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Index | PDF

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A Look at Immigration Numbers

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Sidebar stories: [Research Sites for Immigration Questions](#)

Moras, Antonia. (Fall 2006). "A Look at Immigration Numbers." *Alaska Justice Forum* 23(3): 3-4. This article provides an overview of the most reliable figures on immigration—both authorized and unauthorized—for the United States as a whole and for Alaska in particular.

See also:

> [Noncitizens & Immigration](#)

What follows is an overview of the most reliable figures on immigration—both authorized and unauthorized—for the country as a whole and Alaska, in particular.

Authorized Immigrants

Authorized immigrants are those who, in common parlance, have "green cards." They have been admitted to the United States with permission to stay indefinitely through one of a number of different program routes. (In addition to admittance as immigrants, non-citizens can stay in the U.S. legally for varying periods with differing status—as tourist, diplomat, or student, among other possibilities.) In the data assembled by the Office of Immigration Statistics, which is now in the Department of Homeland Security, they are defined as *legal permanent residents* or LPRs. The Office of Immigration Statistics is the source for the fullest and most detailed data on authorized immigration. The office publishes an annual compendium that shows the number of immigrants and various demographic data, including countries of origin, countries of birth, and state of residence, and type or category of admission. The yearbook also provides data on non-immigrant admissions—refugees and asylees—as well as data on naturalization—the process of becoming U.S. citizens for those not born here.

According to the *2005 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics*, 1,122,373 individuals received legal documentation to remain in the U.S. as LPRs, including 1,525 in Alaska. Also, in 2005, 604,280 foreign-born residents became U.S. citizens, including 951 Alaskans. (The total 2005 U.S. population was 296 million. The Alaska 2005 population was 642,000.)

In addition to the yearbook, the Office of Immigration Statistics also publishes a range of analyses of immigration data—for example, discerning the flow of immigration over varying periods to the different states. A September 2005 paper by John Simanski, "Mapping Trends In U.S. Legal Immigration: 1980 to 2003," reveals that although the flow of immigrants to the state has risen over the two-decade period as it has in the country as a whole, Alaska is very far down in ranking as the state of residence for authorized immigrants—receiving a total of 25,968 individuals as LPRs across the 23 years. These state-of-residence figures are based only on the individual's declaration at the time documentation was granted and do not reflect ensuing changes in residence.

The U.S. Census, taken every ten years, provides a slightly different perspective on the foreign-born population—both legal permanent residents and naturalized citizens. The census assembles figures at much more detailed geographic levels and, unlike the Office of Immigration Statistics figures, provides a snapshot of the characteristics of the population of a specific place at a specific time. The 2000 U.S. Census listed 37,170 Alaskans as foreign-born. Of this number, 20,011 were naturalized citizens; 17,159 were not

citizens. According to the American Community Survey, which is now the Department of Census means of estimating during non-census years, 34,368 Alaskans were foreign-born in 2005 (5 % of the total state population), of whom 20,178 were naturalized citizens.

Alaska differs from the nation as a whole with regard to the country of origin of its foreign-born residents. In 1995, for the country as a whole, Mexico was the country of birth for the highest number of immigrants, with 161,445 authorized immigrants, and immigrants from India formed the second most populous group—84,681 individuals. In Alaska in 2005, the countries of birth for the two most populous groups of immigrants were the Philippines (435) and Russia (115). Mexico ranked third (96).

Unauthorized Immigrants

For obvious reasons, there are no precise numbers on unauthorized immigrants—“illegal aliens”—those individuals who stay in the U.S. without currently valid legal documentation. All figures given for state and national totals of unauthorized immigrants are estimates, as are economic figures and other calculations derived from them. The degree of precision to the estimates varies.

Again, the best source is the Office of Immigration Statistics, which in August 2006 released its most recent figures on the unauthorized immigrant population—“Estimates of the Unauthorized Immigrant Population Residing in the United States: January 2005.” According to this report, an estimated 10.5 million unauthorized immigrants lived in the country in January 2005. This is the figure most commonly used in general media discussions of the unauthorized immigrant population. The estimate for January 2000 was 8.5 million. A comparison of the two figures reveals a growth of 24 percent over the five years. The publication also provides estimates for the five states with the highest numbers of unauthorized immigrants, but not for Alaska. The numbers for 2005 have been derived using an elaborate statistical model which is not valid for population numbers as low as Alaska’s. An earlier study, published by the same office but based on a different methodology, estimated that in 2003, 5,000 unauthorized immigrants were living in Alaska.

Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Figures

Another figure that might throw some light on the unauthorized immigrant population is the number of individuals placed in removal (deportation) proceedings by the Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE, also in the Department of Homeland Security). For the most part, these individuals were in the country without valid legal documentation. The numbers reflect only those who have come to the attention of ICE. The Alaska ICE office did not respond to repeated Forum requests for these numbers. The latest available figure for the state is from FY 2002, when 71 individuals were deported; and 12 agreed to voluntary departure directly from Alaska.

Other Numbers

Since a commonly stated concern regarding immigration is that immigrants draw heavily on public funds—for education, health care and public assistance—the Forum attempted to gather some other relevant figures for Alaska.

Few government or social service agencies in the state compile data on the immigration status of recipients of their services. Neither the Department of Education nor the Anchorage School District track the immigration status of students; Providence Hospital does not ask patients about their immigration status; and the Public Defender Agency does not maintain data on the citizenship or immigration status of clients.

The Department of Corrections compiles some numbers on the immigration status of inmates, in cooperation with the federal government under the State Criminal Alien Assistance Program (SCAAP). The department submits numbers on those inmates who are not legal residents and have been convicted of a felony or two misdemeanors. According to U.S. Bureau of Justice Assistance data, in 2005 the Alaska Department of Corrections held 22 inmates who were undocumented aliens, for a total 788 inmate days, and 65 whose citizenship and immigration status could not be determined for a total 2,605 days. These inmate days represent less than one-third of one percent of total DOC inmate days in 2005.

The Division of Public Assistance has numbers on the citizenship status of its recipients—all of whom

are legal residents. In June 2006, 4,109 non-citizens were receiving public welfare benefits—3.4 percent of the total statewide number of public assistance recipients—120,550.

Finally—in 2006, 44,307 foreign-born Alaska residents, including 13,552 individuals who were not citizens but were legal residents, received permanent fund dividends—in a total pool of 602,350 eligible applicants.

Antonia Moras is the editor of the Alaska Justice Forum.

Research Sites for Immigration Questions

The vast number of internet sites dealing with immigration questions vary widely in quality and reliability. Two nonpartisan organizations whose sites regularly present the results of solid research studies are:

The Urban Institute at www.urban.org: The Urban Institute has studied immigration issues for over twenty-five years, particularly looking at the impact of immigration on the economy and the labor market and at the status and well-being of immigrant children.

The Pew Hispanic Center at www.pewhispanic.org: The Pew Hispanic Center, which is part of the Pew Charitable Trusts, focuses on the U.S. Hispanic-Latino population—both citizens and non-citizens.

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