



# IMMIGRATION POLICY CENTER

...providing factual information about immigration and immigrants in America

July 30, 2008

## **Attrition Through Recession:**

*CIS Report Marred by Inaccuracies, Contradictions, and Wishful Thinking*

Most researchers agree that undocumented immigration to the United States is driven largely by economics. This is hardly surprising given that the vast majority of undocumented immigrants in this country are from nations in which economic opportunities and employment prospects are few and far between. In general, migrants would not leave behind families, friends, and homelands to embark upon potentially deadly journeys to the United States if there weren't a good chance they could find jobs once they got here. Conversely, few immigrants would go back to countries that lack job opportunities unless there simply were no more available jobs in the United States. In other words, immigrants strive to build better lives for themselves in places where they can actually earn livelihoods.

Yet a report released on July 30 by the Center for Immigration Studies (CIS) claims that the decisions of undocumented immigrants about where to live and work are now based more on the politics of immigration enforcement than the economics of their own survival. The report, entitled *Homeward Bound: Recent Immigration Enforcement and the Decline in the Illegal Alien Population*, echoes the findings of other researchers that the number of undocumented immigrants in the United States has recently declined. However, the report reaches the highly dubious conclusion that a decrease in the size of the undocumented population which probably occurred between August 2007 and May 2008 is largely the result of new immigration-enforcement efforts, rather than the downturn of the U.S. economy.<sup>1</sup> The persuasiveness of this argument is undermined not only by an absence of hard data, but by the faulty logic and contradictory statements of the report itself.

### **Undocumented immigration responds more to economic conditions than to immigration-enforcement measures.**

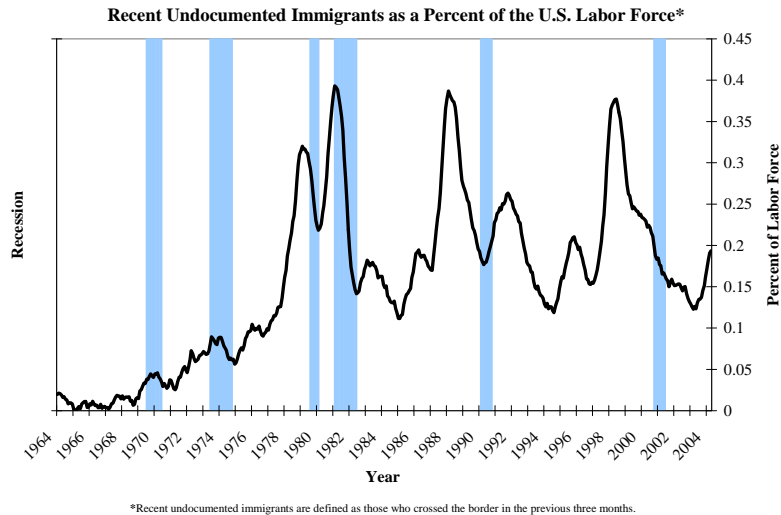
- According to a [June 2008 report](#) by Wayne Cornelius, Director of the Center for Comparative Immigration Studies at the University of California-San Diego, "undocumented migration clearly responds to changing U.S. economic conditions, with steep increases in the flow toward the end of expansion phases of the business cycle and significant decreases during economic downturns. Moreover, the pattern of undocumented migrants responding to economic conditions rather than policy decisions has continued during the border enforcement build-up that began in 1993."<sup>2</sup> As the chart below illustrates, the share of the U.S. labor force comprised of recently arrived undocumented immigrants clearly declines during periods of recession (indicated by the blue bars) and increases when the economy is growing.

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- Similarly, a [May 2007 report](#) from the Pew Hispanic Center observes that “overall migration flows to the U.S....surged at the end of the 1990s, peaked in 2000 and then fell off by more than a quarter following the 2001 recession and the slow recovery of the U.S. labor market.” The report also notes that “migration flows, especially from Mexico, have been highly responsive in the past to levels of demand for new workers in the U.S. economy.” While immigration from Mexico “began to increase again in 2004,” it then experienced “less rapid growth in the first quarter of 2007, and perhaps also in the second half of 2006, compared to 2004 and 2005.”<sup>3</sup>

**The CIS report tries to discount the significance of the current economic downturn with a flawed economic timeline.**

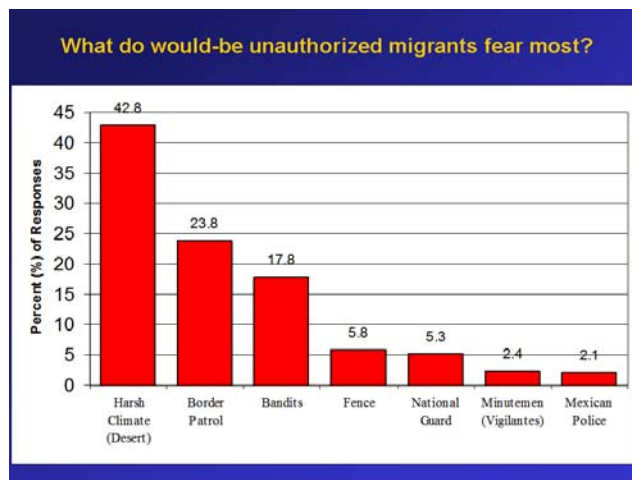
- The CIS report defines the “likely illegal immigrant population” as foreign-born Hispanics age 18 to 40 with a high-school diploma or less education. The report admits this proxy is flawed because it relies on Census statistics that do not accurately capture undocumented immigrants, and because it fails to take non-Hispanic immigrants into account. According to the CIS report, the 11 percent decline in the number of these “likely illegal immigrants” after August 2007 began before “there was a significant jump in their unemployment rate. This suggests that the fall in the size of the likely illegal population was caused by enforcement rather than deterioration in the economy.”<sup>4</sup>
- Leaving aside the open question of whether counting less-educated, foreign-born Latino adults actually captures the undocumented population, this economic timeline is flawed on two counts:
  - According to data from the [Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis](#), the economic downturn in many of the industries where undocumented immigrants tend to be employed began well **before** August 2007. For instance, the construction industry started to shed jobs in the first quarter of 2007. And job growth in the service and retail sectors began to slow in the first months of 2007 as well. Undocumented immigrants would respond to these sorts of changing conditions in the specific industries where they actually work, **not** to changes

in the overall unemployment rate for all Latino adults with no more than a high-school diploma.<sup>5</sup>

- The CIS report bases its estimates on data from the U.S. Census Bureau's [Current Population Survey](#) (CPS), which is a monthly survey of approximately 50,000 households in which “respondents are interviewed to obtain information about the employment status of each member of the household 15 years of age and older.”<sup>6</sup> An undocumented immigrant who has left the United States, for whatever reason, will not be counted as unemployed in the CPS because he or she is not in the country. If recently arrived undocumented immigrants with relatively few family ties in the United States are among the first to leave during an economic downturn, their departure is not going to register as an increase in the unemployment rate for those undocumented workers who do remain in the country after losing their jobs.

### **Undocumented immigrants themselves report that immigration-enforcement measures are not a deterrent.**

- Given that undocumented immigrants come to the United States out of what they perceive to be economic necessity, it is not surprising that they are not easily deterred by new immigration-enforcement measures or even the possibility of death. According to a [June 2008 presentation](#) by Wayne Cornelius, 91 percent of undocumented immigrants know that crossing the border is “very dangerous,” and nearly one-quarter know someone who has died while doing so. Yet they cross anyway. Moreover, when undocumented immigrants are asked what they “fear most” about crossing the border, nearly 43 percent list the “harsh conditions” of the desert, while less than one-quarter list the U.S. Border Patrol.<sup>7</sup>



### **The CIS report repeatedly contradicts and undermines its own conclusions.**

- The report's executive summary offers first “one indication that stepped-up enforcement is responsible for the decline” in the number of undocumented immigrants, then “another indication enforcement is causing the decline...,” before finally acknowledging that “the economic slow-down is likely to be at least partly responsible for the decline...”<sup>8</sup>

- The report argues that “although both legal and illegal immigrants are subject to the economic downturn, it seems that only the illegal immigrant population is declining. This is consistent with the idea that the enforcement of immigration laws is causing the decline.” But the report then observes that “less-educated workers in general are more vulnerable to economic hardship during an economic downturn than are more educated individuals” and that “the increase in unemployment for the likely illegal population was much larger than it was for the legal immigrant population. So this may also explain the divergent trend between these two populations.”<sup>9</sup>
- The report asserts that “there is good evidence that the illegal population grew last summer while Congress was considering legalizing illegal immigrants. When that legislation failed to pass, the illegal population began to fall almost immediately.”<sup>10</sup> But the report also observes, in a footnote, that “illegal immigrant employment is partly seasonal, with more in the country during the summer months when employment increases in agriculture, construction, and the hospitality industry.”<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, the report goes on to spin a fanciful web of supposition, saying that because of the extensive media coverage the immigration reform bill received in both the United States and Latin America, “it is certainly possible that more illegal immigrants settled in the country during the debate and fewer went home than otherwise would have been the case. Illegals may have hoped that by coming to or remaining in the country they would qualify for the legalization.”<sup>12</sup> No evidence is offered in support of this claim, other than the fact that undocumented immigration increased during the summer, which—according to the report itself—is not out of the ordinary.

**The CIS report suggests that the solution to undocumented immigration is more deportation-only measures, a continued economic downturn, and a vow of silence by presidential candidates.**

- The CIS report notes hopefully that if the recent decline in the undocumented population “were sustained, it could cut the illegal population in half within just five years.”<sup>13</sup> The accuracy of these numbers notwithstanding, the continuation of this trend would, as the report itself sometimes acknowledges, require a continuation of the current economic downturn that is shrinking the job market for immigrant and native-born workers alike.
- The CIS report warns that “both presidential candidates have repeatedly stated their strong desire to legalize those in the country illegally. Such pronouncements may encourage illegal immigrants to remain in the country in the hope of qualifying for a future amnesty. It may also encourage more illegal immigration.”<sup>14</sup> Presumably, since even talking about comprehensive immigration reform in the United States could spark a sudden rush of Mexicans across the border, presidential candidates should simply ignore the issue.
- Given the state of the U.S. economy, there is little credibility to the CIS report’s assertion that the decrease in the size of the undocumented population over the past year is due in large part to the “success” of federal, state, and local immigration-enforcement measures in persuading undocumented immigrants to leave the country.<sup>15</sup> In this context, the report’s call for even more “muscular enforcement” of current immigration laws ends up being a

prescription for continuing the status quo by throwing more money into the failed enforcement of a broken immigration system.<sup>16</sup> As Wayne Cornelius points out in a [2006 paper](#) on the failure of the U.S. border-enforcement strategy since 1993, “we have spent more than \$20 billion on this project, and we continue to spend at a rate of more than \$6 billion a year.” And the result is that “during the period of tighter border enforcement, the population of unauthorized immigrants living in the U.S. has more than doubled in size.”<sup>17</sup>

### **We need a real solution.**

- The deportation-only strategies that CIS proposes cost U.S. taxpayers billions of dollars each year, separate families, destroy local communities and economies, and do nothing to address the actual causes of undocumented immigration. Proposals that require undocumented immigrants to come forward, legalize their status, pay back taxes, and learn English are the most practical way forward in restoring the rule of law.

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### **Endnotes**

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<sup>1</sup> Steven A. Camarota and Karen Jensenius, *Homeward Bound: Recent Immigration Enforcement and the Decline in the Illegal Alien Population* (Washington, DC: Center for Immigration Studies, July 2008).

<sup>2</sup> Wayne A. Cornelius, *Controlling Unauthorized Immigration From Mexico: The Failure of “Prevention through Deterrence” and the Need for Comprehensive Reform* {briefing paper} (Washington, DC & La Jolla, CA: Immigration Policy Center & Center for Comparative Immigration Studies, June 10, 2008), p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> Pew Hispanic Center, *Indicators of Recent Migration Flows from Mexico* (Washington, DC: May 30, 2007), pp. 1-2.

<sup>4</sup> Steven A. Camarota and Karen Jensenius, *Homeward Bound: Recent Immigration Enforcement and the Decline in the Illegal Alien Population* (Washington, DC: Center for Immigration Studies, July 2008), pp. 3-4.

<sup>5</sup> Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, Federal Reserve Economic Data (FRED), <http://research.stlouisfed.org/fred2/>.

<sup>6</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, <http://www.census.gov/cps/>.

<sup>7</sup> Wayne A. Cornelius, *Controlling Unauthorized Immigration From Mexico: The Failure of “Prevention through Deterrence” and the Need for Comprehensive Reform* {briefing presentation} (La Jolla, CA: Center for Comparative Immigration Studies, June 10, 2008), slides 13-15.

<sup>8</sup> Steven A. Camarota and Karen Jensenius, *Homeward Bound: Recent Immigration Enforcement and the Decline in the Illegal Alien Population* (Washington, DC: Center for Immigration Studies, July 2008), p. 1.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 5, 8.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>17</sup> Wayne A. Cornelius, “Impacts of Border Enforcement on Unauthorized Mexican Migration to the United States,” *Border Battles: The U.S. Immigration Debates*, Social Science Research Council, September 26, 2006, <http://borderbattles.ssrc.org/>.