

Estimating Undocumented Immigration to California

Over the past several decades, California's population has experienced extraordinary growth and diversification. In the 1980s alone, the state gained over six million new residents. How much of this population growth was due to undocumented immigrants has been the subject of considerable debate.

California leads every state in the nation as a destination for undocumented immigrants. The Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) estimates that almost half of the undocumented immigrant population in the United States resides in California. Yet the precise numbers remain elusive. Several factors make it difficult to measure the size of this population: Undocumented immigrants seek to avoid detection, surveys and censuses do not include questions about the legal status of immigrants, and even the number of legal immigrant residents is not recorded in any administrative data sets. Estimating the annual changes in the size of this population is even more difficult.

In his study *Undocumented Immigration to California: 1980–1993*, Hans Johnson provides the first systematic estimates of annual changes in the net flow of undocumented immigrants to California. His research demonstrates that undocumented immigration is a complex phenomenon of ups and downs rather than the steady stream assumed in political debate and popular discussion.

The fluctuation of immigration over time appears to be related to the state's economy and perhaps also to certain policy interventions such as the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 (IRCA).

The systematic methodology developed in this research will enable policymakers to monitor this important component of population change. It may also help them identify some of the forces behind undocumented immigration, evaluate the effectiveness of control efforts, and ultimately assess the effect of undocumented immigration on government services and the state's economy.

Developing the Estimates

Johnson used a two-step method to create annual net estimates of undocumented immigration (i.e., the difference between those who immigrate into the state and those who emigrate out).

First, he estimated the annual change in the California population over the study period, using census data and various indicators of population size (e.g., occupied housing units, driver licenses, school enrollment, births, deaths, and Medicare enrollment).

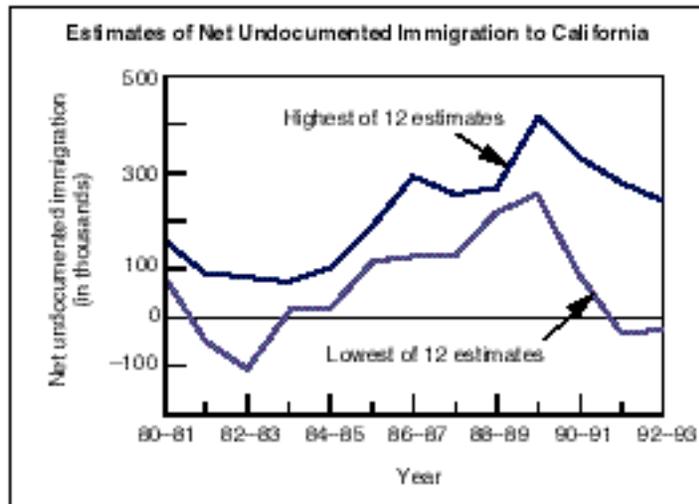
Next, drawing on a wide variety of data sources, he estimated the following components of population change: births, deaths, net legal immigration, and net domestic migration. He then derived the annual net flow of undocumented immigrants by subtracting all of the other components from the estimates of annual population change.

To accommodate the inevitable imprecisions in the data, including possible census undercounts, Johnson developed multiple series of estimates, based on various assumptions and data. Although there were differences between estimates for any one year, each of the series reflected the same general pattern over time.

Patterns of Undocumented Immigration

The estimates of net undocumented immigration between 1980 and 1993 suggest low levels of undocumented immigration during the early 1980s, high levels during the late 1980s, and a dramatic downturn in the early 1990s. The figure below shows the highest and lowest of 12 estimates based on alternative assumptions. Specifically, the following patterns emerge.

1980–1985. Net undocumented immigration to California remained at a relatively low level during the early 1980s. Between 1980 and 1985, net undocumented immigration averaged fewer than 100,000 people per year.



Estimates from different population scenarios show that the net flow of undocumented immigrants fluctuated dramatically throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, possibly influenced by the state's economic conditions.

1986–1989. Throughout the middle of the 1980s, net undocumented immigration rose, reaching a peak of well over 200,000 people between April 1989 and April 1990. Because these are net estimates, this increase in the undocumented population could result from an increase in the number of undocumented immigrants entering the state, a decline in the number leaving the state, or a combination of both.

1990–1993. In the early 1990s, California saw a sharp drop in net undocumented immigration; by 1992–1993, the net annual flow may have declined to fewer than 100,000.

Analysis showed that these changes in the net flow of undocumented immigrants coincided with and contributed to periods of both rapid and slow population growth in the state.

Possible Explanations

California's economic conditions may have contributed to the migration patterns. Low levels of net undocumented immigration coincide with slow employment growth in California in the early 1980s, and the sharp decline in net undocumented immigration in the early 1990s coincides with the state's deep recession. Conversely, high levels of net undocumented immigration in the mid to late 1980s coincide with periods of strong employment growth. The peak in undocumented immigration in the late 1980s may be related to IRCA, as people living outside the United States sought to join amnestied relatives.

In sum, the increase in net undocumented immigration in the late 1980s may be related to expanded social networks and plentiful employment opportunities, whereas the low levels in the early 1980s and the decline in the 1990s may reflect the sluggish nature of California's economy at the time. These relationships are only suggestive. The estimates developed in this study provide a base for investigating the multiple causes of the ebb and flow of undocumented immigrants over time.

This research brief summarizes a report by Hans P. Johnson, Undocumented Immigration to California: 1980–1993. The report may be ordered by calling (800) 232-5343 [mainland U.S.] or (415) 291-4415 [Canada, Hawaii, overseas]. A copy of the full text is also available on the Internet (www.ppic.org). The PPIC is a private, nonprofit organization dedicated to independent, nonpartisan research on economic, social, and political issues that affect the lives of Californians.
