

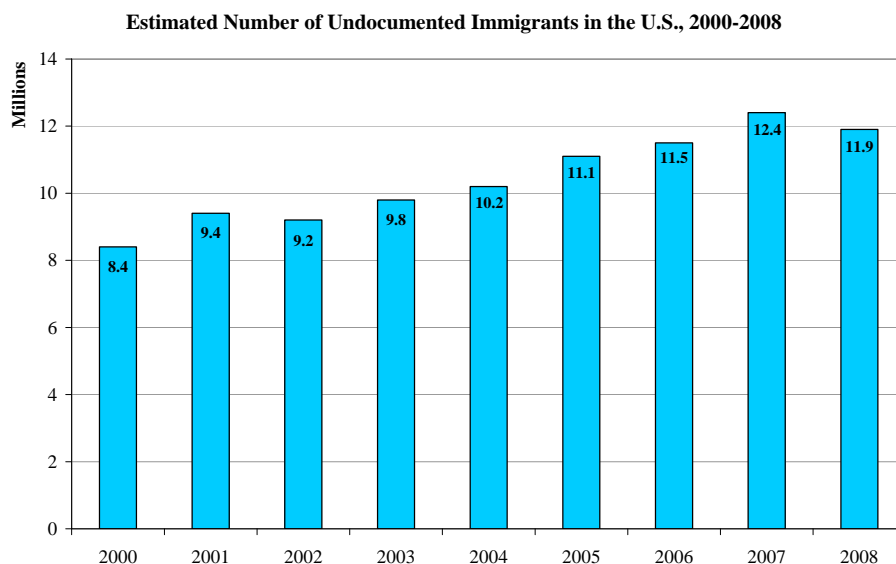


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Fewer Job Openings Equals Fewer Immigrants: Undocumented Immigration Slows Along With the U.S. Economy

According to [new estimates](#) from the Pew Hispanic Center, the number of undocumented immigrants in the United States did not increase between 2007 and 2008, and may actually have fallen. The estimates—based on data from the Current Population Survey conducted every March by the U.S. Census Bureau—contain a margin of error that makes definitive conclusions about year-to-year changes in the size of the undocumented population difficult. However, it appears that the number of undocumented immigrants may have in fact declined by roughly 500,000, from 12.4 million in 2007 to 11.9 million in 2008.¹



Source: Jeffrey S. Passel and D'Vera Cohn, *Trends in Unauthorized Immigration: Undocumented Inflow Now Trails Legal Inflow* (Washington, DC: Pew Hispanic Center, October 2, 2008), p. 1.

Despite the uncertainty over exact *annual* numbers, the new estimates do make clear that the pace of undocumented immigration has slowed considerably since 2005. According to Pew, since 2005 the number of *new* undocumented immigrants who either entered the United States without authorization or overstayed their visas has averaged 500,000 per year—compared to an average of 800,000 per year from 2000 to early 2005.²

The Economics of Survival Trumps the Politics of Enforcement

The primacy of economics in either driving or discouraging immigration has been emphasized by numerous researchers. For instance, the new estimates from Pew echo the Census Bureau's September 23 release of data from the 2007 American Community Survey (ACS), which also indicated that immigration to the United States has slowed recently. Reacting to that data, one of the authors of the Pew study, demographer Jeffrey S. Passel, told the [New](#)

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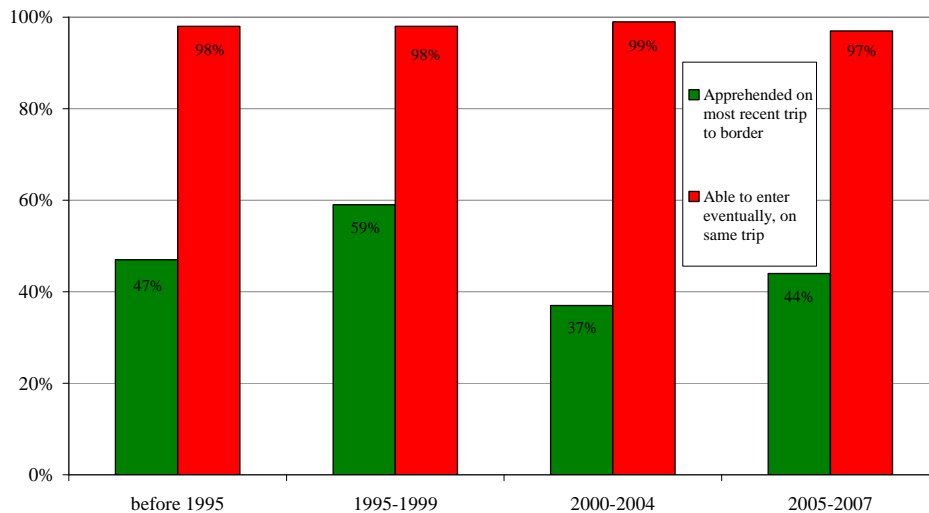
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[York Times](#) that a similar drop in immigration occurred in 2002, “especially in Mexican immigration and especially illegal [immigration]...and we attributed it mainly to the economy.”

Likewise, demographer William H. Frey, a Senior Fellow in the Brookings Institution’s Metropolitan Policy Program, pointed out that “these trends reflect a reaction to employment downturns in previously fast-growing states that provided jobs in construction, retail and meatpacking, like Colorado and New Mexico, as well as poorer job prospects in traditional magnet states like New Jersey, Florida and Illinois.”³ Frey reiterated his observations to the [Washington Post](#): “I think this shows that immigrants are keeping an eye on the economy when they make their decision on whether to come or where to live in the United States. When the economy appears to be in decline—particularly for the kind of construction, retail and service jobs that immigrants are inclined to take—they are less attracted to us.” Frey also observed that stepped-up immigration enforcement is an unlikely cause for the most recent downturn in immigration.⁴

Even more persuasive in driving home this point are the findings of the [Mexican Migration Field Research Program](#) at the University of California-San Diego, led by Wayne Cornelius, Director of the Center for Comparative Immigration Studies.⁵ As Cornelius argues in a forthcoming Immigration Policy Center (IPC) report, four separate studies conducted by his team have found “that fewer than half of migrants who come to the border are apprehended, even once, by the Border Patrol. And of those who are caught, all but a tiny minority eventually get through—between 92% and 98%, depending on the community of origin. If migrants do not succeed on the first try, they almost certainly will succeed on the second or third try.”⁶

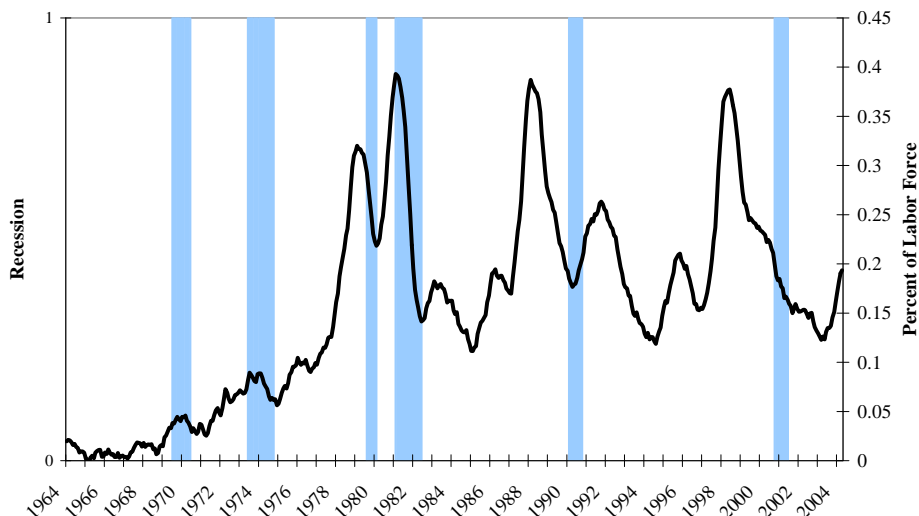
Apprehension and Success Rates Among Oaxacan Migrants, by Year of Most Recent Entry



In stark contrast to the ineffectiveness of border enforcement measures, Cornelius and his team have found “that undocumented migration clearly responds to changing U.S. economic conditions, with steep increases in the flow toward the end of expansion phases of the business cycle and significant decreases during economic downturns. Moreover, the pattern of undocumented migrants responding to economic conditions rather than policy decisions has continued during the border enforcement build-up that began in 1993.” According to Cornelius’

data, since at least 1964, the share of the U.S. labor force comprised of *recent* undocumented immigrants (those who crossed the border during the previous three months) has risen dramatically during periods of economic growth and dropped just as dramatically during periods of economic recession.⁷

Recent Undocumented Migrants as a Share of U.S. Labor Force, 1964-2004



These findings should come as no surprise. As IPC points out in a [July 2008 report](#), the vast majority of undocumented immigrants in this country are from nations in which economic opportunities and employment prospects are few and far between. In general, migrants would not leave behind families, friends, and homelands to embark upon potentially deadly journeys to the United States if there weren't a good chance they could find jobs once they got here. Conversely, few immigrants would go back to countries that lack job opportunities unless there simply were no more available jobs in the United States.⁸

Endnotes

¹ Jeffrey S. Passel and D'Vera Cohn, *Trends in Unauthorized Immigration: Undocumented Inflow Now Trails Legal Inflow* (Washington, DC: Pew Hispanic Center, October 2, 2008), p. 1.

² *Ibid.*, p. 2.

³ Sam Roberts, "'White Flight' Has Reversed, Census Finds," *New York Times*, September 23, 2008.

⁴ N.C. Aizenman, "Data Show Big Dip in Migration To the U.S.," *Washington Post*, September 23, 2008.

⁵ Wayne A. Cornelius, "Controlling Unauthorized Immigration From Mexico: The Failure of 'Prevention through Deterrence' and the Need for Comprehensive Reform" (La Jolla, CA: Center for Comparative Immigration Studies, June 10, 2008).

⁶ Wayne A. Cornelius, et al., *Controlling Unauthorized Immigration From Mexico: The Failure of "Prevention through Deterrence" and the Need for Comprehensive Reform* (Washington, DC: Immigration Policy Center, American Immigration Law Foundation, forthcoming).

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Immigration Policy Center, *Attrition Through Recession: CIS Report Marred by Inaccuracies, Contradictions, and Wishful Thinking* (Washington, DC: American Immigration Law Foundation, July 30, 2008), p. 1.