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IMMIGRATION SOURCE SHIFTS TO ASIA FROM MEXICO

In most states, arrivals from China or India outpace those from the U.S.'s southern neighbor

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Chinese and Indian newcomers to the U.S. are now outpacing Mexican arrivals in most regions of the country, a marked reversal from a decade ago, when immigrants from America's southern neighbor dwarfed arrivals from the large Asian countries.

A Wall Street Journal analysis of census figures shows that in Illinois, New York, Ohio, Virginia, Florida, Georgia and other states, more immigrants from China and India arrived than from Mexico in 2014, the most recent year for which data are available.

That year, about 136,000 people came to the U.S. from India, about 128,000 from China and about 123,000 from Mexico, census figures show. As recently as 2005, Mexico sent more than 10 times as many people to the U.S. as China, and more than six times as many as India.

The figures include people who come legally and illegally, but don't distinguish between the two. While Chinese and Indian immigrants are far more likely to be in the U.S. legally than those from Mexico, Asians represent one of the fastest-growing segments of undocumented immigrants in the country, researchers say. People from Mexico and other Central American countries account for about 71% of the U.S. unauthorized immigrant population, while Asians account for the second-largest share at 13%, according to the Migration Policy Institute.

Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump has made stopping illegal immigration from Mexico a centerpiece of his campaign, through his proposed border wall and other enforcement measures. Last week, he also pledged to add thousands of new border enforcement agents.

But demographers say the quick shift in migration flows shows that the campaign discussion's emphasis on illegal crossings at the nation's southern border doesn't tell the whole picture.

"This notion of a wall and of Mexican immigration being the most pressing challenge facing the United States is completely out of touch with the reality we face," said Karthick Ramakrishnan, associate dean of the University of California, Riverside School of Public Policy. Immigration today "is much more Asian."

A spokesman for Mr. Trump said the campaign is focused on stemming illegal border crossings from all of Central America, noting that apprehensions along the southwest border have surpassed those from the previous fiscal year.

The Republican also has proposed a biometric tracking system to tackle visa overstays, which account for an estimated 40% or more of the people in the U.S. illegally. The federal government has already tried and failed to create the exit portion of such a system, most recently when lawmakers worked on an immigration overhaul in 2013. A spokesman for Mr. Trump called such a system a national-security imperative and said it is achievable with the right leadership in Washington.

Democrat Hillary Clinton wants to enact an immigration overhaul that would create a path to citizenship for some Americans here illegally and end rules requiring certain green card seekers to first leave the country. Her plans also don't explicitly address the shift toward Asian immigration, but put far less focus on securing the Mexican border. A Clinton spokeswoman said the Democratic nominee backs an immigration overhaul but didn't address details of her proposals so far.

The Journal's analysis found that in 2014, there were 31 states where more immigrants arrived from China than from Mexico that year, up from seven states in 2005. Newly arrived immigrants from India in 2014 outnumbered those from Mexico in 25 states, up from four states in 2005. Even in California, a top destination for Latinos, Chinese immigrants outnumbered Mexican immigrants in 2014, and the number from India was only slightly below that of Mexico.

Census figures show that about 82,000 people came to the U.S. from all other Central American countries besides Mexico in 2014, a surge from the prior year tied largely to an influx of unaccompanied children from Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador that has since tapered off.

A swirl of forces is driving the shift. Highly educated technology workers from China and India are flocking to the U.S. for skilled jobs as the U.S. moves toward a more knowledge-based economy. While the number of such work visas is capped each year, extended families that trail such workers are spawning their own wave of new arrivals. China and India now send more international students to the U.S. than any other countries.

At the same time, fewer Mexicans are coming to the U.S. as Mexico's own job market improves and its birth rate has declined. The construction and manufacturing jobs that lured low-skilled Mexican workers until the start of the 2007-09 recession remain in short supply. As of 2014, more Mexicans had returned to Mexico than had migrated here since the recession's end, according to the Pew Research Center.

Census figures show how far Asian immigrants are settling beyond traditional gateways like metropolitan Los Angeles and New York, filtering into places as varied as Atlanta, Cincinnati and Charlottesville, Va. In suburbs and smaller towns, immigration lawyers, language centers and real-estate agents are adapting their work to an increasingly Asian clientele.

In Virginia, the steady flow of Mexicans that came to the state a decade ago has now slowed to a trickle. In 2005, about 4,900 people from Mexico came to Virginia, census figures show. By 2014, that number was less than 500.

Blue Ridge Literacy in Roanoke dropped two of its four English classes tailored toward native Spanish this year as learners from other countries began to outnumber them, said executive director Russ Merritt. An annual celebration for new citizens the center held recently didn't include a single Mexican who had gained citizenship. "For us it's just been a surprise," he said.

Meanwhile, the number of people from China and India coming to Virginia has risen sharply. In 2005, fewer than 700 immigrants came from both China and India, census figures show. In Virginia in 2014, about 4,000 people came from China and almost 3,900 people came from India.

The Northern Virginia towns that comprise an affluent cluster of the Washington, D.C., suburbs—and exurbs that extend beyond them—are attracting a flood of Chinese and Indian workers at defense companies like Northrop Grumman and financial-services firms. They have helped make the state’s immigrant population more highly educated than its native-born residents, said Michael Cassidy, president of the Commonwealth Institute for Fiscal Analysis, a left-leaning think tank in Richmond.

“Within the last five years I’ve started seeing a lot more Indians buying expensive homes,” said Vinh Nguyen, owner of Westgate Realty Group in Falls Church, Va. Lately he said is also seeing more parents of Asian students snapping up homes as investments that double as housing for their children.