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YALE RESEARCHERS DEBUNK THE MYTH OF 11 MILLION ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS
An NPG Forum Paper
by Edwin S. Rubenstein

Call any journalist, lobbyist, activist, or reasonably well-informed citizen – in red state or blue – and ask: a. How many illegal immigrants live in the U.S.?, and b. What is the source of your number? Almost without exception he or she will answer a. 11 million, and b. The Pew Research Center.

Never has so much of the nation's well-being depended on the accuracy of that 11 million estimate. The proposed "**path to citizenship**" for undocumented residents has been called "**the boldest immigration agenda any administration has put forth in generations**."[1] The pro amnesty crowd says it will lift millions of illegal immigrants who were in the U.S. before January 1st "out of the shadows" into higher paying jobs. Those against it warn that native-born workers will be displaced by the newly amnestied, while even more illegals will be induced to enter the country.

Like a tornado that won't quit, arguments have spun around and around these issues for years. At the eye of the storm lies a fairly stable and unquestioned number: 11 million illegal aliens.
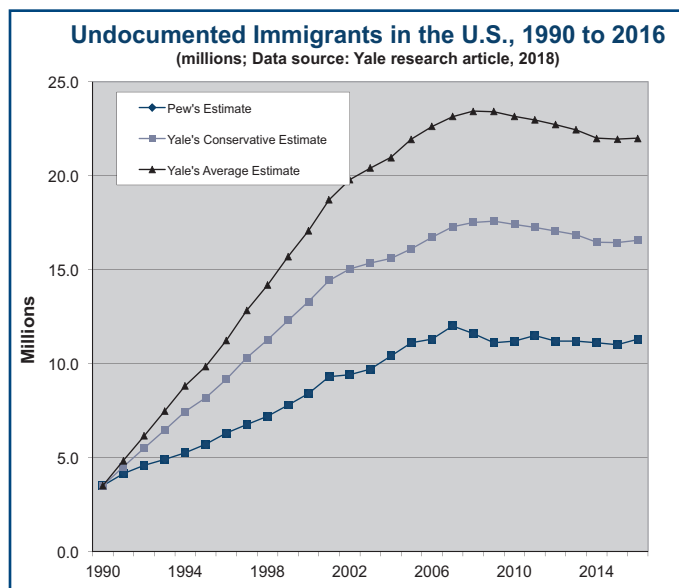
But, a paper by three Yale-affiliated researchers suggests all the perceptions and arguments based on that figure have a faulty foundation; the actual population of undocumented immigrants residing in the country is much larger, perhaps twice as high, and has been underestimated for decades.[2]

Undocumented Immigrants in the U.S., 1990 to 2016
(millions; Data source: Yale research article, 2018)

Legend: Pew's Estimate; Yale's Conservative Estimate; Yale's Average Estimate

Applying their mathematical models to a range of demographic and immigration data, Yale researchers estimated that 22.1 million illegal immigrants resided in the U.S. in 2016. (top line)

Even when they deliberately low-balled their estimate – by using parameters designed to produce an extremely conservative number, they came up with 16.7 million undocumented immigrants (middle line), **which is 50% above Pew Research's 11.2 million figure for that year.** (bottom line) **Pew's is the most frequently cited figure among the DC-based think tanks specializing in immigration issues.**

The results, published in a peer reviewed academic journal, surprised the authors themselves. They started with a conservative model, and expected results to be well below the 11 million consensus. "**Our original idea was just to do a sanity check on the existing number,**" co-author Edward Kaplan, a professor of Operations Research at the Yale School of Management, said, adding that "**Instead of a number which was smaller, we got a number that was 50% higher. That caused us to scratch our heads.**"[3]

While 11 million is the number "**that everybody quotes…when you actually dig down and say, 'What is it based on?' You find it's based on one very specific survey and possibly an approach that has some difficulties. So we went in and just took a very different approach,**" observed economist Jonathan Feinstein, another co-author.

The "**specific survey**" Feinstein refers to is the annual **American Community Survey (ACS)**. We checked out the ACS website. In 2016, it reported 43.7 million immigrants were living in the U.S., of whom 51.4% – or 22.5 million – were not citizens.[4] Not all non-citizens are illegal aliens, of course. Many entered

legally, but haven't been in the country long enough to qualify for a Green Card – and the path to citizenship entailed by that document.

But all illegal immigrants are non-citizens, so taking ACS at face value, 22.5 million is the upper-bound of the 2016 illegal alien population. Yet 22 million is exactly what the Yale researchers put forth as the most plausible estimate of the illegal alien population that year.

Is Yale misrepresenting Census data to generate an unreasonably large estimate? Not at all. The problem, Kaplan and Feinstein explain, lies in the Census data itself:

"**The Census is too blunt an instrument to reach a relatively small population** [i.e., the population of undocumented immigrants] **that has an incentive to remain undetected. First of all, about 5% of households don't respond to the survey at all. Furthermore, around 8% of those who respond skip the question about place of birth.**"[5]

"**Combine the nonresponders with the question skippers, and you get nearly 13% of the population of the United States for whom we have no clear answer to the origin question (and that does not even include undocumented immigrants who misrepresent themselves as having been born in the U.S.). That's approximately 40 million people – far more than the difference between Pew's estimate and ours.**"[6]

The Census is well aware of the possible undercount – and tries to compensate by adding about 10% to its undocumented population calculation. But, Kaplan and Feinstein observe, "**...if you look carefully at this 10% adjustment, you find that it has been repeatedly justified over the years via appeal to a small study performed in the Los Angeles area after the 2000 Census. Leaving aside whether response rates in an urban Western area can be held as representative for the whole country, this study was plagued by the same problem of nonresponses from people who would prefer not to be found, leading us to believe the 10% number is too low.**"[7]

Hmm. Think about this. Seems to me that Kaplan and Feinstein are being too kind. The Census "adjustment" sounds like the blind leading the blind.

The Yale researchers are not political. Nor are they particularly focused on immigration policy. They are professional statisticians interested in overcoming the challenges posed by people who do not want to be counted.

The professors have worked on this type of problem before. "**The analysis we've done can be thought of as estimating the size of a hidden**

population," Kaplan says. "**People who are undocumented immigrants are not walking around with labels on their foreheads. Neither are populations of homeless people, neither are populations of drug users, and neither are populations of terrorists. Yet for policy, it is very important to know the size of these hidden populations because that sets the scale of the problem in each of these different policy areas.**"[8]

As newcomers to the illegal alien estimation business, the Yalies eschew methodology long embraced by Pew and other inside-the-beltway think tanks. For example: they do not rely on Census surveys. Their numbers are based on operational data, such as deportations and Border Patrol apprehensions, and demographic data, including death rates and immigration rates.

"**We combined these data using a demographic model that follows a very simple logic,**" Kaplan says**. "The population today is equal to the initial population plus everyone who came in minus everyone who went out. It's that simple.**"[9]

Nevertheless, there are key points of agreement between Yale and Pew. As seen in the graphic, both groups agree that the greatest growth of the undocumented population occurred in the 1990s and early 2000s. Both find that the population size has been relatively stable since 2008. "**The trajectory is the same. We see the same patterns happening, but they're just understating the actual number of people who have made it here,**" says Yale co-author Fazel Zarandi**.** In his view, that suggests the survey method doesn't effectively reach a group with incentives to stay undetected. "**They are capturing part of this population, but not the whole population.**"[10]

In fact, some of the data available to Yale didn't exist when Pew made their estimates. For example: data on visa overstays wasn't even collected by the Department of Homeland Security until 2015.

The challenges professional statisticians encounter in counting undocumented immigrants are hard for us ordinary folks to comprehend. We get the gist from several excerpts:

"**The key components—inflows and outflows—are each made of numerous subcomponents. Each subcomponent must be aggregated from different sources, evaluated for its specific level of certainty, then incorporated into the mathematical model in a consistent way. There's a lot hidden under the hood, so to speak,**" Feinstein says.[11]

"'**There are very few numbers we can point to and say this is carved in stone,' Kaplan adds. 'We**

allow for all of that variability in the modeling, which complicates everything and explains why we get such a wide range of possible outcomes.' He continues, 'How many people are actually being apprehended at the border? That's hard data. That's reported each year.' From there it's possible to reverse engineer an estimate of how many people must have tried to cross the border. 'This kind of 'backwards logic' is common in models of this form.' Kaplan notes that in the early days of the HIV/AIDS crisis, the number of new HIV infections was reverse engineered from the number of new AIDS cases."

While the Yale numbers are startling, they do not describe a new invasion. "**We wouldn't want people to walk away from this research thinking that suddenly there's a large influx happening now,**" Feinstein says, adding:

"**Of course, our findings will get pulled and tugged in many ways, but our purpose is just to provide better information, This paper is not oriented towards politics or policy. I want to be very clear: this paper is about coming up with a better estimate of an important number.**"[12]

WE'VE BEEN HERE BEFORE: THE REAGAN AMNESTY

The last amnesty comparable to the current proposal is Ronald Reagan's Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA), passed by Congress in 1986.

IRCA gave amnesty to what seemed a huge number of illegal aliens (3 million!) in exchange for harsh employer sanctions – fines of up to $10,000 for every illegal alien hired, and incarceration for repeat offenders. President Reagan called sanctions the "**keystone**" of the law, adding: "**It will remove the incentive for illegal immigration by eliminating the job opportunities which draw illegal aliens here.**"[13]

But U.S. companies had little to fear. Neither Reagan nor subsequent administrations seemed eager to enforce IRCA's employer sanctions. A single statistic attests to this. By 2002 the former Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) levied fines on only 13 employers, a minuscule portion of the thousands of offenders. The flagrant non-enforcement of IRCA sanctions essentially amounted to "**HELP WANTED**" signs hung up for undocumented immigrants.

In truth, no President, no matter how dedicated to immigration control, can match the overarching power of the immigration bureaucracy – the folks who actually enforce the law... Or are supposed to.

The open secret behind the IRCA amnesty was the unspoken F-word: **FRAUD**.

Signed by President Reagan on November 6, 1986, the IRCA amnesty required applicants to prove they were U.S. residents at least since January 1, 1982. Much of the illegal alien population – especially seasonal agricultural workers – had arrived after that date.[14]

A torrent of phony Social Security cards and driver's licenses, back-dated to indicate residency prior to the cut-off, flooded the market. As early as 1989 the INS had placed 390,000 Special Agricultural Worker (SAW) applications on hold because of suspected fraud and had arrested about 750 people for selling forged labor documents for up to $2,000 in central Texas and $1,500 to $3,000 in California.[15]

"**By 1993, it had become clear that the legalization of IRCA immigrants had opened a channel that led to numbers** [of amnesty applicants] **larger than most had anticipated. It also became clear that there had been a considerable amount of fraud in the system, particularly with regard to the special agricultural worker** [SAW] **legalization program.**"[16]

Bad enough, for sure. But an even bigger bombshell leaked from the U.S. Justice Department's Office of Inspector General: "**Despite knowledge of these cases at the highest level of INS, despite knowledge that many of these individuals had become or would soon become eligible to apply for naturalization, and despite Headquarters' commitment to Congress in November 1995 that it would appropriately investigate cases in which SAW fraud was suspected, INS did not take timely action to ensure that applicants suspected of SAW fraud did not naturalize…**"[17]

Translation: The federal immigration bureaucracy looked the other way when confronted with massive fraud in the Reagan years.

A former INS insider explains how the IRCA amnesty game was played:

"**Here's the scenario: The government calls for an illegal alien amnesty. Federal employees in the field suspect massive fraud in the deluge of applications. Bureaucratic inertia enforced by management buries the whistleblowers. The government gives out the 'green cards' anyhow.**

"**Five years pass, and the same suspected liars and cheaters apply for U.S. citizenship. The government says they'll investigate the fraud this second time around…but never get to it.**

"**The unspoken policy of amnesty fraud – and all immigration fraud for that matter – remains: 'don't ask, don't tell.'**"[18]

Fast forward to 2021. INS is no more, but its

successor agency – the Department of Homeland Security, undoubtedly suffers from the same "**Bureaucratic inertia**" syndrome.

But illegal immigrant fraud? We may never see it.

David North explains:

"**If the proposed bill is passed with the current language intact, fraud will not be a problem this time around.**

"**Is that because we are now dealing with a better class of illegal aliens? Not at all. The difference will come because there will be no need for fraud, as virtually every unauthorized alien in the nation will be eligible for getting on the road to citizenship.**

"**So, on one hand, there will be a cleaner, easier process this time, but at the cost of adding 11 million people to our legal population, all without an enforcement program that would prevent the arrivals of millions more illegals.**"[19]

There is fraud, and then there is *fraud*. North speaks to fraud perpetrated by illegal aliens. A different, and potentially more dangerous fraud, occurs when government officials understate the size, and abandon efforts to control, the amnestied population.

When the Reagan amnesty was first announced, the government estimated that about 1 million illegals would be eligible. The number turned out to be 3 million.

Will amnesty for Pew's 11 million turn out to be amnesty for 33 million?

or:

Will Yale's 22 million become amnesty for (GULP) 66 million?

Stay tuned.

NOTES

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3. Mohammad Fazel-Zarandi, Jonathan Feinstein, Edward Kaplan, *Yale Study Finds Twice as Many Undocumented Immigrants as Previous Estimates*, Insight, September 21, 2018. https://insights.som.yale.edu/insights/yale-study-finds-twice-as-many-undocumented-immigrants-as-previous-estimates#gref
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18. Ibid.
19. David North, op. cit., February 5, 2021.

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