



The Truth about Undocumented Immigration

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The arrival of immigrants without a legal right to stay in the United States is a regional issue, involving ties to our closest neighbors in Central America. Three quarters of all undocumented migrants are from Mexico or Central America, with six out of every ten coming from Mexico alone. Fewer than two percent come from far-away countries such as China or India.

Strong emotions and political posturing obscure the real issues. Illegal immigration is NOT growing right now. Military fortification of the border between the United States and Mexico has made problems worse; border controls alone will not solve our problems. Right now, the number of undocumented people is holding steady and key parts of a comprehensive reform are in place. But America still needs to decide how to deal with millions of workers and family members who came in the past and are now part of the life of hundreds of communities.

Undocumented Immigration is Not a Growing Problem

Most undocumented immigration is driven by three factors:

- **The demand for labor in the United States:** illegal immigrants come looking for work, and the key issue is whether American businesses will offer them jobs.
- **Population growth in Latin America:** when there are more people who need to support their families than jobs available in Mexico and Central America, of course people look for opportunities in the United States.
- **The number of visas available for legal entry into the United States:** people prefer to enter the United States legally, if they can.

Taking these factors into account, helps us understand why the population of illegal immigrants is no longer growing. When the U.S. economy fell into recession in 2008, jobs disappeared. Mexico's population has stopped growing rapidly, reducing the need for people to migrate.

It has also become easier for large numbers of Latinos to immigrate legally into the United States. After 1996, Latinos already legally here had to become naturalized citizens to remain eligible for many public benefits. Millions applied to become new U.S. citizens. According to U.S. immigration policy, each citizen has the right to sponsor the entry of family members. Since 1996, some 2.5 million Mexicans have entered the United States as legal permanent residents, the vast majority as relatives of naturalized U.S. citizens. In addition, since 2008 a sizeable guest worker program has been in place. In 2010, there were 517,000 entries by legal temporary workers from Mexico, the largest number in history.

As a result of these shifts, the ranks of undocumented people in the United States peaked at around 12 million in 2008, fell by around a million persons between 2008 and 2009, and has held steady at around 11 million since then.

Militarizing the Border Backfired – Increasing the Number of Undocumented People

Between 1986 and 2010 the United States effectively militarized its border with Mexico, increasing the size of the Border Patrol from 3,700 to 20,000 officers and expanding the budget by 23 times from \$151 million to a whopping \$3.5 billion annually. Politicians proclaim that militarizing the border reduces illegal immigration – and they want to spend more and more taxpayer money this way. But careful research shows that fortifying the border has led to unintended consequences:

- Undocumented migrants keep coming despite the fortified border. Determined people looking for work try repeatedly until they succeed. They may have to pay high fees to get help from “coyote” guides, and an unfortunate few may die in the desert while trying to gain illegal entry. But most get to the United States sooner or later.
- Because the costs and risks of getting to the United States increased after the mid-1980s, migrants stopped going home to their families for Christmas and Easter, or for weddings, funerals, and other family events. Undocumented workers had little choice but to stay at their jobs. Instead of regular trips home, many brought wives and children to join them. Undocumented families moved away from the Mexican border, spreading out across the United States to build more permanent lives.
- With people steadily coming but not able to return home to Mexico or other countries, additional millions of undocumented workers piled up after the mid-1980s. *Rather than reducing undocumented migration, militarizing the border actually increased it!*

The Real Problem: How to Deal with Undocumented People Already Here

Although undocumented migrants are no longer coming to the United States in very high numbers, they are not leaving either. Undocumented migrants remaining here have lives and families rooted north of the border. Most have steady jobs, pay taxes, have stayed out of trouble, and have raised children including those born as U.S. citizens.

Leaders across the political spectrum have acknowledged an obvious truth: it would be impractical – and cruel – to try to hunt down and deport some eleven million undocumented residents, three million of whom came to the United States as innocent children. With the Mexican border under better control and legal routes to entry in place, the big remaining question is how to legislate fairly about undocumented people already here. There are possible compromise solutions. For example, undocumented people who arrived as children and have gone to school and stayed out of trouble could be granted amnesty, while undocumented adults could follow a more measured path. They might be given a chance to earn points for learning English, taking civics courses, holding a steady job, and paying taxes. Only when a threshold is reached would they be granted legal resident status – after paying a fine to discharge their debt to society. A win-win for everyone.

This brief draws on recent immigration data and on basic research reported in Massey, Durand, and Malone, *Beyond Smoke and Mirrors: Mexican Immigration in an Era of Economic Integration* (Russell Sage, December 1, 2011)

<https://scholar.sage.org>

Foundation, 2002).