

# **Illegal Immigrants' Legal Kids Snarl Policy; Increased Birthrate Exacerbates Issue**

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## **Body**

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A new report providing the most detailed portrait to date of the illegal immigrant population found that it is mostly made up of young families that are having children at a much faster rate than previously known. The study, released yesterday by the nonpartisan, Washington-based Pew Hispanic Center, also found that a disproportionate share of such children live in poverty and lack health insurance.

Because any child born in the United States has a right to citizenship, the growing presence of these children is likely to complicate the debate over immigration policies aimed at their parents.

The question of so-called "mixed-status" families is not new. But the increase in the number of children born to illegal immigrants is likely to exacerbate such situations in years to come.

Immigrant advocates and members of Congress, hoping to build momentum for legislation legalizing unauthorized immigrants, have been highlighting the plight of their U.S.-born children in a series of public events across the country in recent months. But the issue also could heighten anxieties in many communities that the U.S.-born children of illegal immigrants will increase demands on schools and social services.

The findings, which analyzed census data, also suggest that the impact of the unprecedented increase in illegal immigration over the past three decades will continue to be felt for years to come, even as the size of the illegal immigrant population appears to have leveled off since 2006 at about 10.4 million adults and 1.5 million foreign-born children. By contrast, the number of children born in the United States to illegal immigrants rose from 2.7 million in 2003 to 4 million in 2008.

The growing presence of children of illegal immigrants in schools has also fueled concern over the cost of illegal immigration in many area communities where the foreign-born population has risen rapidly in the past decade. Commissioners in Frederick County, for instance, have repeatedly tried to make public school officials tally the number of such students in hopes of prompting federal lawmakers to increase education funding or step up

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enforcement. (Last month, the Maryland State Board of Education blocked the effort, saying it could discourage illegal immigrants from enrolling their children in school.)

Children of illegal immigrants now account for about one in 15 elementary and secondary school students nationwide and more than one in 10 students in five states: Arizona, California, Colorado, Nevada and Texas. The vast majority of these children were born in the United States.

In 2007, the poverty rate for such children was almost twice as high as for those born to either legal immigrants or U.S.-born parents. Similarly, U.S.-born children of unauthorized immigrants were about twice as likely not to have health insurance in 2008 as those born to legal immigrants and three times as likely as those born to U.S.-born parents.

The Census Bureau does not ask people their immigration status. So the authors used a technique that estimates the number of legal immigrants using other government records, such as immigrant admissions, then subtracts that population from the total number of foreign-born estimated by the bureau to come up with the number of illegal immigrants. It analyzed census statistics from March 2008.

The spike in births to unauthorized immigrants -- 70 percent of whom come from Mexico or Central America -- is largely due to their relative youth compared with the general population, as well as their greater propensity to marry and have children.

The result, said co-author Jeffery S. Passel, is "a different picture than what we usually see of undocumented immigrants. We usually see the young male day laborers on street corners. But only a fourth of undocumented immigrants are men who are here by themselves without spouses or children. This is a population that is largely made up of young families."

Passel added that this "complicates greatly the difficulty of coming up with policies to deal with this population. . . . While we may be able to fit people into boxes of 'undocumented,' 'legal,' 'legal temporary,' and 'U.S. citizens,' it's not so easy to fit families into that same set of little boxes."

The study's findings also point to the continued geographic dispersal of illegal immigrants since 1990 across southeastern states with little prior history of immigration.

Although longtime magnets such as Florida, Illinois, New Jersey, New York and Texas retained their appeal -- and California continues to house the largest number of unauthorized immigrants -- growth there has slowed compared with such states as Georgia and North Carolina. Similarly, in Virginia, which ranks 10th in number of illegal immigrants, the unauthorized population quintupled since 1990 to 300,000 and accounts for 4 percent of residents and 5.1 percent of workers.

Maryland ranks 11th with an estimated 250,000 unauthorized immigrants, comprising 4.7 percent of residents and 6.7 percent of workers, and the District's 30,000 illegal immigrants make up 5 percent of the population and 7.1 percent of the workforce.

## Graphic

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IMAGE; By Sarah L. Voisin -- The Washington Post; Immigrants filled the Mall for a demonstration in 2006. The undocumented population seems to have leveled off since then at about 11.9 million.

IMAGE

## Classification

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