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Many CT voters said they're worried about illegal immigration's cost to the state. Republicans are too



Immigrant youth, health care advocates, allies, and legislators gather outside the State Capitol in Hartford in support of expanding the HUSKY Health Program to undocumented income eligible immigrants under 26 years of age, Thursday, April 13, 2023. The program went into effect this year. (Jessica Hill/Special to the Courant)



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Thousands of miles from the U.S.-Mexico border, [at polls all over Connecticut, voters said](#) the cost of illegal immigration was their highest priority this election cycle.

In Farmington, Ralph Daily, who came to vote with his wife and children, said legal immigration was the most important issue to him.

“They’re not enforcing the laws that are already on the books. We have lots of laws in America but they’re not being enforced,” he said. “My wife is an immigrant but she went through the legal process, she had to jump through hoops to get here. You’ve got to pay a lot of money as opposed to saying OK, you got here one way or another, you’re suddenly legal. What about the people who are trying to do it legally? It doesn’t seem fair.”

To the south, in Orange, Grayson James, 17, who was at the polls with fellow students, said he has seen that the election has created division in the nation, and he sees Donald Trump as a leader who can improve the economy and one who will be able to end illegal immigration.

But what the cost of illegal immigration might be — and the benefits to Connecticut’s culture and economy — are hard to quantify. Even estimating how many undocumented people are residents of the state is difficult.

As the dust from Election Day settles and a new presidential term approaches, Republican leaders in Connecticut are looking to examine the impact of immigration on the state and calling for an immediate end to some costs.

“In Connecticut, the costs are hidden. We don’t really know the numbers,” [House Republican Leader Vincent Candelora](#) said. “The data is very different, difficult to extrapolate. ... We can’t even quantify overall, the housing and the education costs because a lot of it just isn’t broken out.”

Candelora said analysts estimate that Connecticut spends \$1.3 billion a year on undocumented residents.

How many undocumented residents are in CT?

That figure is [based on a report](#) from the Federation For American Immigration Reform, an anti-immigration nonprofit that projected that illegal immigration cost Connecticut taxpayers [\\$1.28 billion in 2023](#). However, this assessment was based on population estimates that put the number of undocumented residents in the state at 167,000; other organizations estimate that Connecticut's unauthorized population is between [113,000](#) and [150,000](#). The total also included projected costs for an estimated 58,000 U.S. citizens who are the children of undocumented residents in the state.

One reliable population indicator is the number of drive-only licenses in the state. According to the [Department of Motor Vehicles](#), just over 59,800 residents are registered under this license class, which is "designed specifically for undocumented individuals who are 16 years of age or older and unable to establish lawful presence in the United States," the [DMV's website states](#).

According to a [July report](#), the [Pew Research Center](#) estimated that 150,000 unauthorized immigrants called Connecticut home in 2022. The most common country of origin was Guatemala. [Estimates](#) from the [Migration Policy Institute](#) also add Mexico, Brazil, Ecuador and India to this list — and 75% had lived in the U.S. for more than five years, according to Pew.

Statistically sound data on new arrivals is harder to come by at the state level.

In a statement to the Courant Friday, a [Connecticut Department of Social Services](#) spokesperson said the department does not "track information about new migrants."

In a September 2023 report about a "growing wave of asylum seekers coming from Haiti, Venezuela and Cuba," [CT Insider](#) wrote that DSS had recorded roughly 500 Haitians and Cubans who had arrived in the state during the year preceding the article.

On Friday, the DSS spokesperson said that the state has received more than 1,100 refugees since Oct. 1, 2023. The department did not provide figures for other migrant categories.

A public safety issue?

[Senate Republican Leader Stephen Harding](#) said the main concern is “primarily public safety.”

Last month, Harding and Candelora [issued a “wake-up call”](#) after individuals allegedly tied to a transnational Venezuelan gang [were charged](#) in connection to a case that involved a murder in Stamford.

In an interview with the Courant Friday, Harding spoke against policies, such as the [Trust Act](#), which heavily restricts state and local law enforcement’s ability to cooperate with federal immigration agents.

“Local police and troopers don’t even have authority to contact ICE or immigration,” Harding said. “It puts our public safety in danger because we’re not talking about just simply undocumented immigrants that are following the law, we’re talking about protecting undocumented immigrants that are convicted or arrested for committing some heinous crimes.”

According to the Office of Legislative Research, [the Trust Act does allow](#) an undocumented individual “to be arrested and detained pursuant to a detainer without a judicial warrant if the individual has been convicted of a class A or B felony or is identified as a possible match in the federal Terrorist Screening Database or similar database.”

Studies have also shown that undocumented immigrants commit felonies and violent crimes [at a fraction of the rate](#) of both documented immigrants and U.S. citizens.

“The largest misconception though is that people coming into this country are criminals, and that is absolutely not what we see,” [Connecticut Institute for Refugees and Immigrants](#) President and CEO Susan Schnitzer said. “We see folks coming into this country that have very deep values ... that are very much in line with what people would communicate as typical U.S. values. ... They want to work ... they want their children to be educated, and a lot of folks (are here) because they cannot live in their home country for fear of persecution, abuse (or) death.”

HUSKY and other benefits

For the last two years, children in the state who meet the federal poverty level income requirements for Connecticut's Medicaid program, known as HUSKY, can access the benefit, regardless of their immigration status. When the program rolled out in 2023, the cutoff age for undocumented children was 12 years old. In July, the health insurance program expanded to cover children 15 and under.

On Friday Republican leaders in the General Assembly called for the immediate suspension of "Connecticut's free undocumented immigrant healthcare," as Democrats defended the program, emphasizing the importance of mitigating the cost of uncompensated care on hospitals in the state.

The statements came after the state's [Office Of Policy and Management](#) reported that higher-than-budgeted caseloads for undocumented children covered by HUSKY are contributing to a [\\$9 million shortfall](#) as analysts project a \$220 million deficit in Connecticut's Medicaid account.

In Fiscal Year 2023 Connecticut paid \$13 million for HUSKY coverage for children ages 12 and younger, according to a report from the Connecticut Mirror [republished by the Courant](#). With the July expansion, the state budget bumped up funding in Fiscal Year 2024 to \$38 million.

Beyond HUSKY, state leaders said Connecticut's net expenditures on immigration-related items are challenging to gauge.

"While it is difficult to quantify all costs associated with migration to the state, it is important to note that Connecticut does not have a right to shelter provision (as Massachusetts and New York City do) and therefore we have not seen the influx of immigrants that some other states have," [OPM Secretary Jeffrey Beckham](#) wrote in a recent letter to GOP leaders in the state Senate.

In the message that OPM issued in response to an inquiry regarding the financial impact of undocumented immigrants, Beckham said DSS has received \$3.05 million from the state over the last two fiscal years.

According to Beckham, DSS received \$1 million in funding during Fiscal Year 2023 “to support refugee resettlement agencies in the provision of interim supports to help close the welcome gap.” During Fiscal Year 2024, Beckham said the “bipartisan-approved biennial budget also appropriated \$1.0 million ... for additional migrant support.” During this period, DSS also received [\\$1.05 million](#) in federal dollars from the American Rescue Plan Act that the legislature earmarked for “migrant support.” Beckham noted that the funding in this ARPA allocation was reduced during the 2024 session — the original budget called for \$3.25 million.

While at the federal level, the Department of Homeland Security has provided more than [\\$1 billion in grants](#) over the last two fiscal years to states and nonprofits that provide shelter and other services for migrants, undocumented immigrants are [generally ineligible](#) for federal public benefits programs such as food stamps, Supplemental Security Income and welfare, according to the [National Immigration Law Center](#).

Outside of HUSKY coverage, immigration advocates and experts in the state said that undocumented residents do not have access to other state programs.

“That’s a misconception that people come into this country and are supported by public benefits,” Schnitzer said. “It’s a complicated system, but any public benefit is really tied to immigration status.”

[Integrated Refugee and Immigrant Services](#) Executive Director Maggie Mitchell Salem explained that even refugees and humanitarian parolees who are considered documented “do not have access to the full range of social benefits” that are available to U.S. citizens.

While immigrants may not receive public benefits, their tax dollars contribute to these programs.

In 2022, Connecticut’s undocumented population paid an estimated \$406,400,000 in state and local taxes, according to a [2022 report](#) by the [Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy](#).

Unlike the rest of the population that files annual tax returns, Salem said that when it comes to undocumented residents, “They can’t get those taxes back.”

“When you think about those social services and benefits that our citizens depend on — social security, Medicaid and Medicare — (that) requires people to pay into them,” Salem said. “They pay into those other social services that they can’t receive.”

Economy and education

Unauthorized immigrants made up approximately 5.5% of Connecticut’s labor force in 2022, according to estimates from Pew Research. The top industries? “Education/Health,” construction, and service occupations, Pew found.

“I just think people are unaware unless you work with undocumented populations, how many people are working in the dirty, demeaning and dangerous jobs,” Quinnipiac University Professor [Sheila Hayre](#), an expert in immigration law, said. “In terms of the economy, I don’t even know how we would function without these people.”

“The labor lump fallacy is that workers who come from other countries are sort of substitutable, so therefore they take jobs away from American workers,” Hayre explained. “I do think there is some displacement. But on the whole, these workers really complement the work that native-born workers or non-immigrant workers are doing. ... Migrants are opening businesses, doing jobs, filling niches that are largely unfilled and creating work.”

As immigrants start families and bring up the next generation of workers, Salem said [research has shown](#) that the children of immigrants contribute to the economy even more.

A [study by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine](#) concluded that “immigration has an overall positive impact on long-run economic growth in the U.S.” after determining that “First-generation immigrants are more costly to governments than are the native-born, but the second generation are among the strongest fiscal and economic contributors in the U.S.”

“The kids that are born here or the kids that are brought over here when they’re young, they graduate high school, they go on to college, they take on jobs that are not the subsistence jobs that their parents had to take on just to support themselves,” Salem said. “That is the classic American story and it happens every single day across the country, it takes that little initial investment ... and there’s the return.”

In 1982, the [U.S. Supreme Court ruled](#) that all children, regardless of their immigration status, have a right to a free public education. In accordance with this ruling and federal discrimination law, the Office of Legislative Research said in a [2019 memo](#) that “school districts are prohibited from gathering ... information” about whether a “student is a legal resident.”

“Therefore, there is no data on the number of undocumented students attending Connecticut public schools,” the memo stated.

While the immigration status of Connecticut’s student population is unknown, over the last 10 years, the number of English and multilingual learners has [increased by more than 70%](#), according to [enrollment data](#) from the [Connecticut State Department of Education](#).

During the 2023-2024 school year, CSDE recorded a total of 54,078 students that were English language or multilingual learners — 11% of the public school population. However, it is important to note that this demographic includes U.S. citizens and students of all immigration statuses.

In the state’s public schools, staffing levels have failed to keep pace with the increasing need for English as a second language programs. Certified bilingual teachers and TESOL teachers have appeared on [CSDE’s shortage area list](#) since at least 2017, [CSDE memos to superintendents](#) show. According to the [department’s reports](#), the need exists statewide across all grade levels from pre-Kindergarten through grade 12.

The five school districts that have seen the most growth in their English and multilingual learner student populations over the last 10 years are Bridgeport (+5,537 students, a 105% increase), Danbury (+4,364 students, a 98% increase), Waterbury (+3,745 students, a 77% increase), New Haven (+1,513 students, a 55% increase) and Norwalk (+1,190 students, a 92% increase), according to the Courant’s analysis of CSDE data.

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