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BY THE COMPTROLLER GENERAL

Report To The Congress

OF THE UNITED STATES

Number Of Undocumented Aliens Residing In The United States Unknown

While various estimates on the size of the undocumented alien population residing in the United States have been made, none are considered reliable.

Congress, therefore, in considering important immigration issues, may wish to weigh the desirability and feasibility of any proposed actions on both a "best" and "worst" case basis. What may seem right premised on an undocumented alien population of 1 or 2 million could be inappropriate if this population was actually 10 million or more.



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COMPTROLLER GENERAL OF THE UNITED STATES
WASHINGTON D.C. 20548

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To the President of the Senate and the
Speaker of the House of Representatives

A Select Commission on Immigration and Refugee Policy, established to evaluate immigration laws, policies, and procedures, presented its findings and recommendations to the 97th Congress. Legislators' actions on some recommendations--particularly those dealing with immigration law enforcement--will be influenced by the number of undocumented aliens residing in the United States. On this matter, however, the Congress will have to speculate. There is simply no statistically reliable measurement of the undocumented alien population. Through the years estimates have ranged from .6 to 12 million.

OBJECTIVE, SCOPE, AND METHODOLOGY

To assist legislators in gauging the number of undocumented aliens in the country, we have compiled a listing of various estimates showing the source and year for each estimate. (See app.)

In compiling the listing, we relied, for the most part, on a January 1980 study performed by staff at the Census Bureau for the Select Commission on Immigration and Refugee Policy. The Census staff used existing studies to form an estimate of the undocumented alien population for the Commission. The staff notes that the estimate is based not on empirical research, but speculation based on the other studies, and is not an official estimate of the Bureau. We made no judgement on the methods or validity of the data used in the various studies. However, comments on these matters by the Census staff and others have been noted. Since this report is informational in nature and does not contain recommendations, we did not request agency comments.

IMPACT OF ILLEGAL ALIEN QUESTION ON
IMMIGRATION POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

The Select Commission on Immigration and Refugee Policy, created by Public Law 95-412, constitutes a major effort by a joint Presidential/congressional commission to examine and overhaul the immigration laws of the United States. A host of considerations were offered to the Congress by the Commission on March 1, 1981. How legislators view some of these considerations will be influenced, to some extent, by the perceived magnitude of the undocumented alien population living in the United States.

The importance of the undocumented alien matter was clearly noted by the Chairman of the Commission, in September 1980, when he said:

"Now undocumented aliens come to the United States in large numbers by land and sea. There is no question that many of them are ambitious, hard-working seekers of opportunity and freedom. But by permitting our laws to be flouted, we bring immigration policy as a whole into disrespect and, more importantly in the long run, we undermine respect for law, the foundation of a free society. This must not happen. The world and the United States will be a much poorer place if legal immigration is cut back because we failed to gain control over undocumented/illegal migration."

The following issues, identified by the Commission, are the kind that may be considered differently depending on whether the number of undocumented aliens is perceived to be .6 or 12 million:

- Should a program to legalize illegal/undocumented aliens now living in the United States be adopted?
- What measures should be taken to enhance border and interior enforcement efforts to curb illegal migration?
- Should the United States adopt an employer responsibility system to curtail access to the job market by illegal migrants?

However, no one knows the size of the undocumented alien population. Our report, "Prospects Dim For Effectively Enforcing Immigration Laws" (GGD-81-4, Nov. 5, 1980), discusses this matter in detail. The Immigration and Naturalization Service 1982 budget estimates for its interior border patrol program confirms the absence of data by stating:

"Since the size of the undocumented alien population in the United States is currently unknown, it is not possible for this program to define its workload input."

Legislators, therefore, will be asked to consider important immigration issues without benefit of knowing the dimensions of the problem.

ESTIMATES OF UNDOCUMENTED
ALIENS VARY WIDELY

Through the years there have been various estimates, by Government and other sources, of the undocumented alien population. As shown in the appendix, nationwide estimates have ranged

from .6 to 12 million. Obviously, reliable estimates of this population are difficult because illegal aliens have no motivation to be counted. As stated in our report, "Procedures To Adjust 1980 Census Counts Have Limitations" (GGD-81-28, Dec. 24, 1980), the Census Bureau has not devised a way of estimating the number of undocumented aliens.

The Select Commission on Immigration and Refugee Policy estimates the undocumented alien population to be between 3.5 and 6 million. The estimate is based on the study by members of the Census Bureau requested by the Commission.

The authors of the Census staff study stressed that there are no reliable estimates of the numbers of illegal residents in the country or of the net volume of illegal immigration to the United States in any recent past period. Although many estimates have been made, the staff noted that some were simply speculation and that several analytical studies were subject to major limitations. For example, the assumptions on which some analytical studies were based could be replaced by reasonable alternative assumptions which would substantially modify the resulting population estimates.

Nevertheless, on the basis of the studies conducted by others, the Census staff cautiously speculated, in a January 1980 study, that the total number of illegal residents in the United States is almost certainly below 6.0 million and may be substantially less, possibly only 3.5 to 5.0 million.

Also critical of undocumented alien estimates was David S. North who, in a September 1980 study titled "Enforcing the Immigration Law: A Review of the Options" (prepared for the Select Commission on Immigration and Refugee Policy), stated:

"With the single exception of the Lancaster-Scheuren estimates of the illegal alien population in the spring of 1973 (which centered around 3.9 million for those aged 18-44), the Government had made little headway towards securing a plausible estimate of the size or stock of the illegal migrant population."

Mr. North concluded that the 3.5 to 6 million figure used by the Commission was conservative.

The Government has tried to estimate the size of the undocumented alien population. Congress, in fiscal year 1976, appropriated \$1 million to the Immigration and Naturalization Service for research on the problem of illegal aliens. Subsequently, approximately \$800,000 was set aside for a residential survey to

obtain information about the number and impact of illegal aliens in the United States. The remaining funds were used primarily for management and technical assistance to the Service.

The project, however, encountered numerous problems and has not been completed. In November 1980, the Service stated that the information collected during the survey is so old now, and the problems of statistical validity so great, that it would be a further waste of resources to attempt to complete that study.

The Service said that its experience indicates that undocumented alien population studies may be futile because (1) it is very difficult to get people to provide information, (2) elaborate guarantees of confidentiality have to be made, and (3) the statistical validity of the result is questionable. Moreover, the Service stated that it lacks the expertise to contract for and monitor such a study.

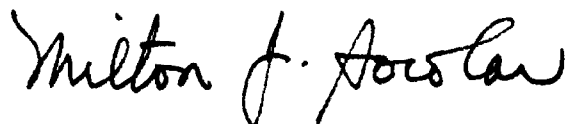
CONCLUSION

A reliable estimate of the number of undocumented aliens residing in the United States is not available and is unlikely for the immediate future. But the size of the undocumented alien population will be an important consideration for the Congress in reviewing the findings and recommendations of the Select Commission on Immigration and Refugee Policy.

Given the above situation, legislators will have to, in a sense, make their own estimate of the undocumented alien population. Legislators may wish to weigh the desirability and feasibility of any proposed actions on both a "best" and "worst" case basis. What may seem right premised on an undocumented alien population of 1 or 2 million could be inappropriate if this population was actually 10 million or more. For that reason we have listed the various estimates that have been made in the last 10 years.

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We are sending copies of this report to the Director, Office of Management and Budget; and to the Attorney General.



Acting Comptroller General
of the United States

UNDOCUMENTED ALIEN POPULATION

<u>Estimate</u> <u>(in millions)</u>	<u>Year of</u> <u>estimate</u>	<u>Source and year</u>
1.6 (Mexican-origin population only)	1970	Goldberg, Howard, 1974. "Estimates of Emigration from Mexico and Illegal Entry into the United States, 1960-1970, by the Residual Method," unpublished graduate research paper, Center for Population Research, Georgetown University, Washington, D.C., 1974.*
1.0	1972	INS Commissioner Raymond Farrell, Appropriation Hearings, 1972.
1.0 to 2.0	1973	House Committee on the Judiciary Report, 93-108, dated April 5, 1973.
3.9 (Ages 18-44)	1973	Lancaster, Clarice and Frederick J. Scheuren, 1978. "Counting the Uncountable Illegals: Some Initial Statistical Speculations Employing Capture-Recapture Techniques," <u>1977 Proceedings of the Social Statistics Section, Part I</u> , pp. 530-535, American Statistical Association, 1978.*
4.0 to 7.0 (but could be as high as 12.0)	1974	Attorney General Statement in October 1974.
4.0 to 12.0	1975	Immigration and Naturalization Commissioner, Leonard F. Chapman, 1975.
8.2	1975	Lesko Associates, 1975. <u>Final Report: Basic Data and Guidance Required to Implement a Major Illegal Alien Study During Fiscal Year 1976</u> , prepared for Office of Planning and Evaluation, U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, Washington, D.C., October 1975.*

0.6 to 4.7	1975	Robinson, J. Gregory, 1979. "Estimating the Approximate Size of the Illegal Alien Population in the United States by the Comparative Trend Analysis of Age-Specific Death Rates," unpublished paper presented at the annual meeting of the Population Association of America, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, April 26-28, 1979.*
0.4 to 1.2 (increase in Mexican- origin population since 1970)	1975	Heer, David M., 1979. "What is the Annual Net Flow of Undocumented Mexican Immigrants to the United States?," <u>Demography</u> , Vol. 16, No. 13, August 1979, pp. 417-423.*
6.0 to 8.0	1976	House Committee on the Judiciary quoting Immigration and Naturalization Service, 1976.
6.0	1976	Guss, Edward Jon, 1977. "Even If You're on the Right Track, You'll Get Run Over If Just You Sit There," <u>I and N Reporter</u> , Vol. 25, No. 4, Spring 1977, pp. 52.*
6.0	1976	Chapman, Leonard F., 1976. Statement before the Subcommittee on Immigration and Naturalization of the Committee on the Judiciary, United States Senate, 94th Congress, Second Session, Washington, D.C., March 17, 1976.*
0.5 to 1.2 (Mexican-origin population only)	1977	Mexico, Centro Nacional de Informacion y Estadisticas del Trabajo, 1979. <u>El Volumen de la Migracion de Mexicanos no Documentados a los Estados Unidos: Nuevas Hipotesis</u> , by Manuel Garcia y Driego, December 1979.*
0.7 to 2.2 (Mexican-origin population only)	1977	Reestimation of Mexican Border Survey, 1979, by U.S. Bureau of the Census.*
3.0 to 6.0	1978	Castillo, Leonel, 1978. Statement before the House Select Committee on Population, House of Representatives, 95th Congress, Second Session, Washington, D.C., April 6, 1978, pp. 497-515.*

0.4 (Mexican nationals over 15 years of age working or looking for work, without regard to legal status.)	1978-1979	Mexico, Centro Nacional de Informacion y Estadisticas del Trabajo, 1979. <u>Los Trabajadores Mexicanos en los Estados Unidos: Primeros Resultados de La Encuesta Nacional de Emigracion</u> , by Carlos H. Zazueta and Rodolfo Corona, December 1979.*
2.0 to 12.0 (although emerging consensus seems to be 3.0 to 6.0)	1979	House Select Committee on Popu- lation Report, 1979.
3.5 to 5.0	1978	Staff members of the Bureau of Census, 1980. Based on review of studies noted above (*). Prepared at the request of the Select Commission on Immigration and Refugee Policy.

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