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U.S. illegal immigrant population declines for second year

By Spencer Hsu

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U.S. illegal immigrant population falls again

The number of illegal immigrants living in the United States fell by 1 million, or 8 percent, between 2007 and 2009, the U.S. government reported Tuesday.

The decline, to 10.8 million people in January 2009 from 11.8 million in 2007 and 11.6 million in 2008, coincides with the national economic downturn. It marked the first back-to-back drops in the number of illegal immigrants since the federal government allowed many to obtain legal status after a 1986 amnesty.

The report by the Department of Homeland Security's Office of Immigration Statistics feeds a technical but politically sensitive debate over whether a weaker U.S. economy or tougher immigration enforcement is more responsible for the change.

Advocates for reduced immigration said the findings show the country can shrink the population of illegal immigrants without simply legalizing them. Immigration advocates say enforcement alone is neither practical, affordable nor humane over the long run.

Independent analysts said that, while it appears that declines in the past two years are real and not due solely to changes in methodology in underlying U.S. Census data, the impact of enforcement will only be seen when the U.S. labor market recovers.