THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE UNAUTHORIZED FOREIGN-BORN POPULATION IN THE UNITED STATES: WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM SIPP AND L.A.FANS? *

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Over the past two decades, the U.S. foreign-born population has grown increasingly diverse with respect to citizenship and immigration status, and consists of significant shares of naturalized citizens, legal permanent residents, legal temporary migrants, and unauthorized migrants (Passel and Cohn 2009). Yet, we know little about how these various immigrant statuses, especially unauthorized status, relates to immigrant incorporation and indicators of well being among the immigrant generation and their children (Bean and Stevens 2003). Owing to a lack of public-use survey data including questions about the legal status of immigrants in the United States, our knowledge about the characteristics and socioeconomic status of unauthorized immigrants are limited to reports based on the indirect assignment of legal status based on the residual method (Passel and Cohn 2009; U.S. Department of Homeland Security 2010). In this research note, we draw on two data sources – the 2001 and 2004 panels of the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) and the 2001 wave of the Los Angeles Family and Neighborhood Survey (L.A.FANS) – and develop a profile of the unauthorized foreign-born population and compare this profile to those reported previously based on the residual method. In so doing, we provide what is to our knowledge the first assessment of the validity of the series of questions used in the SIPP and in L.A.FANS that allow users to infer the legal status of foreign-born respondents, and thus gauges the extent to which the two samples are representative of their respective populations.

In this extended abstract, we provide an initial set of results comparing the unauthorized foreign-born population estimated in the SIPP sample to the profiles of the unauthorized population estimated by DHS and the Pew Hispanic Center (PHC) using the residual method.

With a few notable exceptions that will be discussed at length in the full paper, weighted

estimates from the SIPP sample correspond closely to profiles of the unauthorized reported by

DHS and PHC with respect to country and/or region of origin (Tables 1 and 2); year of arrival to

the United States (Table 3); and state of residence (Table 4). This similarity suggests that these

two surveys are valuable sources of data for much-needed research on the extent to which

unauthorized status impedes the incorporation of immigrants and their children (Bean et al.

2011). In the full version of the paper, we will also demonstrate the considerable variation that

exists across immigrant status and nativity groups on numerous indicators of incorporation and

well-being available in the two surveys including poverty status, labor market position,

educational attainment, family and household structure, access to health care and health

insurance, and numerous adult and child health outcomes and indicators.

These two main findings combine underscore our main conclusions, which we discuss in

much further detail in the full paper. In short, we conclude by suggesting that other population-

based surveys could include similar questions facilitating the inference of migrant legal status, at

little expense, thereby making substantial contributions to research on immigrant incorporation

with important public policy implications. Though we recognize the concerns expressed by

researchers, administrators and service providers over the collection of sensitive information

pertaining to migrants' legal status, we contend that surveys such as SIPP and L.A.FANS

demonstrate that in collecting information about the legal status of the foreign-born can be done

successfully, while both maintaining the scientific integrity of the data and putting in place the

proper safeguards to ensure that confidentiality agreements cannot be violated.

\TABLES

Table 1. Comparison of Country of Birth Distributions for the Unauthorized Foreig-Born Population in the United States between DHS Estimates and SIPP, 2000-2005

	DHS (%)[a]		SIPP (Weighted %)		
	2000	2005	2001	2004	Combined
Mexico	55	57	36.9	59.3	47.3
El Salvador	5	4	2.3	3.8	3.0
Guatamala	3	4	1.2	4.1	2.5
India	1	3	4.1	2.5	3.4
China	2	2	2.6	2.6	2.6
Korea	2	2	1.8	1.2	1.5
Philippines	2	2	2.9	0.8	1.9
Honduras	2	2	1.6	1.2	1.4
Brazil	1	2	0.7	1.5	1.1
Vietnam	2	2	4.1	0.4	2.4
Other Countries	23	21	41.9	22.6	33.0
Total	*98*	*101*	*100*	*100*	*100*

[a] Source: Hoefer, Rytina and Baker (2006)

Table 2. Comparison of CountryRegion of Birth Distributions for the Unauthorized Foreig-Born Population in the United States between Pew Hispanic Center Estimates and SIPP, 2000-2004

	PHS (%)		SIPP (Weighted %)		
	2000	2004	2001	2004	Combined
Mexico	57	57	36.9	59.3	47.3
Other Latin America	22	24	16.6	19.1	17.8
Asia	11	9	25.7	12.1	19.4
Europe and Canada	7	6	14.2	5.0	10.0
Africa and Other	2	4	6.6	4.5	5.6
Total	*99*	*100*	*100*	*100*	*100*

Table 3. Comparison of State of Residence Distribution of the Unauthorized Foreign-Born Population in the United States, 2000-2005

Period of Entry	DHS (2005)	SIIPP 2001-04 Weighted %
1995-1999	42.1	46.8
1990-1994	28.1	18.1
1985-1989	15.6	22.9
1980-1984	14.1	12.2
Total	*99.9*	*100.0*

Period of Entry	PHC (2004)	SIIPP 2001-04 Weighted %
1995-1999	50.7	46.8
1990-1994	31.0	18.1
1980s	18.3	35.1
Total	*100.0*	*100.0*

Table 4. Comparison of State of Residence Distribution of the Unauthorized Foreign-Born Population in the United States, 2000-2005

	DHS (%)		PHC (%)		SIPP (Weighted %)		
	2000	2005	2000	2004	2001	2004	Combined
California	30	26	27.6	23.7	32.3	31.9	32.1
Texas	13	13	13.2	13.4	10.5	11.2	10.8
Florida	9	8	6.8	8.6	8.6	7.3	8.0
New York	6	5	8.5	6.1	7.7	6.1	7.0
Illinois	5	5	5.7	3.9	3.7	2.7	3.2
Arizona	4	5	3.7	4.4	2.1	3.6	2.8
Georgia	3	4	3.0	3.4	2.5	3.9	3.1
New Jersey	4	4	3.9	3.4	3.2	4.1	3.6
North Carolina	3	3	2.4	3.8	2.3	3.7	3.0
Nevada	2	2	1.7	1.6	1.7	1.0	1.4
Other States	21	24	23.4	27.6	25.5	24.4	25.0
Total	*100*	*99*	*100*	*100*	*100*	*100*	*100*