

## Legal Immigration to US Still Declining

New data released by the Department of Homeland Security show that in FY 2003:

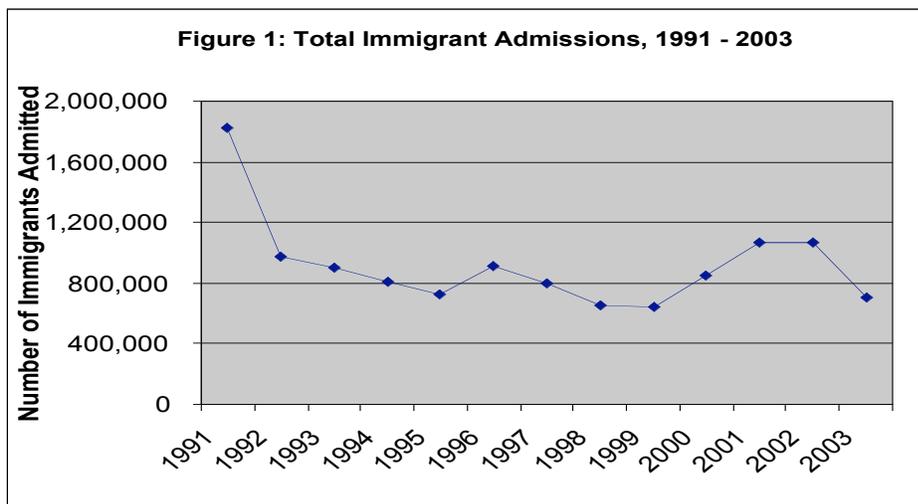
- Legal immigration fell by 34 percent
- The number of people in the US who were able to adjust their status to legal permanent residence dropped 50 percent, explaining much of the overall decline
- The level of newly arriving legal permanent residents remained relatively steady
- Refugee admissions rebounded slightly from the 25-year low following 9/11
- The level of temporary visitors continued at 15 percent below pre-9/11 levels
- Naturalizations decreased by 19 percent

Below is an overview of US immigration based on Fiscal Year 2003 data from the *2003 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics*, which was released in mid-September 2004 by the Department of Homeland Security's Office of Immigration Statistics.

### Permanent Immigration

**The number of people granted legal permanent residence in the United States in FY 2003 dropped 34 percent to just under 706,000. This included 358,000 new arrivals and 347,000 persons who adjusted their status.**

These figures are down significantly from the 1.06 million who became new legal permanent residents in FY 2002. The decline reflects that only half as many persons who were present in the United States adjusted their status as had done so the year before (347,000 in FY 2003 compared to 680,000 in FY 2002). DHS officials attribute the processing slowdown to new requirements for additional background checks on applicants, as well as the shifting of adjudications staff to the Special Registration program, leaving fewer officials available to process green cards.



Source: 2003 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics, Office of Immigration Statistics, DHS

**Mexican nationals were among those most affected by the slowdown in adjustments of status, with their numbers declining by 47.2 percent.**

Fewer than 116,000 Mexicans became legal permanent residents in FY 2003, compared to over 219,000 in FY 2002. According to the new figures, Mexican nationals accounted for 16.4 percent of legal immigrants in FY 2003. They had represented 20.6 percent in the previous fiscal year.

**Over half of all new legal immigrants arrived from just 10 countries.**

The 10 countries of origin were Mexico (116,000), India (50,000), the Philippines (45,000), China (41,000), El Salvador (28,000), the Dominican Republic (26,000), Vietnam (22,000), Colombia (15,000), Guatemala (14,000), and Russia (14,000). The last three countries were newcomers to the top 10 list in 2003, while Cuba, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Ukraine fell out of the top 10.

**Six states remain key destinations for many new legal immigrants.**

Sixty-three percent of immigrants live in six states – California, New York, Texas, Florida, New Jersey, and Illinois. There was a slight decline in the percentage of immigrants heading to California, Texas, and Florida, with increases for other states.

**Family reunification-based immigration continued to make up a large proportion of legal immigration, though the absolute numbers dropped by 27 percent, reflecting the overall decline in legal immigration.**

Approximately 70 percent of the immigrants who obtained legal permanent residence in FY 2003 were relatives of United States citizens or permanent residents. This percentage is similar, if a bit higher, to previous years. In absolute numbers, however, the total of relatives of US citizens or permanent residents who obtained legal permanent residence fell 27 percent, from 674,000 in 2002 to 492,000 in 2003.

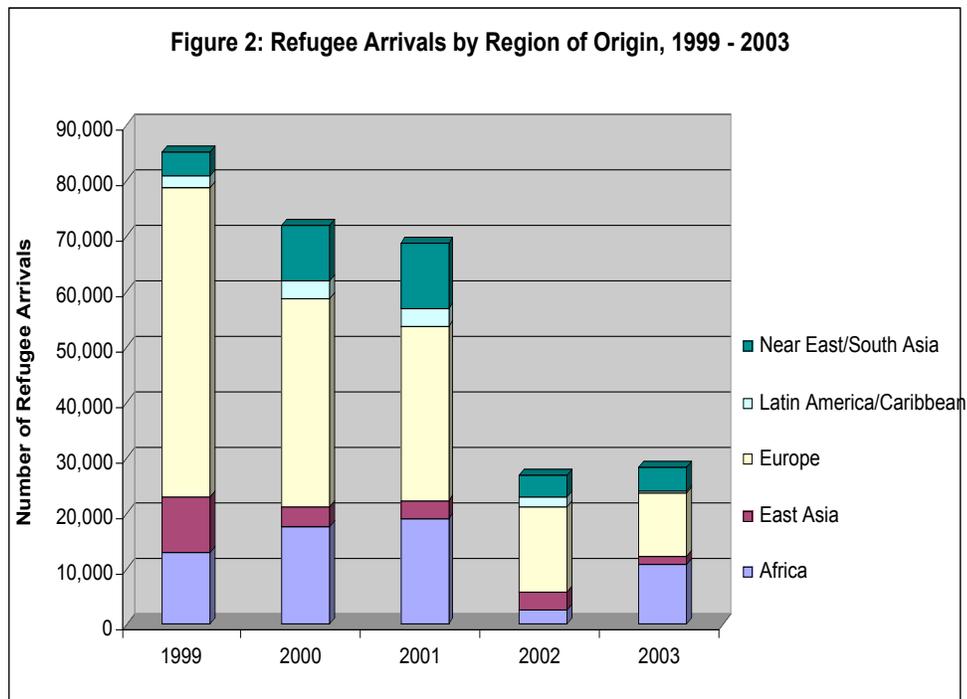
**Employment-based immigration declined as a percentage of overall legal immigration, while the absolute numbers dropped by 53 percent.**

Employment-based immigration accounted for 82,000 (11.6 percent) of new immigrants in FY 2003, compared to 16 percent in FY 2002. In absolute numbers, the figure of 82,000 was a 53 percent decline from nearly 175,000 in 2002. The decline occurred across most categories.

**Refugee admissions rose by five percent but remained significantly below the 70,000 admissions ceiling authorized by the president in consultation with Congress.**

The number of arrivals by refugees, who are eligible to obtain legal permanent residence after one year in the US, totaled just over 28,000 in FY 2003. This was above the 27,000 in FY 2002 (a 25-year low), but 59 percent less than the nearly 70,000 who arrived in FY 2001. According to the data, 11,000 refugees were from European countries such as Ukraine, Russia, Serbia and Montenegro, Belarus, and Moldova. Nearly as many originated in Africa, in countries including Liberia, Sudan, Somalia, Ethiopia, and Sierra Leone, while almost 6,000 were from Asian countries such as Iran, Afghanistan, and Vietnam. A few hundred refugees came from Latin American/Caribbean countries such as Cuba and Colombia. The decline in refugee admissions appears to reflect tightened security checks, as well as safety concerns that have hindered the

travel of officials who process refugee cases. [The admissions figures for FY2004 are expected to top 50,000, as some of these processing bottlenecks are resolved.]



Source: 2003 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics, Office of Immigration Statistics, DHS

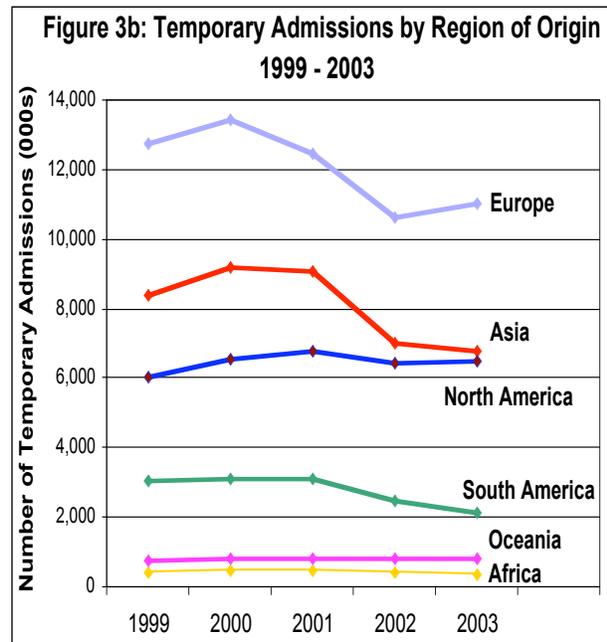
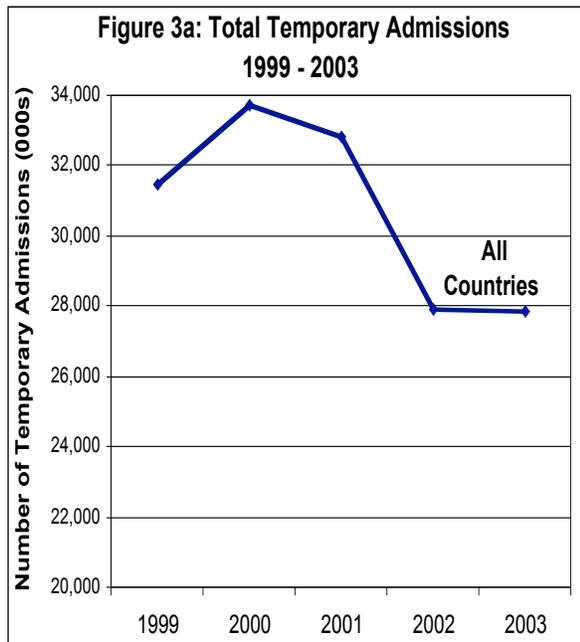
### **Temporary Admissions**

**Temporary non-immigrant admissions totaled 27.8 million in 2003, continuing at 15 percent below pre-9/11 levels.**

In FY 2002, the number of admissions already had fallen 15 percent to 27.9 million. In the decade prior to the 9/11 attacks, non-immigrant admissions had ranged from 21.6 million to 33.7 million, following the ups and downs of the economy. The vast majority of non-immigrant visitors were tourists and business travelers (87.2 percent in 2003). Their leading destinations were Florida, California, New York, Texas, and Hawaii.

**Temporary admissions from certain countries declined sharply.**

Between 2002 and 2003, admissions from Asian Islamic countries and African Islamic countries dropped by an average of 10 percent, after having dropped nearly 36 percent one year earlier. Between 2001 and 2003, for instance, admissions from Jordan fell nearly 40 percent and Malaysia nearly 46 percent, while admissions from Saudi Arabia plummeted by nearly 76 percent and Somalia 71 percent. Other parts of the world were affected as well. Non-immigrant admissions from Brazil fell to 497,000 in FY 2003, down from 576,000 in 2002 (a 13.8 percent decline) and 734,000 in 2001 (a 21.5 percent decline).



Source: 2003 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics, Office of Immigration Statistics, DHS

**Half of all non-immigrant visitors were nationals of the United Kingdom, Mexico, Japan, and Germany.**

Admissions from the United Kingdom and Mexico experienced an increase between 2002 and 2003, while admissions declined for the other top sending countries, after having already experienced significant declines one year earlier. Nevertheless, 61 percent of all non-immigrants arrived from 10 countries: the UK (4.5 million), Mexico (4.3 million), Japan (3.6 million), Germany (1.4 million), France (1.0 million), Korea (840,000), China (579,000), Italy (639,000), Brazil (497,000), and the Netherlands (544,000).

**Reductions occurred across many temporary admissions categories, including foreign students (625,000 in FY 2003) and temporary workers and trainees (650,000 in FY 2003).**

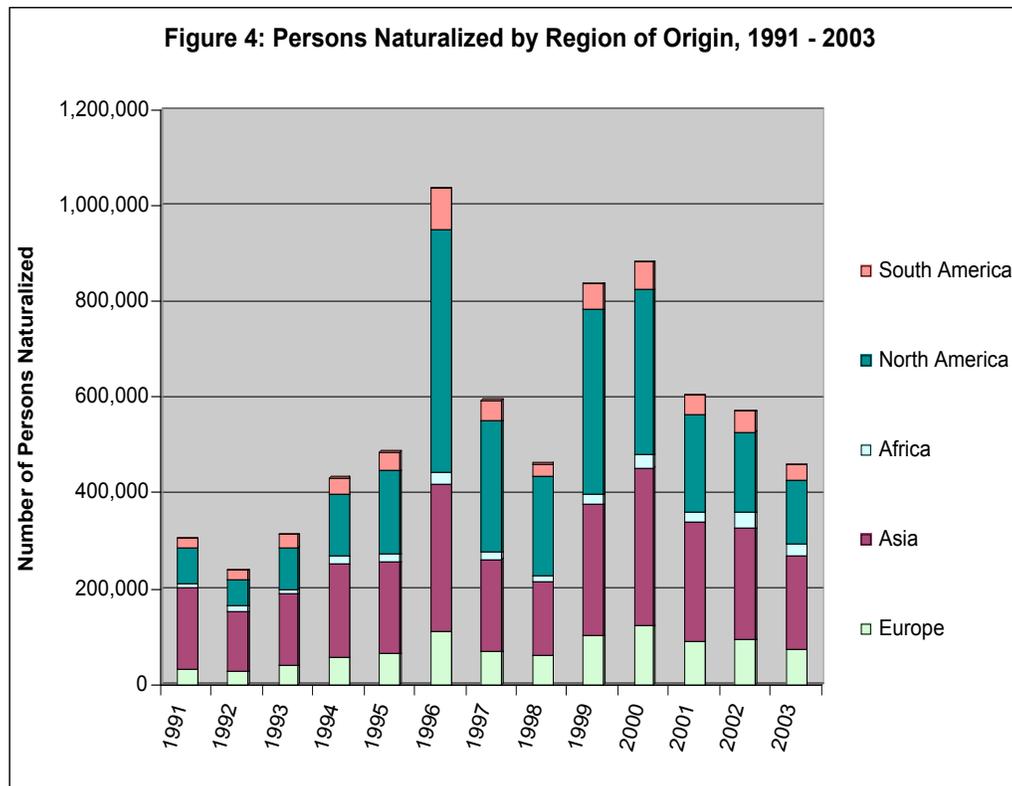
The number of foreign students has not yet recovered to pre-9/11 levels of nearly 699,000 and declined another 3.3 percent from the previous year (646,000 in 2002.) Certain temporary worker categories also continue to experience visible declines three years after 9/11. In FY 2003, there were 14,000 H-2A temporary agricultural workers (about half as many as two years earlier), and there were only 59,000 TN workers (holders of NAFTA visas for professionals), compared to 74,000 in 2002 and 95,000 in 2001, a two-year decline of 37.7 percent.

**Naturalizations**

**More than 463,000 people gained US citizenship in FY 2003, yet a processing backlog of 625,000 naturalization applications remains.**

The number of naturalizations was a 19 percent decrease from the 574,000 naturalized in FY 2002. The lower naturalization numbers were consistent with the lower number of applications received during FY 2003. Naturalizations tend to lag behind legal admissions because of the 5-

year residence requirement for most applicants. The median amount of time between receiving permanent residence and naturalizing for this group of new citizens was eight years.



Source: 2003 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics, Office of Immigration Statistics, DHS

**Forty-two percent of the 463,000 people who naturalized in FY 2003 were born in Asia, while 28 percent were born in North America.**

The single largest country of origin for newly naturalized US citizens in FY 2003 was Mexico, with 56,000. Other key countries of origin this past year were India (30,000), the Philippines (29,000), Vietnam (26,000), China (24,000), South Korea (16,000), the Dominican Republic (13,000), Jamaica (11,000), Iran (11,000), and Poland (9,000). Nearly half of all naturalizations in 2003 were of nationals from these 10 countries.

**The majority of those who naturalized in FY 2003 were married.**

Fifty-four percent of those who naturalized in FY 2003 were female, and two-thirds were married. Over 40 percent were ages 30-44. Their stated occupations included professional and technical workers; operators, fabricators, and laborers; service; executive and managerial; sales; unemployed; students; homemakers; and the military.

## DATA SOURCE

The data are from the *2003 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics* published by the Office of Immigration Statistics in the Department of Homeland Security. Fiscal Year (FY) 2003 began October 1, 2002 and ended September 30, 2003.

This information was compiled by MPI Policy Analyst Deborah Meyers and intern Jennifer Yau in October 2004. For questions or to arrange an interview with an MPI expert on immigration, please contact Colleen Coffey, Communications Coordinator, at (202) 266-1910 or [ccoffey@migrationpolicy.org](mailto:ccoffey@migrationpolicy.org). Please visit us at [www.migrationpolicy.org](http://www.migrationpolicy.org).

For more information on immigration to the United States and worldwide, visit the Migration Information Source, MPI's online publication, at [www.migrationinformation.org](http://www.migrationinformation.org). The Source provides fresh thought, authoritative data from numerous global organizations and governments, and analysis of international migration trends.

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