

Undocumented Migrants in West Texas

Kenneth L. Stewart and Laurence F. Jones

July 7, 2019

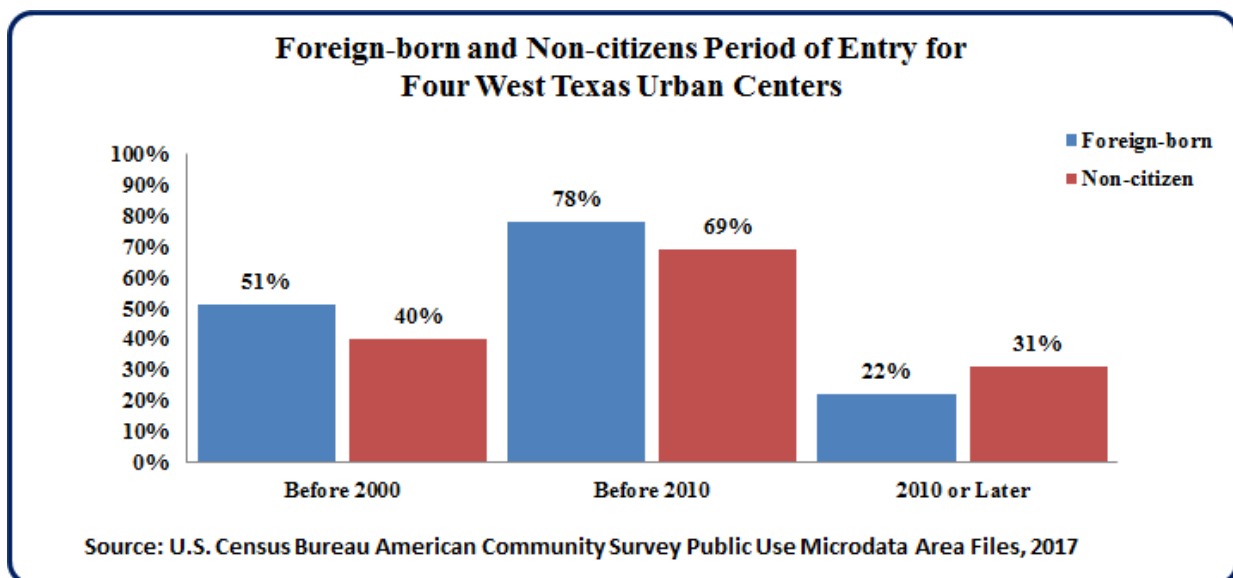
"When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending the best.... They're bringing drugs, they're bringing crime. They're rapists and some, I assume, are good people." This was Donald Trump's description of immigrants when he announced his candidacy for president.

Since that day in June of 2015, immigration has centered a tragically divisive set of issues as Trump and his administration have battled for a Muslim ban, raged about "invading" immigrants, turned to disastrous policies of wholesale separation and detainment of immigrant children and families, and shuttering the government in hopes of forcing Congress to fund a border wall.

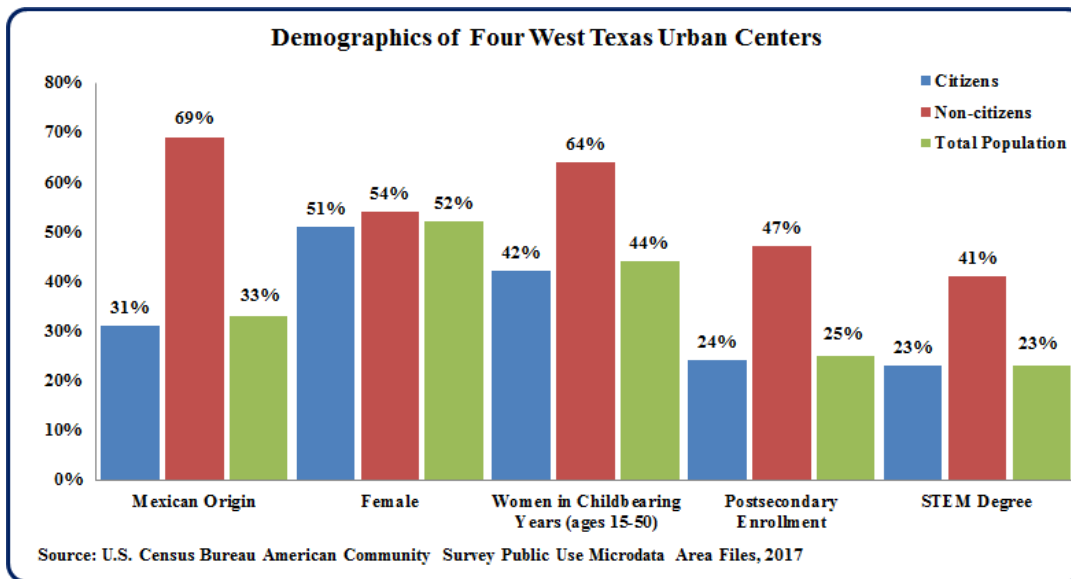
Since Trump seems intent on serving up horrific depictions and rants through the 2020 election cycle, we decided it is a good time to review the available data on immigrants living in the four urban centers of our West Texas region. , We asked, who are the 71,653 foreign-born and 41,155 non-citizen people living in Taylor (Abilene), Midland, Ector (Odessa) and Tom Green counties according to 2017 Census Bureau information?

To begin, the Census Bureau indicates that about 22,675 or 32.1% of the foreign-born regional population has earned citizenship. On the other hand, using methods developed by the Pew Research Center, we estimate that the non-citizen segment of the regional population may include as many as 18,000 undocumented, unauthorized immigrants.

Even so, the data reminds us to appreciate the long history of the region with immigrants. Most foreign-born and non-citizen people living in Taylor (Abilene), Midland, Ector (Odessa) and Tom Green counties are not recent arrivals. Indeed, nearly 8 of 10 foreign-born and 7 of 10 non-citizens moved to the area prior to 2010. Half of the foreign-born and 40% of non-citizens arrived before the year 2000. Their established residence comports with an abundance of evidence indicating how grounded immigrants are in the communities of West Texas.



Most West Texans know that people of Mexican origin are prevalent among immigrants to the region. Even as the more recent immigrants often come from the so-called “northern triangle” of central America, Mexican origin people still comprise about 69% of the non-citizens in the four urban centers of our region. They make up only 31% of area citizens and 33% of the total population.



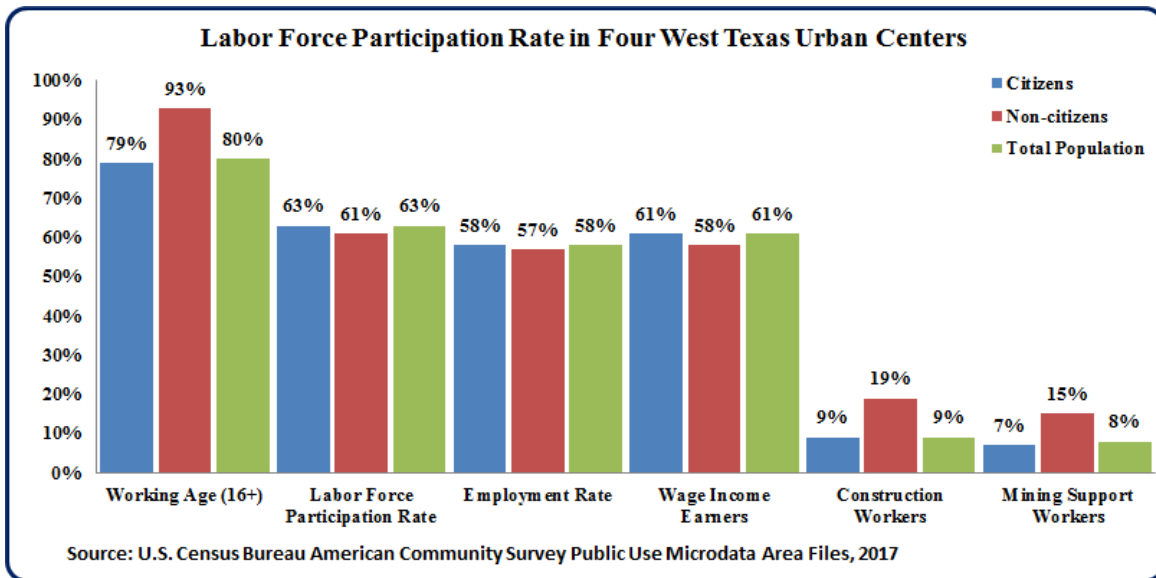
Fewer regional residents are aware of other significant demographic features of immigrants who are not U.S. citizens. Some know that females are slightly more numerous (54%) than males, and women in childbearing years comprise more than 6 of 10 non-citizen female immigrants. However, the most outstanding traits of non-citizens involve the extent of their educational and labor force engagement.

Overall, about 24% of the combined population of the four West Texas urban areas is enrolled in some level of schooling. The proportion drops to about 18% among non-citizen immigrants. However, nearly half (47%) of the non-citizens attending schools are enrolled in postsecondary programs. This compares to just 24% of the region’s citizen population.

Moreover, 4 of every 10 non-citizens who earn an Associate, Bachelor, or higher degree beyond high school are in a science, technology, engineering or mathematics (STEM) field. Only 23% of citizens taking degrees in the region are doing the same. It is fair to say that non-citizen immigrants engage education in a way that is more attuned to developing high-demand, cutting-edge skills.

The status of non-citizen immigrants in the regional labor force is also noteworthy. Indeed, 93% of non-citizens are 16 years old or over in their working ages. Their labor force participation (61%), employment (57%) and wage earner (58%) rates align with the corresponding rates for all working age members of the regional population.

Moreover, non-citizens play crucial roles in supplying labor for certain key economic sectors. For instance, 19% of non-citizen employees are construction workers compared to only 9% of all workers in the region. Thus, non-citizens have twice the level of concentration in construction work. Similarly, the 15% of non-citizen workers in mining support jobs represents



double the level of concentration of all workers in this industry which largely supports the region's oil patch. Other industries where non-citizen immigrants have higher percentages of workers compared to the overall labor force are food services, hospitals, housekeeping, and ground maintenance.

The available data on non-citizen immigrants in our region of West Texas indicate a population contributing to the community and striving for self improvement. Yet, they remain a vulnerable population. Despite vigorous attachments to the labor force, data showing that their 33% medically uninsured rate is nearly double that of the total regional population indicates their vulnerability.

Nevertheless, the factor that contributes most to their vulnerability is lack of citizenship, especially in these times as Donald Trump continues to demagogue the issues. In just the last two weeks of June, Trump started another episode by tossing out one of his tweets claiming that ICE would begin "removing the millions of illegal aliens who have illicitly found their way into the United States." "They will be removed," he claimed, "as fast as they come in."

It is absolutely tragic that many people have come to expect and accept it as normal for an American President to dump whoppers like this on us almost daily. It turned out that Trump was actually talking about a plan pushed by the White House for ICE to target about 2,000 members of immigrant families to scoop up and deport from cities across the country in a pre-dawn Sunday morning raid.

Meantime, before that Sunday arrived, a group of immigration lawyers released a report on the results of interviews they conducted with more than 60 immigrant children incarcerated in centers along the Rio Grande. Children are living in unhealthy and unsanitary conditions, according to the findings, leaving many sick, eating uncooked frozen food or rice, and going without clean clothes or an opportunity to bathe for weeks.

Holly Cooper, a member of the interview team, commented, "In my 22 years of doing visits with children in detention I have never heard of this level of inhumanity." Still before the scheduled Sunday raids, a Department of Justice lawyer coincidentally was representing the

government in a hearing to appeal a 2017 federal court ruling that U.S. authorities breached legal standards on sanitary conditions after young immigrants caught on the border had reported in earlier interviews that they slept in the cold, were held in overcrowded cells, and were given inadequate food and dirty water. The U.S. government's lawyer actually argued in the hearing that sanitary conditions for detained immigrant children may not necessarily mean a toothbrush and soap must be provided as part of "safe and sanitary conditions."

Eventually, the day before the scheduled raids, Trump called them off, again using Twitter. In an effort to pose as hero of his own manufactured episode of fear mongering, he claimed to be delaying, "at the request of Democrats," time to work out an immigration compromise. If a deal is not made in the next two weeks, Trump bellowed, "Deportations Start!"

Among the delusions at the root of Donald Trump's immigration policy is the idea that Americans have been pining for a border wall since the 1980s. Last December, Trump tweeted, "Even President Ronald Reagan tried for 8 years to build a Border Wall, or Fence, and was unable to do so. Others also have tried. We will get it done, one way or the other!"

Back in the real world, what is true is that Reagan did use the "make America great again" slogan in his 1980 election campaign against President Jimmy Carter. He also linked the slogan to immigration in a speech under the shadow of the Statue of Liberty on Labor Day that year. However, Reagan's depiction of immigrants was opposite of Donald Trump's rant in 2015.

"Through this Golden Door," Reagan said, "under the gaze of that Mother of Exiles, have come millions of men and women, who first stepped foot on American soil right there, on Ellis Island, so close to the Statue of Liberty." "They didn't ask what this country could do for them," he claimed, "but what they could do to make this refuge the greatest home of freedom in history.... They brought with them courage, ambition and the values of family, neighborhood, work, peace and freedom."

The truth is that what Donald Trump and his acolytes are doing to immigrants is one of the ways they have turned America upside down. It is now time to start the work of setting it right.