

Revised Method for Estimating the Resident Unauthorized Immigrant Population in the United States

Estimating the resident unauthorized immigrant population in the United States is difficult in the absence of national surveys or administrative data that capture the legal status of foreign nationals in the country. Researchers have relied on indirect methods such as the “residual” approach pioneered by Robert Warren and Jeffrey Passel (see Warren and Passel, 1987) in which estimates of the legally resident population, obtained primarily from DHS administrative data, are subtracted from estimates of the total foreign-born population, obtained from Census data. Using a revised version of this methodology, the Department of Homeland Security released estimates of the resident unauthorized immigrant population for January 1, 2005 (Hoefler, Rytina and Campbell, 2006). Our goals were to make as few simplifying assumptions as possible, be transparent, and take advantage of our internal expertise on administrative immigration data. The 2005 estimates are the first of a planned annual series to be based on the Census Bureau’s American Community Survey (ACS) for estimating the foreign born population and DHS administrative data for estimating the legally resident.

In this paper we elaborate on our methodology and results:

1. We explain our use of the residual methodology in greater detail. We focus on those components of the estimates that generated the most uncertainty: emigration of the legally resident population and undercount of the foreign born population in the ACS, particularly unauthorized immigrants. We highlight the quantitative impact of this uncertainty primarily through sensitivity analysis indicating what the estimates would be under different scenarios of emigration and undercount.
2. We discuss other sources of uncertainty in the estimates and their potential impact, e.g. the nonimmigrant population estimates, the use of the ACS versus the CPS to estimate the foreign-born population, and internal migration (we did not have direct data on the migration of the legally resident population subsequent to obtaining refugee, asylee or LPR status).
3. We compare our estimates of the unauthorized immigrant population for 2005 and 2000 with those of other researchers providing information not included in our published report. Our 2005 estimate of 10.5 million is close to that of Jeffrey Passel (2006) (11.0 million), but this closeness masks some differences in data (Passel used the March CPS) and assumptions. Our 2000 estimate (8.5 million) is greater than the previous DHS estimate (Department of Homeland Security, 2003) (7.0 million) due to differences in definitions and methodology.
4. We provide estimates of the unauthorized immigrant population for 2005 by age and gender. These results were not reported in our published report either and are part of our ongoing efforts to provide as much demographic information as possible on the unauthorized population.

5. We discuss options for improving unauthorized estimates and indicate their relative merits, problems, advantages/disadvantages such as:
- Conducting exit surveys to improve emigration estimates.
 - Adding legal status questions on surveys of foreign-born population
 - Validating estimates of emigration/mortality by matching DHS flow data on legally resident immigrants to other administrative records, e.g. death certificates, tax records, drivers' licenses, residential home sales/assessments, and arrest records.

References

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