

Mixed-status families increasing in U.S., study finds.

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Body

Presenting a new **family** dynamic for the nation's 12 million illegal immigrants, a new **study** shows that a growing majority of their children are **U.S.** citizens, a fact that could further complicate and polarize the nation's upcoming debate on immigration reform.

While California is no longer the nation's pre-eminent destination for illegal immigrants, they still make up about one in every 13 of the Golden State's residents, and about one in 10 workers, among the highest shares in the nation, according to the report released Tuesday by the Pew Hispanic Center. But increasingly, it is also a population of **families** that straddle the line between citizen and illegal immigrant, a line that could cleave their futures.

"We usually see the young men, the day laborers, on the corners," said Jeffrey Passel, a Pew demographer and co-author of the report. "And while that is a significant share of the population, one of the things we **found** is that only about one-quarter of the undocumented population, 2.9 million, are men who are here by themselves without a spouse or children."

There are now about 4 million **U.S.**-born children of illegal immigrants, a 48 percent jump over the past five years, according to the **study**. Nearly three-quarters of all children of undocumented immigrants are **U.S.** citizens by right of birth.

"While we may be able to fit people into boxes undocumented, legal, legal temporary resident, **U.S.** citizen it's not so easy to fit **families** into that same set of little boxes," Passel said. The mushrooming numbers of so-called **"mixed-status" families** "complicates greatly, I think, the task of coming up with policies to deal with this population."

About 8.8 million people are now living in **mixed-status families**, where one or both parents are undocumented while their children are citizens, according to the Pew **study**, which is based on an analysis of Census Bureau data. That is a 2.2 million-person **increase** since 2005.

That number hits home for people like Nancy, a 22-year-old senior at San Jose State, who plans to graduate with a degree in sociology this year. Nancy, who attended a rally calling for immigration reform Tuesday in downtown San Jose, asked that her last name not be used because she is undocumented. Her parents are undocumented, but her younger brother was born in California and is a **U.S.** citizen. She dreams of going on to earn a Ph.D. in the **United States**, but she worries whether her **family** will be able to stay here together.

"I love this country. I don't see myself living anywhere else," she said. "One of the big fears I have is finishing my **studies** and not being able to go out and exercise my degree."

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With President Barack Obama saying that he plans to propose immigration reforms this year, there is intense debate about the fiscal effect of bringing illegal immigrants into the mainstream by forcing them to pay income and payroll taxes, and having full access to government and educational benefits.

William Gheen, president of the anti-immigration group Americans for Legal Immigration PAC, predicted that the Pew report would intensify calls to change the Constitution to remove the rights to citizenship by birth, because of the huge growth in children born to illegal immigrants.

"Their movement into the U.S. is some type of colonization, as opposed to an immigration phenomenon," he said. "It needs to stop immediately. It's a generosity that Americans can no longer afford to offer."

Dan Siciliano, executive director of the Program in Law, Economics, and Business at Stanford Law School, argued that bringing unauthorized immigrants into the mainstream would stimulate the economy. There could be a future economic cost, he said, if mixed-status families feel too much uncertainty to invest fully in the education of their U.S.-born children.

At risk, Siciliano said, could be "the son or daughter of the housekeeper or the groundskeeper who goes on in Silicon Valley to be well educated and goes on to found whatever it might be, the next Google or the next Facebook."

Nevada is the only state with a larger share of its work force who are unauthorized immigrants than California's 9.9 percent, the study found. The data comes from a survey before March 2008 and does not reflect the full effect of the recession.

While California has a much smaller share of the nation's total undocumented population than it did in 1990, its 2.7 million illegal immigrants are the most in the country, and that number is almost double what it was in 1990. They made up 7.3 percent of California's total population in 2008, second only to Arizona.

Children of illegal immigrants make up 13.6 percent of California kindergarten through grade 12 school students, ranking behind only Nevada and Arizona. A majority of those children are citizens, Passel said.

While growth of the undocumented population has leveled off, more women are joining men and starting families in the United States, perhaps because it has become tougher to go back and forth across the border.

"The growing numbers of women has contributed to this formation of families, and that has led to the higher numbers of children," Passel said.

Even though Nancy, the undocumented San Jose State student, doesn't know if she will gain legal status or citizenship, she hopes to become a political organizer, a job that would "fulfill my need to be part of the community."

It's about exercising your citizenship, she said, "even though I don't have it."

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