Unauthorized immigrants contribute to Idaho’s economy through their work in industries such as agriculture, services and construction, as well as through their everyday spending. Unauthorized immigrants pay taxes and are ineligible for most taxpayer-funded programs.

In contrast to national trends, Idaho’s unauthorized immigrant population remained stable, around 35,000 people, between 2005 and 2021. Unauthorized immigrants are part of Idaho’s communities, having lived and worked in the state for decades.
Unauthorized immigrants pay taxes in Idaho. In 2014, the most recent year for which data are available, unauthorized immigrants paid:

\[
\text{Sales tax: } \$15.5M \\
\text{Property tax: } \$8.4M \\
\text{State income tax: } \$2.4M \\
\text{Total: } \$26.3M
\]

Unauthorized immigrants are ineligible for most public programs that are funded by tax dollars, including housing and food assistance programs, Medicaid and subsidized health insurance.

Unauthorized immigrants are eligible for Emergency Medicaid, K-12 education and the National School Lunch Program.

A full account of tax revenues and program expenditures associated with unauthorized immigrants in Idaho is not available.
Dairy producers in Idaho experience ongoing difficulty attracting and retaining authorized workers, despite increasing the efficiency of their operations through technology. Dairy farms are not eligible for the H-2A program.

Hospitality services in Idaho often face small profit margins and customers who are unwilling or unable to afford price increases to match the costs of labor. This limits business owners’ ability to increase wages to attract and retain workers.

Construction companies nationally had an increasing number of unfilled positions between 2013 and 2023. Additional detail on unauthorized immigrant workers in Idaho’s construction industry is not available.

The H-2A temporary agricultural worker program offers the opportunity to meet labor shortages in seasonal agriculture with foreign workers. Employers with year-round labor needs, such as those in dairy production and non-agricultural industries, are not able to participate in H-2A. H-2A workers are authorized workers.

Unmet labor needs in crop production, dairy and hospitality industries. Labor shortages may lead businesses to hire unauthorized immigrants.

Commodity crop producers in Idaho are limited in their ability to increase wages to attract and retain workers because commodity prices are set on the global market, rather than based on the cost of inputs. Many commodity crop producers use the H-2A program, but this does not meet the needs of all producers. The H-2A program structure limits participation, especially for smaller or diversified operations that require fewer, more flexible workers in multiple roles.

In Idaho, in 2021, an estimated 10,000 unauthorized immigrants worked in agriculture, 10,000 worked in services broadly and 5,000 worked in construction.

People who enter the U.S. through ports of entry have their documentation inspected upon arrival. Entry without inspection occurs when immigrants arrive without passing through ports of entry. Unauthorized immigrants have either overstayed their visas or entered without inspection. Between 2010 and 2017, the majority of unauthorized immigrants in the U.S. had overstayed their visas.
ESTIMATING THE UNAUTHORIZED IMMIGRANT POPULATION

The precise number of unauthorized immigrants in the U.S. and in Idaho is not known. While some unauthorized immigrants may be willing to disclose their legal status in population surveys, others may choose not to due to fear of repercussions, including deportation.

Organizations such as the Center for Migration Studies and the Pew Research Center provide model-based estimates that use information collected by the U.S. Census Bureau and well-developed statistical methods to describe the unauthorized immigrant population.

IDAHO’S UNAUTHORIZED IMMIGRANT POPULATION

92% are working-age adults
86% are in the workforce
78% are from Mexico
58% speak English “well” or “very well”
48% have a high school diploma, some college or a bachelor’s degree

LONG LENGTHS OF STAY

In 2021, 76% of unauthorized immigrant adults had been in Idaho for six or more years. More detailed data from 2014 showed that at least half of unauthorized immigrants had been in Idaho for more than 16 years. This was the longest length of stay in the nation.

SOURCE: This Idaho at a Glance is based on the full-length research report, The Unauthorized Immigrant Workforce and Idaho’s Economy, published by the McClure Center (2024). The report describes Idaho’s unauthorized workforce and how their work, spending and taxes relate to Idaho’s economy. The most recent data on unauthorized immigrants in the U.S. and Idaho are from 2021, with more detailed data only available for earlier years. View the full report: go.uidaho.edu/workforce2024.

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