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Unauthorized Aliens in the United States: Estimates Since 1986

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Summary

Estimates derived from the March Supplement of the U.S. Bureau of Census's Current Population Survey indicate that the unauthorized resident alien population (commonly referred to as illegal aliens) has risen from 3.2 million in 1986 to 9.3 million in 2002. The estimated number of unauthorized aliens had dropped to 1.9 million in 1988 following passage of a law that legalized many unauthorized aliens. Research suggests a constellation of factors have contributed to the increase in unauthorized resident aliens, including the "push-pull" of a prosperous economy, the inadvertent consequence of border enforcement policies that have curbed the fluid movement of migrant workers, and the backlogs in processing immigrant petitions. This report will be updated as needed.

Background

An estimated 32.5 million foreign-born people resided in the United States in 2002. In recent years, the United States typically admits or adjusts 600,000 to one million aliens annually, giving them the status of "legal permanent resident" (LPR), which is commonly known as an immigrant. In addition to those foreign nationals who permanently reside legally in the United States, millions each year come temporarily on nonimmigrant visas, and some of these nonimmigrants (e.g., foreign students and intra-company business transfers) may reside legally in the United States for several years. It is also estimated that each year hundreds of thousands of foreign nationals overstay their nonimmigrant visas or enter the country illegally and thus are unauthorized aliens.

The last major law that allowed unauthorized aliens living in the United States to legalize their status was the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986 (P.L. 99-603). Generally, legislation such as IRCA is referred to as an "amnesty" or a legalization program because it provides LPR status to aliens who are otherwise residing illegally in the United States. Among IRCA's main provisions was a time-limited legalization program, codified at §245A of the Immigration and Nationality Act, that enabled certain illegal aliens who entered the United States before January 1, 1982, to

become LPRs.¹ It also had a provision that permitted aliens working illegally as “special agricultural workers” to become LPRs.² Nearly 2.7 million aliens established legal status through the provisions of IRCA.

Continued high levels of unauthorized migration to the United States have, in part, prompted the current discussion of guest worker programs, and several major legislative proposals include provisions that would permit legalization under specified conditions.³ There are also legislative proposals aimed at reducing unauthorized migration by tightening up enforcement of immigration laws.⁴ The recently issued report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States (also known as the 9/11 Commission) stated that “... more than 9 million people are in the United States outside the legal immigration system” as one of the reasons for their recommendations to improve immigration services and strengthen enforcement of immigration laws.⁵

This report presents data estimating the number of unauthorized aliens who have been living in the United States since 1986. There have been a variety of estimates of the unauthorized resident alien population over this period, sometimes with substantially different results. This report is limited to data analyses of the Current Population Survey (CPS) conducted by the U.S. Bureau of the Census and the Bureau of Labor Statistics so that there is a basic standard of comparison over time.⁶

¹ 8 U.S.C. §1255a.

² 8 U.S.C. §1160.

³ For a discussion of current legalization proposals, see CRS Report RL32044, *Immigration: Policy Considerations Related to Guest Worker Programs*, by Andorra Bruno; and CRS Report RL31365, *Unauthorized Alien Students: Issues and Legislation*, by Andorra Bruno and Jeff Kuenzi.

⁴ For further discussions of immigration enforcement legislation, see CRS Report RL32369, *Immigration-Related Detention: Current Legislative Issues*, by Alison Siskin; and CRS Report RL32270, *Enforcing Immigration Law: The Role of State and Local Law Enforcement*, by Lisa M. Seghetti and Stephen Viña.

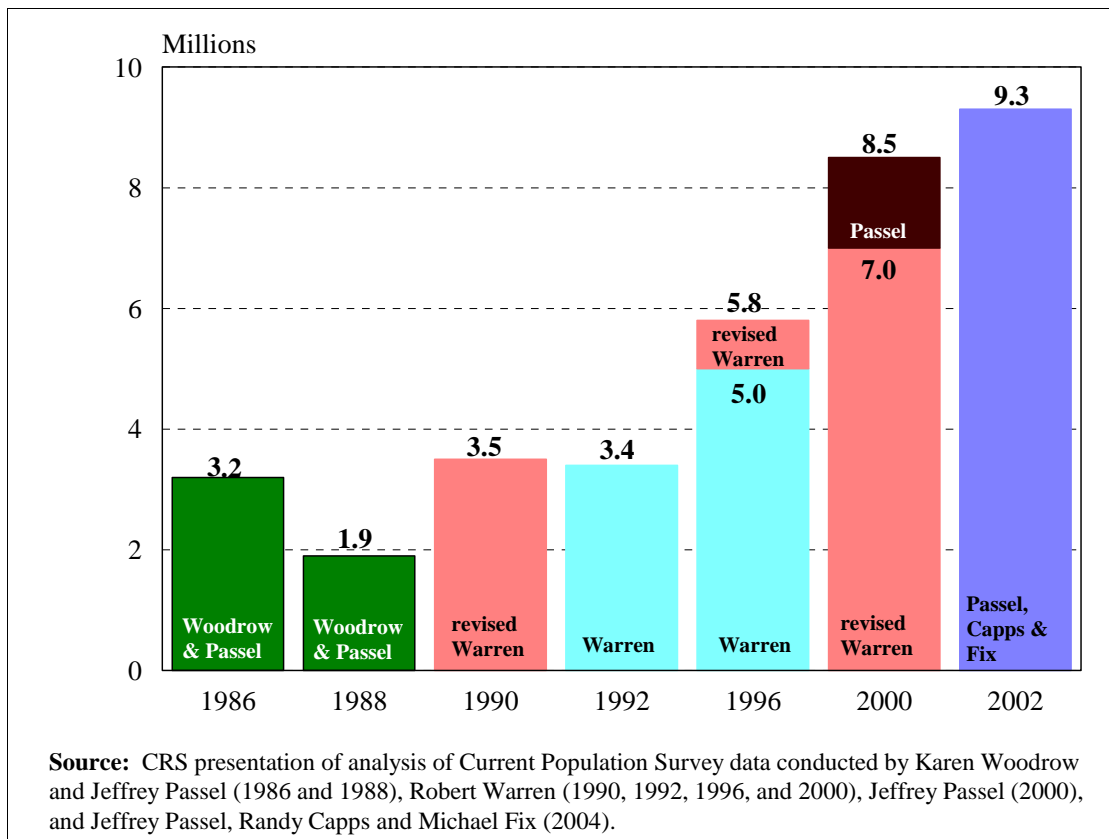
⁵ For a discussion of these recommendations, see National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report*, Chapter 12.4, pp. 383-391, July 2004.

⁶ The demographers who conducted these analyses all used some variant of a residual methodology to estimate the population (i.e., the estimated population remaining after citizens and authorized aliens are accounted for), another reason they were selected for this comparison. Demographers at the U.S. Census Bureau also have used a similar methodology to estimate the residual foreign born population in the 2000 decennial census, and they reported the following. “According to our calculations, the estimated residual foreign-born population counted in the 2000 census was 8,705,419. Assuming a 15-percent undercount rate yields a population of 10,241,669 in 2000.” They point out that the category of residual foreign born includes “quasi legal aliens” (i.e., aliens without legal status who have petitions pending or court cases underway that potentially would give them LPR status) as well as unauthorized aliens and thus should not be considered an official estimate of unauthorized resident aliens. U.S. Bureau of Census, Population Division Working Paper #61, *Evaluating Components of International Migration: The Residual Foreign Born*, by Joseph M. Costanzo, Cynthia Davis, Caribert Irazi, Daniel Goodkind, and Roberto Ramirez. June 2002. Available at [<http://www.census.gov/population/documentation/twps0061/twps0061.pdf>].

Estimates Since 1986

For a basis of comparison, **Figure 1** presents the estimate of 3.2 million unauthorized resident aliens in 1986 calculated by demographers Karen Woodrow and Jeffrey Passel, who worked for the U.S. Census Bureau at that time. As expected after the passage of IRCA, the estimate for 1988 dropped to 1.9 million.⁷ According to demographer Robert Warren of the former Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), the estimated unauthorized resident alien population grew to 3.4 million in 1992 and to 5.0 million in 1996.⁸ By the close of the decade, the estimated number of unauthorized alien residents had more than doubled. Passel, now at the Urban Institute, estimated the unauthorized population in 2000 at 8.5 million, but this latter estimate included aliens who had petitions pending or relief from deportation.⁹

Figure 1. Estimates of Unauthorized Aliens Residing in the United States



⁷ Karen Woodrow and Jeffrey Passel, "Post-IRCA Undocumented Immigration to the United States: An Analysis Based on the June 1988 CPS," in *Undocumented Migration to the United States*, by Frank D. Bean, Barry Edmonston and Jeffrey Passel, RAND Corporation, 1990.

⁸ *Annual Estimates of the Unauthorized Immigrant Population Residing in the United States and Components of Change: 1987 to 1997*, by Robert Warren, Office of Policy and Planning, U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, Sept. 2000.

⁹ U.S. Congress, House Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee on Immigration and Claims, *Hearing on the U.S. Population and Immigration*, Aug. 2, 2001.

Subsequently, Warren estimated that there were 7.0 million unauthorized aliens residing in the United States in 2000. As depicted in **Figure 1**, he also revised his earlier analyses using the latest CPS and estimated that there were 3.5 million unauthorized aliens living in the United States in 1990 and 5.8 million in 1996. Warren excluded “quasi-legal” aliens (e.g., those who had petitions pending or relief from deportation) from his estimates.¹⁰

Unauthorized Alien Residents in 2002

The most recent published estimate based upon the March 2002 CPS is that 9.3 million unauthorized aliens are residing in the United States. According to this analysis by Passel (along with Randy Capps and Michael Fix of the Urban Institute), Mexicans make up over half of undocumented immigrants — 57 % of the total, or about 5.3 million. They estimate that 2.2 million (23%) are from other Latin American countries. About 10% are from Asia, 5% from Europe and Canada, and 5% from the rest of the world.¹¹

As **Figure 2** illustrates, the 2002 distribution by region of origin is similar to Woodrow and Passel’s analysis of the 1986 data, despite the growth in overall numbers from 3.2 million in 1986 to 9.3 million in 2002. In 1986, 69% of the unauthorized aliens residing in the United States were estimated to be from Mexico compared to 57% in 2002. Asia’s share of the unauthorized alien residents appears to have grown over this period (from 6% to 10%), as has the portion from the “other” parts of the world. Note that Canada is grouped with North and South America (excluding Mexico) in 1986 and with Europe in 2002.

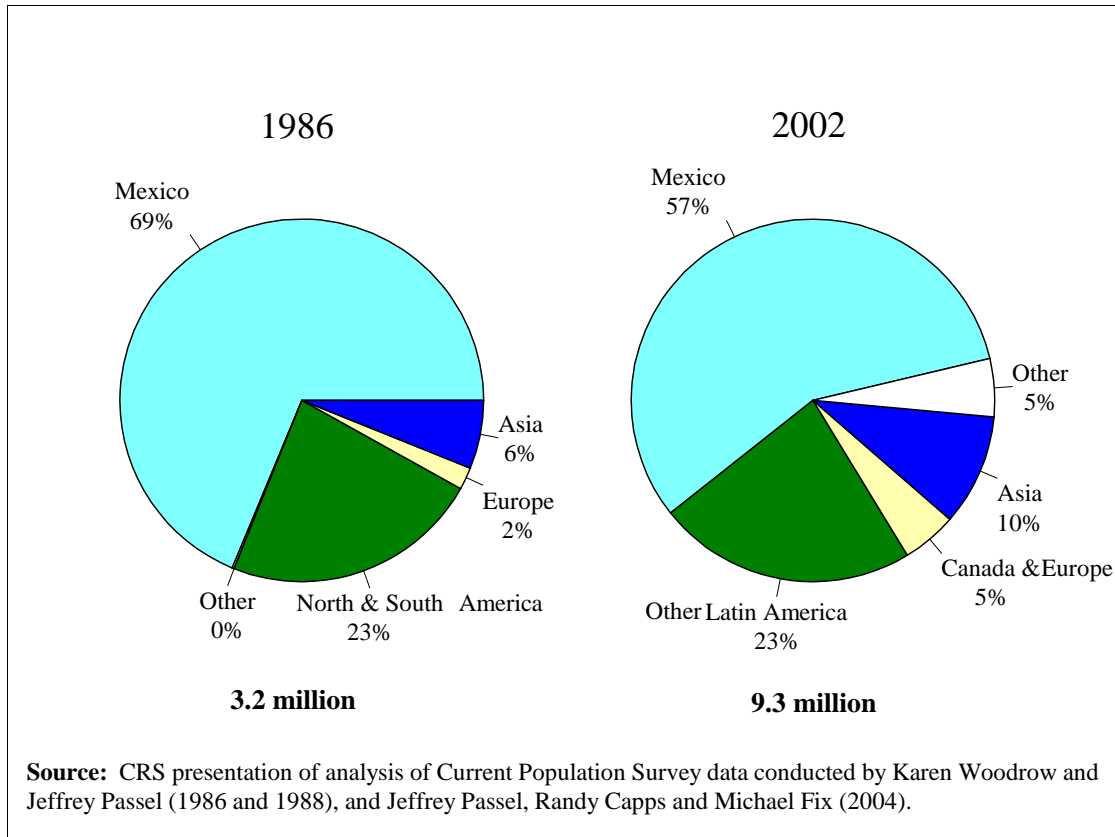
In terms of the distribution of unauthorized aliens across the country in 2002, Passel, Capps and Fix calculate that almost two-thirds (65 %) live in six states: California (27%), Texas (13%), New York (8%), Florida (7%), Illinois (6%), and New Jersey (4%). The researchers observe, however, that the most rapid growth in the unauthorized resident aliens since the mid-1990s has been outside these states.¹²

¹⁰ U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, *Estimates of the Unauthorized Immigrant Population Residing in the United States, 1990 to 2000*, Jan. 31, 2003. Available at [<http://uscis.gov/graphics/shared/aboutus/statistics/Illegals.htm>].

¹¹ The Urban Institute, *Undocumented Immigrants: Facts and Figures*, by Jeffrey Passel, Randy Capps, and Michael Fix, Jan. 12, 2004. Available at [http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/1000587_undoc_immigrants_facts.pdf].

¹² The Urban Institute, *Undocumented Immigrants: Facts and Figures*, by Jeffrey Passel, Randy Capps, and Michael Fix, Jan. 12, 2004. Available at [http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/1000587_undoc_immigrants_facts.pdf].

**Figure 2. Unauthorized Alien Residents by Region of Origin:
1986 and 2002**



Contributing Factors

The research points to a constellation of factors that have contributed to the increase in unauthorized resident aliens. Historically, unauthorized migration is generally attributed to the “push-pull” of prosperity-fueled job opportunities in the United States in contrast to limited or nonexistent job opportunities in the sending countries.¹³ Some observers maintain that lax enforcement of employer sanctions for hiring unauthorized aliens has facilitated this “push-pull,” but it is difficult to empirically demonstrate this element. Political instability or civil unrest at home is another element that traditionally has induced people to risk unauthorized migration, but the motives for such migrations are sometimes mixed with the economic hardships that are often correlated with political upheaval.¹⁴

¹³ For a discussion of how many unauthorized aliens are currently in the U.S. workforce, see CRS Report RL32044, *Immigration: Policy Considerations Related to Guest Worker Programs*, by Andorra Bruno, pp. 6-7. For trends in apprehensions of unauthorized aliens, see CRS Report RL32562, *Border Security: The Role of the U.S. Border Patrol*, by Blas Nuñez-Neto.

¹⁴ For a summary of this research, see Commission for the Study of International Migration and Cooperative Economic Development, *Unauthorized Migration: An Economic Development Response*, Appendix E, July 1990.

Although most policy makers have assumed that tighter border enforcement would reduce unauthorized migration, some researchers are now suggesting that the strengthening of the immigration enforcement provisions, most notably by the enactment of the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996 (IIRIRA), may have inadvertently *increased* the population of unauthorized resident aliens. This perspective argues that IIRIRA's increased penalties for illegal entry coupled with increased resources for border enforcement stymied what had been a rather fluid movement of migratory workers along the southern border; this in turn raised the stakes in crossing the border illegally and created an incentive for those who succeed in entering the United States to stay.¹⁵

Another contributing factor — best represented by the “quasi-legal” aliens discussed above — is the wait-times for immigrant petitions to be processed and visas to become available to legally come to the United States. There are statutory ceilings that limit the number of immigrant visas issued each year. There are also significant backlogs in processing petitions due to the high volume of aliens eligible to immigrate to the United States and the large number eligible to become U.S. citizens. Of the pending cases, reportedly almost 2 million are immediate relative and family preference petitions.¹⁶ Many observe that these family members sometimes risk residing without legal status with their family in the United States while they wait for the petitions to be processed or visas to become available.

Some observers point to more elusive factors — such as shifts in immigration enforcement priorities away from illegal entry to removing suspected terrorists and criminal aliens or discussions of possible “amnesty” legislation — when they assess the increase of unauthorized resident aliens. Others argue that border security measures enacted in recent years have not received adequate funding to be effective against unauthorized migration, and some maintain that state and local law enforcement officers have not been sufficiently involved in apprehending illegal aliens.¹⁷ It is difficult to measure whether, or to what extent, these other phenomena have contributed to the increase in unauthorized resident aliens.

¹⁵ For analysis of the IIRIRA's effect on unauthorized alien residents, see Wayne Cornelius, “Death at the Border: Efficacy and Unintended Consequences of U.S. Immigration Control Policy,” in *Population and Development Review*, vol. 27, no.4, Dec. 2001. For an analysis of the reduction in unauthorized alien apprehensions after IRCA, see Thomas J. Espenshade, “Undocumented Migration to the United States: Evidence from a Repeated Trials Model,” in *Undocumented Migration to the United States*, by Frank D. Bean, Barry Edmonston and Jeffrey Passel, RAND Corporation, 1990.

¹⁶ For analysis of immigration admissions, visa priority dates, and backlogs, see CRS Report RL32235, *U.S. Immigration Policy on Permanent Admissions*, by Ruth Ellen Wasem.

¹⁷ For a full discussion of these legal and policy issues, see CRS Report RL32270, *Enforcing Immigration Law: The Role of State and Local Law Enforcement*, by Lisa M. Seghetti and Stephen Viña.