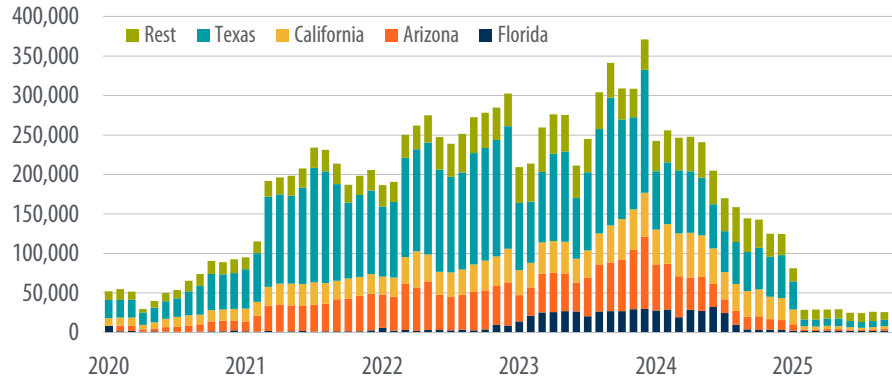


## Illegal Immigration

In this week's "Three on Thursday," we take a closer look at recent immigration trends in the United States and how federal policy has shifted over the past several years. During his first term, President Trump made reducing illegal immigration a central priority, expanding physical barriers at the southern border and increasing enforcement. When President Biden took office in 2021, his administration took a different approach—rolling back several Trump-era policies, adjusting enforcement priorities, and changing how asylum and processing were handled. Those shifts coincided with a historic surge in border crossings from 2020–2023, which placed significant strain on processing capacity and the broader immigration system. Now in his second term, President Trump has moved to reestablish tighter controls, including restricting certain border crossings and restoring policies aimed at discouraging unauthorized entry. The three charts below illustrate how these varying policy approaches have aligned with changes in illegal immigration patterns over time.

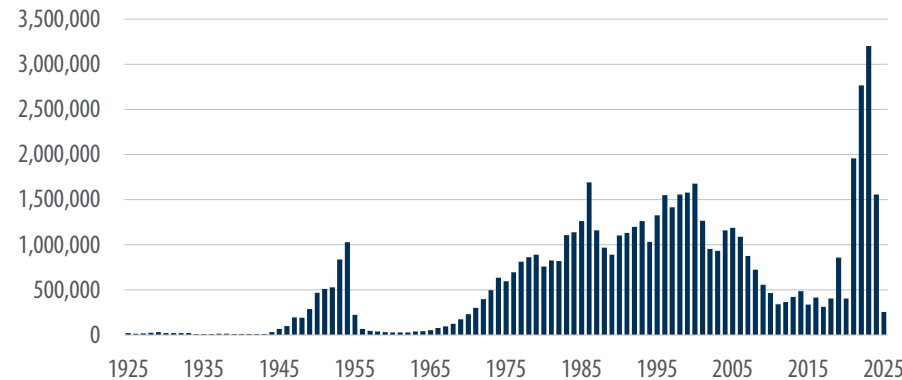
### U.S. Border Patrol Encounters by State



Source: U.S. Customs and Border Protection, First Trust Advisors. Monthly data 10/2019-10/2025.

The southern border has historically been a focal point for illegal crossings into the U.S. Only 38% of the 1,950-mile boundary is covered by physical barriers, providing relatively open and unmonitored access to the country. Despite this exposure, Customs and Border Protection has been effective in discouraging illegal entry attempts this year. Since February, under the new administration, the number of U.S. Border Patrol encounters with illegal migrants at the southern border averaged about 15,000 per month, down from 150,000 per month over the same period in 2024.

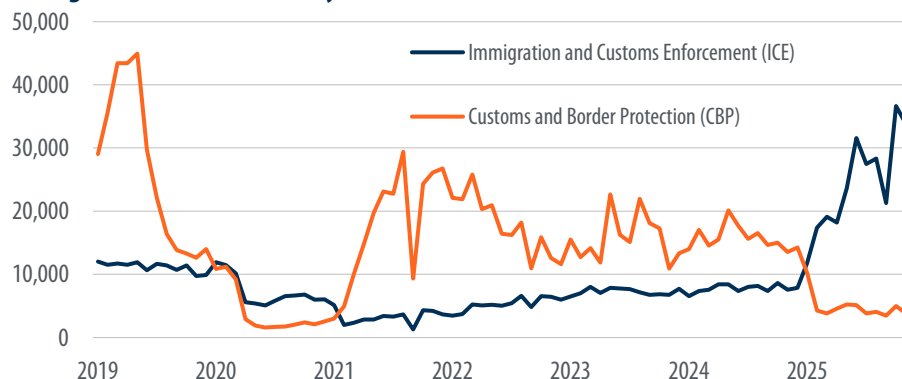
### Nationwide Enforcement Encounters by the U.S. Border Patrol



Source: U.S. Customs and Border Protection, First Trust Advisors. Fiscal year data from 1925-2025.

President Trump's crackdown on undocumented immigrants has brought illegal entry attempts to a halt. Following four years of historically high levels of encounters between U.S. Border Patrol agents and illegal migrants at the border, fiscal year 2025 saw the lowest number of encounters since 1970. However, this decrease does not fully offset the massive immigration experienced over the last five years. "Unauthorized" immigrants are comprised of two categories: those who entered the country illegally, and those who overstayed visas or violated the terms of admission. This population grew an estimated 3.5 million between 2021 and 2023, reaching about 14 million—many of whom are still in the U.S. today.

### Immigration Arrests Made by ICE and CBP



Source: Immigration and Customs Enforcement, First Trust Advisors. Monthly data 1/2019-11/2025.

Customs and Border Protection (CBP) has authority only along the U.S. border, limiting its focus to individuals physically entering the country. On the other hand, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) is able to work anywhere in the U.S. The total number of arrests made by the two agencies reached 37,000 in November 2025. While high, it is still 19,000 less than the recent peak in 2019. However, the nature of these arrests has changed since then. Instead of taking place at the remote southern border under CBP, these ICE immigration arrests are happening among illegal immigrants who have been in the country longer and in public view, prompting backlash and protests in major cities.