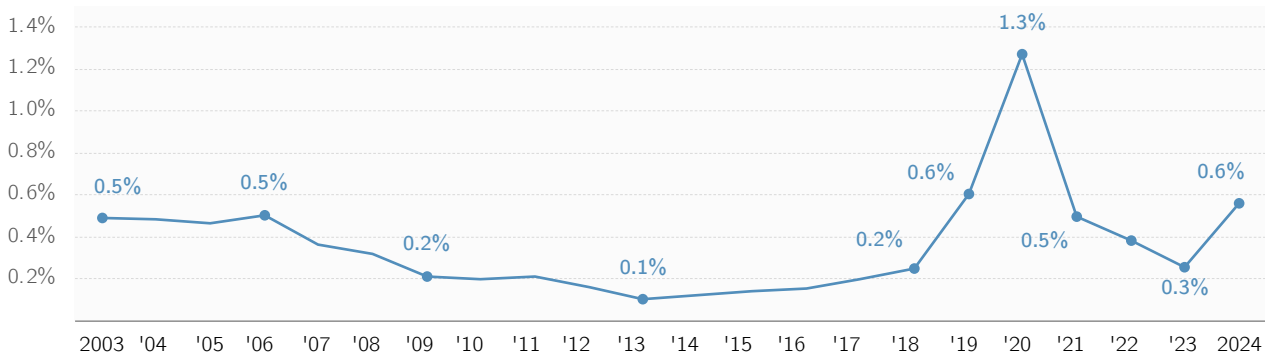


Figure 6.2 Share Indian citizen among all immigrants removed from the U.S. by ICE
FY 2003 – 2024



Source and note: U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Removals Statistics and ICE Removals data obtained by Transnational Records Access Clearinghouse (TRAC).

The data on removals refer to ones that were carried out by the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency.⁶ In FY 2024, ICE reported the removal of over 1,500 Indian nationals from the U.S. (Figure 6.1). An increasingly larger share of Indian nationals were repatriated following arrests initially made by CBP at the border, rather than by ICE within the country’s interior. In FY 2024, 90% of deportations stemmed from initial arrests made by CBP, a sharp increase compared to just 10% in 2003. This trend mirrors the recent surge in border apprehensions involving Indian migrants. Overall, however, reflecting their paltry share among unauthorized immigrants in the U.S., Indian nationals account for only a small fraction of all migrants deported from the U.S., rarely exceeding 1% of the total (Figure 6.2).

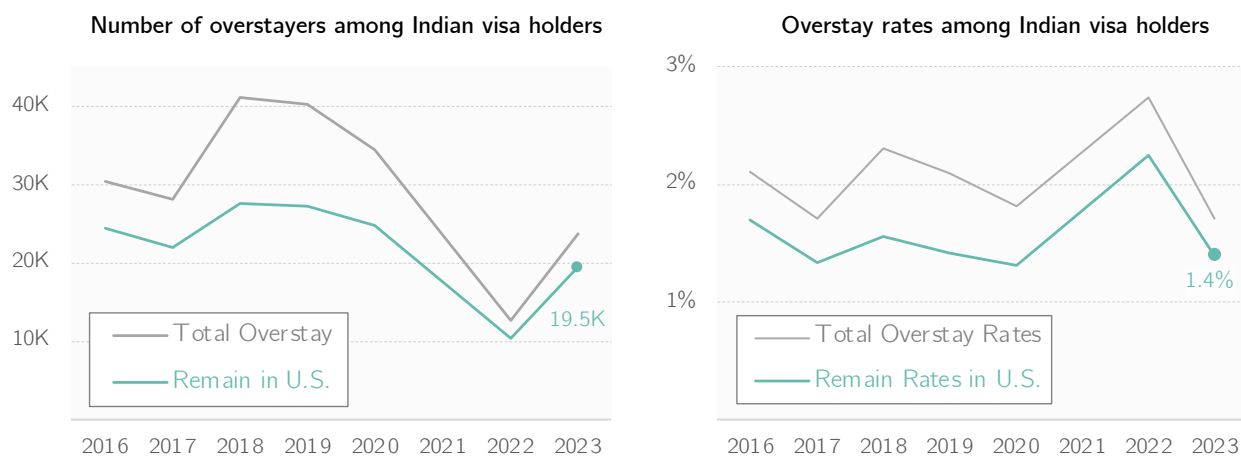
⁶ It also covers cases where a migrant was originally arrested by U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) who were then transferred to ICE authorities.

Overstayers Among Indian Visa Holders in the U.S.

Recent research indicates that a growing share of unauthorized migrants likely entered the U.S. legally on non-immigrant visas but remained in the country after their temporary status expired.⁷ The Center for Migration Studies reported that in recent years, approximately 60% of unauthorized migrants initially entered the U.S. legally on temporary nonimmigrant visas but later fell out of status, ultimately becoming undocumented. This trend has led to increased scrutiny of the "visa overstayer" population in the country.

Figure 7. Overstay numbers and rates among Indian visa holders in the U.S.

FY 2016 – 2023



Source and note: U.S. Customs and Border Protection's Entry/Exit Overstay Report. Overstay estimates include *non-immigrant* visas only. "Total overstays" include individuals who were confirmed to have left the U.S., though only after their visa expiration dates have passed. The business and tourism visa label includes the WB, WT, B-1, and B-2 visas. The student visa label includes the F, M, and J visas. Total overstay rates include both out-of-country and in-country overstayers

U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) first released detailed origin-level estimates of the nation's visa overstayer population in 2016. The agency identifies two distinct categories of overstayers. The first, colloquially known as "out-of-country overstays," refers to individuals who officially departed the U.S., but only after exceeding the duration permitted by their visa. The second category, officially coined "suspected in-country overstays" by CBP, consists of individuals believed to have remained in the U.S. beyond their visa expiration, likely transitioning to undocumented status.

By extension, estimates for the second group—suspected in-country overstayers—facilitate the calculation of "remain rates" (Figure 7). These rates reflect the proportion of visa holders within a given year that CBP suspects stayed in the U.S. unlawfully after their authorized stay ended. CBP's access to noncitizen entry and exit travel data through U.S. ports of entry also allows for a more detailed breakdown of these estimated remain rates, namely by migrant origin countries and broad visa status categories.

⁷ Robert Warren, "[US Undocumented Population Continued to Fall from 2016 to 2017, and Visa Overstays Significantly Exceeded Illegal Crossings for the Seventh Consecutive Year](#)", Center for Migration Studies, January 16, 2019.

Among Indian temporary (nonimmigrant) visa holders in the U.S., suspected in-country remain rates have generally stayed low between FY 2016 and 2023, consistently below 2 percent in most years (and under 30,000 in any year). Notably, the unlawful remain rates for Indians are similar to those from China (Figure 7).

Examining specific non-immigrant visa types provides additional insight into the remain rates among Indians in the U.S. The in-country remain rates for student and cultural exchange visas have gradually increased between FY 2020 and 2023, reaching a record high of 3.8% from 1.6%—the highest rate recorded since overstay estimates were made available in 2016. Meanwhile, the remain rates for business and tourism visa holders rose significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic but returned to pre-pandemic levels in 2023.

Indians Under Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA)

Finally, a small ground of the Indian migrant population is covered under the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, more commonly known by its acronym, DACA. This policy (established in 2012) provides temporary protection from deportation as well as work authorization to undocumented immigrants who initially entered the U.S. as minors, though it is notably *not* a direct pathway to citizenship.

The vast majority of DACA recipients are Hispanic or Latino immigrants, with Mexicans comprising by far the largest share. Although Indians rank as the 7th largest origin group within the DACA population, they represent only a small fraction of active recipients, never exceeding 0.4% of the total since 2017—the first year origin country data became available.⁸ The number of active Indian DACA recipients has steadily declined over the past seven years, dropping from 2,640 in 2017 to 1,620 in 2024, likely driven by individuals who have obtained green cards or U.S. citizenship, leading to their removal from the program.

Altogether, Indian DACA recipients provide limited insight into the broader undocumented Indian population in the U.S. who largely entered the country as adults. This excludes them from the policy's eligibility criteria, which only covers those who arrived as minors.

Discussion and Conclusion

At the turn of the decade, U.S. borders and ports witnessed an unprecedented surge in migrant encounters, reaching levels unseen in over 20 years. Notably, the number of Indians apprehended—formerly a small group among encountered migrants—skyrocketed by 40-times in just four years, from around 1,000 in FY 2020 to a peak of 43,000 in 2023 (Figure 1). This sharp rise in apprehensions was closely followed by a notable increase in asylum requests from Indian nationals, particularly among Punjabi speakers (Figure 5).

Despite these trends, official U.S. government estimates show no obvious or systematic rise in the overall population of unauthorized Indian immigrants in the country between FY 2020 and 2022, the most recent year for which data is available. Analysis of other data sources frequently observed to signal trends in undocumented populations similarly offer inconclusive evidence of a definitive rise in the number of unauthorized Indian migrants in the country. In terms of migrant removals, the number of Indian nationals

⁸ However, estimates from the Migration Policy Institute suggest that approximately 35,000 Indians in the U.S. actually meet DACA eligibility criteria.

repatriated from the U.S. by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) significant increased between FY 2023 and 2024, rising from fewer than 400 to over 1,500. However, the highest peak in removals actually occurred in 2020, when nearly 2,300 individuals were removed—one year preceding the surge in Indian apprehensions at the border. Estimated in-country overstay rates for Indian visa holders have also remained consistently low since 2016, rarely exceeding 2%. Meanwhile the estimated number of active Indian recipients under DACA have steadily fallen to just above 1,600 in 2024.

Regardless of these mixed findings, a natural follow-up question based on the trends outlined in this paper is: *why?* What forces may have driven these recent unprecedented changes in Indian migration patterns to the U.S.?

One might look to the migrants' country of origin, India, for potential explanations. Were there recent "shocks" that prompted its citizens to seek refuge in the U.S. through informal channels? It's tempting to interpret the rise in asylum claims filed by Indian nationals as a consequence of democratic backsliding and increasing authoritarianism in India. However, correlation is not causation.

U.S. data suggests that asylum seekers are primarily Punjabi and Gujarati—ethnic groups from some of India's wealthiest states who are more likely capable of bearing the high costs of migrating to the West through unauthorized channels. This contrasts with individuals from less prosperous regions or marginalized groups most affected by current national policies. Disenfranchised communities notably absent from asylum claims include Indian Muslims, individuals from Scheduled Caste populations, and those residing in conflict-ridden areas such as the Adivasi (tribal) belt and the Kashmir region. Ham-handed policies of the Indian government targeting Khalistani activists in the West gave further credence to those from Punjab alleging persecution by Indian authorities.

The drivers of migration are rooted in *both* the sending and receiving countries, in this case India and in the U.S. Both Gujarat and Punjab have tradition of seeking better lives overseas, with large number of migrants going to the UK and U.S., as well as Canada and Australia. The remittances (India received an estimated \$120 billion in remittances in 2023) from employment overseas, visually apparent in more opulent homes, lead more to try to escape not poverty but "relative deprivation", fearing limited economic prospects in India.⁹ At the same time a full industry of agents and brokers facilitating this illegal migration sprang up in India. India's Home Ministry looked the other way since this issue likely because the issue of illegal migration is much more a burden for receiving than sending countries.

It is no surprise that the beginning of Joe Biden's Presidency in 2020 coincided with the aforementioned significant rise in migrant apprehensions at U.S. borders from all nationalities, with a widespread *perception* that the U.S. was more open, especially in contrast to the draconian policies of Donald Trump's administration. By the time the Biden administration woke up to the domestic political costs of the large migrant surge by end 2023, enacting stronger border control policies, it was too late for the Democrats. Meanwhile a host of diploma mills in Canada were only too happy to accept dubious international students, 50,000 of whom did not show up after entering Canada (20,000 from India alone), heading South to the U.S. border, a cheaper and much less arduous entryway than from the Southern border.¹⁰

⁹ Jonathan Head and Thu Bui, "[Channel migrants: The real reason so many are fleeing Vietnam for the UK.](#)"

¹⁰ Marie Woolf, "[Nearly 50,000 foreign students listed as 'no-shows' by Canadian schools.](#)" *The Globe and Mail*, January 15, 2025.

By comparison, the Trump administration has made it unequivocally clear that the U.S. is closed to newcomers during his second term. With this reversal in approach, it is highly likely that the number of asylum authorization and temporary legal status approved for migrants who were initially apprehended at the border will decline. At the same time, the U.S. is exerting greater pressure on neighboring governments, particularly Mexico and Canada, to help reduce the flow of migration to the U.S. across their shared borders. And by sending back deportees in handcuffs on U.S. army planes, it is signaling its deterrence strategy in highly publicized ways. However, the understandable anger in India (as has been the case in several Latin American countries) at the cruel treatment of its citizens is bound to rile relations between the two countries if this practice continues.

As for the Indian government's response to this new development, it has few options. It's hard to defend illegal migrants and the larger goal of maintaining relations with the Trump administration means that it will swallow its pride and largely accept the hardline stance. For instance, Modi's team has explicitly agreed to facilitate the repatriation of 18,000 unauthorized Indian immigrants from the U.S. back to India. However, the complete deportation of *all* unauthorized Indian migrants is a pie-in-the-sky objective, largely due to the immense logistical challenges and time constraints involved in such a drastic undertaking. Nonetheless we expect unauthorized migration to the U.S. to drop sharply, and from India even more so.