

Census estimates a doubling of illegal immigrants in '90s

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Body

The number of **illegal immigrants** in the United States more than **doubled** during the 1990s, preliminary **Census** Bureau **estimates** show.

Nearly half these **immigrants** arrived from Mexico, lured by a then-strong economy and plentiful jobs. But since the 2000 **census** was taken, much has changed for many of the roughly 8.7 million undocumented **immigrants** in the United States. Some lost their jobs and returned to their native countries.

And after the Sept. 11 attacks, the focus has shifted even more to closing immigration loopholes and tightening border patrols amid greater suspicion of foreigners.

For instance, the Justice Department has targeted for deportation thousands of men from countries - many in the Middle East - where Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda network operates.

Preliminary **estimates** from the 2000 **census** show that 115,000 people from Middle Eastern countries live in the United States illegally, or in "quasi-legal" status - refugees or political-asylum seekers.

While the vast majority of Middle Eastern **immigrants** are not terrorists, "the fact that tens of thousands of people from that region and millions more from the rest of the world can settle in the United States illegally means that terrorists who wish to [enter the United States] face few obstacles," said Steven Camarota, research director at the nonpartisan Center for Immigration Studies.

Critics favoring more restrictive immigration policy are unfairly using the terrorist attacks to advance their agenda, said Cecilia Munoz, vice president for policy at the National Council of La Raza, a Hispanic advocacy group.

"It is unreasonable to use this as an opportunity to stir up fear and division," she said.

Census estimates show that the number of undocumented **immigrants** rose nearly 5 million during the decade, to 8.7 million in 2000. Of that total, almost 3.9 million, or 44 percent, were from Mexico.

Census forms did not ask about the legal status of noncitizens. **Estimates** were derived from 2000 **census** data and Immigration and Naturalization Service records.

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Census Bureau analyst Joe Costanzo stressed that the figures were preliminary. But for many demographers, they provide insight into how the U.S. population changed during the 1990s.

"I wouldn't necessarily raise a red flag over 100,000 people from the Middle East," said Jeffrey Passel, a demographer with the Urban Institute, a liberal-leaning think tank. "However, 8.7 million is a very big number - and it does point to an overall problem in controlling immigration."

Pro-**immigrant** groups such as the National Immigration Forum favor stricter measures in the way student and tourist visas are distributed as a key step in tightening security.

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