A Number Everyone Should Know
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Of the estimated 11,550,000 unauthorized immigrants living in the United States as of January 2006, 6,570,000 (or 57%) are from Mexico.¹

Illegal immigration into the United States has been and continues to be a prominent topic in public discourse, because it brings with it an array of economic, political, and cultural consequences for the U.S. government and citizenry. It raises questions not only of border security and international economics (in how and why migrants enter without authorization), but also questions of social and legal policy (in what the relation of the immigrants and state is once they’ve arrived). The first step in answering these questions is to know who illegal immigrants are and from where they’re coming; this is why the number cited above is so important.

A close look at the number reveals several pieces of information. First of all, it provides a sense of overall scale; with this number, when we talk about illegal immigration we know that we’re talking about almost 12 million people. Furthermore, it indicates that a majority of these people are from Mexico, and thus helps explain why “Mexican” has sometimes become synonymous with “illegal alien” in day-to-day discussion. However, it also indicates that a significant portion (43%) of illegal immigrants are NOT Mexican, and thus reveals that policy approaches cannot automatically assume such synonymy if they wish to be truly comprehensive.

As informative as this number may potentially be, as with any number based on estimation and survey sampling, it must be interpreted carefully. It is derived using two sets of data. The first is an estimate of the total foreign-born U.S. population (from the U.S. Census Bureau’s American Community Survey [ACS], which surveys 3 million households). Because this survey is based on a sample, and not an actual population count, there are opportunities for variation and error. For example, this number requires an estimation of the undercount rate of unauthorized immigrants responding to the ACS, thus requiring a smaller-scale estimate of the figure it is ultimately being used to calculate. The second set of data is an estimate of the legally-resident foreign-born population (gathered from applicants’ files at the Department of the Homeland Security [DHS]). This set of data has its own limitations, in that it is not a survey and the information it contains must be adapted accordingly. The final calculation of the unauthorized immigrant population (derived by subtracting the numbers gathered from the DHS from those gathered by the ACS) as 11,550,000 is thus necessarily based on many interwoven assumptions and estimates. There are two other points that should be considered. Firstly, while the ACS data includes an estimation of the rate of emigration out of the U.S. for legal foreign-born residents, there is no such adjustment for the derived number of unauthorized foreign-born residents. Secondly, the country-of-birth classifications of illegal immigrants are also a product of estimation and assumption; thus the statement that “57% of illegal immigrants are from Mexico” must also be interpreted carefully.