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U.S.

Migrant Labor Force Withstands Mass-Deportation Push

Employment continues to grow since Trump took office, despite fears from immigration crackdown

By [Paul Kiernan](#) [Follow](#)

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WASHINGTON—President Trump’s [mass-deportation push](#) has instilled widespread fear among migrants. What it hasn’t done, so far, is stop many from showing up for work.

While data covering immigrants lacking permanent legal status is fragmentary, what is available shows no broad pullback from the labor force.

In the three months since Trump took office, employment has continued to grow. That includes many industries reliant on workers lacking legal status: construction; the category that includes janitorial and landscaping services; food-manufacturing and restaurants; and staffing firms.

As of April, there were 31.8 million foreign-born workers with jobs, up 0.1% from January and 4.4% from a year earlier, according to a monthly Census Bureau survey of households. The data doesn’t distinguish between workers in the U.S. legally and those without legal status.

“In general it’s surprising to me,” said Tara Watson, an economist at the Brookings Institution who studies immigration in the economy. “We haven’t heard stories of big chicken shortages or [higher] construction costs.”

A [Kaiser Family Foundation survey](#) published May 8 said 41% of U.S. immigrants—including naturalized citizens—worry that they or a family member could be detained or deported, up from 26% in 2023.

But many workers without legal status say they have to keep working out of economic necessity. Some have lived in the U.S. for years or even decades and have families, homes and cars to pay for. The certainty of falling behind on bills often outweighs the unquantifiable risk of being detained by federal authorities, some migrants say.

In April, federal agents detained at least 10 people in the parking lot of a Los Angeles Home Depot, where many migrants solicit day jobs helping with light construction. Two days later, one Mexican man, a father of three, was in the same parking lot looking for work. “Of course there is fear,” said the man, who has been in the U.S. for 25 years without legal permission. But with car insurance, rent and other costs rising fast, he added: “What alternative do we have?”

Trump has promised the largest deportation operation in U.S. history. During his first 100 days in office, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement ramped up arrests but [deported fewer migrants a day](#) than under former President [Joe Biden](#) in 2024.



A street vendor from Guanajuato, Mexico, sells merchandise in a Home Depot parking lot in Los Angeles. He says despite fears of deportation, he works to support family. PHOTO: ZAYDEE SANCHEZ FOR WSJ

A much larger effect would come from the administration’s push to remove more than a million migrants who have temporary permission to live and work in the U.S.—which for now is tied up in courts. That effort won an incremental victory Monday when the [Supreme Court allowed](#) the government to strip up to 350,000 Venezuelans of temporary protected status while a lawsuit plays out in lower courts.

So far, Trump’s main impact is at the southwest border, where crossings fell to an average of 391 people per day in February, March and April—down from a peak of 9,741 per day in December 2023, according to U.S. Customs and Border Protection.

Economists believe that decrease will, over time, leave a far bigger hole in the labor force than deportations.

From 2021 to 2024, roughly 12 million migrants came to the U.S., about two-thirds of whom entered either illegally or by requesting some form of temporary status, such as asylum or parole. Some of them say they are increasingly resigned to leaving and want to save as much money as possible before that.

On a side street in downtown, Washington, D.C., a group of Venezuelan food-delivery drivers gathered at their usual spot on a recent Monday despite warnings of planned immigration raids in the city, disseminated via messaging groups that migrants use to share such information.

“What we need to do is work, work, work and earn, earn, earn, because we don’t have much time,” said one driver, a 29-year-old Venezuelan who hiked through [the treacherous Darién Gap jungle path](#) and crossed the U.S. southern border last June. He has a refugee claim pending but isn’t counting on it succeeding under Trump.

He said he drives for Uber Eats from 8 a.m. to 11 p.m. most days, earning between \$1,300 and \$1,500 a week. He took English classes at a local charter school but declined to re-enroll at the beginning of this year.

“With this political situation where they don’t want migrants, I’m not going to keep learning English just so I can go back to Venezuela and speak English to the animals,” he said.



Migrants working at a farm in Homestead, Fla., in April. PHOTO: CHANDAN KHANNA/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

In the days following reports of immigration enforcement activity across Washington, the side street was largely devoid of delivery drivers.

A recent [survey of employers](#) by law firm Littler Mendelson found 58% had some concern about staffing challenges as a result of Trump's immigration policies. But there are as yet no reports of widespread labor shortages, even in migrant-heavy industries.

The National Association of Home Builders has received only “anecdotal reporting of some limitations” related to labor supply, the group's chief economist, Robert Dietz, said.

A spokeswoman for the American Farm Bureau Federation said while some farmers report employees afraid to come to work, “we are not aware of widespread interruptions in farm operations due to employees' absenteeism.”

Undocumented migrants' role in the labor force is hard to measure reliably, as they are often wary of providing information to government agencies.

The Census Bureau's monthly survey of households, which is used to compute the unemployment rate and other key labor market data, has seen a sharp decline in responses from segments of the population that include many migrants who entered illegally.

In April, it received 1,196 responses from noncitizens with a high-school diploma or less, down 16% from August and the fewest in 21 months, according to a Wall Street Journal analysis of census data archived by IPUMS at the University of Minnesota. Overall responses declined 4%.

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