



Written by [Raven Clabough](#) on September 25, 2018

Number of Illegal Immigrants in U.S. Much Higher Than Previous Estimates

According to a study by two Yale professors and an MIT instructor, there are approximately 22.1 million illegal aliens living in the United States, more than twice previous estimates. This underscores the enormity of the illegal-immigration crisis.

Ironically, the researchers had actually set out to disprove the 11.3 million figure that is often used when referring to the number of illegal immigrants living in the United States. They admit to being shocked by their findings, which showed the figure to be significantly higher.



“Our original idea was just to do a sanity check on the existing number,” said Edward Kaplan, a professor of operations research at Yale School of Management, according to a report at [Yale Insights](#). “Instead of a number which was smaller, we got a number that was 50% higher. That caused us to scratch our heads.”

The researchers explain that the 11.3 million figure was based on data in the Census Bureau’s annual American Community Survey, but the information was derived from a flawed research method. Mohammad Fazel-Sarandi, a senior lecturer at the MIT Sloan School of Management, points out it’s unfortunately been “the only method used for the last three decades.”

Jonathan Feinstein, professor of economics and management at Yale, added, “There’s a number that everybody quotes, but when you actually dig down and say, ‘What is it based on?’ you find it’s based on one very specific survey and possibly an approach that has some difficulties. So we went in and just took a very different approach.”

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Using alternative methods, the researchers embarked on a mission to learn whether 11.3 million illegal immigrants did, in fact, reside in the United States. The researchers understood that many undocumented immigrants will do what is necessary to stay under the radar and therefore, they reviewed different data to determine the actual figure.

“The analysis we’ve done can be thought of as estimating the size of a hidden population,” Kaplan says. “People who are undocumented immigrants are not walking around with labels on their foreheads. Neither are populations of homeless people, neither are populations of drug users, and neither are populations of terrorists. Yet for policy, it is very important to know the size of these hidden populations because that sets the scale of the problem in each of these different policy areas.”

Yale Insights reports:

The approach in the new research was based on operational data, such as deportations and visa overstays, and demographic data, including death rates and immigration rates. “We combined



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these data using a demographic model that follows a very simple logic,” Kaplan says. “The population today is equal to the initial population plus everyone who came in minus everyone who went out. It’s that simple.”

Yale Insights writes that even with parameters aimed at producing a more conservative estimate, the number of undocumented immigrants would sit at 16.7 million, still a marked increase from the generally accepted figure.

The researchers note that gathering the data was simple but inserting it into a mathematical model was far more strenuous and that the best estimate could still only be presented as a range. They reportedly ran 1,000,000 simulations of the model and reached a 95-percent probability range placing the figure anywhere from 16 million to 29 million, with 22.1 million as the mean.

But while the researchers found the number to be significantly higher than 11.3 million, they did confirm that the period of greatest growth took place in the 1990s and early 2000s. Since 2008, the population size has been stable, they found. Census data show the same trend, but the difference is that the Census data has only captured a portion of the undocumented population.

“The trajectory is the same. We see the same patterns happening, but they’re just understating the actual number of people who have made it here,” said Fazel-Zarandi. “They are capturing part of this population, but not the whole population,” he added.

“We wouldn’t want people to walk away from this research thinking that suddenly there’s a large influx happening now. It’s really something that happened in the past and maybe was not properly counted or documented,” he explained.

The researchers emphasize that their research is not politically motivated. Rather, they were interested in finding the most accurate information.

“Our purpose is just to provide better information,” said Feinstein. “This paper is not oriented towards politics or policy. I want to be very clear: this paper is about coming up with a better estimate of an important number.”

But while the intentions behind the study may not have been political, the findings do certainly have political ramifications, particularly when estimating the cost of illegal immigration to the American taxpayer.

In 2017, for example, FAIR’s “The Fiscal Burden of Illegal Immigration on United States Taxpayers” [report](#) found that the total cost of illegal immigration was \$135 billion a year and that illegal immigrants only paid \$19 billion a year in taxes, leaving local, state, and federal governments a burden of \$116 billion annually.

That report was highly [criticized](#) because it was based on an estimate of approximately 12.5 million undocumented immigrants, one million more than the accepted figure. However, if the figure is closer to 22 million, as the new study finds, the financial burden of illegal immigration increases dramatically.



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