Who are unauthorized immigrants in the U.S.?

There are 10.5 million unauthorized immigrants living in the United States, according to the latest Pew Research Center estimate from 2017. Some crossed the U.S. border illegally, and others arrived on temporary legal visas but stayed past their deadlines.

To arrive at our estimate, we use U.S. Census Bureau data to establish the size of the total foreign-born population, subtract the number of lawful...
immigrants, and then use the remainder to estimate the size and characteristics of the unauthorized immigrant population.

There are fewer than a decade ago.

After rising for many years, the number of unauthorized immigrants peaked at more than 12 million in 2007, the first year of the Great Recession. The total declined after that and the 2016 total was the lowest since 2004. By contrast, the number of legal U.S. immigrants has continued to rise.

Most have lived in the U.S. for at least a decade.

About two-thirds of unauthorized immigrant adults have lived in the U.S. for more than 10 years, and that share has grown over time. A smaller percentage, compared with a decade ago, has been in the country for five years or less.
Mexicans are the largest group, but the share of non-Mexicans is rising.

4.9 million unauthorized immigrants were born in Mexico, as of 2017. The number of Mexicans and their share of the total unauthorized immigrant population have been going down in recent years, and Mexicans are no longer the majority of unauthorized immigrants. Meanwhile, the numbers from Asia and Central America have risen over the past decade.

The birth regions and countries of unauthorized immigrants differ from those of legal immigrants. Lower shares of unauthorized immigrants are from Asia, Europe, Canada and the Caribbean and a higher share are from Mexico.

Most unauthorized immigrants live in just six states.

About six-in-ten unauthorized immigrants live in 20 major metro areas – with the biggest populations in New York, Los Angeles and Houston. These areas also have large legal immigrant populations. By contrast, a little more than a third of the overall U.S. population lives in these areas.

Most unauthorized immigrants live in just six states: California, Texas, Florida, New York, New Jersey and Illinois. Again, these are top states for legal immigrants too, but only about 40% of the total U.S. population lives there.
Nearly 8 million are working or looking for work.

That number (which is nearly 5% of the total U.S. workforce) has declined from a decade earlier. The employment patterns of unauthorized immigrants are different from those of legal ones or of workers born in the U.S.

Unauthorized immigrant workers make up a higher share of some occupations – especially farming and construction – than they do the total workforce. But in all major occupational categories, U.S.-born workers are a majority.

They are parents to more than 5 million children who live with them.

Most of these children (5.0 million) were born in the U.S. and are U.S. citizens, while nearly 700,000 are unauthorized immigrants themselves. Children of unauthorized immigrants make up nearly 8% of the nation’s K-12 students.

While the number of U.S.-born children of unauthorized immigrants had been rising for decades, in recent years, the number of births to unauthorized immigrant mothers has declined.

At least 1.5 million cannot be deported, for now.

They have applied for asylum and their cases are pending, or they have protection (and are eligible to work legally) under two government programs. The first, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), covers about 700,000 young adults who were brought to the U.S. as children.

The second program, Temporary Protected Status (TPS), applies mainly to Central American immigrants from countries the U.S. government deemed dangerous because of
Fewer are caught at the border than a decade ago.

The number of people caught at the U.S.-Mexico border while trying to cross illegally – one measure of unauthorized immigration trends – generally rises and falls from month to month, according to government statistics. However, the number of apprehensions has increased since 2017, after declining for the past decade.

One notable change is that Mexicans no longer accounted for the majority of border apprehensions in some recent fiscal years. In fact, from 2009 to 2014, more Mexican immigrants (both lawful and unauthorized) returned to their home country from the U.S. than migrated to the U.S.

Despite recent uptick, U.S.-Mexico border apprehensions still far below late 1990s levels

Number of apprehensions at southwest border, by fiscal year

Source: U.S. Customs and Border Protection.

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