

## MI Policy Brief:

### Illegal immigration is declining, civil debate to rise?

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Illegal immigration has been an especially volatile political issue in Arizona, and promises to remain so. In recent months, it may have been displaced in the headlines by the federal debt-ceiling dispute, the downgrading of the United States' bond rating and other matters. But 2012 is an election year in Arizona and the nation; it seems inevitable that illegal immigration will feature prominently in political campaigns and other discourse, beginning with this January's session of the Arizona Legislature. It might thus be useful to briefly review the current status of illegal immigration in Arizona and the nation, so as to provide a firmer basis for the coming debates.

The most salient fact concerning the stream of undocumented immigrants entering Arizona is that it seems to have slowed to a trickle. Authorities such as the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS)<sup>1</sup> and the Pew Hispanic Center<sup>2</sup> agree the number of undocumented immigrants living in Arizona and the rest of the United States peaked in 2007 and has since declined sharply. The U.S. Border Patrol recorded just under 448,000 apprehensions on the Southwest border in 2010, down 62% from the 1.2 million apprehensions in 2005.<sup>3</sup> Princeton Professor Douglas Massey, who directs the Mexican Migration Project, estimates that the rate of new undocumented migration from Mexico dropped to zero in 2008 for the first time in 50 years.<sup>4</sup>

The Pew Center estimates that, as of March 2010, about 11.2 million illegal immigrants were living in the United States, basically unchanged from a year earlier.

#### States with Largest Unauthorized Immigrant Populations, 2010

(thousands)

Estimated Population

<b>U.S. Total</b>	<b>11,200</b>
California	2,550
Texas	1,650
Florida	825
New York	625
New Jersey	550
Illinois	525
Georgia	425
Arizona	400
North Carolina	325
Maryland	275
Washington	230
Virginia	210

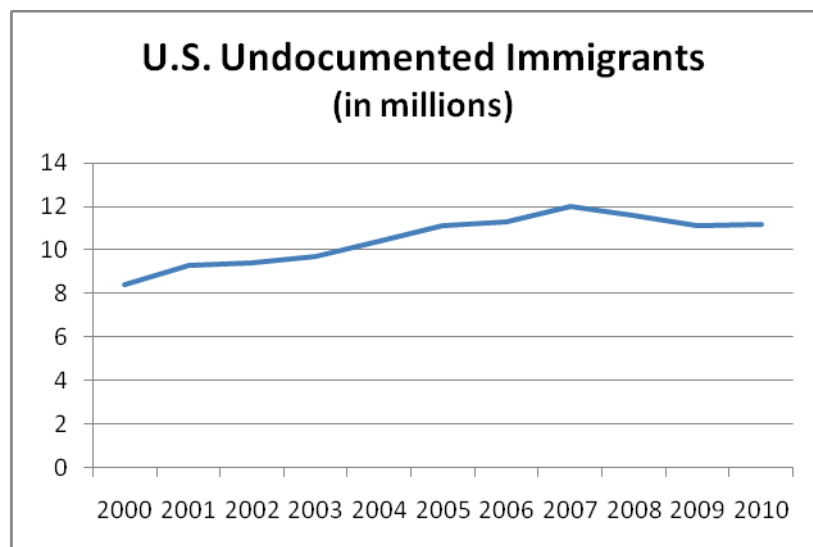
Source: Passel and Cohn, Pew Research Center

This stability in 2010 followed a two-year national decline from the peak of 12 million in 2007 to 11.1 million in 2009. The DHS numbers tell basically the same story, but offer a lower estimate of the latest total, 10.8 million in 2009. Pew estimates that there were 8 million undocumented immigrants in the nation's workforce in March 2010, down slightly from 2007, representing 5.2% of the nation's workforce.<sup>5</sup>

Arizona has seen a similar trend. The state's undocumented population peaked in 2007 at about 500,000, according to Pew; it declined to about 400,000 by 2010. At this level, Arizona ranked eighth among states in 2010, with about same illegal population as Georgia (425,000), and well below California (2.55 million) and Texas (1.65 million). Undocumented residents comprised 6% of Arizona's population in 2010, fifth highest among the states and about the same as New Jersey (6.2%); Nevada ranked first at 7.2%. Arizona in 2010 ranked fifth in the proportion of illegal immigrants in the state workforce at 7.2%, just above Georgia (7%) and below the lead state, Nevada (10%).

What accounts for this dramatic decline in illegal immigration? Pew, DHS and other sources generally agree on the following factors:

- **The Great Recession.** Employment has always been the main attraction drawing illegal immigrants across the border, and analysts agree that the deep U.S. economic slump has played the major role in slowing the influx. The recession that began in late 2007 officially ended in 2009, but recovery has been slow and unemployment remains high. Immigration flows have tended to decrease in previous periods of economic distress.
- **The hardening of the border.** Though warnings still abound about our "insecure" southern border, scholars point to the substantial rise in border enforcement as another factor in the decline in illegal crossings. Massey says that, since 1990, the size of the Border Patrol has increased by a factor of five and its budget by a factor of 13. However, he and others also note a unintended consequence of the "hardened" border: The increasing expense and danger of illegal crossings means that fewer undocumented residents, having succeeded in reaching the U.S., are likely to return to their native country. Once here, in other words, they are staying put.



Source: Passel and Cohn, Pew Research Center

- **Restrictive immigration policies.** Arizona has been in the forefront of anti-illegal immigration policies aimed at driving undocumented residents away and discouraging their arrival. The impact of these policies remains in dispute, but they are likely to have had some effect. A recent study by the Public Policy Institute of California concluded that Arizona's 2007 Legal Arizona Workers Act (LAWA), which requires employers to use a national work-authorization verification system, reduced Arizona's population of undocumented immigrants by as much as 17% in 2008-2009.<sup>6</sup> However, the study also noted that LAWA "had the unintended consequence of shifting unauthorized workers into less formal work arrangements," i.e., the underground economy. Massey claims that no significant level of "self-deportation" among undocumented residents has occurred.
- **Changes in demographics and opportunities in Mexico.** Scholars say a declining birth rate and an increasingly robust economy in Mexico are keeping more Mexicans home. The rising cost of crossing the border is also a factor, they say. This would represent a reversal of conditions during much of the past quarter century, when a surplus of young Mexican workers fled an ailing economy for the booming U.S. labor market.<sup>7</sup>
- **An increase in guest workers.** Many Americans might be surprised to learn that a "guest-worker" program for foreign workers — often debated as one solution to the illegal immigration issue — already exists. Massey reports that, from 1990 to 2008, the number of Mexicans admitted with temporary work visas grew from 17,000 annually to 361,000.
- **A rise in the legal immigration.** Mexicans who have become American citizens have legally brought in 64% more relatives from 2006 through 2010, compared with the previous five years, according to State Department figures. Tourist visas are also being granted at a higher rate.

If accurate, these estimates mean that Arizona and most of the rest of the nation are experiencing at least a pause in the large-volume influx of illegal immigrants that has fomented controversial public policies, sharp political divisions and high-profile court cases. These data also suggest that three of the major components of a comprehensive national immigration solution are in place, or nearly so: a substantial drop in immigration, a much-hardened border and a functioning guest-worker program. The "pro-immigrant" side of the debate usually cites a fourth component — a path to legal status for the millions of undocumented currently in the country.

It remains to be seen whether leaders in Arizona and elsewhere will take advantage of this pause to seek broader agreement on the immigration issue, or will continue arguing for new and more restrictive measures. Several such measures failed to pass the Arizona Senate in the last session, but they are likely to be re-introduced in some form. The U.S. Supreme Court has upheld LAWA, which might re-energize the drive to enforce employer compliance with the act's

**Estimates of Arizona Unauthorized Immigrant Population,  
Selected Years 1990 to 2010**

<b>2010</b>	<b>2007</b>	<b>2005</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>1990</b>
400,000	500,000	450,000	300,000	90,000

Source: Passel and Cohn, Pew Hispanic Center

requirements. And the federal government’s challenge to Senate Bill 1070 continues to work its way through the courts, helping ensure that the issue will remain in play.

Regardless of one’s viewpoint on the issue, an argument can be made that Arizonans can find better uses for their time and energy than continuing to focus on the influx of undocumented individuals and the need to “secure” the border. Relatively few individuals are currently seeking to sneak across our southern border. Meanwhile, millions of undocumented people are already settled in Arizona and the U.S. and are unlikely to leave, and millions of their children are U.S. citizens. While enforcing LAWA and maintaining reasonable border vigilance, it might be advisable for American leaders to begin working on the fairest and most efficient ways to help undocumented immigrants and their families assimilate to the society they are very likely remain in — a society that, especially in the Southwest, is becoming increasingly Hispanic.

Even if the goal of assimilation were adopted, serious issues remain. The overwhelming majority of illegal immigrants to Arizona are Mexican, and Mexican immigrants are the least formally educated of all immigrants, according to the Migration Policy Institute (MPI).<sup>8</sup> In 2008, 61.5% of all Mexican immigrants age 25 and older had less than a high school education, compared to 32.5% of all foreign-born adults, the MPI reports. Mexicans also lag other immigrants in English proficiency: 52% of all foreign-born individuals age 5 and older reported limited English proficiency in 2008, according to MPI. The rate for Mexicans was 74%.

And the problem of immigrants’ competition with low-skilled native-born workers persists. As the Center for Immigration Studies notes, the rate of unemployment and underemployment for U.S.-born adults who have not completed high school was 34.6% in the first quarter of 2011.<sup>9</sup> For young native-born workers (18-29) with only a high-school education, the rate was 34.4%.

Still, as MPI suggests, policymakers can reduce illegal employment by applying employer sanctions, reforming the labor market to reduce violations of labor standards that attract employers to hire illegal workers, and expanding existing guest-worker programs.<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile,

Massey suggests that illegal immigrants who entered the country as minors — and thus not by their own volition — should be given amnesty; those who entered as adults should be offered temporary legalization, allowing them time to demonstrate their fitness for U.S. citizenship.

The illegal-immigration dilemma is of course not a new one. Twice before, in the 1930s and 1950s, the United States mounted massive round-ups and expulsions of undocumented residents — campaigns that featured wholesale violations of civil rights, left scars that remain to this day, and also caught up tens or hundreds of thousands of U.S. citizens. Unless Arizona and the nation are prepared for another such effort, they seem to have little choice but to address the reality that a large undocumented population is here to stay.

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Hofer, et. al., *Estimates of the Unauthorized Immigrant Population Residing in the United States: January 2009*, January 2010, U.S. Department of Homeland Security, [http://www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/statistics/publications/ois\\_ill\\_pe\\_2009.pdf](http://www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/statistics/publications/ois_ill_pe_2009.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Jeffrey S. Passel, D'Vera Cohn, *Unauthorized Immigrant Population: National and State Trends, 2010*, Pew Hispanic Center, 2011, <http://pewhispanic.org/files/reports/133.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Lesley Sapp, *Apprehensions by the U.S. Border Patrol: 2005-2010*, U.S. Department of Homeland Security Fact Sheet, 2011. It's important to note that the level of apprehensions has risen in part due to the large increase in agents along the border. DHS also warns that apprehensions do not match one-for-one with individual immigrants, and may have only an indirect relationship to the actual flow across the border.

<sup>4</sup> Douglas Massey, *CNN Global Public Square*, July 2011  
<http://globalpublicsquare.blogs.cnn.com/2011/07/07/its-time-for-immigration-reform/>

<sup>5</sup> These and the figures below come from Jeffrey S. Passel, *op.cit.*

<sup>6</sup> Magnus Lofstrom, et.al., *Lessons from the 2007 Legal Arizona Workers Act*, Public Policy Institute of California, 2011, [http://www.ppic.org/content/pubs/report/R\\_311MLR.pdf](http://www.ppic.org/content/pubs/report/R_311MLR.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Damien Cave, "Changes in Mexico Slow Illegal Immigration to U.S.," *The New York Times*, July 6, 2011,

<http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2011/07/06/world/americas/immigration.html?ref=damiencave>

<sup>8</sup> Kate Brick, et. al., *Mexican and Central American Immigrants in the United States*, Migration Policy Institute/European University Institute, June 2011

<http://www.migrationpolicy.org/pubs/MexCentAmimmigrants.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> Steven A. Camarota, "A Need for More Immigrant Workers?" Center for Immigration Studies, June 2011

<http://www.cis.org/no-need-for-more-immigrant-workers-q1-2011>

<sup>10</sup> Madeleine Sumption, *Policies to Curb Unauthorized Employment*, Migration Policy Institute, 2001,

<http://www.migrationpolicy.org/pubs/unauthorizedemployment-2011.pdf>