

Central American migrants on the rise

By Daniel González and Bob Ortega The Republic | azcentral.com Mon Sep 23, 2013 9:40 PM

The size of the nation's undocumented population may be growing again, but any increase is being driven by a surge in illegal immigrants from Central America, not from Mexico as in the past.

The projected increase, based on preliminary numbers, comes after the nation's undocumented population plunged during the Great Recession as jobs in the U.S. dried up, prompting fewer immigrants to come illegally and more to return home.

Any increase, however, is expected to remain small because illegal immigration from Mexico remains flat and is unlikely to be offset by the increase in illegal immigration from Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador, because those Central American countries have much smaller populations, experts say.

Still, any growth in illegal immigration will likely complicate the debate in Congress over immigration reform, fueling claims by opponents that the border is still not secure and arguments by supporters that broader reforms are needed.

The size of the undocumented-immigrant population increased from 11.3 million in 2009 to 11.7 million as of March 2012, according to a report released Monday by the nonpartisan Pew Research Center's Hispanic Trends Project.

The increase comes after the size of the undocumented population plunged from a peak of 12.2 million in 2007 to 11.3 million in 2009, the report said.

The undocumented-immigrant population fell during the recession primarily because of a sharp drop in illegal immigration from Mexico, according to demographer Jeffrey Passel, the study's lead author.

Mexicans likely still account for the majority of the undocumented immigrants in the U.S., but their share of the overall undocumented population fell from 57 percent in 2007 to 52 percent in 2012, as illegal immigration from Mexico remained flat and illegal immigration from other countries increased, the report said. The report's latest estimate of the size of the nation's undocumented population is only preliminary, Passel noted. He cautioned against drawing firm conclusions.

"We're not in a position to say it's gone up with any degree of certainty, but statistically, it is more likely that it has gone up than down," Passel said.

The estimate was calculated from the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey, which has a margin of error of about half a million, Passel said.

That means the population estimate of 11.7 million undocumented migrants is actually the middle of a range from as low as 11.2 million or as high as 12.2 million.

One trend is clear, Passel said. Illegal immigration from Mexico has not increased. But there has been an increase in illegal immigration from other countries.

“The Mexico part is pretty clear; it’s clear that nothing’s going on,” Passel said. “We saw a big decrease in the number of undocumented Mexicans from 2008 to 2009 to 2010; from then, it’s completely flat. Among non-Mexicans, if you compare 2012 to the post-recession trough in 2009, that change is statistically significant. We can say the proportion of non-Mexicans increased.”

Randy Capps, a senior researcher at the Migration Policy Institute, a nonpartisan think tank in Washington, D.C., said that if the undocumented population has grown, “it’s only by a small amount.”

Illegal immigration is unlikely to return to the levels before the recession, when the undocumented population was growing by about a half a million people a year, he said.

That’s because there are now better job and educational opportunities in Mexico, where the majority of undocumented immigrants came from, he said.

What’s more, while the U.S. economy is picking up steam overall, industries such as construction, meatpacking and poultry processing that rely on immigrants remain weak, Capps said.

He said the recent increase in the size of the undocumented population is likely the result of a surge in illegal immigration from Central America, mostly from Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador.

Apprehensions by the Border Patrol of illegal immigrants from countries other than Mexico along the southwestern border jumped to 94,532 in fiscal 2012, up from 46,997 the previous year.

Steven Camarota, director of research for the Center for Immigration Studies, said the Pew report indicating a possible rise in the undocumented population shows that illegal immigration remains a problem, which may make it harder to pass immigration reforms in Congress to legalize undocumented immigrants.

“It probably undermines the argument that illegal immigration is a thing of the past,” he said.

He attributed the possible increase to three things:

Less work-site enforcement under President Barack Obama’s administration.

The prospect of a legalization program for undocumented immigrants, which has caused fewer undocumented immigrants to leave.

The recovery of the U.S. economy.

In June, the Senate passed an immigration-reform bill that calls for billions of dollars in additional border-security spending plus more work-site enforcement, reforms in the nation's visa system and a program that allows undocumented immigrants to gain legal status and eventually citizenship.

The bill has stalled in the House, however, where Republicans want to consider smaller bills that address immigration reform one step at a time, beginning with more spending on border security.

Frank Sharry, director of America's Voice, a group pushing for immigration reform, said the Pew report indicating a possible rise in the undocumented population shows the need for broad immigration reforms.

“Obviously enforcement alone doesn't work,” Sharry said. “Enforcement at the border, plus at the workplace with new visas and a legalization and citizenship component. That's the combination that has the best chance to deliver a legal, orderly humane system.”

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