

Projecting Trends in Undocumented and Legal Immigrant Populations in the United States

RYAN BHANDARI, BENJAMIN FEIGENBERG, DARREN LUBOTSKY, EDUARDO MEDINA-CORTINA

Key Findings and Policy Implications

Matrícula identification cards are issued by the Mexican government to many Mexican-born individuals living in the United States. Matrícula cards are issued almost exclusively to individuals who reside in the U.S. without legal authorization.

This paper uses administrative data on over 9 million Matrícula cards issued between 2008 and 2017 to better estimate the undocumented Mexican population living in the United States. The Matrícula data are also used in conjunction with data from the American Community Survey and other sources to better estimate the undocumented immigrant population from other countries. The study estimates suggest that:

- There were on average 8.3-8.7 million undocumented Mexican individuals in the United States per year in the 2008 to 2012 period, and 7.5-8.2 million in the 2013 to 2017 period. Both estimates are somewhat higher than the well-known estimates produced by the Pew Center.
- The undocumented immigrant population from other Latin American and Caribbean countries was between 2.6 and 3.2 million during the 2008 to 2012 period, and between 3.2 and 4.0 million in the 2013 to 2017 period. These estimates are more closely aligned with those from the Pew Center.
- Matrícula data is unlikely to be useful in estimating the undocumented population from outside of the Latin America and Caribbean region.

Basic facts about the size of the immigrant population, the fraction undocumented, and future trajectories are crucial for public policy analysis, including as component factors in SSA models and projections. This study demonstrates the significant incremental value of Matrícula data in improving estimates and projections of this difficult-to-measure aspect of the U.S. economy.

RYAN BHANDARI is a PhD candidate in Economics at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

BENJAMIN FEIGENBERG is an Associate Professor of Economics at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

DARREN LUBOTSKY is an Associate Professor of Economics at the University of Illinois at Chicago and a Research Associate at the National Bureau of Economic Research.

EDUARDO MEDINA-CORTINA is a PhD candidate in Economics at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.

The research reported herein was performed pursuant to grant RDR1800003 from the US Social Security Administration (SSA) funded as part of the Retirement and Disability Research Consortium. The opinions and conclusions expressed are solely those of the author(s) and do not represent the opinions or policy of SSA, any agency of the Federal Government, or NBER. Neither the United States Government nor any agency thereof, nor any of their employees, makes any warranty, express or implied, or assumes any legal liability or responsibility for the accuracy, completeness, or usefulness of the contents of this report. Reference herein to any specific commercial product, process or service by trade name, trademark, manufacturer, or otherwise does not necessarily constitute or imply endorsement, recommendation or favoring by the United States Government or any agency thereof.