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# Who's Counting Illegal Aliens?

By James H. Walsh

The United States has more illegal aliens than any other nation on Earth. Each day and each night, more aliens cross U.S. borders in violation of the law, and others become illegal as their visas expire. No one, including the federal government, can say precisely how many illegal aliens currently reside in the United States. As the impact of these numbers heightens, it is high time someone took a count.

The current failure to identify with certainty the number of illegal aliens in the United States has serious implications. A coalition of academicians, politicians, federal and state bureaucrats, special-interest groups and ethnic spokespersons is striving to scale down the numbers and to minimize their impact. The true numbers would incite the taxpayers to more restrictive national and state legislation than California's Proposition 187.

## Current Guesstimates

The INS figure for illegal aliens permanently crossing U.S. borders or overstaying their visas each year is between 200,000 and 300,000 men, women, and children. Using this annual rate, published in the INS Statistical Report of 1992, the total illegal alien population in the United States would have risen from 2.2 million in 1988 to 4.1 million men, women, and children in 1995. The Urban Institute, a social research think tank, hired by the INS to study immigration legislation and policy, uses these figures, as does the General Accounting Office (GAO). Professor Julian Simon of the University of Maryland, who writes on business aspects of immigration, uses the INS range, as does Sam Roberts, *New York Times* urban affairs columnist, in his book, *Who Are We, A Portrait of America*. Attorney General Janet Reno cited these figures in testimony before the Senate Judiciary Committee in 1994. The INS figures would seem to be etched in stone, but should they be?

The seminal statistical work was conducted by Robert Warren, director of the INS Statistics Division, and published in a 1994 INS paper entitled, "Estimates of the Unauthorized Immigrant Population Residing in the United States, by Country of Origin and State of Residence: October 1992." Warren emphasizes that his figures are estimates and acknowledges the assistance of the Urban Institute; the Center for Social Demographic Analysis at the State University of New York, Albany; and the New York City Planning Department. All the major players in immigration statistics quote each other.

Warren used the INS Nonimmigrant Information System (NIIS) to establish the estimate that more than

half of each year's illegal aliens are persons admitted for a temporary period who fail to depart as required — in other words, visa overstays. Failing to mention that the 1990 nonimmigrant records were lost during an error in processing of the NIIS database, Warren concludes:

*The actual population residing in the United States in October 1992 is not likely to have been higher than the estimated total of 3.4 million because the assumptions used to construct the estimates were selected deliberately to avoid underestimating the population.*

In other words, the INS just guessed.

## Who's Actually Counting?

When INS Commissioner Doris Meissner testified before Congress in 1994, she admitted that estimates of illegal aliens in the United States are only estimates but still cited the Warren paper as a dispeller of myths about illegal alien numbers. The incestuous cycle of affirming the Warren figures of 200,000 to 300,000 new illegal aliens in the U.S. each year discourages bureaucrats and academicians from testing these numbers with fieldwork, and weakens the credibility of the audits, studies, and position papers based on them.

The current INS focus is on visa overstays rather than border crossings. The agency estimates that over half of all illegal aliens in the U.S. entered legally on business, student, or tourist visas but then decided not to go home. Many visa overstays planned from the start to use their visas as an entry permit and had no intention of leaving the country, especially those persons coming from Africa and the Asian sub-continent. In this way, they avoid paying a smuggler and often receive financial assistance from schools and philanthropic groups.

## Testing the INS Estimates

The INS estimates that 200,000 to 300,000 persons have entered or overstayed illegally each year since 1992. With a variance as wide as 100,000 persons, let us use 250,000 as an annual figure for new illegal aliens. Accepting the INS estimate that less than half of these are border crossers, then under 125,000 persons permanently cross the borders illegally each year, or 342 persons crossing the air, land, and water borders each day! Such a figure is absurd and does not coincide with the daily apprehensions at the U.S.-Mexican land border alone.

In 1994 U.S. officials estimated that 100,000 Chinese are smuggled into the United States each year,

such as those who came ashore off Queens, New York, in 1993 on the *Golden Venture*. That means approximately 273 Chinese enter illegally each day, which from personal experience, is about right, but this would leave only 25,000 other aliens entering illegally at other borders each year.

Mexico traditionally is the largest exporter of illegal aliens to the United States. Other than Mexico, Central American countries were the chief exporters in the 1980s, followed by the Caribbean area.

How many Mexicans are in the U.S. permanently and illegally? The Urban Institute in its 1994 report, *Immigration and Immigrants — Setting the Record Straight*, rehearses the same numbers with maximum additions of 300,000 a year and tries to explain away the much larger number of Mexican illegals — over 1 million apprehended by the U.S. Border Patrol each year. The Urban Institute finds this figure misleading because the Border Patrol counts individuals who may enter more than once until they elude apprehension. The Border Patrol figures also include Mexicans who enter illegally but only for a short stay before returning home, according to the Urban Institute.

Those with experience on the border will find flaws in this rationale. The vast majority of illegal southern border crossers pay \$2,000 to a coyote (smuggler) or pay a bribe to the local or federal Mexican police. Border crossers risk robbery, rape, and death in the no-man's land along the border, especially in the San Diego and Yuma sectors. Those hiding from detection have been run over in the dark by Border Patrol vehicles in the arroyos of Arizona and California. Crossing of the Mexican-U.S. land border illegally can be hazardous to one's health. These are very high prices to pay for a few days in the U.S., especially when a legal-border crossing card is easily obtained.

Border patrol field agents calculate that three aliens escape apprehension for every one caught. This is a conservative estimate, as most agents say the rate is more likely five to one. Yet the INS estimate of illegal border crossers comes out to only 69 illegal aliens each day. Why would the United States be putting 4,000 Border Patrol agents on the southern land border in 1995, an increase of 1,000 agents over 1994, if the number of border crossers were so small? The figure, which reflects the absurdity of the INS estimate, does not include illegal aliens crossing the Canadian land border or arriving at airports, seaports, or other coastal landings. The only logical conclusion is that *more* than 300,000 illegal aliens are permanently entering the U.S. each year — *many more*.

The actual figure could be ten times the INS estimate or 2 million illegal aliens per year since 1980 for a total of some 30 million illegal aliens currently residing in the U.S. Such a figure would better account for the taxpayer revolts in the border states.

Another source of illegal aliens not included in any estimates are the approximately 400,000 asylum

applicants currently awaiting adjudication. Only 8 to 12 percent of asylum applicants have received grants of asylum in recent years. Those denied asylum may appeal the ruling, but in actuality, few of these persons are ever deported, because they simply disappear into the population. INS managers have not been able to allocate the resources to apprehend and deport this group of illegal aliens, which could number 352,000 persons from the current asylum applicant pool.

## Correcting the Count

It is time for the United States to provide its policy makers with accurate numbers on illegal aliens currently within U.S. borders overstaying their visas, or failing to comply with orders of exclusion and deportation. ■