

## **Recession blocks illegal immigration**

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### **Body**

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Their job prospects battered by a deep **recession**, fewer immigrants are being caught trying to cross illegally into the United States than at any time since the 1970s, say two reports based on new federal data. But it remains unclear whether many **illegal** immigrants already here are heading back home.

Apprehensions of **illegal** immigrants at the U.S.-Mexico border are down 34 percent over the past two years, according to new U.S. Department of Homeland Security data on pace to be even lower in fiscal 2009. With record removals of unauthorized migrants in the U.S. and increased spending on border security, the economic and enforcement barriers to crossing into California and other Southwestern states have rarely been higher, federal officials and **immigration** experts say.

"It's far riskier to cross the border, it costs more, and the rewards are simply not there the jobs that have driven people here for 40 years," said Al Camarillo, a Stanford historian who follows Latin American **immigration**.

A new Pew Research Center report estimates that for the 12 months ending in February 2009, the net migration between Mexico and the U.S. the number of people coming to the U.S. minus those returning to Mexico was about 203,000, less than half of the 547,000 two years earlier.

"There is no real way to separate what part is enforcement and what part is economic," said Jeffrey Passel, co-author of the Pew report. "They may work together."

And now, those who cross the border increasingly make states other than California their destination.

Even after the economy picks up, Camarillo said, "I don't think you're going to see a place like California be the magnet again, as it was from the 1970s to the late '90s."

While some have theorized that the **recession** has prompted more Mexicans to go home, Pew found no such evidence from an analysis of data from the Mexican government and the U.S. Census.

Others disagree. Steven Camarota of the Center for **Immigration** Studies, a group that favors increased **immigration** curbs, says his census data analysis suggests more young, undocumented Mexicans are returning home this year because of the **recession**.

"I think it's half right," Camarota said of the Pew report. "The legal population is not going home, but it appears the **illegal** population is going home in larger numbers. Fewer people are coming."

Numbers drop

Camarota says the population of **illegal** immigrants in the U.S. may have dropped below 11 million, from a high of about 12 million in 2006.

## Recession blocks illegal immigration

Local organizations that work with immigrants from Mexico and the rest of Latin America agree that few are returning home. But they paint a mixed picture when asked whether immigration from those countries has slowed in recent years.

"We here on the ground have not seen the slightest decrease in clients or requests for information on our hot line," said Basil Robledo, director of programs at SIREN, the Services, Immigrant Rights and Education Network in San Jose.

But Karla Reyes, a 22-year-old San Jose State University student who works with many undocumented immigrants, has detected a decrease in the number of immigrants coming from Latin America.

"Definitely it's getting harder for immigrants to be here because so many people are losing their jobs," Reyes said. But, she added, "there's still a flow of immigrants because their home countries are worse off economically than here."

### Work competition

The result, she said, has been that immigrants are becoming more desperate as they compete for jobs and affordable housing often crowding into shabby rental housing as they line up at food banks instead of job lines.

Mark Silverman, an attorney at San Francisco's Immigrant Legal Resource Center who for many years had held community meetings in San Jose, said he always used to get questions about "somebody's brother or cousin caught at the border" for illegally attempting to cross it. Now, he said, he rarely hears such questions an indication of how fewer immigrants are being nabbed by the Border Patrol because fewer are coming.

Increased spending for border security has greatly increased the fee Mexican nationals are paying to smugglers to cross the border, said a spokesman for U.S. Customs and Border Protection, an arm of homeland security. Meanwhile, tougher border scrutiny is forcing people trafficking drugs and illegal immigrants to become more creative with people hollowing out surfboards to hide marijuana and even floating narcotics through the sewer system of Nogales, Ariz.

Through June 30 of this fiscal year, authorities apprehended about 429,000 people attempting to cross the border dramatically off the 1.7 million people apprehended in 2000, the peak year. Nine months into the 2009 fiscal year, the pace is comparable to the 597,000 people apprehended in 1975.

"Does the economy have anything to do with it? Of course it does," said Lloyd Easterling, the Customs and Border Protection spokesman. "But we would be foolish to say that enforcement, especially since we've ramped up in several areas in the last few years, wasn't a part of it. It's a big part of it."

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## Graphic

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