



THE REAL HISPANIC CHALLENGE

WITH PRESIDENT OBAMA'S recent announcement that long-term unauthorized immigrants will be allowed to remain in the country “without fear of deportation,” the debate on immigration has, predictably, ramped up. In the course of this debate, several disturbing myths about Hispanic immigration have come to circulate, myths that misrepresent the facts about what is and is not special and distinctive about Hispanic immigration. The simple purpose of this piece is to confront these myths with the available evidence on Hispanic immigration.

BY DOUGLAS S. MASSEY

TABLE 1. Estimated percentage undocumented within selected immigrant groups in the United States.

Latin American nationalities 2010		Asian nationalities 2011	
Mexico	56.7	China	12.5
El Salvador	51.1	Philippines	14.9
Guatemala	62.2	India	12.9
Honduras	63.1	Korea	21.2
Ecuador	40.6	Vietnam	13.5
Total	56.3	Total	14.4

Source: Hoefer, Michael, Nancy Rytina, and Bryan Baker. 2011. Estimates of the Unauthorized Immigrant Population Residing in the United States: January 2010. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Office of Immigration Statistics; Hoefer, Michael, Nancy Rytina, and Bryan Baker. 2012. Estimates of the Unauthorized Immigrant Population Residing in the United States: January 2011. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Office of Immigration Statistics.

Myth #1: There Are Profound Cultural Obstacles to Hispanic Incorporation

The first myth has it that Hispanic incorporation has been stymied because, unlike the European immigrants of the past, there is a profound cultural divide between Hispanics and other Americans. This myth has a long heritage. Ten years ago, the late political scientist Samuel P. Huntington published an infamous article in *Foreign Affairs* entitled “The Hispanic Challenge,” in which he argued that “the persistent inflow of Hispanic immigrants threatens to divide the United States into two peoples, two cultures, and two languages...forming their own political and linguistic enclaves—from Los Angeles to Miami—and rejecting the Anglo-Protestant values that built the American dream.”¹

Subsequent research has refuted the idea that Hispanics constitute a cultural and linguistic threat to American society. Like other immigrants before them, Hispanics display a rapid shift into English with time and with generations spent in the United States,² and the music, food, literature, and art they have created and introduced have enriched, rather than diminished, American culture.³ Because the evidence on this point is so clear, there’s little need to belabor the point. Over the course of U.S. history, the cultural threat hypothesis has been repeatedly issued for one immigrant group after another (including many European immigrant groups), but it’s never held true.

Myth #2: There’s Nothing All That Special about Hispanic Incorporation

Does it follow that Hispanic incorporation has proceeded and will continue to proceed smoothly? Not at all. It’s not that Huntington was wrong to worry about Hispanic incorporation. But the challenge, far from arising from intrinsic cultural differences, is instead of our own making. The principal barriers to progress lie in our own immigration and border policies, which have placed a large share of the population outside of the law, deprived of the most elemental social, economic, and civic rights. Of the more than 11 million unauthorized migrants liv-

ing in the United States today, the vast majority—around 80 percent—are from Latin America, with a hugely disproportionate share coming from Mexico and Central America.⁴

Putting together estimates of the number of undocumented migrants from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security⁵ with estimates of the number of foreign-born from the U.S. Bureau of the Census⁶ yields estimates of the proportion undocumented in various immigrant groups. These are summarized in Table 1. Homeland Security publishes undocumented population estimates for only the top 10 national origins, five of which are Latin American (Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Ecuador) and five of which are Asian (China, the Philippines, India, Korea, and Vietnam).

As shown in the table, whereas only 14 percent of Asian immigrants from the nations listed are present without authorization, the corresponding figure is 56 percent for those from Latin America. Among Latin American immigrant groups, the percentage undocumented ranges from 41 percent among Ecuadorans to 63 percent among Guatemalans and Hondurans. In between are Mexicans at 57 percent and Salvadorans at 51 percent. When ranked in terms of size, Mexico is by far the largest national origin group among Latin American immigrants, at some 11.7 million persons, followed by Salvadorans at 1.2 million. Cuba and the Dominican Republic are in third and fourth place with 1.1 million and 879,000 persons, respectively, followed by Guatemala at 831,000, Colombia at 637,000, and Honduras at 523,000.⁷ Thus in four of the seven largest Latin American immigrant populations, a clear majority are undocumented.

Mass illegality is thus a characteristic structural feature of Latin American immigration, setting Latino immigrants distinctly apart from their Asian counterparts. Overcoming the barrier of illegality is the single most important challenge facing Latinos today. The roots of this challenge date to 1965 when Congress acted to eliminate the national origins quotas that had discriminated against Southern and Eastern Europeans and repeal bans on immigration from Asia and Africa. In doing so, however, it also imposed the first-ever numerical limitations of legal immigration from the Western Hemisphere while scrapping a guest worker agreement with Mexico that had been in place for 22 years.⁸

Whereas in the late 1950s annual entries by Mexican guest workers ran at 450,000 per year, while legal permanent immigration averaged 50,000 per year, by the late 1970s, the guest worker program was gone, and legal immigration was limited to 20,000 visas per year. Given ongoing labor demand in the United States and the existence of well-developed networks connecting migrants in Mexico to employers and communities in the United States, the inflow of half a million Mexicans per year did not cease after 1965. It simply reestablished itself under undocumented auspices. By 1979, roughly the same number of Mexicans were entering the country each year, but the overwhelming majority were now undocumented and technically “illegal.”⁹

Myth #3: Restrictive Border Policies Reduce the Size of the Hispanic Population

Unfortunately, the rise of undocumented migration led to the spread of a Latino threat narrative propounded by politicians and officials in the immigration bureaucracy, a narrative in which migrants from south of the border were framed as a grave threat to the nation.¹⁰ After all, since they were “illegal,” they were by definition “criminals” and “lawbreakers.” During the Contra War of the 1980s, they came to be seen as communist infiltrators; during the later War on Terror, they became labeled as potential terrorists; and most recently, they were portrayed as potential carriers of Ebola. The framing of undocumented migrants as a grave threat to the nation gave rise to increasingly restrictive immigration and border policies that ultimately militarized the Mexico-U.S. border and institutionalized the largest deportation regime in American history.¹¹

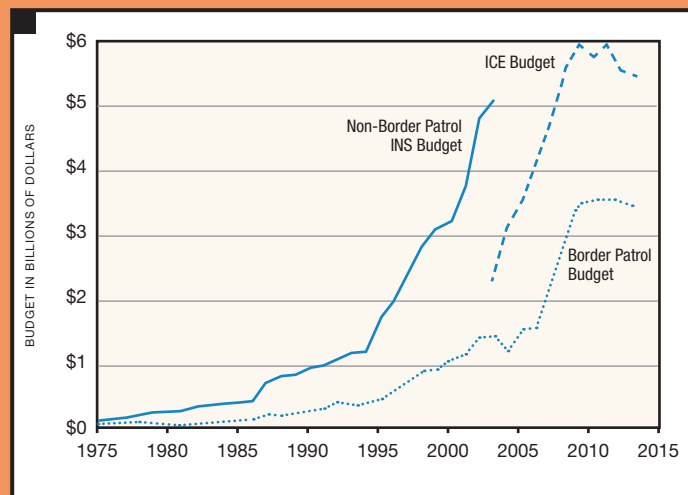
The simple—albeit misguided—logic was that the perceived grave threat was best met by restrictive border policies. As will be shown below, these policies failed to appreciate that return migration, which had once been substantial, would also be affected by bolstering border defenses. Before making that point, however, it’s important to first document the spectacular rise of restrictive border policies.

Figure 1 shows three indicators of the U.S. immigration enforcement effort from 1975 through 2013: the budget of the Border Patrol, the budget of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) up to the point where it was absorbed into the Department of Homeland Security, and the budget of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) from its inception to the present. The INS budget, which does not include funds allocated to the Border Patrol, rose from \$63 million in 1975 to \$426 million in 1986. After the passage of the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA), it began to accelerate and reached \$1.2 billion in 1994 and \$5.1 billion in 2003, whereupon ICE assumed many of the agency’s duties. The ICE budget, in turn, began at just \$2.3 billion in 2003 but rose rapidly, to peak at \$5.9 billion in 2009.

The Border Patrol budget also began to rise rapidly after the passage of IRCA in 1986, to reach 1.4 billion in 2001. It then shot up exponentially following the passage of the USA PATRIOT Act, to peak at \$3.6 billion. From 1986 to 2013, the budget for internal enforcement rose by a factor of 13, and that for border enforcement grew by a factor of 23.

But what about the effects of this policy? Did it work as intended? The militarization of the border clearly backfired: Rather than reducing the inflow of undocumented migrants, it curtailed the outflow. As border enforcement increased, so did the costs and risks of unauthorized border crossing, and in response, migrants minimized border crossing—not by remaining in Mexico, but by hunkering down in the United States once they had experienced the risks and paid the costs.¹² As a result, during the 1990s, the net rate of undocumented migration more than doubled, causing the undocumented population to

FIGURE 1. Indicators of the U.S. immigration enforcement effort.



Source: Office of Immigration Statistics, U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

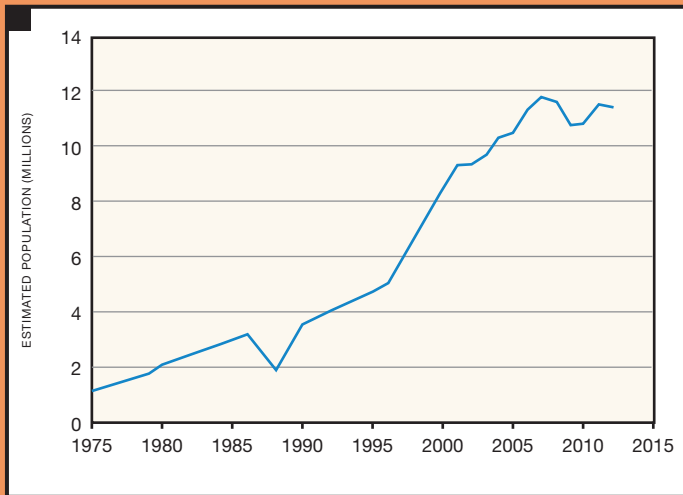
grow exponentially, not because more people were arriving, but because fewer were going home.

Figure 2 shows the size of the undocumented population from 1970 to 2012.¹³ As can be seen, the population slowly increased from 1975 to 1986, when it reached 3.2 million persons. In the wake of IRCA’s legalization program, the population dropped to around 1.9 million in 1988 before rebounding and returning to trend from 1990 to 1996, growing by around 350,000 persons per year during that interval. After the 1993 launch of Operation Blockade in El Paso and the 1994 debut of Operation Gatekeeper in San Diego, however, the pace of undocumented population growth more than doubled, rising by 861,000 persons per year from 1996 to 2001. Although the volume of undocumented migration slowed thereafter, the population continued to grow until the Great Recession in 2008. Between 2008 and 2009 the undocumented population fell from 12 to 11 million persons, where it has remained ever since. Undocumented migration has plateaued largely because of Mexico’s demographic transition, which reduced the rate of labor force growth and increased the average age of the population, not because of enforcement or because of changes in labor demand, which is now met by legal migration both temporary and permanent.¹⁴

Mexicans will soon surpass African Americans to be the largest single minority group in the United States. The key difference between these groups: Some 22 percent of all persons of Mexican origin are presently undocumented, and among those of Central American origin, the vast majority are unauthorized. Moreover, between 2 and 3 million of those without documents entered the country as minors, speak English, and have no possibility of improving their lives unless the burden of illegality is removed from their shoulders.

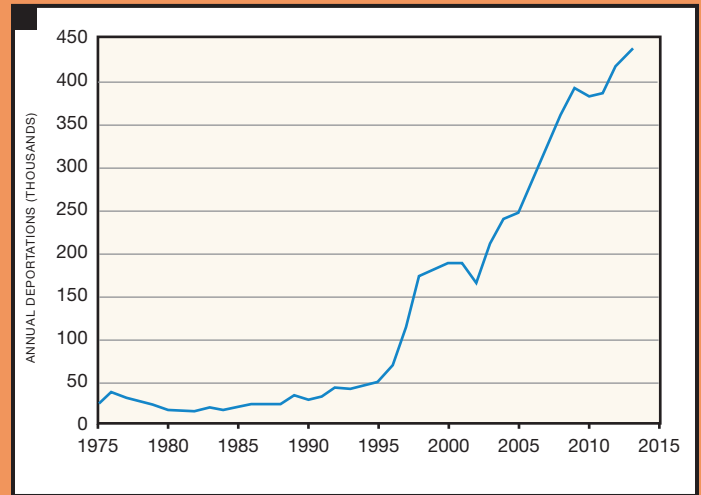
Rather than lifting the burden of illegality, however, U.S.

FIGURE 2. Estimated size of the undocumented population.



Source: Wasem, Ruth E. 2011. *Unauthorized Aliens Residing in the United States: Estimates Since 1986*. Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service; Baker, Bryan, and Nancy Rytina. 2013. *Estimates of the Unauthorized Immigrant Population Residing in the United States: January 2012*. Washington, D.C.: Office of Immigration Statistics, U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

FIGURE 3. Annual deportations from the United States.



Source: Office of Immigration Statistics, U.S. Department of Homeland Security (available at <http://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/immigration-statistics/yearbook/2013/ENF/table39.xls>).

policy has steadily and quite dramatically increased its weight. Figure 3 shows the annual number of deportations from the United States. From 1975 to 1995, deportations averaged just 29,000 per year. With the passage of the Anti-Terrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act, the annual number rose rapidly, to plateau at around 189,000 circa 2001. The passage of the USA PATRIOT Act in that year led to another surge to an all-time record of 438,000 deportations in 2013. As of 2010, two-thirds of all Latino immigrants surveyed said they worried about deportation, and even among native-born Latinos, the figure was one-third. Some 84 percent saw discrimination as a problem for Hispanics and 61 percent felt discrimination was holding them back. When asked about the cause of discrimination against Hispanics, 36 percent said immigration status, as compared with 21 percent who said skin color.¹⁵

What Does It All Mean?

The marginalization of Hispanics has thus been *created* by aggressive border enforcement and deportation policies. It is no coincidence that trends in Hispanic poverty and income, after occupying a middle position between blacks and whites for many years, have recently fallen to converge on the low level historically occupied by African Americans (see the article by Mattingly and Pedroza in this issue). It is no coincidence that Mexicans in new immigrant destinations, where undocumented migrants predominate, are relatively more disadvantaged compared with those in old destinations (see article by Tran in this issue). And it is no coincidence that Hispanics live a larger share of their lives in poor health than other groups, and that Mexicans, although being self-selected on the basis of good health, are more prone to develop Type 2 diabetes (see the article by

Riosmena et al. in this issue).

So what's to be done? It is precisely because the threat of deportation is the principal barrier to incorporation that President Obama acted recently to reduce this threat. Although obviously a limited response, it properly appreciates that the real "Hispanic challenge" stems not from the resistance of Latinos to English or their opposition to American culture. Indeed, 92 percent of all Hispanics see the United States as a land of opportunity,¹⁶ and 67 percent speak English very well or exclusively.¹⁷ Instead, the barriers to Hispanic social and economic integration stem from misguided policies that not only failed to limit immigration, but actually accelerated net undocumented migration to create a marginalized, vulnerable, and eminently exploitable population of unprecedented size. The precariousness of undocumented status not only constrains opportunities for those without documents, but for all those tied to them through close networks of family and friendship, regardless of legal status.

The ongoing marginalization of the Latino population is among the most important policy issues facing the United States in the 21st century, since barriers to Hispanic social and economic progress are barriers to the progress of America. As of 2013, Latinos constitute 17 percent of the U.S. population, up from 4.7 percent in 1970, but they represent 20 percent of all persons under age 5 and a quarter of all births. According to Census Bureau projections, Hispanics will comprise nearly a third of the U.S. population by the year 2050. The future of the United States is increasingly Latino, and the disinvestment and exclusion of Hispanics inevitably triggered by mass illegality represents the true threat to the prosperity and health of the nation. ■

Endnotes

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