

# CONFLICTING FIGURES ON ILLEGAL ALIENS ROBERT REINHOLD

The New York Times

May 7, 1987, Thursday, Late City Final Edition

Copyright 1987 The New York Times Company

**Section:** Section A; Page 16, Column 1; National Desk; Analysis

**Length:** 1127 words

**Byline:** Special to the New York Times

**Dateline:** HOUSTON, May 6

## **Body**

---

As the largest legalization of illegal immigrants ever undertaken by any country gets under way, the program is awash with confusing and often conflicting estimates of the number of aliens eligible for legal status and how many might come forward to claim it. The Immigration and Naturalization Service has said that its 107 legalization centers around the country are prepared to process up to 3.9 million applications, a figure some experts say is far too high and others say is just about right.

Some local and state officials have been making estimates for the potential number of illegal aliens in their areas that border on the fantastic. They have estimated the number eligible in Texas alone at a million, which would mean there are about 10 million eligible nationally, since demographers estimate that about one-tenth of the illegal aliens are in that state. But almost no demographers put any credence in that, or some Congressional estimates that have put the number as high as 12 million.

The question of how many foreigners live illegally in the United States has long been clouded in uncertainty. The "illegals," or "undocumented," have avoided official contact. Their numbers can only be estimated, and those estimates have often been distorted by political exigencies.

The new immigration law confers legal status, or amnesty, on those who have lived continuously in the United States since Jan. 1, 1982. Thus, the upper limit of the number eligible would be the total here on that date, minus those who died, emigrated or achieved legalization through normal means.

### More Than 100,000 Annually

The Census Bureau believes it counted 2.1 million illegal aliens nationally at the last Census Day, April 1, 1980. But since many presumably avoided being counted, the bureau estimated the actual number at 2.5 million to 3.5 million, a figure that many demographers still consider extremely conservative.

Jeffrey S. Passel, a demographer with the Census Bureau, said that the number of illegal aliens was estimated to have grown by 100,000 to 300,000 a year since the last census. Thus, he said, the figure on Jan. 1, 1982, would have been in the range of 2.7 million to 4 million, half of them estimated to have been in California and a tenth in New York State. The majority were from Mexico (55 percent), but there were also substantial numbers of Britons, Iranians, Salvadorans and Haitians, among others.

Mr. Passel said he believed the immigration service's figure of 3.9 million was plausible, saying it was "on the high end of the range but in the ballpark." He added that the Census Bureau figures did not include the special agricultural workers included under the amnesty, estimated to be 400,000.

## CONFLICTING FIGURES ON ILLEGAL ALIENS ROBERT REINHOLD

Even within the immigration service there appears to be confusion over the numbers. Robert Warren, a demographer who is chief of the statistics branch at the agency in Washington, said he estimated the upper limit of the number eligible for amnesty at 3.3 million, consisting of 2.9 million illegal residents, in addition to 35,000 illegal aliens in Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands and Guam and the special farm workers from Mexico.

But Michael H. Landon, special assistant to the associate commissioner for examinations at the immigration office in Washington, said the agency was working on the assumption that 3.9 million would apply and 2.9 million would gain approval. He said the figure was purely a "guestimate" based both on census figures and information from local immigration community relations officials.

'Nothing Definite About It'

"There's nothing definite about it," he said, adding that the agency wanted to err on the upper end to avoid being caught short on staff and forms.

On Monday, Alan C. Nelson, head of the immigration service, gave still another figure on illegal aliens, saying he thought two million would win amnesty.

That number seems small, at least to judge from the assertions of local government and church officials aiding the aliens. In New York City alone there may be up to 500,000 coming forward for amnesty, according to the Department of Social Services. The Roman Catholic Diocese of Brooklyn says it expects to aid a minimum of 100,000 aliens.

And Catholic Charities of the Los Angeles Diocese says it had preregistered 287,000 applicants the week before the one-year amnesty period opened on Tuesday.

Charles B. Keely, a demographer with the Population Council in New York, who has been a long-time student of immigration, said he thought many estimates of the numbers of illegals were exaggerated. He estimated that about 2.25 million would qualify, at the most.

Another scholar of illegal immigration, Leon F. Bouvier, recently retired from the Population Reference Bureau. "I would lean toward the lower side."

That view was seconded by Frank D. Bean, director of the Population Research Center at the University of Texas at Austin, who said he thought the census range of 2.5 million to 4 million was correct. "We do not know for certain, but a lot of us will be very astounded if anything outside that range turned up," he said.

Whatever, the theoretical pool of applicants, the big imponderable is how many will come forward. Lingering fear and suspicion, as well as the daunting paperwork requirements, the cost of applying and other factors are thought likely to deter many, as well as medical requirements and the barriers to people who have committed felonies in this country or abroad.

In addition, it is unknown how many do not plan to stay anyway, or how strictly immigration officers will interpret the rules.

But the experience in other countries is that turnout is well below expectations, according to several studies by David S. North of the New TransCentury Foundation in Washington. He has studied previous amnesties offered by Britain, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the United States Virgin Islands, the Netherlands and other countries.

"Generally we learned that fewer came forward than the managers expected," Mr. North said.

The 60-day Canadian amnesty, proclaimed on Aug. 15, 1973, for illegal immigrants who had entered before Nov. 30, 1972, was widely expected to confer benefits on about 200,000. In fact, only 29,000 people were granted "landed immigrant" status, in spite of what Mr. North said was a "splendid job" of promoting and executing the program.

## CONFLICTING FIGURES ON ILLEGAL ALIENS ROBERT REINHOLD

But the situation in Canada in 1973 is vastly different from that of the United States in 1987, considering its lengthy border with economically depressed Mexico. The question now is whether the incentives to remain in this country are strong enough to induce many people to overcome the considerable bureaucratic and psychological hurdles to amnesty.

## Graphic

---

graphs of estimated aliens eligible to apply for legal residency status (Source: Bureau of the Census and Immigration and Naturalization Service)

## Classification

---

**Language:** ENGLISH

**Subject:** IMMIGRATION (91%); ***ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS*** (91%); IMMIGRATION LAW (90%); CENSUS (89%); CITIZENSHIP (78%); AMNESTY (78%); EMIGRATION (78%); US FEDERAL GOVERNMENT (77%); US STATE GOVERNMENT (75%); FARM LABOR (50%)

**Company:** IMMIGRATION AND NATURALIZATION SERVICE (US) IMMIGRATION & NATURALIZATION SERVICE (91%); IMMIGRATION & NATURALIZATION SERVICE (91%)

**Organization:** IMMIGRATION & NATURALIZATION SERVICE (91%); IMMIGRATION & NATURALIZATION SERVICE (91%); IMMIGRATION AND NATURALIZATION SERVICE (US) IMMIGRATION & NATURALIZATION SERVICE (91%); IMMIGRATION & NATURALIZATION SERVICE (91%)

**Industry:** AGRICULTURE (50%); FARM LABOR (50%)

**Geographic:** NEW YORK, USA (79%); CALIFORNIA, USA (79%); UNITED STATES (92%)