

# Immigration, Naturalization has Changed City

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*September 7, 2017*

“All our ancestors, unless we’re American Indian, came from another country, another culture.” LaDainian Tomlinson chose these words for his induction into the Professional Football Hall of Fame. He joined the many leaders reminding us of the contributions migrants made to founding and progress of our nation.

Unlike his ancestors, today’s immigrants to America must attain citizenship in order to attain and exercise specific rights and benefits. Beyond civil rights such as the vote, citizenship is the basis for the right to live and work in the United States and to receive federal assistance when necessary.

There are two primary pathways to US citizenship for people born in other nations. A small number attain citizenship as a birthright because at least one parent is a US citizen. However, most current foreign born citizens achieved their status through the naturalization process.

Naturalization is a route that satisfies citizenship requirements created by Congress under its power to establish a “uniform rule of naturalization” according to the Constitution. Current law stipulates a multistep process beginning with eligibility checks requiring an immigrant to be at least 18 years old, have a lawful permanent residence for at least five continuous years (three years if the individual is married to a citizen), and no criminal record.

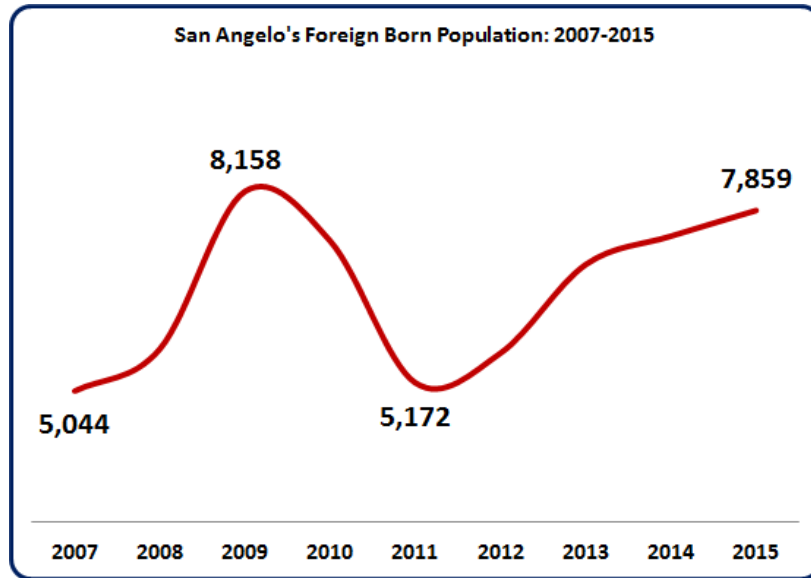
Applicants also must demonstrate ability to read, write, and speak English, as well as knowledge and understanding of American history and government. The process concludes with a ceremony highlighting the passage to citizenship by taking the oath of allegiance to the United States.

The Pew Research Center (PRC) estimates that 11.1 million unauthorized immigrants lived in the United States in 2014,. This figure represents a small but statistically significant decline from the PRC estimate of 11.3 million for 2009. The number had also dropped previously during the 2007-2009 Great Recession, mainly because illegal entries from Mexico decreased according to PRC. This continued through 2014, but increases from Asia, Central America, and sub-Saharan Africa worked to offset the decreasing numbers from Mexico.

To estimate the number of unauthorized immigrants, PRC employs data from the Census Bureau’s American Community Survey. The basic step is to subtract the legal resident population from the census-documented foreign born population, leaving an estimated number of unauthorized residents as the residual.

Since some unauthorized residents choose to stay under the radars that document the community’s daily life, the PRC method surely underestimates illegal immigration to a degree. Since there is no more accurate approach available, however, we turned to census numbers for 2007-2015 to paint a portrait of immigration patterns in San Angelo.

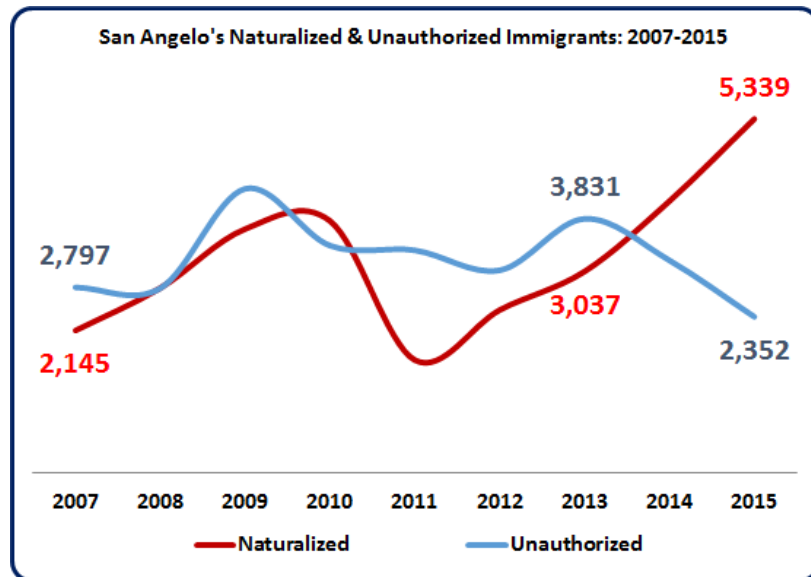
The data indicates that 5,044 people or 5.5 percent of the city’s population was foreign born in 2007. This number jumped to 8,158 by 2009, but then receded to 5,172 in 2013. By 2015, it climbed again to 7,859 or 7.8 percent of the city’s total. The overall increase of foreign born population from 2007 to 2015 was 42 percent.



Back in 2007, about 2,145 foreign born residents of San Angelo had become citizens through the naturalization process. This represents 42.5 percent of the total foreign born population that year.

Since then, the local naturalization rate surged so that 5,339 or 67.9 percent of the city's foreign born had taken the oath of citizenship in 2015. More important than the surge, however, is the divergent trend that opened up after 2013 between the rising numbers of local naturalized citizens and the declining population of unauthorized immigrants.

Indeed, the number of illegal immigrants hovered above the number of naturalized citizens for five of the seven years from 2007 to 2013. However, naturalized citizenship leaped from 3,037 in 2013 to 5,339 for 2015, an increase of 76 percent. The number of unauthorized residents plummeted by 40 percent during the same time, falling from 3,831 to 2,352.



Without doubt, immigration is a dynamic process that responds to a labyrinth of political,

economic, social and cultural forces over time. Nevertheless, it is important in these particular times to notice the inflections of policy change.

Given the current gross distortion and hype about illegal immigration and uncontrolled borders, an appropriate starting point is to harken back to 1996 when Congress passed its last major reform of immigration law.

The aim of the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act was to strengthen border control by imposing criminal penalties for alien smuggling and use of fraudulent documents. It also invoked major increases to the authority and manpower of federal enforcement agencies monitoring visa applications and responding to overstays or illegal entries.

The law set the table for a long-term runup in arrests, detentions, and deportations that lasted through eight years of the Bush presidency and the beginning years of the Obama administration. It was the final year of Obama's first term in 2012 when the number of deportations peaked with a record high of more than 400,000 deportations. As noted, unauthorized residents continued to outnumber naturalized citizens in our city during this time.

It was also in 2012 that the Obama White House pivoted to recalibrate immigration policy. In our city, it is likely that the creation of the White House Task Force on New Americans formed in 2014 affected the divergent increase of naturalization coupled with the decline of illegal residents. This campaign was a government-wide effort to better integrate immigrants and refugees into American communities.

Another celebrated step by the Obama administration was the announcement of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program. This initiative protects young people brought into the country illegally as children by their parents. While not granting permanent legal status, DACA clears the way for these young people to pursue work or advanced education at in-state college tuition rates, and to obtain driver's licenses and other documents needed to function in society.

In 2007, 46.4 percent of San Angelo's 1,802 foreign-born residents age 25 and over had not graduated from high school and only 618 had achieved a four-year college degree or higher. By 2015, 1,404 of the city's 7,266 foreign born residents age 25 and over had earned post-secondary degrees. This is the reach of the DACA policy into our home town.

Given this policy history and its local impact, it is regrettable that the 2016 political campaigns and current federal administration turned immigration into a lightning rod dividing the country. Unfortunately, some Texas political leaders are enthusiastic participants in the firestorm.

This summer, for instance, the Texas Attorney General and nine other state attorneys issued a challenge to the Trump administration to quash DACA as it comes up for review this fall. If the President overturns the program, the 10 states agreed to dismiss their lawsuit against DACA in a currently pending filing at the Southern District Court of Texas.

More recently, President Trump announced support for a new immigration reform called the "Reforming American Immigration for Strong Employment (RAISE) Act." The Senate sponsors, Tom Cotton of Arkansas and David Perdue of Georgia, claim the legislation would help raise American wages by implementing a 50 percent reduction of legal immigration over 10 years and restoring it to what they claim are historical norms.

What seems to attract the President to the idea is its promise to rebalance the system toward granting more employment-based visas. "I campaigned on creating a merit-based immigration system," said Mr. Trump.

Trump's embrace of RAISE endorses severe visa reductions most likely to create new pressures for increased illegal entry, higher enforcement costs, and cut-throat lobbying by businesses for government to cherry pick foreign workers for their respective sectors. Moreover, it ignores factual evidence from this and other communities showing policy adjustments like the Obama administration's Task Force on New Americans and DACA that demonstrate "merits" like increased naturalization and more self-motivated education and skill development by immigrants.

In actuality, it was LaDainian Tomlinson who had the better idea in the rest of his reminder about the contributions of migrants. He pleaded in the speech, "Let's not slam the door on those who may look or sound different from us. When we open the door for others to compete," he continued, "we fulfill the promise of one nation, under God, with liberty and justice for all."