

## Born Here, Raised in Fear: The Invisible Challenge Facing Millions of American Children

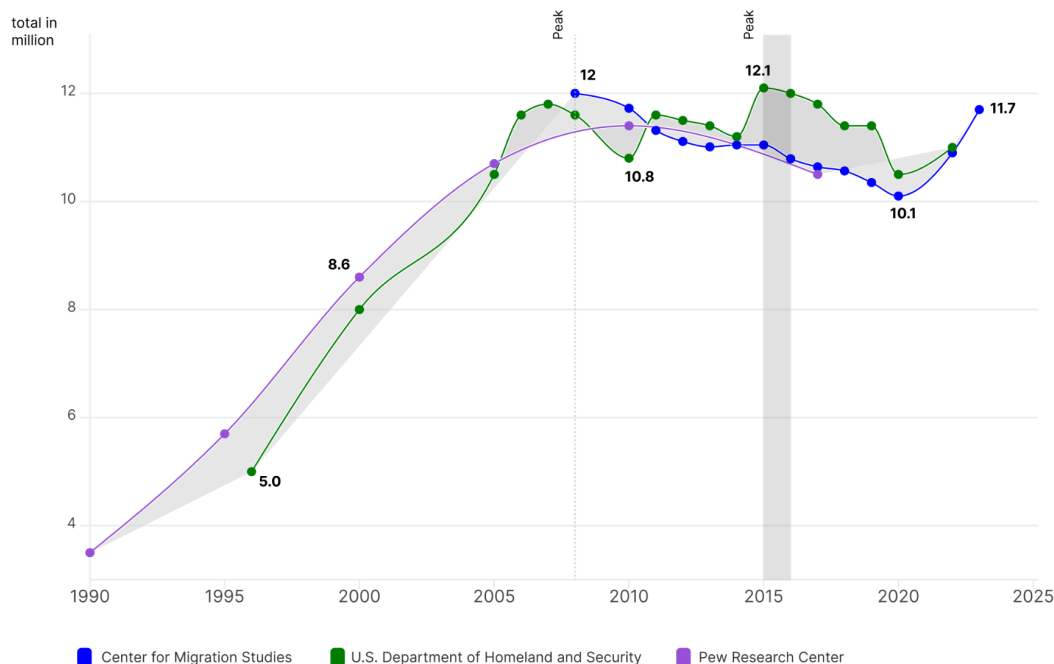
By Carolina Gonçalves. May 7, 2025.

The world is watching (again). Recent headlines about mass deportations in the United States have increased international concern, especially after the case of a [U.S. citizen children being deported with their undocumented mothers](#). The story caused a lot of outrage, but why now? Haven't American-born children of undocumented parents always lived with this risk? According to the [American Immigration Council](#), 4.4 million U.S.-citizen children under the age of 18 lived with at least one undocumented parent as of 2018. For decades, millions of children have grown up in mixed-status families, torn between two legal realities: one that grants them citizenship by birth, and another that threatens to take their parents away at any moment.

The current U.S. president's mass deportation campaign made his voters' eyes light up, even as it ignores a specific panorama: the reality of a population that has not only grown, but also adapted and established itself deeply in American life. The unauthorized immigrant population in the United States has more than tripled since 1990, when it was estimated at around 3.5 million. According to the Center for Migration Studies, by 2008, it had peaked at 12 million. This growth happened again between 2014-2015, according to the U.S. Department of Homeland and Security.

### Estimate of Unauthorized Immigrants in the United States

The graph compares estimates of the Unauthorized Immigrant population in the U.S. between 1990-2023 from three different sources.

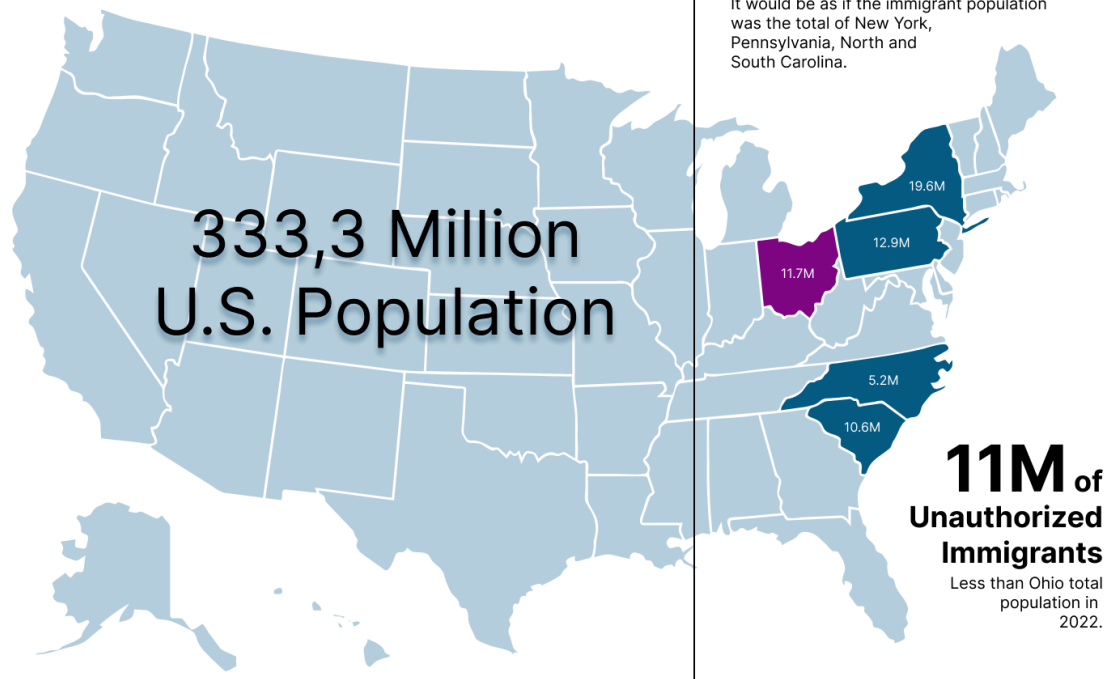


Source: The graph is a collection of data from the Center for Migration Studies<sup>1</sup>, U.S. Department of Homeland and Security<sup>2</sup> and Pew Research Center<sup>3</sup>. [Data file](#). Graph author: Carolina Gonçalves.

These numbers may be scary, and according to sociologist Carolyn Pinedo-Turnovsky, an expert on undocumented migrants and mixed-status families, the number is often portrayed as large, creating fear and misconceptions about immigrants. “When we think of the foreign-born population in the U.S., the undocumented immigrants make up less than 25% of that number.”

## U.S. Population in 2022

Visualizing the U.S. Immigrant Population  
by State-Size Equivalents



Source: United States Census Bureau<sup>4</sup>. Graph author: Carolina Gonçalves.

Even though the number of undocumented immigrants living in the U.S. is small as 3.3% of the total population, the entry and residence of these people became a central issue again in 2025. What was once a steady, if complex, reality has now exploded into a national crisis, one whose silent victims are often overlooked: the U.S.-born children of undocumented parents.

Lucia\*, a 39-years-old mother of two U.S.-born children, from Mexico City, have lived most of her life in the U.S, since when she was 11, but because of a “voluntary exit”, that happened over 20 years ago, she cannot legalize her status, even after marrying an American citizen. “They took my pictures, they took my fingerprints, they made me feel very like ‘you’re a criminal’.” Now, she fears her family’s future. “They would have to go to Mexico, to a country where not a lot of English is spoken, where they don’t really know anybody, their whole lives are here and they don’t have the choice of saying no, you know what I mean?”. If she is caught by ICE and deported, her children and husband would not be in the country without her.



# 4.4M

**U.S.-citizen children  
lived with at least  
one undocumented  
parent in 2018.**

(18 and younger)



# 27,980

**people deported with  
U.S.-born children  
in 2019**

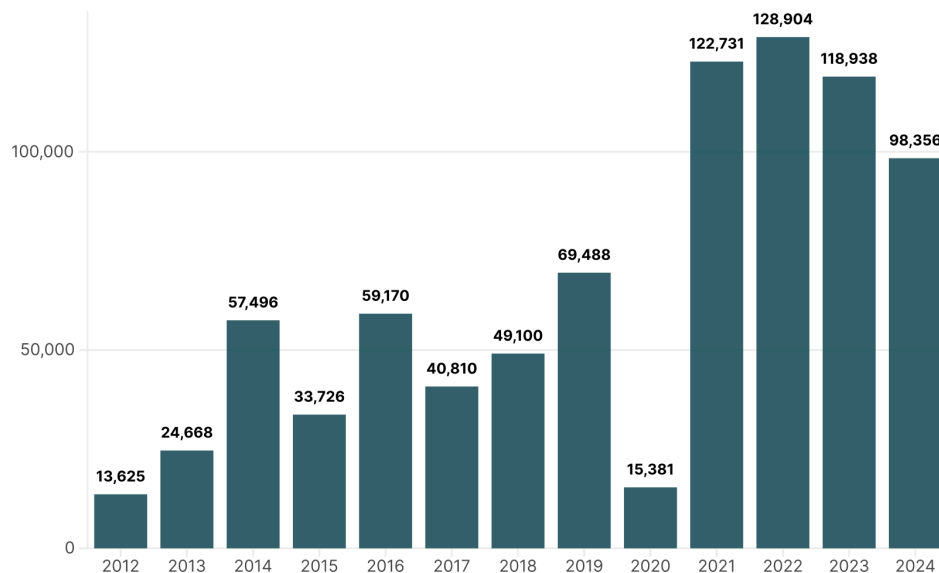
Source: American Immigration Council<sup>9</sup>. Infographic author: Carolina Gonçalves.

Despite the world being focused on mass deportations right now, U.S.-citizen children from undocumented parents face unprecedented emotional and structural risks for a long time. According to the American Immigration Council, more than 16.7 million people in the U.S. live in mixed-status households and family separation remains a real threat. Between 2013 and 2018, [ICE deported over 231,000 people who reported having at least one U.S.-citizen child](#). When parents are detained without time to arrange care, their children can end up in the foster system, placed with strangers or in group homes.

Another recurring case is that of children under 18 crossing borders without their parents. These children are part of a large group report that the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) receives everyday. The graph below shows the number of children referred to the ORR each fiscal year, offering a glimpse into the disrupted childhoods in the U.S. immigration system.

## Number of Referrals the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) receives each fiscal year

ORR accepts referrals of unaccompanied alien children from any department or agency of the Federal Government. Upon notification a child must be transferred to ORR custody.



The Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) serves unaccompanied children in two distinct programs: the Unaccompanied Refugee Minors Program (URM) and the [Unaccompanied Alien Children \(UAC\) Bureau](#). The URM program serves some of the most vulnerable minors in the world — those who fled persecution, violence, or abuse, and entered the United States without a parent or custodian. Source: The Office of Refugee Resettlement<sup>6</sup>. Graph author: Carolina Gonçalves.

In 2025, fears have intensified: [thousands of children are afraid to attend school](#), worried their parents might be gone when they return. In Oklahoma, the [State Board of Education approved a request proof](#) of citizenship or immigration status from families during school enrollment, further deepening anxiety in mixed-status communities. This policy contradicts the protections affirmed by the Supreme Court in *Plyler v. Doe* (1982), which guarantees all children in the U.S., regardless of immigration status, the right to a public education.

For families like Lucia's\*, living in a constant state of alert has become the norm. "We all got [passports], my kids got their passports", she said. "We still keep those documents very handy in case we need to just, it's literally like one day you might have to just grab your stuff and go." In this fragile reality, immigrant communities and advocacy groups have to think about a proactive plan, as Carolyn Pinedo-Turnovsky explains. "We need to come up with a support system, we need to have a list with emergency contacts... who can be guardians for their children." For millions of mixed-status families, these conversations are no longer theoretical:

they are a necessary plan for survival in a country where the “American Dream” is more like a nightmare.

## References:

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