

Unauthorized immigrants in Europe and the US: Trends, characteristics and methods

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Abstract

This paper presents estimates of the unauthorized immigrant population in EU-EFTA countries (including the UK) and compares them with similar estimates for the US and constituent states. Initial estimates for EU-EFTA are significantly smaller than for the US in terms of numbers and shares of total population for recent years (2014-2017); the US has a higher proportion of Noncitizens who are unauthorized, however. Trends over time differ with the US showing consistent declines from a peak in 2007 and EU-EFTA showing an increase for 2014-2016 followed by a leveling off. We also provide comparisons for countries of origin, age-sex composition and duration of residence for the regions and largest constituent areas.

The US estimates are based on a residual method; estimates for EU-EFTA countries use a variety of methods (residual, demographic components, regularization, proportional ratio) drawing on similar work done for the *Clandestino* project a decade ago and more recent efforts by European researchers. The paper presents details of the estimation methods and also addresses the definition of unauthorized immigrant population in terms of groups included and excluded —clandestine entrants, visa overstayers, asylum seekers awaiting a final decision, groups with temporary protection (TSP and DACA in the US; Duldung in Germany) and other groups with subsidiary protection, plus native-born children of other groups.

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Extended Abstract

Both Europe and the U.S. are major destinations for the world's immigrants, legal and unauthorized. The unauthorized immigrant population sizes and compositions in each reflect the broader migration trends overall. Europe's unauthorized immigrant population has grown largely due to a surge of asylum seekers from the Middle East and Africa in 2015. And, while the US has a larger number, its unauthorized immigrant population is shrinking and consists mostly of people from the Americas, in particular Mexico, who entered the country illegally more than a decade ago.

At least x.x million unauthorized immigrants – and possibly as many as x.x million lived in Europe in 2017, according to new estimates based on European data sources. **[Note that final estimates await clearance but have been prepared and will be available for presentation. This is also true for the implied comparisons with the US and information on characteristics noted later in the Extended Abstract,]** The total is up from 2014, but is little changed from a slightly higher peak in 2016. Overall, unauthorized immigrants accounted for less than 1% of Europe's total population of more than 500 million people living in the 28 European Union (EU) member states, including the United Kingdom, and four European Free Trade Association (EFTA) countries (Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland).

In contrast, the number of unauthorized immigrants in the US peaked at 12.2 million in 2007, dropped dramatically over the next two years by about a million and has continued to drift downward, reaching 10.5 million in 2017 (10.3-10.7 million); over the 2014-2017 period, the number declined from 10.9-11.3 million, or more than half a million. The unauthorized immigrants continue to represent more than 3% of the US population of more than 325 million — a share that has dropped from 4% a decade ago.

In the US, unauthorized immigrants represent over 40% of noncitizens. The four states with largest numbers (California, Texas, Florida, New York) have just under half the US total. **[Note that new estimates for 2018 for the US will be available before June 2020.]** More than three-quarters of US unauthorized immigrants are from the Americas with almost half from Mexico, alone. A relatively small share of the unauthorized immigrant population in the US (18%) has lived in the country for less than five years; the majority came prior to the Great Recession which began in 2008.

The US estimates are based on a residual method; estimates for EU-EFTA countries use a variety of methods. Four primary methods were used to estimate the unauthorized immigrant population in Europe:

- (1) **Residual method**, generally considered the best methodology for estimating unauthorized immigrant populations. This method was used in 11 of the 32 European countries, but accounts for more than half (about 60%) of the estimated unauthorized immigrant population

in Europe. The residual method is the total number of immigrants lawfully in a country subtracted from the total number of immigrants overall. This approach has been used by the Pew Research Center for many years to estimate the size of the U.S. unauthorized immigrant population. In Europe, the “residual” method has previously been used by other researchers, including some country level estimates published by the *Clandestino* project in 2008.

- (2) **Demographic components method**, a second-best methodology for estimating the unauthorized immigrant population and used when the residual method was not possible. This technique was used in Italy and Greece that together account for about 17% of the unauthorized immigrant population in Europe. The unauthorized immigrant population using this method is a demographic update from the last reliable estimate of unauthorized immigrants in Europe published in 2008.
- (3) **Regularization method**, based on data of immigrants achieving lawful status after being in an unauthorized position. This methodology was used for the unauthorized immigrant population estimate in Spain and represents about 3% of the unauthorized immigrant population in Europe.
- (4) **Proportional ratio method** was used in countries where the three preferred methods were not possible to implement due to data limitations. The method relies on a proxy ratio of unauthorized immigrants to total non-EU-EFTA citizens from countries with a similar immigration history and policies. This method was used for the majority of countries in the EU-EFTA, 18 of the 32, but accounted for only about one-fifth (20%) of the total unauthorized immigrant population in Europe.

A range of estimates were produced to reflect different methodological approaches and adjustments in estimating the size of the unauthorized immigrant population in each European country.

Following the estimation of the size of unauthorized immigrant populations in Europe, methods for measuring the demographic characteristics of Europe’s unauthorized immigrant population (e.g., age, sex, origins) were developed as an adaptation of the Pew Research Center’s used for unauthorized immigrants in the United States. More specifically, the methods involve assigning legal status probabilistically to Noncitizen respondents in large-scale surveys.

The application of these methods depended on the coverage, quality and sample size of the survey in each country as well as the relative size of the estimated unauthorized immigrant population in the country. Accordingly, the figures were based on the Noncitizen samples in Eurostat’s [labor force surveys](#) (LFS), but only those surveys that relied on a census or an address-based sampling frame. In all, we developed data on characteristics of unauthorized immigrants not waiting for an asylum decision in 18 European countries. We added to these estimates, the same characteristics of asylum seekers in all 32 countries waiting for decisions on their case. This combined group represented 84% of the estimated total unauthorized immigrant population in Europe.

The paper also addresses the definition of unauthorized immigrant population in terms of groups included and excluded —clandestine entrants, visa overstayers, native-born children of other groups, asylum seekers awaiting a final decision, groups with temporary protection (TSP and DACA in the US; Duldung in Germany) and other groups with subsidiary protection. The impact of the definitions on

estimates of the size of the unauthorized population is assessed in the paper. Asylum seekers awaiting a decision represent about one-quarter of the unauthorized immigrant population. An alternative set of estimates excluding this group are also presented.