Anthony’s parents risked their lives to immigrate to America illegally from Mexico about 16 years ago. They hoped to find more opportunities for their children and to pursue, in short, “the American Dream.”

“My mom wanted a better life for herself,” Anthony says. “My dad wanted to find a job.”

Anthony, 11, belongs to a kind of “mixed” family unique to immigrants. Because he was born in the United States, he is a citizen, but his parents are still illegal. The sixth-grader from Brooklyn, New York, didn’t want his full name used for this story because he worries that immigration officials might force his parents to leave the country.

There are about 11 million illegal immigrants living in the U.S. today. They lack the documents that would make them legal residents or citizens.

Illegal immigration is a subject of intense debate in the U.S. At a time of high unemployment, many people think that these immigrants take jobs away from Americans.

That has helped make illegal immigration a major issue in this year’s presidential election.

Yet a recent study by the Pew Hispanic Center found that the number of illegal immigrants is down 8 percent from its peak in 2007. The decline is even more dramatic for immigrants from Mexico, the top country of origin for illegal immigrants (see graph, p. 10). In 2000, approximately 750,000 Mexicans came to the U.S., the majority of them illegally. Last year, only about 150,000 crossed the border.

“We are in a very different kind of immigration situation [today],” Jeffrey Passel of the Pew Hispanic Center told The New York Times.

There are several reasons for the
Immigration

immigration is back in the headlines

decline, including stricter patrols along the U.S.-Mexican border and crackdowns in some states. America’s struggling economy also means fewer jobs to attract immigrants.

"Most people come here for work," Susan Yanun, a director of an immigrants’ aid group in Chicago, Illinois, tells JS. “And there just aren’t as many jobs, so people aren’t coming.” At the same time, the economies of Mexico and other countries in Latin America have been doing better, so there are more jobs at home.

What Franklin Thought

The U.S. is often called “a nation of immigrants.” Yet since the country’s beginnings, there have been outcries against newcomers. Back in 1753, Benjamin Franklin worried that a large influx of German immigrants "will soon outnumber us, that [we won’t] be able to preserve our language, and even our government will become [endangered]."

In addition to the presidential campaign, new laws in a number of states have once again made illegal immigration a divisive issue.

In May 2010, the Arizona legislature passed a law that requires the police to check the immigration status of anyone they pull over. It was the first of similar measures adopted in Utah, Georgia, Indiana, South Carolina, and Alabama that seek to aggressively identify illegal immigrants and get them deported.

Although the new laws were popular in those states, they also met with a storm of protest. Critics charged that the measures would lead to racial profiling of Hispanics and devastate communities.

"[The Alabama law] has destroyed lives and ripped apart families," said Mary Bauer of the Southern Poverty Law Center, a civil rights organization, during a protest in Montgomery, the state capital. “It has set Alabama back at least 20 years.”

U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder filed suit to block the Arizona law, saying that under the Constitution only the federal government can make immigration...
policy. In December, the U.S. Supreme Court agreed to hear the case, U.S. v. Arizona, later this year.

Officials in Arizona and the other states with similar laws say that they were forced to act on their own when the federal government failed to do so. Especially with an ailing economy, they say, it’s wrong for illegal immigrants to take jobs from citizens. And, they argue, illegal immigrants commit crimes and drain social services.

Immigrants counter that they take jobs Americans don’t want, especially part-time or seasonal farm and construction work. In October, tomato farmer Brian Cash told a reporter that the Alabama law had caused his 64-man Hispanic migrant crew, many of whom he’d hired during picking season for years, to vanish overnight. Only two U.S. citizens came to apply for the jobs, leaving most of Cash’s crops to rot in the ground.

Path to Citizenship

Most of the Republican candidates for President say that illegal immigrants should be deported. But one candidate, Newt Gingrich, proposes that anyone who has been in the U.S. for 25 years or more should be able to stay legally.

“I do not believe that the people of the United States are going to take people who have been here a quarter century . . . separate them from their families, and expel them,” Gingrich said in November.

Both President Barack Obama, a Democrat, and his Republican predecessor, George W. Bush, put forth proposals to grant legal status and eventual citizenship to illegal immigrants who meet certain standards. But opposition in Congress has prevented either of these plans from going into effect.

Many Americans support a measure called the DREAM Act. It would allow children of illegal immigrants who were brought here by their parents before age 16—and grew up in the U.S.—to become legal residents after they graduate from high school and spend two years in college or the military. That has also failed to make it through Congress.

Still, immigrant advocates continue to insist that some path to citizenship is only right and fair. “We have this whole generation of people here who contribute to the economy, who have family here,” says Susan Yanun. “But we shut them out because they don’t have the right documents. That’s not what this country is about.”

In Brooklyn, Anthony hopes that Americans will be able to see through the arguing to one simple truth. “At some point,” he says, “we were all immigrants to this country.”

—Joe Bubar