

Trends in Unauthorized Immigration: Undocumented Inflow Now Trails Legal Inflow

Jeffrey S. Passel
Senior Demographer
Pew Hispanic Center

D’Vera Cohn
Senior Writer
Pew Research Center

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Daniel Dockterman, Research Assistant

Susan Minushkin, Deputy Director

Mark Hugo Lopez, Associate Director

Jeffrey S. Passel, Senior Demographer

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Mary Seaborn, Administrative Manager

Executive Summary

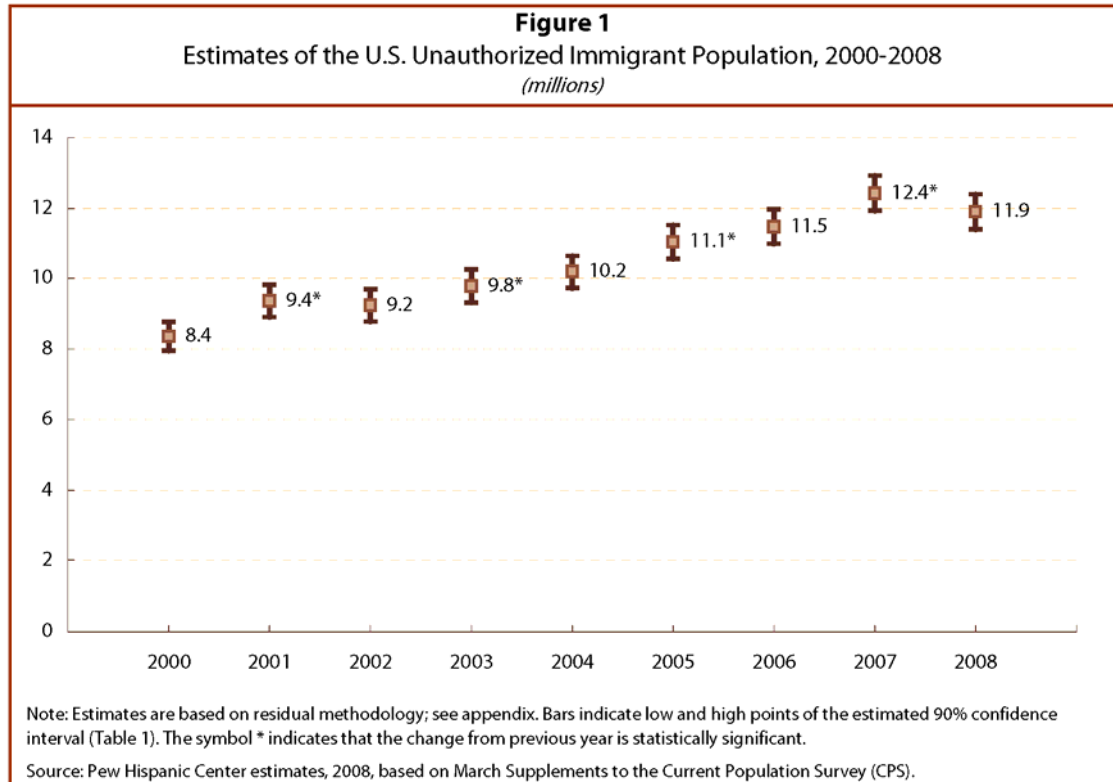
There were 11.9 million unauthorized immigrants living in the United States in March 2008, according to new Pew Hispanic Center estimates. The size of the unauthorized population appears to have declined since 2007, but this finding is inconclusive because of the margin of error in these estimates.

However, it is clear from the estimates that the unauthorized immigrant population grew more slowly in the period from 2005 to 2008 than it did earlier in the decade.

It also is clear that from 2005 to 2008, the inflow of immigrants who are undocumented fell below that of immigrants who are legal permanent residents. That reverses a trend that began a decade ago. The turnaround appears to have occurred in 2007.

The Pew Hispanic Center also estimates that inflows of unauthorized immigrants averaged 800,000 a year from 2000 to 2004, but fell to 500,000 a year from 2005 to 2008 with a decreasing year-to-year trend. By contrast, the inflow of legal permanent residents has been relatively steady this decade.

Although the growth of the unauthorized population has slackened, its size has increased by more than 40% since 2000, when it was 8.4 million. In 2005, the Pew Hispanic Center estimated there were 11.1 million undocumented immigrants in the United States. The most recent estimate, 11.9 million, indicates that unauthorized immigrants make up 4% of the U.S. population.



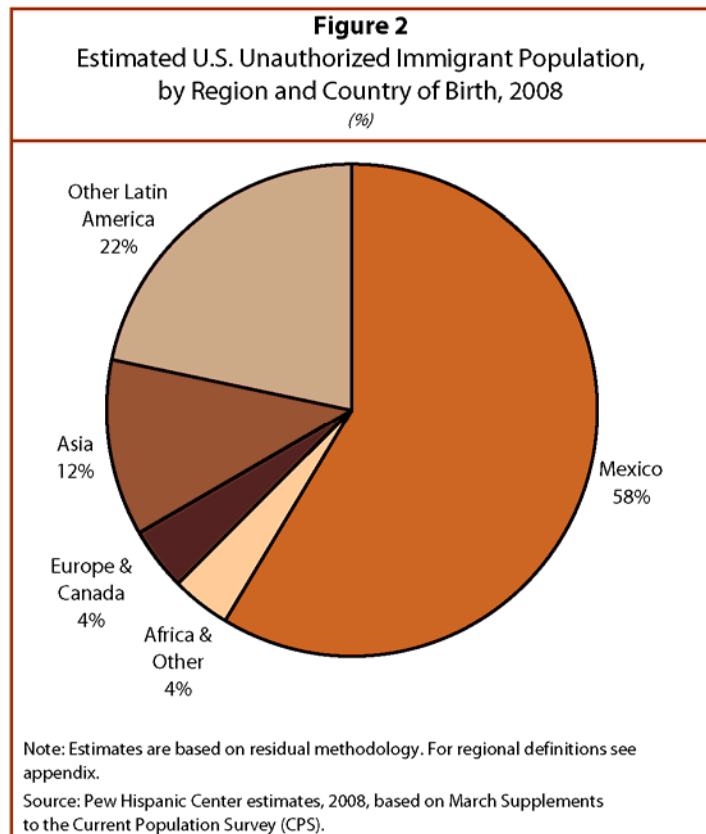
These estimates are based mainly on data from the 2000 Census and the March Current Population Surveys for the years since then. Because the Census Bureau does not ask people their immigration status, these estimates are derived using a widely accepted methodology that essentially subtracts the estimated legal-immigrant population from the total foreign-born population. The residual is treated as a source of data on the unauthorized immigrant population. [For more details, see Methodology appendix]

The estimates are not designed to explain why the net growth rate has declined. There could be a number of possible causes, including a slowdown in U.S. economic growth that has had a disproportionate impact on foreign-born [Latino workers](#), at the same time that economic growth in Mexico and other Latin American countries has been stable. Another factor could be a heightened focus on enforcement of immigration laws, which a [recent Pew Hispanic Center survey](#) indicates has generated worry among many Hispanics.

Other major findings:

- Undocumented immigrants make up 30% of the nation's foreign-born population of more than 39 million people. More than four-in-ten of the nation's unauthorized immigrants—5.3 million people—have arrived since the decade began.

- The vast majority of undocumented immigrants—four-in-five—come from Latin American countries. In March 2008, 9.6 million unauthorized immigrants from Latin America were living in the United States.
- The number of unauthorized immigrants from Mexico, 7 million, appears to have leveled off since 2007. Mexico remains the birth country of most unauthorized immigrants in the U.S.
- The number of undocumented immigrants from other Latin American nations has fallen since 2007.



About this Report

The Pew Hispanic Center estimates the undocumented population using the “residual method,” a well-developed and widely accepted technique that is based on official government data. Under this methodology, a demographic estimate of the legal foreign-born population—including naturalized citizens, legal permanent residents, temporary legal residents and refugees—is subtracted from the total foreign-born population. The remainder, or residual, is the source of population estimates and characteristics of unauthorized immigrants.

These unauthorized immigrants consist of residents of the United States who are not U.S. citizens, who do not hold current permanent-resident visas or who have not been granted permission under a set of specific authorized temporary statuses for longer-term residence and work. The vast majority of undocumented immigrants either entered the country without valid documents or they arrived with valid visas but stayed past their visa expiration date or otherwise violated the terms of their admission.

Also included in this group are some people who had entered without valid documents or violated the terms of their visas but later obtained temporary authorization to live and work in the United States. Among them are immigrants from certain countries holding temporary protected status (TPS) or people who have filed for asylum status but whose claims are unresolved. This group may account for as much as 10% of the unauthorized estimate. Many of these “quasi-legal” individuals could revert to unauthorized status.

These Pew Hispanic Center estimates use data mainly from the Current Population Survey, a monthly survey of about 55,000 households conducted jointly by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics and the Census Bureau. It is best known as the source for monthly unemployment statistics. Each March, the CPS sample size and questionnaire are augmented to produce additional data on the foreign-born population and other topics. The Pew Hispanic Center estimates make adjustments to the government data to compensate for undercounting of some groups, and therefore its population totals differ somewhat from the ones the government uses. Estimates for any given year are based on a March reference date.

A Note on Terminology

The terms “Latino” and “Hispanic” are used interchangeably in this report.

“Foreign-born” refers to an individual who is not a U.S. citizen at birth or, in other words, who is born outside the U.S., Puerto Rico or other U.S. territories and whose parents are not U.S. citizens. The terms “foreign-born” and “immigrant” are used interchangeably.

The terms “unauthorized immigrants” and “undocumented immigrants” are used interchangeably.

About the Authors

Jeffrey S. Passel is a senior demographer at the Pew Hispanic Center. He is a nationally known expert on immigration to the United States and on the demography of racial and ethnic groups. In 2005, Dr. Passel was made a fellow of the American Statistical Association, which cited his outstanding contributions to the measurement of population composition and change. He formerly served as principal research associate at the Urban Institute’s Labor, Human Services and Population Center. From 1987 to 1989, he was assistant chief for population estimates and projections in the Population Division of the U.S. Census Bureau.

D’Vera Cohn is a senior writer at the Pew Research Center. She was a reporter at The Washington Post from 1985 to 2006, where she wrote chiefly about demographic topics including race, immigration and families. She was the newspaper’s lead reporter for the 2000 Census.

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Current Estimates and Trends

As of March 2008, 11.9 million undocumented immigrants were living in the United States. This represents an increase since 2005, when the Pew Hispanic Center estimated there were 11.1 million undocumented immigrants in the country. The number has risen by more than 40% since 2000, when it was estimated at 8.4 million.

The estimate of unauthorized immigrants in 2007 appears to be larger than the estimate for 2008, but this difference is not statistically significant. The estimates are derived from sample surveys and thus are subject to uncertainty from sampling error, as well as other types of error. Each annual estimate of the undocumented population is actually the midpoint of a range of possible values that could be the true number. Although it is sometimes difficult to infer magnitude or direction of any single year-to-year trend, intervals based on estimates of sampling error allow some conclusions to be drawn about changes over time.

As can be seen in Table 1 and Figure 1 the range of values for the undocumented population in 2008 is 11.4 million to 12.4 million. In 2007, the range is 11.9 million to 12.9 million. Although the apparent change between the two years is a decline of 500,000, no conclusion should be drawn about the one-year trend. That is because the apparent change of 500,000 has its own margin of error—a range that is larger than the range for either the 2007 or 2008 estimate. Thus, the true change could be zero or could be larger than 500,000. (These ranges represent approximate 90% confidence intervals, meaning that there is a 90% probability that the interval contains the true value.)

	ESTIMATE	LOW	HIGH
Year			
2008	11.9	11.4	12.4
2007	12.4	11.9	12.9
2006	11.5	11.0	12.0
2005	11.1	10.6	11.5
2004	10.2	9.7	10.7
2003	9.8	9.3	10.2
2002	9.2	8.8	9.7
2001	9.4	8.9	9.8
2000	8.4	7.9	8.8

Note: Estimates are based on residual methodology. Low and high values represent the bounds of the estimated 90% confidence interval; see appendix. Boldface indicates that the change from previous year is statistically significant.
Source: Pew Hispanic Center estimates, 2008, based on March Supplements to the Current Population Survey (CPS).

The series of annual estimates in Table 1 and Figure 1 show that the overall undocumented population has increased since 2000. For half the years of this decade, it can be concluded that the unauthorized population grew during the previous year, but for the rest, the apparent change in size of the unauthorized population is not statistically significant. Looking at two-year periods, the

apparent change between 2006 and 2008 is the only time this decade that there was not a statistically significant increase.

Annual Growth

Although the undocumented population has been rising, its net growth has slowed substantially since 2005, compared with earlier in the decade.

For 2000 to early 2005, the unauthorized immigrant population grew by an annual net average of about 525,000, increasing to 11.1 million from 8.4 million. Using information on date of arrival, the Pew Hispanic Center estimates imply that during those years, an average of 800,000 new undocumented immigrants—both border crossers and visa violators—entered the U.S. annually.

Since 2005, the growth patterns have changed substantially. From 2005 to 2008, annual growth has averaged only 275,000 as the undocumented population grew from 11.1 million to 11.9 million. The estimates of unauthorized immigrants by period of arrival imply that new annual arrivals averaged 500,000 over the three-year period, with a substantially smaller number arriving since 2007.

The undocumented population is not a fixed group of people. Over time, some immigrants enter the unauthorized population and others are subtracted from it—by leaving the country, converting to legal status or dying. The methodology behind these estimates does not produce definitive estimates for each of these components of change.

Legal and Unauthorized Trends

This decreasing inflow of undocumented immigrants, which occurred during a period when legal immigration has been relatively steady, has had a hand in reshaping the composition of the nation's new foreign-born population. A decade ago, newly arrived unauthorized immigrants began to outnumber newly arrived legal permanent residents. The reverse now appears to be true.

Over the [1998-2004 period](#), the inflow of undocumented immigrants exceeded arrivals of legal permanent residents. From 2005 to 2008, about 1.6 million new undocumented immigrants arrived (an average of 500,000 a year), compared with 2.1 million legal permanent residents (an average of 650,000 a year). Examination of the

PERIOD	NUMBER	PERCENT
Total	11.9	100%
2005-2008	1.6	13%
2000-2004	3.7	31%
1995-1999	3.1	26%
1990-1994	2.0	16%
1980-1989	1.6	13%

Note: Estimates are based on residual methodology; see appendix. Numbers rounded independently and may not add to total shown. Estimates represent persons in the U.S. in unauthorized status as of March 2008. They do not represent the status at entry or the magnitude of unauthorized immigration during the period.

Source: Pew Hispanic Center estimates, 2008, based on March Supplements to the Current Population Survey (CPS).

annual estimates point to 2007 as the year the turnaround occurred.

The growth of the undocumented population may have slowed, but unauthorized immigrants continue to make up a notable share—30%—of the nation’s foreign-born population of more than 39 million people.

Arrival Year

The unauthorized immigrant population is dominated by recent arrivals—44% came to the United States in this decade. Of those, 1.6 million, or 13% of all unauthorized immigrants, arrived from 2005 to 2008. The other 3.7 million, or 31% of the undocumented population, came to the country from 2000 to 2004.

A slightly smaller share, 43%, includes longer-term residents who arrived during the 1990s. Of the 5.1 million who arrived during that decade, 3.1 million came from in 1995 to 1999, when immigration rates reached their modern peak. An estimated 1.5 million undocumented immigrants, 13% of the total, remain as undocumented residents since arriving in the 1980s.

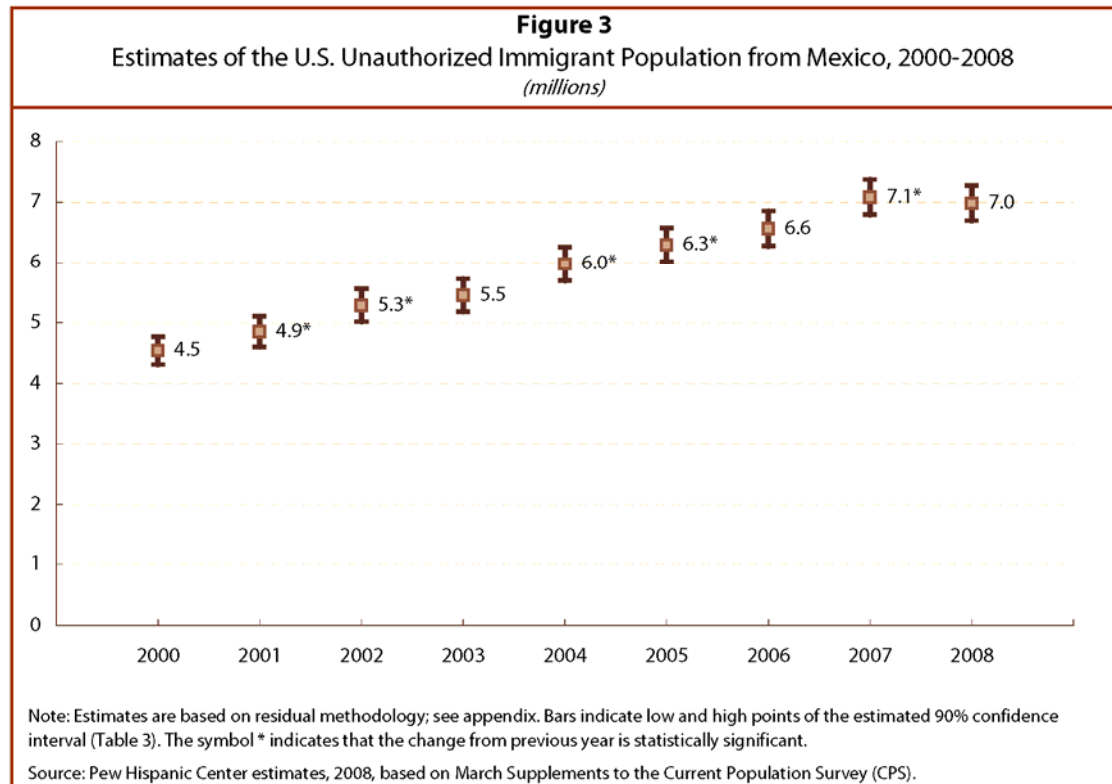
Mexico

The population of undocumented Mexican immigrants has grown markedly since 2000 but appears to have leveled off since 2007. There were 4.8 million unauthorized Mexican immigrants living in the United States at the time of the 2000 Census and 7 million in March 2008, according to the Pew Hispanic Center estimates.

	ESTIMATE	LOW	HIGH
Year			
2008	7.0	6.7	7.3
2007	7.1	6.8	7.4
2006	6.6	6.3	6.9
2005	6.3	6.0	6.6
2004	6.0	5.7	6.3
2003	5.5	5.2	5.7
2002	5.3	5.0	5.6
2001	4.9	4.6	5.1
2000	4.5	4.3	4.8

Note: Estimates are based on residual methodology. Low and high values represent the bounds of the estimated 90% interval; see appendix. Boldface indicates that the change from previous year is statistically significant.

Source: Pew Hispanic Center estimates, 2008, based on March Supplements to the Current Population Survey (CPS).



Inflows from Mexico have varied considerably in the [past 15 years](#), peaking around 2000, dropping dramatically in 2002 and 2003, and increasing somewhat after that. The slowing growth of unauthorized Mexican population in accord with a number of [other indicators](#) suggests a lessening of immigration from Mexico since mid-2006.

Undocumented immigrants remain a large majority of new Mexican immigrants arriving in the U.S., with 80% to 85% of Mexicans who have been in the U.S. for less than a decade being unauthorized. Among all foreign-born Mexicans in the country, more than half (56%) are estimated to be unauthorized.

Immigrants from Mexico account for a majority (58%) of all unauthorized immigrants in the United States; no other country makes up even a double-digit share. The Mexican-born share of all undocumented immigrants remained essentially unchanged for more than a decade.

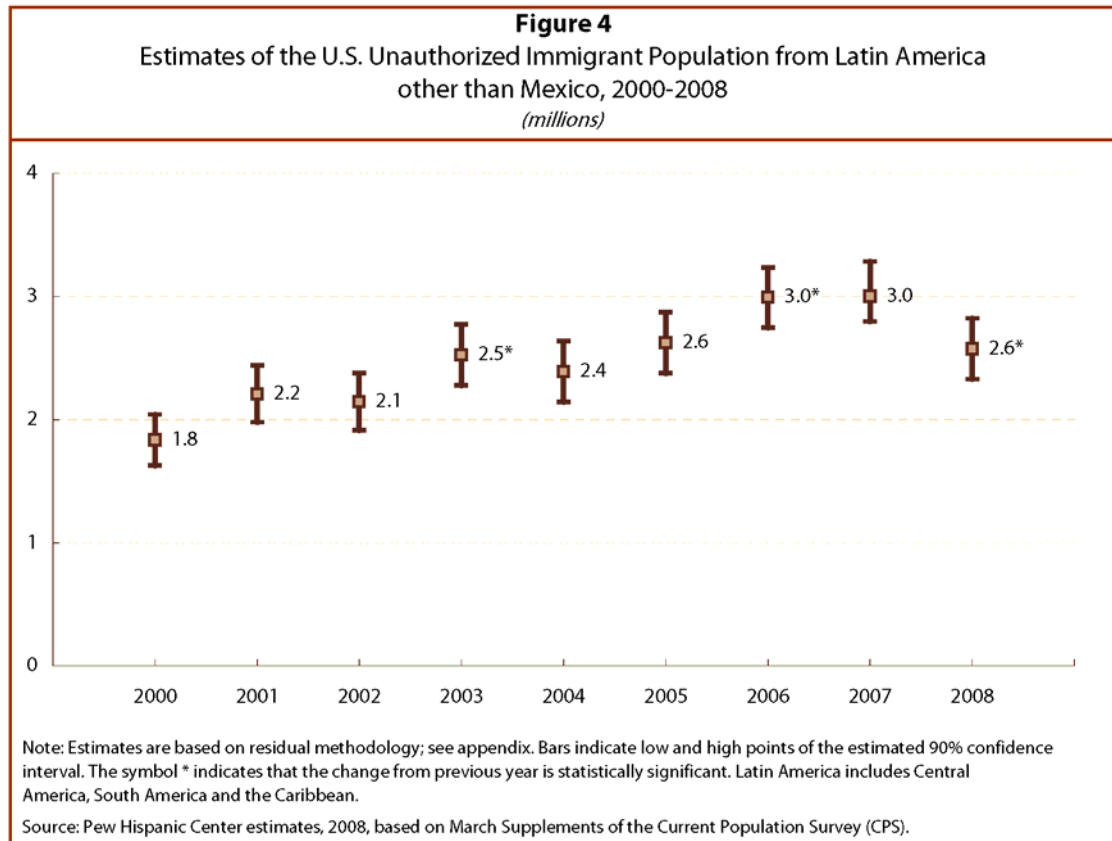
Among U.S. residents of [Mexican ancestry](#), most were born in the United States. Four-in-ten are foreign-born.

Other Latin America

The number of unauthorized immigrants in the United States from Latin American countries other than Mexico grew by more than 40% from 2000, when

there were 1.8 million, to 2008, when there were 2.6 million. This population reached 3 million in March 2006, but has declined since then.

The short-term trends earlier in the decade are unclear. Overall, the number of undocumented immigrants from Latin American nations other than Mexico has risen since 2000, but the growth rate is smaller than for undocumented Mexicans and the pattern of year-to-year changes more erratic.



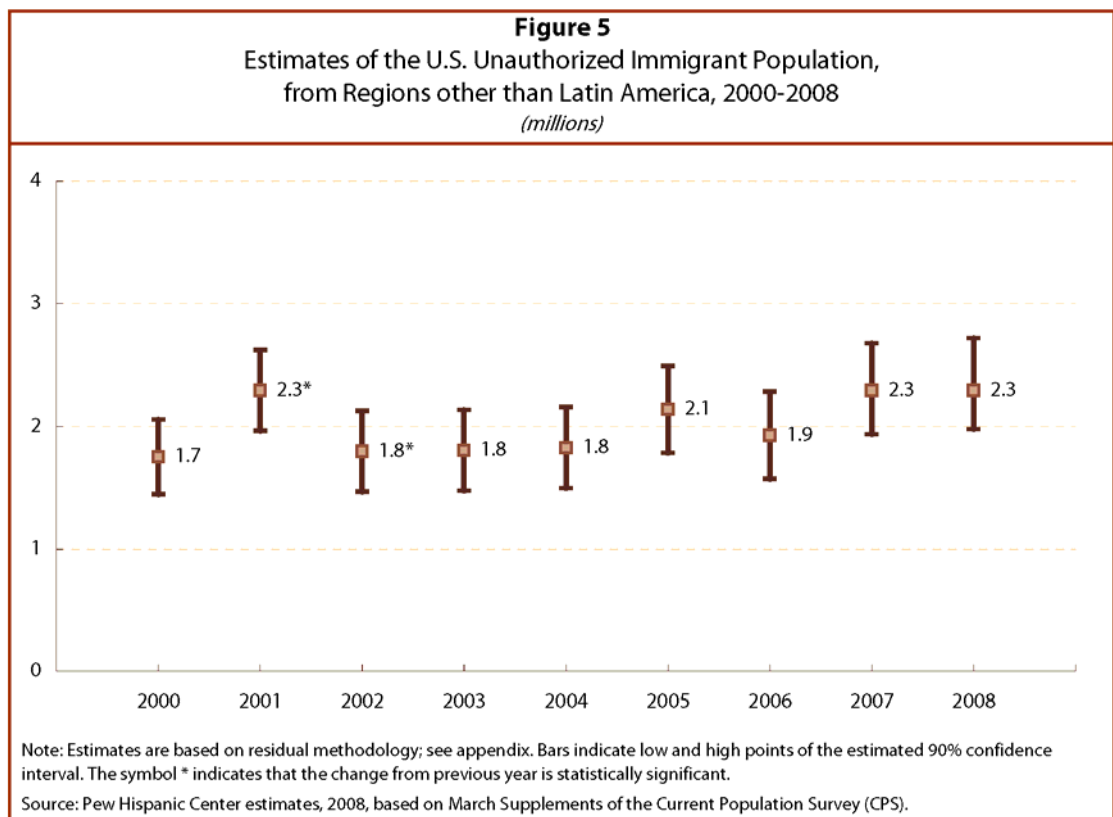
This recent decline is borne out by other Bureau of Labor Statistics data, cited in a [recent annual Pew Hispanic Center report](#), indicating that the number of foreign-born South Americans in the U.S. workforce declined in the first quarter of 2008 compared with 2007.

It appears that legal immigration from Latin American countries other than Mexico has been steady through the decade, while undocumented immigration has declined. That means that the composition of the immigration flow from these countries has changed this decade from majority undocumented to majority legal.

Other Undocumented

The number of undocumented immigrants from nations outside Latin America may have risen somewhat since 2000 and leveled off since 2005, but most year-to-year changes are not statistically significant.

In March 2008, the number of unauthorized immigrants from countries outside Latin America was estimated at 2.3 million—a figure significantly larger than the 1.7 million in 2000. Few of the year-to-year changes over the decade are statistically significant. It is difficult to determine a trend because this unauthorized population is relatively small compared with the legal population, which leads to a large margin of sampling error.



References

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Appendix A: Methodology

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