

KARA MILLER | THE BIG IDEA

How do we solve the labor shortage? Bring in more immigrants.

By **Kara Miller** Globe Correspondent, Updated January 31, 2023, 46 minutes ago

A "now hiring" sign is displayed in a window in New York City. SPENCER PLATT/GETTY

The clock is ticking on immigration. In more ways than one.

In December, former Governor Charlie Baker said that Massachusetts was struggling mightily to house the massive influx of refugees — [more than 11,000](#) — that we've seen over the past year.

Mayor Eric Adams declared a state of emergency after 40,000 migrants landed in New York City in 2022, [many bused there by Texas Governor Greg Abbott](#).

But while the crisis is real, and cities and states need far more help from the federal government, there is almost no talk about the crisis beneath the crisis: America is running out of working-age adults. And immigration — at levels that many, many people won't feel comfortable with — may be our only solution.

Why are workers evaporating? A bunch of reasons. Baby Boomers are [retiring](#). Some women are staying home because [child care](#) is unaffordable. And working-age men are [opting out](#) of the labor force in record numbers, particularly those without college degrees.

But the single most important reason is that America's birth rate has largely been [below replacement level](#) since the 1970s, and in steep decline for the past 15 years.

Once, the country was [brimming](#) with an up-and-coming workforce. In 1960, there were six working adults for every person over 65. In 2030, we'll hit 2.8 working adults for every person over 65.

That's an economic earthquake. And the number of working adults is slated to keep shrinking in proportion to older Americans. So if you think it's hard finding a home health aide, or a preschool teacher, or a waiter, or a construction worker now, buckle up.

We may be staring down the barrel of worker shortages so severe that our life choices become increasingly constrained. Can you accept that plum job across the country? Not if your dad needs someone to take care of him, and professional help is unaffordable. Can you return to work after maternity leave? Not if there aren't any slots in nearby preschools.

In the Northeast, [where birthrates have long been some of the lowest in the country](#), the future is now. As the Globe's Larry Edelman recently [reported](#), Massachusetts has "two open jobs for each unemployed resident," and the labor pool has shrunk by more than 100,000 since 2019.



A "help wanted" sign outside of the Dunkin' Donuts at 330 Washington Street in Boston on Jan. 26, 2023. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

So, what do we do? Well, there are two potential solutions to America's incredible shrinking labor pool: Have more babies, or bring in more immigrants.

The baby option might sound fun, but I wouldn't bet on it. Falling birthrates are a [global phenomenon](#), affecting countries from South Korea to Poland. And government policies rarely turn the tide. Offering high-quality, affordable child care [helps](#) encourage couples, but even Scandinavian countries with exceptional child care have about 1.5 children per woman (we're at 1.6 in the US).

Which leaves us with option two: Bring in more immigrants.

But, wait. Aren't we in the middle of a surge of border crossings? Which Baker [called](#) "just nuts"?

Yes and yes. There were more than two million [encounters](#) at the southern border during the 2022 fiscal year, an enormous increase over 2021 — and a seven-fold increase over 2017 (though an undetermined chunk of those are repeat encounters).

But, says Michael Clemens, a fellow at the Center for Global Development and an economics professor at George Mason University, we're actually facing an immigrant deficit. Trump-era policies excluded 1.5 million to 2 million people who would normally have immigrated to the US between 2017 and 2021.

And because those folks never paid taxes, demanded goods and services, or made investments here, Clemens calculates that Trump's clampdown on refugees costs the economy more than [\\$9 billion a year](#).

But good luck trying to convince Americans we need more immigrants. [Nearly 70 percent](#) feel that present immigration levels are sufficient or should be decreased.

To be fair, about 14 percent of current Americans are immigrants, a percentage that's [higher](#) than at any time in the last 100 years. And much like a century ago (after the arrival of large numbers of Southern and Eastern Europeans), Americans have concerns about whether immigrants can effectively assimilate.

Clemens points out that assimilation has never happened quickly, but it always happens. His own ancestors arrived in Ohio in 1846 and were still attending church in German 60 years later.

Those opposed to increasing immigration, he says, sometimes argue that "there's no such thing as a labor shortage. Just raise the wage. I hear that with some bitterness, having experienced the eldercare market personally with my late mom."



People stand outside of the John F. Kennedy Federal Building in Boston to protest the treatment of Haitian migrants by the Biden Administration on Sept. 24, 2021. ERIN CLARK/GLOBE STAFF

Clemens says that giving his mother 24-hour care meant “spending down her savings... The person who’s on the other side of that labor market transaction is not always some big, rich, fat-cat corporation. With elder care, child care, or disabled care, it’s often people who are financially stretched themselves.”

Many Americans, of course, dislike the fact that some who migrate here have crossed the border unlawfully. But Clemens and Nicole Kreisberg, a postdoctoral fellow at Harvard’s Center for Population and Development Studies, told me that if jobs are plentiful in the US, immigrants will try to get to them. And if the government limits legal ways to get here, people will look for alternate routes.

Clemens notes that during the 2021 fiscal year, there were 750,000 apprehensions of people trying to enter the US from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. How many

visas and asylum slots were available for those immigrants? Just 3 for every 100 people, he says.

And Clemens, among others, argues that letting immigrants into America is a long-term revenue generator. “People often think of migrant workers as people who are applying labor. There’s a certain number of landscaping jobs out there, and immigrants doing landscaping means there are fewer jobs for Americans,” the thinking goes.

But that’s wrong, he says. “Immigrants are people. Immigrants are consumers. Immigrants are inventors. Immigrants are founders of businesses, and they are overrepresented as founders of businesses relative to natives.”

Clemens does note that sudden surges in immigration can temporarily depress wages for those at the lowest end of the wage spectrum. “But in general,” he says, “it creates jobs for Americans.”

Strict limits on immigration, though, stifle immigrants’ economic contributions to the US.

Kreisberg studied Latino high school students in New York and found that, on average, “undocumented immigrants are very, very high performing... [But] when they graduate high school, they often learn of their undocumented status and then realize that their options are more limited, in terms of higher education.”

The problem for politicians (and those who vote for them) is that the tectonic demographic shifts we face are mostly invisible. It’s hard to see the tax base disappearing, or the number of young workers contracting.

Of course, the pain may eventually become apparent — when our parents can’t get nursing help, or our children’s camp can’t find staff. But by then, our own options in life will likely have narrowed, and there won’t be a quick fix.

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