Original Article

US Undocumented Population Continued to Fall from 2016 to 2017 and Visa Overstays Significantly Exceeded Illegal Crossings for the Seventh Consecutive Year

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Executive Summary[1]

This article presents estimates of the US undocumented population for 2017 derived by the Center for Migration Studies of New York (CMS). It focuses on the steep decline in the undocumented population from Mexico since 2010. While the president has focused the nation's attention on the border wall, *half a million*[2] US undocumented residents from Mexico left[3] the undocumented population in 2016 alone, more than three times the number that arrived that year, leading to an overall decrease of nearly 400,000 undocumented residents from Mexico from 2016 to 2017. From 2010 to 2017, the undocumented population from Mexico fell by a remarkable 1.3 million.

For the past 10 years, the primary mode of entry for the undocumented population has been to overstay temporary visas. This article provides estimates of the number of noncitizens who overstayed temporary visas and those who entered without inspection (EWIs) in 2016 by the top five countries of origin.

Summary of Findings

- The US undocumented population from Mexico fell by almost 400,000 in 2017.
- In 2017, for the first time, the population from Mexico constituted less than one half of the total undocumented population.
- Since 2010, the undocumented population from Mexico has declined by 1.3 million.
- In California, the undocumented population from Mexico has declined by 26 percent since 2010, falling from 2.0 to 1.5 million; it also dropped by 50 percent in Alabama, and by one third in Georgia, New York, and New Mexico.
- The undocumented population from Venezuela grew rapidly after 2013, increasing from 60,000 to 145,000 in just four years.
- Visa overstays have significantly exceeded illegal border crossings during each of the last seven years.
- Mexico was the leading country for overstays in 2017, with about twice as many as India or China.

The estimates presented here were derived by CMS based on information collected in the Census Bureau's annual American Community Survey (ACS). The procedures used to derive detailed estimates of the undocumented population are described in Warren (2014). CMS used its annual estimates of the undocumented population for 2010 to 2017 — by state of residence, country of origin, and year of entry — to compile the information described here. Additional methodological details appear as footnotes or as notes in the tables.

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[1] This article was originally published as a Center for Migration Studies essay at http://doi.org/10.14240/cmsesy011619.

[2] In 2016, the US undocumented population from Mexico *that arrived before 2016* was 5.6 million; one year later, in 2017, the number *that arrived before 2016* had dropped to 5.1 million, indicating that half a million had left the undocumented population from Mexico.

[3] Undocumented residents leave the population by being removed, emigrating voluntarily, adjusting to permanent legal status, or dying.

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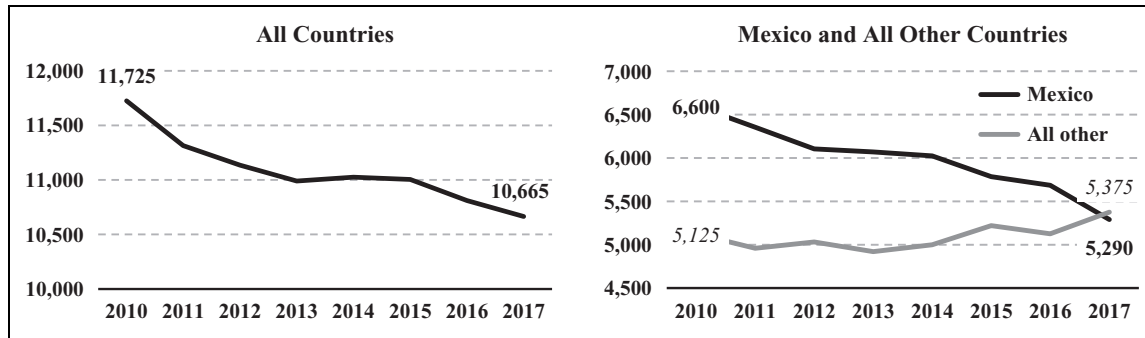Email: rwarren@indy.rr.com

Figure 1. Undocumented Population from All Countries, Mexico, and All Other Countries, 2010 to 2017 (in Thousands).
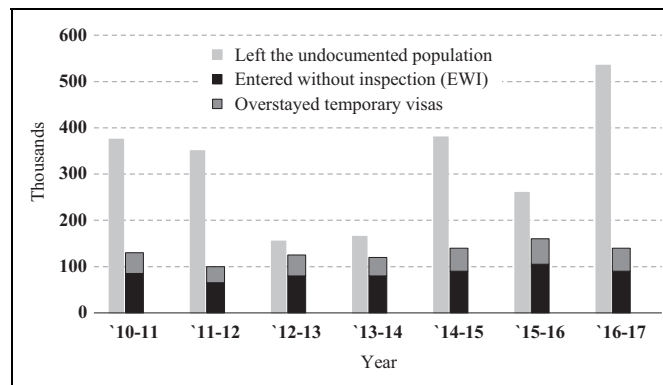*Source*: Center for Migration Studies.

Figure 2. Entries and Departures from the Undocumented Population from Mexico, 2010 to 2017.
Source: Center for Migration Studies

Undocumented Population Change since 2010

As shown in Figure 1, the total undocumented population declined by about 1 million from 2010 to 2017. The undocumented population from the rest of the world (not Mexico) increased by about 250,000 from 2010 to 2017. In Figure 1, the population increase for all other countries for 2017 is mostly the result of increases from India (100,000) and Venezuela (45,000). The right panel of Figure 1 reveals a historic precedent: in 2017, for the first time, the population from Mexico constituted less than one half of the total undocumented population.

The undocumented population from Mexico fell faster than the total population, dropping by 1.3 million during the period, spurred by more departures from this population than visa overstays or illegal entries (Figure 2).

The decline in the undocumented population from Mexico from 2010 to 2017 occurred nationwide. Table 1 shows 11 states that had 50,000 or more undocumented residents from Mexico in 2017 and had 20 percent or higher declines in the population from Mexico. The population in California fell by 26 percent, from 2.0 million in 2010 to 1.5 million in 2017. The population in Alabama (not shown) dropped by half, and the populations in Georgia, New York, and New Mexico by one third (Table 1).

Population Change by Country, 2010 to 2017

Table 2 shows estimates of the overall undocumented population and the change from 2010 to 2017 for the top 15 countries in 2017. The population from India increased by 265,000, or 72 percent, from 2010 to 2017. The population from Venezuela more than doubled, from 65,000 in 2010 to 145,000 in 2017, with all of the growth occurring from 2014 to 2017. Countries with the largest population *declines* during this period (in addition to Mexico) were the Philippines (−70,000), Ecuador (−45,000), and Korea (−40,000) (Table 2).

Mode of Entry

Arriving by air and overstaying temporary visas has been the primary way of entering the United States for the undocumented population during the entire seven-year period covered by this article. Table 3 shows estimates of undocumented arrivals in 2016 by

Table 1. Change in the Undocumented Population from Mexico, by State, 2010 to 2017 (in Thousands): States with 50,000 or More from Mexico *and* Declines of 20 Percent or More.

| | Estimated undocumented population from Mexico | | Change in the undocumented population from Mexico | |
| | 2010 | 2017 | Amount | % |
State of residence	*(1)*	*(2)*	*(3) = (2) − (1)*	*(4) = (3) / (1) × 100*
All states	**6,600**	**5,290**	**−1,310**	**−20%**
California	2,015	1,495	−520	−26
Illinois	395	300	−95	−24
Arizona	260	195	−70	−26
North Carolina	220	170	−50	−24
Georgia	240	160	−80	−33
New York	200	135	−70	−34
New Jersey	110	85	−25	−23
Oregon	100	75	−30	−28
Oklahoma	80	60	−15	−20
Indiana	70	55	−15	−22
New Mexico	75	50	−25	−35
All other	2,835	2,515	−320	−11

Note: States ranked on 2017 population from Mexico.
Source: Center for Migration Studies.

Table 2. Undocumented Population Change, 2010 to 2017 (in Thousands): Top 15 Countries in 2017 Ranked by Population in 2017.

| | 2010 | 2017 | Change | % Change |
Country	*(1)*	*(2)*	*(3) = (2) − (1)*	*(4) = (3) / (1) × 100*
All countries	**11,725**	**10,665**	**−1,060**	**−9%**
Mexico	6,600	5,290	−1,310	−20
El Salvador	615	670	60	9
India	365	630	265	72
Guatemala	465	545	80	17
Honduras	315	380	65	21
China	295	305	10	3
Dominican Republic	180	190	10	6
Philippines	245	175	−70	−29
Korea	205	165	−40	−19
Colombia	170	155	−15	−8
Venezuela	65	145	80	124
Brazil	140	145	5	3
Ecuador	175	125	−45	−27
Haiti	135	125	−10	−7
Jamaica	100	95	−5	−7
All other	1,655	1,520	−135	−8

Source: Center for Migration Studies.

country of origin and mode of entry for the top five countries of origin. Of the estimated 515,000 arrivals in 2016, a total of 320,000, or 62 percent, were overstays, and 190,000, or 38 percent, were those who entered without inspection (EWIs).

The estimates are based on Center for Migration Studies of New York (CMS) estimates of undocumented arrivals by year of entry for 2016 and 2017 by country of origin, and US Department of Homeland Security estimates of overstays for Mexico, Central American countries, and the Dominican Republic in 2017.[4]

Mexico was the leading country for overstays in 2016, about twice the number from India, China, and Venezuela (Table 3). Overstays accounted for approximately one third of all undocumented arrivals from Mexico in 2016.

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[4] The percentage of undocumented to total arrivals for Mexico (34.7 percent), El Salvador (11.0 percent), Guatemala (24.9 percent), Honduras (20. 4 percent), Nicaragua (56.3 percent), and the Dominican Republic (54.4 percent) are from Table A-1 of Warren (2017). Estimation of overstays is also discussed in Warren and Kerwin (2017).

Table 3. Arrivals of Undocumented Migrants in 2016, by Mode of Arrival and Country of Origin: Top Five Countries (in Thousands).

Country	Total arrivals	Country	Overstays	Country	EWIs
All countries	**515**	**All countries**	**320**	**All countries**	**190**
Mexico	145	Mexico	50	Mexico	95
El Salvador	35	India	25	El Salvador	35
Guatemala	30	China	25	Honduras	25
Honduras	30	Venezuela	20	Guatemala	20
India	25	Philippines	15	Dominican Republic	10
All other	245	All other	185	All other	5

Note: Except for "All countries" and Mexico, overstays and EWIs do not sum to total arrivals because different countries are included in the columns that show overstays and EWIs. EWIs = people who entered without inspection.
Source: Center for Migration Studies.

The appearance of Venezuela as a leading country of overstays in Table 3 might be surprising. The undocumented population from Venezuela (almost all overstays) increased sharply after 2013, however, most likely because of the political and economic turmoil in that country (CMS 2017).

Discussion

The estimates shown here have important policy implications. The varied rates of change for many of the countries shown here — the sustained drop in the population from Mexico, the upsurge from Venezuela after 2013, and the continuing increase from India even as the populations from other Asian sending countries declined — indicate that the United States needs a more nuanced and evidence-based response to undocumented migration.

The downward undocumented population trends for Nicaragua, Ecuador, Peru, Poland, and Korea demonstrate that undocumented migrants will return to their home countries, even some in difficult conditions. A serious commitment to improving conditions in the Northern Triangle states of Central America, Venezuela, and other countries could significantly reduce the US undocumented population.

Because more than one half of all US undocumented residents arrive by air, visa-issuing posts have become the real frontline deterrent to undocumented migration. This article suggests that more attention and resources should be given to that crucial mission of the US Department of State. The sudden increase in the undocumented population (that is, overstays) from Venezuela after 2013 illustrates this point. In addition, Congress and the administration should pursue legislation to legalize populations like the DREAM Act–eligible population, long-term beneficiaries of Temporary Protected Status (TPS), and "intending immigrants" with a recognized relationship with a US citizen or lawful permanent resident that would qualify them for a family-based visa (Kerwin, Alulema, and Nicholson 2018).

The disparity between current public discourse and the empirical data presented here obscures the fact that tremendous progress has been made in reducing undocumented immigration since 2000. It is time to build on that success by constructing an immigration reform package that upholds the rule of law while embracing the values that have truly made America great.

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