



Illegal and unseen: Nine surprising facts about Indians in the US



Indian asylum seekers from Gujarat await US border patrol after crossing into Arizona in 2024

Donald Trump has made the mass deportation of undocumented foreign nationals a key policy, with the US said to have identified about 18,000 Indian nationals it believes entered illegally

Last week Narendra Modi said India would take back its nationals who were in the US illegally, and also crack down on the "human trafficking ecosystem". "These are children of very ordinary families, and they are lured by big dreams and promises," he said during his visit to Washington.

Now a new paper by Abby Budiman and Devesh Kapur from Johns Hopkins University has shed light on the numbers, demographics, entry methods, locations and trends relating to undocumented Indians over time. Indian migrants make up only a small share of the overall unauthorised migrant population in the US.

If Pew and CMS estimates are accurate, nearly one in four Indian immigrants in the US is undocumented - an unlikely scenario given migration patterns, the study says. (Indian immigrants are one of the fastest-growing groups in the US, surging from 600,000 in 1990 to 3.2 million in 2022.) The DHS estimated in 2022 that the undocumented Indian population in the US dropped 60% from its 2016 peak, falling from 560,000 to 220,000.

How did the number of undocumented Indians drop so steeply from 2016 to 2022? Mr Kapur says the data doesn't provide a clear answer, but plausible explanations could be that some obtained legal status while others returned, particularly due to COVID-related hardships. The number of Indian recipients of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (Daca) has also declined from 2,600 in 2017 to 1,600 in 2024. The Daca programme protects migrants who came to the US as children.

To sum up: the undocumented Indian population grew both in numbers and as a share of all unauthorised migrants, rising from 0.8% in 1990 to 3.9% in 2015 before dropping to 2% in 2022.