

Estimating the number of undocumented aliens

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Prior to January 1986, the Census Bureau's postcensal population estimates included no allowance for undocumented immigration.¹ Even though there was widespread recognition of the phenomenon, the only estimates of the magnitude of undocumented immigration, particularly of the annual flow, were based on little more than speculation. Research conducted at the Census Bureau over the last several years² has shown that undocumented aliens appearing in censuses and surveys can provide a basis for measuring at least a portion of undocumented migration to the United States.

Estimates of the number of undocumented aliens included in the 1980 census were derived by comparing two different sets of estimates:³ (1) estimates of the total number of aliens included in the 1980 census; and (2) estimates of the number of aliens residing legally in the United States at the census date, derived primarily from the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) data. The difference between the two estimates is assumed to be the result of undocumented aliens being included in the 1980 census.

Both sets of data used to derive the estimates—1980 census data on the foreign-born population and 1980 alien registration data from INS—required a number of corrections and modifications to account for known deficiencies. The census data were corrected for nonreporting of country of birth, misreporting of citizenship status, and misreporting of nativity. The INS data were corrected for underregistration and nonreporting of country of birth.

A comparison of the independently derived estimates of the legally resident population on April 1, 1980, with the 1980 census count of aliens shows that 2,057,000 undocumented aliens were included in the 1980 census. Of these, 1,131,000, or 55 percent, were born in Mexico. No single country other than Mexico accounts for as much as 5 percent of the total. An estimated 1,517,000, or 75 percent, of the undocumented immigrants counted in the census entered the United States during the 1970's, with 946,000 (or 46 percent) entering during the 5 years prior to the 1980 census.

A supplement to the April 1983 Current Population Survey (CPS) provided data on country of birth, year of immigration, and citizenship that were used to estimate growth of

the undocumented alien population since the 1980 census.⁴ An estimate of the foreign-born population residing legally in the country in 1983 was first developed by carrying forward the estimate for 1980 by adding legal immigration and by subtracting mortality and emigration during the intervening period. The difference between the estimated legally resident foreign-born population and the total foreign-born population in the April 1983 CPS gives the number of undocumented aliens in 1983. Because the CPS sample is smaller than the census and because of other inherent limitations, the 1983 estimate of undocumented aliens is less precise than the estimate for 1980. In spite of such limitations, the research shows that the undocumented alien population grew by between 100,000 and 300,000 per year between 1980 and 1983.

On the basis of these studies, the Census Bureau's postcensal estimates have been revised to allow for net annual undocumented immigration of 200,000 for every year since 1980. Approximately 70 percent of the undocumented immigrants are Hispanic. The items needed to develop further estimates of undocumented aliens were included in a supplement to the June 1986 CPS. On the basis of these data, the Census Bureau plans to update the estimates of growth in the undocumented alien population and, if necessary, revise the estimates of net annual undocumented immigration. Until the research based on the June 1986 CPS supplement is completed, the figure of 200,000 will continue to be used for net annual undocumented immigration. □

—FOOTNOTES—

¹ Various terms have been used to refer to this group of noncitizens present in the United States who entered illegally or who violated their conditions of entry. In addition to undocumented immigrants, some examples include illegal aliens, undocumented workers, nonlegal residents, and illegal entrants.

² Robert Warren and Jeffrey S. Passel, "A Count of the Uncountable: Estimates of Undocumented Aliens Counted in the 1980 United States Census, forthcoming in *Demography*"; Jeffrey S. Passel and Karen A. Woodrow, "Geographic Distribution of Undocumented Immigrants: Estimates of Undocumented Aliens Counted in the 1980 Census by State," *International Migration Review* 18, Fall 1984, pp. 642-71; Passel and Woodrow, "Growth of the Undocumented Alien Population in the United States, 1979-1983, as Measured by the Current Population Survey and the Decennial Census," paper presented at the 1985 annual meeting of the Population Association of America, Boston, MA, March 1985.

³ Details of the estimation procedure can be found in "A Count of the Uncountable." It must be stressed that the research regarding undocumented aliens included in the 1980 census did not compromise the confidentiality of U.S. census data that is required by law. No attempt was made to determine the legal status of individual aliens. The estimates were developed by comparing statistical aggregates, not by determining the legal status of individuals.

⁴ The estimation procedures and underlying assumptions are described in "Growth of the Undocumented Alien Population."

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