

You probably already know something about the colonists and settlers of early America. Do you know about their reasons for leaving their homes? There were a few common reasons. Some colonists came to gather natural resources, such as wood, to send back to Great Britain. Others wanted to search for silver and gold, run their own farm, or even run a business. Some of the settlers just wanted to be able to practice their religion without persecution.

People choose to immigrate for many reasons. These reasons are called push and pull factors. Push factors are conditions that drive people out of one place, and pull factors are conditions that lead people to another place. These push and pull conditions can be political, economic, social, or environmental. Let's take a look at some factors that bring people to the United States today and examine some of the challenges of immigration.



Immigrants wait to be examined as they enter the United States at Ellis Island.

Pull Factors

Just as the colonists came to America for a better life, waves of immigrants came to Ellis Island in Upper New York Bay searching for new opportunities. Many passed through hoping for a better life after a long, difficult journey across the ocean. Between 1892 and 1924 alone, 17 million people are estimated to have set foot onto the island! The reasons for immigration have not changed much since then; today, many still come to the United States seeking better employment opportunities. Even during periods of economic hardship, the United States has a fair supply of jobs compared to other countries. These jobs often pay higher wages than in other nations. While some countries have a smaller selection of jobs, the United States offers jobs in various industries, including agriculture, manufacturing, restaurants, hotels, health care, education, environmental studies, shipping, technology, communications, law, medicine, and many others.

The variety of employment is only one of the many attractions of the United States. The United States has long had a reputation as a place where anyone can find respect and success if he or she works hard for it. This idea is supported in American books, television shows, songs and movies.

Chasing the American dream is true for immigrants from more developed nations as well. Usually these immigrants seek educational opportunities. Consider the following situation: In many thriving countries, such as Japan and parts of Europe, students are tracked throughout their school years. Students' test scores and skill levels are used to place them on a specific career track. Imagine that you have always dreamed of becoming a doctor, but your test scores are not very high. With lower test scores, it can be difficult to get into a European or Japanese university. This means that a student who wants to be a doctor will have to settle and get another job that he or she does not want, such as nursing or research. But the student could still be a doctor if he or she is willing to apply to a university in the United States. The freedom to choose one's career path and the adventure of moving to a new place draw many to the United States every year.

You have read through a few ideas about what pulls people to the United States, away from the homes they have known all their lives. But what could push some to leave their homes? What would make you want to leave your home for a new land?

Push Factors

When you are at home and the political debates come on after your favorite show, all you have to do is change the channel if you want to watch something else. You might think all the debates are boring or pointless, but they are a sign of the freedom many people in other countries fight for every day. For many in other nations, life can be very difficult due to political conditions. Some look to flee their own countries because of civil unrest and warfare. For example, immigrants from Somalia fled after dictator Mohamed Siad Barre was overthrown and left the country in 1991. His departure led to civil war among several clans and factions of people in Somalia. As the conflict goes on, many family members have managed to leave Somalia to join their family members in the United States.

There are also countries ruled by authoritarian governments, which often take away people's individual rights. Under these governments, people look to escape from oppressive rulers and very limited opportunities. For example, in May 2012, Chen Guangcheng, a Chinese dissident (someone who opposes governmental rule), came to the United States after escaping house arrest. He had been imprisoned for bringing attention to the harsh enforcement of the one-child policy in Shandong province in 2005. With the assistance of Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, he left China for New York City to protect his family from further punishment by Chinese authorities.

Educational opportunities can be a pull factor, as discussed earlier, but they can also be a major push factor. People with few schooling options in their own country often feel “pushed” to leave and seek opportunities in the United States. Some parents in other countries resort to sending their children to the U.S. illegally. Critics say many parents do this to make it easier for their children to attend college in the United States. Debates have arisen in several states about what to do about the issue. Some say there are benefits, but opponents argue that states suffer because of this situation. This is because universities charge a lower tuition rate for students who are already residents. In early 2012, illegal immigrant Jose Luis Zelaya ran for student body president at Texas A&M. Zelaya and other students have been very open about their immigration statuses, which has caused some student groups to stage protests at universities. The main argument has been that the states are losing out on the higher tuition rates for non-residents, but some wonder if the motivations behind the protests are connected to anti-immigrant feelings.

The Challenges of Immigration

Many people throughout the centuries have improved their lives by coming to the United States. However, immigration can be quite controversial. Throughout United States history, laws have been passed to limit the number of immigrants allowed to enter the country. Similarly, laws have existed that state which immigrants are allowed and not allowed to enter. In 1882, during the gold rush in the American West, the U.S. government passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, which prohibited Chinese immigrants from entering the United States or working without certification. Settlers were worried that Chinese immigrants were taking too many jobs away from Americans. The act reflected the distrust and intolerance many Americans felt towards Chinese immigrants at the time.

Immigration is still very controversial. While new processes for screening and limiting immigrants have made it more difficult for immigrants to settle in the United States without proper authorization, many immigrants enter the country without documentation each year. Some Americans worry that undocumented immigrants have access to jobs and resources that should be available only to Americans. Some states affected by high levels of immigration have passed or amended many laws in an effort to reduce the number of illegal immigrants. For example, the state of Arizona passed two pieces of legislation in April 2010. The pieces of legislation would have made it illegal for unauthorized immigrants to apply for jobs. They also would have required immigrants to carry alien registration papers. The two pieces of legislation would have allowed state law officers to examine a person’s immigration

status during any lawful traffic stop. Finally, they would have also legalized warrantless arrests without probable cause. This, in turn, would have led to the immigrants' expulsion from the country. However, these laws were eventually ruled unconstitutional by the Supreme Court of the United States.

Pull and push factors bring all types of people onto American soil. There are many reasons that people leave their home country and seek out a new life in the United States. Some are pulled into a search for freedom of education, while others are pushed from their homelands due to political turmoil. Some just want a better life for their families and believe they will find more opportunities in the United States. In many cases, life may be better here than where they started, but that does not mean that this new life will be easy. Some may find better jobs but will have to face prejudice in the workplace. Some may get accepted into law school but be criticized by fellow students because they are not legal residents. Immigrants often face a difficult life, full of many risks and challenges. Based on what you have read today, would it be worth the risk for you to make the journey?

After reading the passage, answer the following questions:

1. What was the main reason the United States passed the Chinese Exclusion Act?
 - A. The government was hoping to attract more Chinese workers.
 - B. People were worried that the Chinese were taking too many jobs.
 - C. People were concerned that the Chinese workers were taking gold back to China.
 - D. The government wanted the Chinese to stay near the East Coast of the United States.

2. Which of following is an example of a *pull factor* for coming to the United States?
 - A. There are many opportunities for employment, from serving in a restaurant to becoming a nurse.
 - B. There is too much political unrest in other countries.
 - C. Testing in schools in Japan leave no other choice for some students than to migrate to the United States.
 - D. Other countries provide plenty of rights and freedoms that make people want to stay in their home countries.

3. Which fictional news headline best illustrates a major reason that people immigrate to America?
 - A. Immigrants Move to Unites States to Reduce Career Choices
 - B. United States Offers Career Tracking for Students
 - C. Students Seek University Experience in United States
 - D. United States Restricts Freedom of Choice for Immigrants

4. The United States offers many opportunities and freedoms that cannot be experienced in other countries. In what ways, positive and negative, has immigration affected the United States? Use details from the reading passage to support your answer.