Unauthorized Immigrants and Their U.S.-Born Children

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1. Unauthorized Immigrants and Their U.S.-Born Children

An estimated 340,000 of the 4.3 million babies born in the United States in 2008 were the offspring of unauthorized immigrants, according to a new analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data by the Pew Hispanic Center, a project of the Pew Research Center.

Table 1
Estimates of Births in the United States, by Parents' Status, Annual Average, 2008
(millions)

	NUMBER	PERCENT
All Births	4.3	100%
U.S.-born parents	3.3	76%
Immigrant parents	1.0	24%
Legal immigrant parents	0.7	16%
Unauthorized immigrant parents	0.3	8%

Note: A child has unauthorized immigrant parents if either parent is unauthorized; a child has U.S.-born parents if all identified parents are U.S. born.

Source: Pew Hispanic Center estimates based on children under 2 years old from March Current Population Surveys of 2008 and 2009, augmented with legal status assignments and corrected for survey omissions. See Appendix B and Passel and Cohn (2009, 2008) for methods, assumptions and definitions.

Unauthorized immigrants comprise slightly more than 4% of the adult population of the U.S., but because they are relatively young and have high birthrates, their children make up a much larger share of both the newborn population (8%) and the child population (7% of those younger than age 18) in this country.

These figures are based on data from the U.S. Census Bureau's March 2009 Current Population Survey, augmented with the Pew Hispanic Center's analysis of the demographic characteristics of the unauthorized immigrant population using a "residual estimation methodology" it has employed for the past five years. (For a description, see Appendix B.)

The new Pew Hispanic analysis finds that nearly four-in-five (79%) of the 5.1 million children (younger than age 18) of unauthorized immigrants were born in this country and therefore are U.S. citizens. In total, 4 million U.S.-born children of unauthorized immigrant parents resided in this country in 2009, alongside 1.1 million foreign-born children of unauthorized immigrant parents.

Table 2
Estimates of the Number of Children in the United States, by Parents' Status, 2009
(millions)

	NUMBER	PERCENT
All Children (17 and younger)	74.5	100%
U.S.-born parents	57.5	77%
Immigrant parents	17.1	23%
Legal immigrant parents	11.9	16%
Unauthorized immigrant parents	5.1	7%

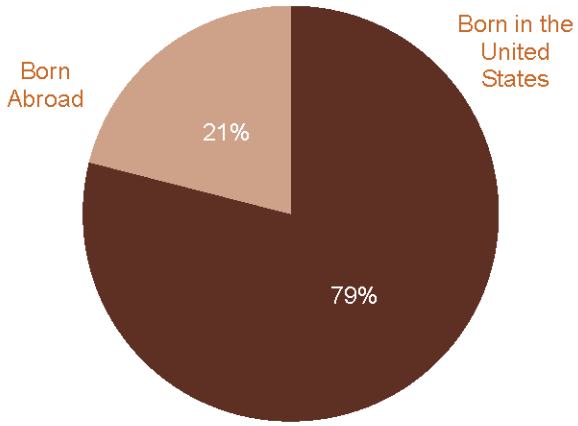
Note: A child has unauthorized immigrant parents if either parent is unauthorized; a child has U.S.-born parents if all identified parents are U.S. born. Numbers may not total due to rounding.

Source: Pew Hispanic Center estimates based on March 2009 Current Population Survey augmented with legal status assignments and corrected for survey omissions. See Appendix B and Passel and Cohn (2009, 2008) for methods, assumptions and definitions.

The 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, adopted in 1868, grants an automatic right to citizenship to

anyone born in the U.S. In recent weeks, a number of prominent elected officials have called for the repeal of birthright citizenship, which they argue serves as one of the magnets that attract undocumented immigrants to the United States. A nationwide survey by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press in June found that, by 56% to 41%, the public opposes changing this provision of the Constitution.[1]

Figure 1
Children with at Least One Unauthorized Immigrant Parent, 2009



Source: Pew Hispanic Center estimates based on March 2009 Current Population Survey augmented with legal status assignments and corrected for survey omissions. See Appendix B and Passel and Cohn (2009, 2008) for methods, assumptions and definitions.

This report does not address the merits of the birthright citizenship debate. Rather, it analyzes the family structure and parenting status of unauthorized immigrants. A follow-up Pew Hispanic report, expected to be released in several weeks, will examine trends in the size of the unauthorized population and key demographic characteristics, including its geographic settlement patterns; its countries and regions of origin; and its economic circumstances.

[1] The Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, "Obama's Ratings Little Affected by Recent Turmoil," June 24, 2010.

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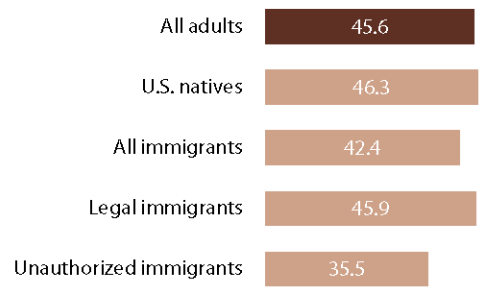
2. Immigrants, Parenthood and Fertility

In 2009, immigrants—be they legal or unauthorized—comprised 12.8% of the total population of the United States and 15.7% of the total adult population. However, because of their youthful age structure and higher fertility rates, immigrant adults are more likely than native-born adults to be parents of children younger than 18. As a result, they are the parents of 23% of all children in this country ages 17 and younger. About 85% of these children of immigrants were born in the United States.

Figure 2
Median Age of Adults, 2009
(years)



Note: Adults include all individuals 18 and older.
Source: Pew Hispanic Center tabulations from augmented March 2009 Current Population Survey

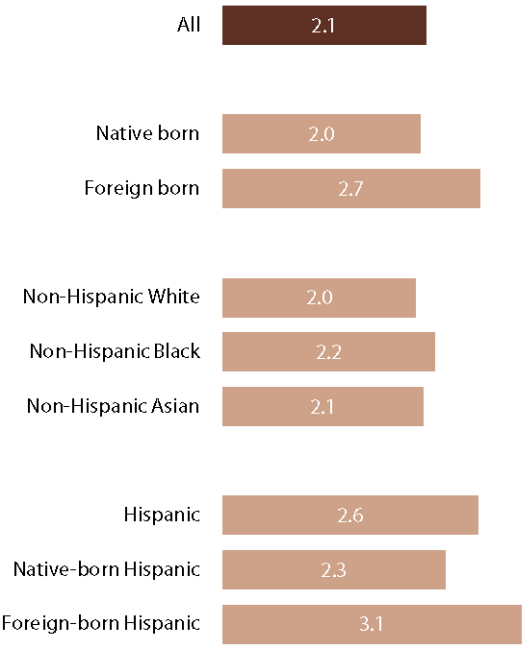
Unauthorized immigrant adults, in particular, skew young. The median age of all U.S.-born adults (ages 18 and older) in 2009 was 46.3 years. For legal immigrants, this figure was 45.9; for unauthorized immigrants, it was more than a decade younger—35.5, according to the Pew Hispanic estimates.

In addition, immigrant adults tend to have higher rates of fertility than do native-born adults. As of 2008, the total fertility rate among females ages 15 to 44 was 2.0 for the native born and 2.7 for immigrants.

Data limitations do not allow for an analysis in this report comparing the fertility rates of the unauthorized with those of legal immigrants.

However, the fertility patterns of other demographic groups are instructive. Overall, Hispanics who live in the U.S. have higher rates of fertility than do whites, blacks or Asians. And among Hispanics, the foreign born have higher rates of fertility than the native born (3.1 versus 2.3). About three-quarters of the nation's unauthorized immigrant

Figure 3
Estimated Completed Fertility
for Selected Groups of Women, 2008



Note: The figures shown are Total Fertility Rates which represent the average number of children a woman would have if she experienced the fertility rates from 2008 throughout her lifetime. Asian includes Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islanders.
Source: Pew Hispanic Center tabulations of the 2008 American Community Survey

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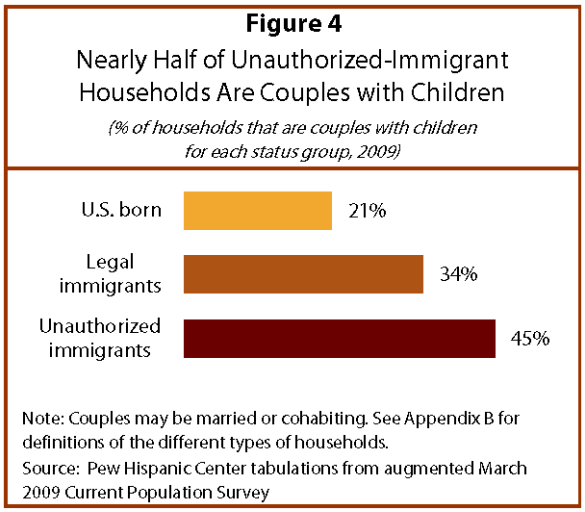
population is Hispanic, according to a 2009 Pew Hispanic report.[2]

3. Household Structure; Mixed Families

Unauthorized immigrants are much more likely than either legal immigrants or native-born adults to live in a household with a spouse and a child or children.

According to Pew Hispanic estimates, some 45% of unauthorized immigrants live with a spouse (or cohabiting partner) and child or children, compared with 34% of legal immigrant adults and 21% of U.S.-born adults. Here again, the chief reasons are that unauthorized immigrants tend to be younger and have higher rates of fertility than other adults.



One byproduct of these demographic patterns is that a substantial share of the undocumented population of this country lives in a so-called mixed-status family—that is, a family with at least one unauthorized immigrant parent and at least one U.S. citizen child.

According to a 2009 Pew Hispanic Center report[3] (which was based on 2008 census data), 37% of all adult unauthorized immigrants were parents of children who are U.S. citizens. This figure has remained essentially unchanged since 2003. A forthcoming Pew Hispanic Center report will update this figure for 2009.

[2] Passel, Jeffrey and D'Vera Cohn, "A Portrait of Unauthorized Immigrants in the United States," Pew Hispanic Center, April 14, 2009.

[3] Passel, Jeffrey and D'Vera Cohn, "A Portrait of Unauthorized Immigrants in the United States," Pew Hispanic Center, April 14, 2009.

A Note on Terminology

"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.

"U.S. born" refers to an individual who is a U.S. citizen at birth, including people born in the United States, Puerto Rico or other U.S. territories, as well as those born elsewhere to parents who are U.S. citizens.

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.

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AILA InfoNet Doc. No. 10081260. (Posted 08/12/10)

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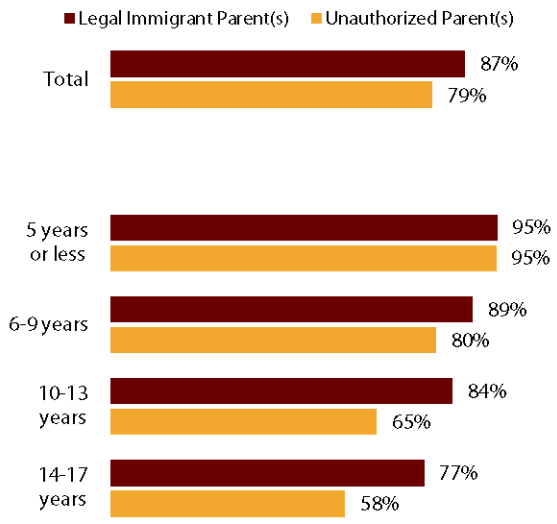
Appendix A: Additional Tables & Figures

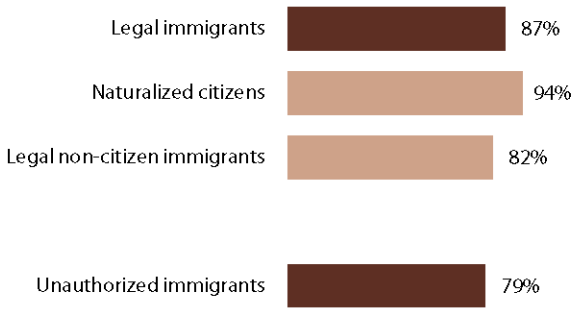
Figure A1
Share Born in U.S. among Children with Immigrant Parent(s), by Age, 2009
(%)



Note: Children are persons younger than 18 who are not married or parents. A child has unauthorized immigrant parents if either parent is unauthorized.

Source: Pew Hispanic Center tabulations from augmented March 2009 Current Population Survey. See text for details.

Figure A2
Share Born in U.S. among Children with Immigrant Parent(s), by Parents' Status, 2009
(%)



Note: Children are persons younger than 18 who are not married or parents. A child has unauthorized immigrant parents if either parent is unauthorized.

Source: Pew Hispanic Center tabulations from augmented March 2009 Current Population Survey. See text for details.

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Appendix B: Methodology

Unauthorized Immigrants—Overview

The data presented in this report on unauthorized and legal immigrants were developed through a multistage estimation process, principally using March Supplements to the Current Population Survey (CPS). The CPS is a monthly survey of about 55,000 households conducted jointly by the Bureau of Labor Statistics and the Census Bureau; the sample is expanded to about 80,000 households for the March supplement.

The first stage in the estimation process uses CPS data as a basis for estimating the number of legal and unauthorized immigrants included in the survey and the total number in the country using a residual estimation methodology, described in detail in previous reports and papers (especially Passel and Cohn 2008; Passel 2007).

Then, the March CPS Supplements are augmented to assign a specific legal status (one option is unauthorized immigrant) to each foreign-born survey respondent and to adjust the survey weights to account for immigrants missing from the survey. These augmented files serve as a basis for the detailed tabulations of the family, social, economic and geographic characteristics presented here. The data and methods for the overall process were developed initially at the Urban Institute by Passel and Clark (especially 1998) and were extended by work of Passel, Bean and Van Hook (2004) and by subsequent work at the Pew Hispanic Center.

The residual method compares the number of immigrants in the CPS with an independently derived demographic estimate of legal foreign-born residents. The difference between the survey total and the estimated legal foreign-born population is an estimate of unauthorized immigrants included in the survey. Variants of the residual method have been widely used and are generally accepted as the best current estimates. The initial estimates here are calculated separately for age-gender groups in six states (California, Texas, Florida, New York, Illinois and New Jersey) and the balance of the country and for 35 countries or groups of countries by period of arrival in the United States.

The next step adjusts the estimates of legal and unauthorized immigrants counted in the survey for omissions. The basic information on coverage is drawn principally from comparisons with Mexican data, U.S. mortality data and specialized surveys conducted at the time of the 2000 Census (Bean et al. 1998; Capps et al. 2002; Marcelli and Ong 2002). These adjustments increase the estimate of the legal foreign-born population, generally by 1-3%, and of the unauthorized immigrant population by 10-15%. For 2008, these procedures

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yielded an estimate of 11.9 million unauthorized immigrants in the United States, with 7 million from Mexico (Passel and Cohn 2008).

Status Assignments—Legal and Unauthorized Immigrants

Individual respondents are assigned a status as a legal or unauthorized immigrant based on the individual's demographic, social, economic and geographic characteristics so the resulting number of immigrants in various categories agrees with the totals from the residual estimates. The assignment procedure employs a variety of methods, assumptions and data sources.

First, all immigrants entering the U.S. before 1980 are assumed to be legal immigrants. Then, the CPS data are corrected for known over-reporting of naturalized citizenship on the part of recently arrived immigrants (Passel et al. 1997) and all remaining naturalized citizens from countries other than Mexico and those in Central America are assigned as legal. Persons entering the U.S. as refugees are identified on the basis of country of birth and year of immigration to align with known admissions of refugees and asylees (persons granted asylum). Then, individuals holding certain kinds of temporary visas (such as students, diplomats and "high-tech guest workers") are identified in the survey, and each is assigned a specific legal temporary migration status using information on country of birth, date of entry, occupation, education and certain family characteristics. Finally, some individuals are assigned as legal immigrants because they are in certain occupations (e.g., police officer, lawyer, military occupation, federal job) that require legal status or because they are receiving public benefits (e.g., welfare or food stamps) that are limited to legal immigrants. As result of these steps, the foreign-born population is divided between individuals with "definitely legal" status (including long-term residents, naturalized citizens, refugees and asylees, legal temporary migrants, and some legal permanent residents) and a group of "potentially unauthorized" migrants.

The number of potentially unauthorized migrants exceeds the estimated number of unauthorized migrants (from the residual estimates) by 20-35%. So, to have a result consistent with the residual estimate of legal and unauthorized immigrants, probabilistic methods are employed to assign legal or unauthorized status to these potentially unauthorized individuals. This last step also involves a check to ensure that the legal statuses of family members are consistent; for example, all family members entering the country at the same time are assumed to have the same legal status. The entire process requires several iterations to produce estimates that agree with the demographically derived population totals. At the end, the final estimates agree with the residual estimates for the six individual states noted earlier and for the balance of the country; for Mexican-born and other legal and unauthorized immigrants in each area; and for children, working-age men and working-age women within each category. Finally, the survey weights for the

foreign born are adjusted upward so the tabulated figures agree with the analytic, demographic estimates of the total number of legal and unauthorized migrants developed in the very first step.

This methodology obviously requires a number of assumptions and is applied to survey data from a sample (albeit a large one). The resulting estimates, such as those presented here, are subject to both sampling and non-sampling error. Accordingly, small differences should not be treated as significant or substantive. Sampling error intervals have been developed for the national estimates of all unauthorized immigrants and totals by country or region of birth. These estimates were presented in Passel and Cohn (2008).

CPS Weights

Official population estimates from the Census Bureau provide the basis for weighting the Current Population Survey and developing the population figures used in this report. In both 2008 and 2009, the Census Bureau introduced significant revisions in its population estimation methods. Because of these revisions, some potentially large differences over time in both numbers and characteristics of unauthorized immigrants could be due entirely to methodological changes and not to real changes in the population. Pew Hispanic Center estimates published in Passel and Cohn (2009) for 2003-2008 use revised population figures for 2003-2007 to produce consistent trend data. The figures shown here from the March 2009 CPS are not consistent with these previously published estimates. A new set of revised estimates for 2000-2008 will be released in a forthcoming report.

U.S.-Born, Legal Immigrant and Unauthorized Immigrant Households

A “U.S.-born household” is one where the head of the household and the partner or spouse (if present) are U.S. natives.

An “unauthorized immigrant household” is one where either the householder or spouse/partner (if present) is unauthorized.

In “legal immigrant households” the householder or spouse/partner (if present) is a legal immigrant. Neither the head of household nor the spouse/partner may be an unauthorized immigrant. Couples that consist of a U.S. native and a legal immigrant are classified as legal immigrant households.

A household that is defined as being a “couple with children” includes at a minimum a householder, a spouse or unmarried partner, and a minor child of either the householder or spouse/partner.