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# Many Visitors Just Don't Bother to Go Home

By Maria Puente

The image of illegal immigrants scurrying over the Mexican border is familiar to most Americans, but it's only a partial picture of illegal immigration in the USA, officials say.

Indeed, more than half the estimated 4 million illegal immigrants are "visa overstays" — people who enter the country legally on a tourist, student or business visa but don't go home — says the Immigration and Naturalization Service.

But visa overstays are not a part of the current immigration debate — which has seen more INS resources shifting to a blockade of border states.

"The border is the hot issue — you can take pictures of people clambering over the border," says Cecilia Munoz, senior analyst at the Hispanic immigrant-rights group National Council of La Raza. "Visa overstayers don't make good 30-second sound bites."

One reason: overstayers are perceived to "blend in" better than even native Hispanics. In New York and New Jersey, for instance, the largest groups of overstayers are from Poland, Italy and Portugal. "One of the great ironies is that an Italian who arrived yesterday is perceived as 'more American' than a fifth-generation Mexican-American — and that drives our community crazy," Munoz says.

Last year Congress made it even easier for Irish and Portuguese to come to the USA, by adding Ireland and Portugal to the "visa waiver list."

"As long as you didn't get into trouble with the law, you were fine," says Sean Murphy, 33, an Irish overstayer who eventually got a green card and now is a contractor. "You could go to a bar, find out about work, even cash your paycheck with the bartender."

Visitors from the 22 countries on the list don't have to get visas for short visits because the countries don't have a history of visa fraud or large numbers of illegal immigrants in the USA.

"That's a huge, Mack truck hole in our ability to stop illegal immigration," says Dan Stein of the Federation for American Immigration Reform.

Visas are issued by the State Department, which is supposed to reject applicants believed to be potential overstayers. The INS estimates only 150,000 a year overstay of a total of 22 million visitors. But the INS has no way to track down and deport overstayers. Only 658 overstayers were deported in 1993 of 36,700 immigrants expelled.

INS Commissioner Doris Meissner says the way to discourage overstayers is to reduce access to jobs by beefing up enforcement of employer sanctions.

And immigration lawyers and leaders of the nation's \$77 billion tourism industry worry about increased attention to visa overstays.

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Warren Leiden, head of the American Immigration Lawyers Association, says it's already extremely difficult for visitors from Third World countries to get visitor visas.

"We caution against Draconian measures that penalize all visa visitors for sins of a few," says William Norman, president of the Travel Industry Association of America.

But Draconian measures may not be necessary. "Make it clear that people have to leave and then enforce departure — and the U.S. has never done that," says the American Bar Association's Carol Wolchok. ■