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Illegal immigration in U.S. stabilizes

By Nicholas Riccardi

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After two years of declines, the number of illegal immigrants living in the U.S. was virtually unchanged last year, according to a report released Tuesday by the Pew Hispanic Center.

The annual report, relied upon by both sides in the contentious immigration debate, found 11.2 million illegal immigrants living in the U.S., statistically identical to the 11.1 million estimated in 2009. The number peaked in 2007 at 12 million and dropped steadily as the economy collapsed.

"It seems the decline has halted as of 2010," Jeffrey Passel, one of the report's authors, said in a conference call with reporters.

The center's findings do not include reasons for the decline or for the stabilization in the illegal immigrant population, which has widely been attributed to the sluggish economy and tougher enforcement.

"Common sense suggests both of them are, in fact, factors," said Paul Taylor, the center's director.

The stabilization seems to stem largely from a dwindling number of people making the often perilous journey into the U.S. from Mexico.

"People in Mexico look at the U.S. economy, they look at the U.S. as a potential source of employment, and they see that the opportunities aren't here," Passel said. "They weigh that against the cost of hiring somebody to get them across the border and the risks of getting across the border."

The report also found that illegal immigrants in 2010 were parents of 5.5 million children, 4.5 million of whom were born in the U.S. and are citizens. Because illegal immigrants are younger and more likely to be married, they represented a disproportionate share of births — 8% of the babies born in the U.S. between March 2009 and March 2010 were to at least one illegal immigrant parent.

Two Republican senators, as well as lawmakers in a number of states, have introduced legislation to strip away automatic citizenship for children born to illegal immigrants in the U.S.

Passel said there was no way to determine how many of those children might have two illegal immigrant parents, and how many might have a legal resident or U.S. citizen as the other half of the parental pair. The report found that only a small number — 9% — of illegal immigrants with U.S.-born children arrived after 2007. The majority have lived here for more than six years.

Advocates for legalizing illegal immigrants or for removing them found data in the report that bolstered their arguments. Frank Sharry, director of America's Voice, which pushes for legalization of some undocumented immigrants, said that despite the worst recession in 80 years and tough new laws against them, illegal immigrants are clearly here to stay.

"This is a group of rooted people who live in families and work hard, and they're not going to be easily expelled," Sharry said.

Roy Beck, president of Numbers USA, which advocates tougher measures against illegal immigration, focused on the report's finding that 8 million illegal immigrants held jobs in 2010, slightly down from 8.4 million in 2009.

"The federal and state efforts to make sure that jobs go to legal workers have failed," Beck said.