

# Many Visitors Just Don't Bother to Go Home

By Maria Puente

The image of illegal immigrants scurrying over the Mexican border is familiar to most Americans, but it's only a partial picture of illegal immigration in the USA, officials say.

Indeed, more than half the estimated 4 million illegal immigrants are "visa overstays" — people who enter the country legally on a tourist, student or business visa but don't go home — says the Immigration and Naturalization Service.

But visa overstays are not a part of the current immigration debate — which has seen more INS resources shifting to a blockade of border states.

"The border is the hot issue — you can take pictures of people clambering over the border," says Cecilia Munoz, senior analyst at the Hispanic immigrant-rights group National Council of La Raza. "Visa overstayers don't make good 30-second sound bites."

One reason: overstayers are perceived to "blend in" better than even native Hispanics. In New York and New Jersey, for instance, the largest groups of overstayers are from Poland, Italy and Portugal. "One of the great ironies is that an Italian who arrived yesterday is perceived as 'more American' than a fifth-generation Mexican-American — and that drives our community crazy," Munoz says.

Last year Congress made it even easier for Irish and Portuguese to come to the USA, by adding Ireland and Portugal to the "visa waiver list."

"As long as you didn't get into trouble with the law, you were fine," says Sean Murphy, 33, an Irish overstayer who eventually got a green card and now is a contractor. "You could go to a bar, find out about work, even cash your paycheck with the bartender."

Visitors from the 22 countries on the list don't have to get visas for short visits because the countries don't have a history of visa fraud or large numbers of illegal immigrants in the USA.

"That's a huge, Mack truck hole in our ability to

stop illegal immigration," says Dan Stein of the Federation for American Immigration Reform.

Visas are issued by the State Department, which is supposed to reject applicants believed to be potential overstayers. The INS estimates only 150,000 a year overstay of a total of 22 million visitors. But the INS has no way to track down and deport overstayers. Only 658 overstayers were deported in 1993 of 36,700 immigrants expelled.

INS Commissioner Doris Meissner says the way to discourage overstayers is to reduce access to jobs by beefing up enforcement of employer sanctions.

And immigration lawyers and leaders of the nation's \$77 billion tourism industry worry about increased attention to visa overstays.

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Warren Leiden, head of the American Immigration Lawyers Association, says it's already extremely difficult for visitors from Third World countries to get visitor visas.

"We caution against Draconian measures that penalize all visa visitors for sins of a few," says William Norman, president of the Travel Industry Association of America.

But Draconian measures may not be necessary. "Make it clear that people have to leave and then enforce departure — and the U.S. has never done that," says the American Bar Association's Carol Wolchok. ■

*George Immerwahr, a retired actuary and demographer, writes from Bothell, Washington. A teacher of demography, he also worked to evaluate population strategies for the U.S. A.I.D. program and for the World Health Organization. His article, "Take Me With You to the U.S.A." appeared in the Spring 1995 issue of THE SOCIAL CONTRACT.*

# The Immigration We Have Brought on Ourselves

By George E. Immerwahr

Many of us are deeply concerned over the present high level of immigration and the domestic problems which are exacerbated by immigration, but are we equally aware of the extent to which immigration has been heightened by U.S. policies in which we ourselves may have acquiesced?

Legal immigration is now averaging close to one million a year, and annual illegal immigration, net of return migration, may run as high as another 400,000. Immigrant women often have much higher fertility than white Americans, and Mexican-born immigrant women have a total fertility rate<sup>1</sup> (TFR) double that of non-Hispanic white women and possibly higher even than that of Mexican women living in Mexico.

Because of the high level of immigration and high immigrant fertility, it is now feared that total U.S. population may reach and surpass 500 million during the 21st century, whereas it was once thought that the population would peak out at about 300 million and then slowly decline.

About 90 percent of recent legal immigrants and virtually all illegal immigrants are persons born in the less-developed countries (LDCs) of Latin America, Asia and Africa, and these are the countries in which population is growing most rapidly and where fertility rates are relatively high. Europe, which was the main source of immigrants before 1950, now has very low fertility and practically no population growth other than immigration from the LDCs.

It is commonly recognized that poverty and the pressures arising from LDC population growth, and an LDC labor force growth much more rapid than their ability to create jobs, are the main forces driving people into the more-developed countries (MDCs) of North America, Europe, Australia, New Zealand, and now also into Japan. But we should add to this that modern communication has heightened overseas

awareness of the MDCs' higher living standards, and that modern international transportation has facilitated the movement of people into the MDCs.

Mexico is just one of the many LDCs in which population has skyrocketed during this century. Mexico is believed to have had only 14 million people in 1900. Today it has 90 million, but this number does not include many additional millions of persons now in our country who — or whose forbears — were living in Mexico earlier in the century. Counting them, it may be said that Mexico has had a seven-fold population growth over the last 95 years. Until about 1970, Mexico's TFR was about 7. It has now declined substantially, but because there are so many Mexican women now at childbearing ages due to the high fertility of the past, Mexico's population will continue its rapid growth for several decades to come, even if more millions emigrate.

Add to all this the current political and civil turmoil and conflict prevalent in so much of the world, particularly in the LDCs. One example is the violence which erupted in 1994 in Rwanda, and which may now be spreading into neighboring Burundi. Another example is Haiti (where internal conflict is far from settled), another the continuing Palestinian-Israeli conflict, still another the oppression of the Kurds by both Turkey and Iraq, not to mention the many less-publicized conflicts and unrest in a host of other LDCs.<sup>2</sup>

Several of the conflicts just mentioned are in regions where fertility rates and population growth rates are high, and where population density is much higher than ever before. There can be little doubt that population growth and overcrowding have greatly contributed to the troubles of Haiti, Rwanda and Burundi, and also of the Palestinian people. The West Bank has a population density of 700 people per