

Group: Tougher enforcement is reducing number of illegal migrants

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WASHINGTON -- An organization that advocates for tough immigration restrictions reported yesterday that the illegal immigrant population nationally and in New Jersey has dropped sharply during the past year due to stepped-up enforcement and the economic downturn.

The Center for Immigration Studies said an analysis of monthly Census data suggests the number of illegal immigrants nationwide declined by about 11 percent, or by 1.3 million people since last summer.

That would mean there were roughly 11.2 million illegal immigrants in the United States as of May, compared with 12.5 million in August of 2007, the center said.

The group said New Jersey reflected the national trend. A review of the Census data showed the number of illegal immigrants in the state dropped from an estimated 430,000 people last summer to about 384,000 in May, according to co-author Steven Camarota.

"Is this consistent with what is being seen on the ground in New Jersey? It is hard to tell," he said.

Amy Gottlieb, director of immigrant rights for the American Friends Service Committee in Newark, said it is difficult to accurately assess the situation.

She said that increased immigration raids and arrests have taken their toll, and have "devastated and broken up families."

"We see people being picked up and deported," she said. "People talk about leaving."

"There is no doubt people have left, whether forcefully or on their own. Whether they have left the state or the country, I can't say," she said.

Camarota argued that "increased enforcement seems to have played a significant role in reducing the illegal population, with "the deterioration in the economy also likely to be partly responsible."

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The decline in the illegal immigrant population is at least seven times larger than the number removed by the government over a 10-month period, meaning that "most of the decline is due to illegal immigrants leaving the country on their own," according to the study.

Camarota said the analysis undercuts a contention by immigration advocates who argue that illegals will never go home, and should be provided with a legalization option as part of a broader immigration reform.

He said the evidence also suggests that tougher enforcement can be effective, and argued that that talk of legalization by the presidential candidates will only encourage people to stay in the country.

The report was quickly denounced by immigration advocates, who called the data flawed and the center's analysis biased by its own political point of view.

"They are attempting to promote policies that involve enforcement only," said Shia Goldstein of the New Jersey Immigration Policy Network. "Any decrease in immigration is likely attributable to the recession that we are in. Economics and economic opportunity are the driving engine for immigration."

Goldstein said he has seen increased enforcement and hardship for families, but he questioned the accuracy of the group's findings.

Angela Kelley, Director of the Immigration Policy Center, an immigration rights organization, said the report stresses enforcement as a major factor when "most researchers agree that undocumented immigration to the United States is driven largely by economics."

"CIS provides no real solutions to the nation's immigration problems. They insult thoughtful Americans when they seemingly hope for continued unemployment and recession, promote harsh enforcement measures that separate families and destroy communities, and suggest that politicians should not even talk about real solutions," said Kelley.

Rather than just rely on tough restrictions, she said, the Congress should adopt comprehensive reform that includes enforcement as well as a path to legalization for undocumented immigrants.