The 2,000 Mile Wall in Search of a Purpose: Since 2007 Visa Overstays have Outnumbered Undocumented Border Crossers by a Half Million

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Executive Summary

The Trump administration has made the construction of an "impregnable" 2,000-mile wall across the length of the US-Mexico border a centerpiece of its executive orders on immigration and its broader immigration enforcement strategy. This initiative has been broadly criticized based on:

· Escalating cost projections: an internal Department of Homeland Security (DHS) study recently set the cost at $21.6 billion over three and a half years;

· Its necessity given the many other enforcement tools — video surveillance, drones, ground sensors, and radar technologies — and Border Patrol personnel, that cover the US-Mexico border: former DHS Secretary Michael Chertoff and other experts have argued that a wall does not add enforcement value except in heavy crossing areas near towns, highways, or other "vanishing points" (Kerwin 2016);

· Its cost-effectiveness given diminished Border Patrol apprehensions (to roughly one-fourth the level of historic highs) and reduced illegal entries (to roughly one-tenth the 2005 level according to an internal DHS study) (Martinez 2016);

· Its efficacy as an enforcement tool: between FY 2010 and FY 2015, the current 654-mile pedestrian wall was breached 9,287 times (GAO 2017, 22);

· Its inability to meet the administration's goal of securing "operational control" of the border, defined as "the prevention of all unlawful entries to the United States" (White House 2017);

· Its deleterious impact on bi-national border communities, the environment, and property rights (Heyman 2013); and

- Opportunity costs in the form of foregone investments in addressing the conditions that drive large-scale migration, as well as in more effective national security and immigration enforcement strategies.

The Center for Migration Studies (CMS) has reported on the dramatic decline in the US undocumented population between 2008 and 2014 (Warren 2016). In addition, a growing percentage of border crossers in recent years have originated in the Northern Triangle states of Central America (CBP 2016). These migrants are fleeing pervasive violence, persecution, and poverty, and a large number do not seek to evade arrest, but present themselves to border officials and request political asylum. Many are de facto refugees, not illegal border crossers.

This report speaks to another reason to question the necessity and value of a 2,000-mile wall: It does not reflect the reality of how the large majority of persons now become undocumented. It finds that two-thirds of those who arrived in 2014 did not illegally cross a border, but were admitted (after screening) on non-immigrant (temporary) visas, and then overstayed their period of admission or otherwise violated the terms of their visas. Moreover, this trend in increasing percentages of visa overstays will likely continue into the foreseeable future.

The report presents information about the mode of arrival of the undocumented population that resided in the United States in 2014. To simplify the presentation, it divides the 2014 population into two groups: overstays and entries without inspection (EWIs). The term overstay, as used in this paper, refers to undocumented residents who entered the United States with valid temporary visas and subsequently established residence without authorization. The term EWI refers to undocumented residents who entered without proper immigration documents across the southern border.

The estimates are based primarily on detailed estimates of the undocumented population in 2014 compiled by CMS and estimates of overstays for 2015 derived by DHS. Major findings include the following:

- In 2014, about 4.5 million US residents, or 42 percent of the total undocumented population, were overstays.

- Overstays accounted for about two-thirds (66 percent) of those who *arrived* (i.e., joined the undocumented population) in 2014.

- Overstays have exceeded EWIs every year since 2007, and 600,000 more overstays than EWIs have arrived since 2007.

- Mexico is the leading country for both overstays and EWIs; about one-third of undocumented arrivals from Mexico in 2014 were overstays.

- California has the largest number of overstays (890,000), followed by New York (520,000), Texas (475,000), and Florida (435,000).

- Two states had 47 percent of the 6.4 million EWIs in 2014: California (1.7 million) and Texas (1.3 million).

- The percentage of overstays varies widely by state: more than two-thirds of the undocumented who live in Hawaii, Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Pennsylvania are overstays. By contrast, the undocumented population in Kansas, Arkansas, and New Mexico consists of fewer than 25 percent overstays.

Introduction

Undocumented immigration has been a major national concern in recent years, and efforts to resolve the issue are likely to remain near the top of the new administration's agenda. This report seeks to add clarity to the discussion of alternative policies by presenting demographic information on the mode of arrival — overstays and EWIs — of the undocumented population that lived in the US in 2014. The finding that EWIs have accounted for fewer than 40 percent of all undocumented arrivals since 2010, and just one-third of arrivals in 2014, raises questions about the necessity and efficacy of extending the border wall.

An important component of the estimates, overstays by country of origin, relies on DHS information about overstays in 2015 (DHS 2015). The DHS estimates of overstays were derived primarily from the Arrival Departure Information System (ADIS), which tracks the arrival and departure of temporary visitors admitted for business or pleasure. The second component, detailed estimates of the undocumented population in 2014, was derived by CMS (Warren 2016). The procedures used to derive estimates of overstays and EWIs are described in detail in the Appendix. Before proceeding, two important aspects of these estimates merit attention.

- First, nearly all EWIs come from just six countries — Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Dominican Republic. To derive the total number of *overstays* in the United States, CMS compiled estimates of overstays for those six countries and then added the number of undocumented arrivals from "all other countries."[1] EWIs were estimated as the difference between the total population and the number of overstays.

- Second, the percentage of overstays in a state is strongly influenced by how many undocumented residents from Mexico live in the state. About 55 percent of undocumented immigrants are from Mexico, and the large majority of them are EWIs.
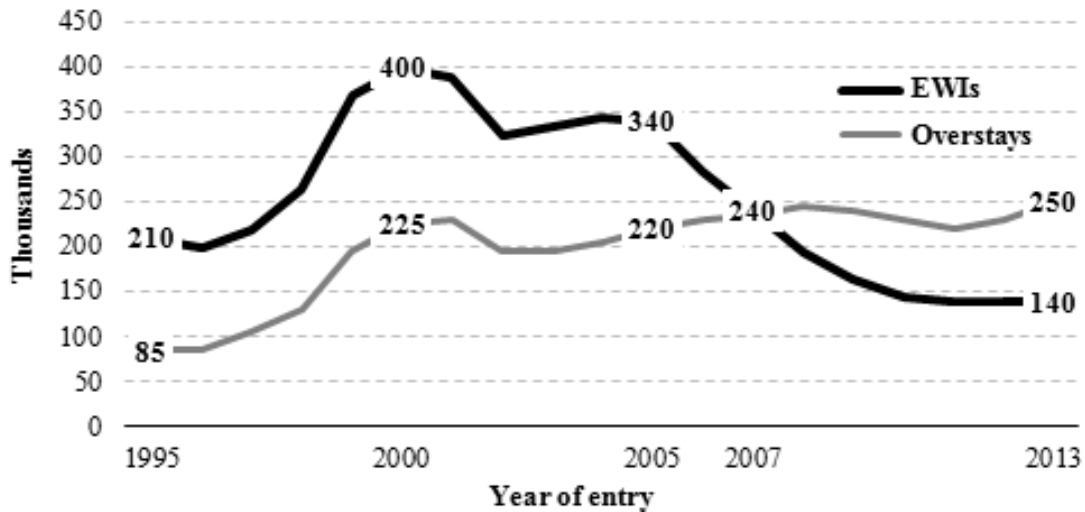
Results

Mode of Arrival

Before 2007, well over half of all undocumented arrivals were EWIs (Figure 1).[2] In fact, as recently as 2005, EWI arrivals exceeded overstays by about 120,000. The number of EWI

1 To take account of the likelihood that at least *some* undocumented residents from "all other countries" were EWIs, CMS assumed that .1 percent of undocumented residents who arrived from "all other countries" were EWIs.

2 In all three figures in this report, the trend lines were smoothed using a three-year moving average.

arrivals began a steep decline after 2005, falling from 340,000 in 2005 to 140,000 in 2013. Since the crossover in these trends in 2007, the total number of overstays has exceeded EWIs by about 600,000 (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Undocumented Population in 2014, by Year and Mode of Entry *(rounded to 5,000s)*


The steep drop in EWIs from 2005 to 2010 shown in Figure 1 is the result of a sharp decline in undocumented immigration from Mexico after 2005. This is clearly illustrated by Figure 2, which shows the undocumented population from Mexico in 2014, by year of entry.

Figure 2. Undocumented Population from Mexico in 2014, by Year of Entry *(rounded to 5000s)*

The trends shown in Figures 1 and 2 produced the pattern of overstay rates shown in Figure 3. The percentage of overstays increased somewhat from 1995 to 2000, stayed steady until 2004, and then increased rapidly from 2005 to 2010 (Figure 3). This occurred because, as we have seen, after 2005 the number of EWIs fell rapidly while overstays remained at roughly the same level. Overstays reached 61 percent of the total in 2010 and continued to rise, reaching about two-thirds (66 percent) of the total in 2014.

Figure 3. Estimated Percent of the 2014 Undocumented Population that Overstayed, by Year of Entry
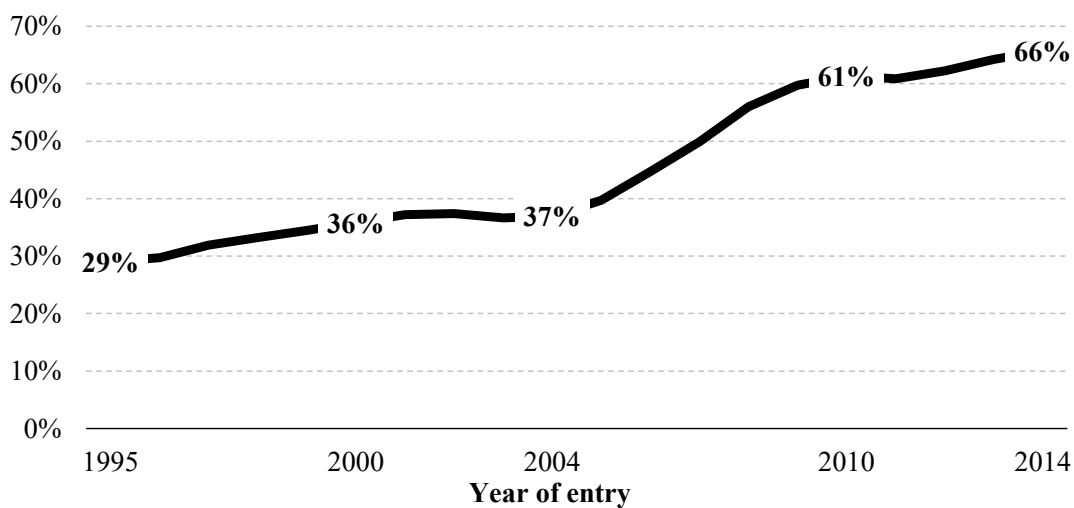
State of Residence

Table 1 shows estimates for the 10 states with the highest percentage of overstays and the 10 states with the lowest percentage. The states with the highest percentage of overstays range from 96 percent in Hawaii[3] to 59 percent in Michigan. In the 10 high-overstay states, nine of which are in the eastern part of the country, only 22 percent of the total undocumented population is from Mexico.

The 10 states with the lowest percentage overstays range from 31 percent in Colorado to 22 percent in New Mexico (Table 1). In these 10 states combined, slightly more than three quarters (77%) of the total undocumented residents are from Mexico. Most of the low-overstay states are in the western part of the country.

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3 It might seem unlikely that EWIs would be living in Hawaii, but these estimates refer to the population living in the United States in 2014. One explanation could be that EWIs that entered in prior years subsequently moved to Hawaii.

Table 1. States with the Highest and Lowest Percent Overstays in the 2014 Population

Numbers in thousands; rounded independently.
States with fewer than 20,000 total population excluded.

State of residence	Total undocumented population (1=2+3)	Estimated mode of entry EWIs (2)	Estimated mode of entry Overstays (3)	Percent overstays (4=3/1)
US total	**10,912**	**6,368**	**4,545**	**42%**
The 10 states with the highest percent overstays in 2014				
Hawaii	35	1	34	96%
Massachusetts	147	34	113	77%
Connecticut	114	37	76	67%
Pennsylvania	158	52	106	67%
Ohio	80	28	52	65%
New York	817	297	521	64%
New Jersey	452	166	286	63%
Florida	711	276	435	61%
Delaware	22	9	13	61%
Michigan	109	44	64	59%
The 10 states with the lowest percent overstays in 2014				
Colorado	179	123	56	31%
Mississippi	22	15	7	31%
Idaho	39	27	11	29%
Nebraska	42	30	12	28%
Texas	1,737	1,261	476	27%
Arizona	277	202	75	27%
Oklahoma	95	70	25	27%
Kansas	67	51	16	24%
Arkansas	66	51	15	23%
New Mexico	76	60	17	22%

Source: Center for Migration Studies. See text for method of computation.

Estimates of overstays and EWIs by state have not previously been available. Table 2 below shows estimates of the undocumented population, along with the percent that overstayed, for every state as of 2014. Caution should be exercised in the use and interpretation of these estimates because they are subject to sampling variability, non-sampling errors, and limitations in the assumptions. However, as described in the appendix, reasonable alternative assumptions would change any of the percentages shown in this report by only a couple of percentage points.

Table 2. Percent of the 2014 Undocumented Population that Were Overstays, by State

Numbers in thousands; rounded independently.

State	Undocumented population	Percent overstays	State	Undocumented population	Percent overstays
All states	**10,912**	**42%**	Missouri	49	50%
Alabama	59	40%	Montana	3	34%
Alaska	7	87%	Nebraska	42	28%
Arizona	277	27%	Nevada	180	32%
Arkansas	66	23%	New Hampshire	11	73%
California	2,598	34%	New Jersey	452	63%
Colorado	179	31%	New Mexico	76	22%
Connecticut	114	67%	New York	817	64%
Delaware	22	61%	North Carolina	322	32%
D.C.	20	47%	North Dakota	4	67%
Florida	711	61%	Ohio	80	65%
Georgia	345	39%	Oklahoma	95	27%
Hawaii	35	96%	Oregon	121	36%
Idaho	39	29%	Pennsylvania	158	67%
Illinois	455	40%	Rhode Island	29	50%
Indiana	106	38%	South Carolina	83	34%
Iowa	37	43%	South Dakota	4	57%
Kansas	67	24%	Tennessee	117	37%
Kentucky	49	40%	Texas	1,737	27%
Louisiana	60	32%	Utah	91	33%
Maine	2	72%	Vermont	1	81%
Maryland	233	50%	Virginia	269	51%
Massachusetts	147	77%	Washington	234	44%
Michigan	109	59%	West Virginia	4	37%
Minnesota	95	52%	Wisconsin	71	36%
Mississippi	22	31%	Wyoming	9	26%

Source: Center for Migration Studies. See text for method of computation.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The estimates of overstays presented in this paper make it clear that since 2005 a significant shift has occurred in the mode of arrival of undocumented immigrants to this country. Even

though fewer than half (42%) of the *total* population living in the United States in 2014 were overstays, that percentage will continue to increase as long as overstaying continues to be the predominant mode of arrival into the undocumented population, as it has been since 2005. In 2014 about two-thirds (66%) of all arrivals were overstays. The changing trends are largely the result of the drop in undocumented immigration from Mexico, especially since 2005. The two most important demographic conclusions from these estimates are: (1) after 2007, overstaying a temporary visa became the primary means of entering the undocumented population, and (2) the sharp drop in arrivals from Mexico since 2005 was primarily responsible for that shift.

The striking change in the mode of arrival after 2005 raises important policy questions not just about the need for a 2,000-mile wall, but about the allocation of immigration enforcement resources and funding levels for border enforcement compared to other strategies that might reduce new arrivals into the undocumented population and strategies to reduce the overall size of this population.[4] Rather than extending the wall, for example, border enforcement resources might be better directed to supporting rule of law and economic development initiatives in the Northern Triangle states of Central America, or to refugee processing in Central America, or to improving the screening of visitors at visa-issuing posts. Such shifts in the allocation of resources would address the primary source of undocumented immigration — overstaying temporary visas — and the causes of the flight of large numbers of migrants from the violence-plagued Northern Triangle states to the United States and elsewhere.

Appendix

Methodology

The first part of the appendix describes the data and methods used to estimate the numbers presented in this report. The last section examines the sensitivity of the estimates to changes in the assumptions and the data used. In the following discussion, the terms "percent overstays" and "overstay rates" mean the same thing: estimated overstays divided by total undocumented population.

The estimates of the 2014 undocumented population used to make these visa overstay estimates were compiled by CMS (Warren 2016). Specifically, two sets of data were compiled: (1) estimates of the undocumented population in 2014 cross-classified by state of residence and country of origin, and (2) estimates of the 2014 population for each country, by single year of entry, from 1982 to 2014.

As noted above, all but a very small number of EWIs are from only six countries — Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Dominican Republic. The first step was to estimate the percent of undocumented arrivals who overstayed from those six countries *in 2014*, as shown in Table A-1 below.

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4 CMS has found that a substantial percentage of visa overstays, likely in the range of one-third, leave the undocumented population — through voluntary emigration, death, removal, or securing immigration status — within five years.

The estimated overstays in Table A-1, column 1, were compiled by DHS, as described in their report (DHS 2015). The figures in columns 2 and 3 are from the CMS estimates for 2014. In column 4, the averages of the numbers in columns 2 and 3 were computed and then adjusted, as shown in the table, to reflect the fact that some of those who arrived in 2013 and 2014 would have left the undocumented population between arrival and the date of our estimates. The percent overstays in column 5 for each of the six countries was computed as the ratio of overstays to total recent arrivals (Table A-1).

Table A-1. Estimation of Percent Overstays in 2014, by Country of Origin

Numbers rounded independently.

| Country of origin | DHS 2015 overstays | Arrivals estimated by CMS | | Estimate of recent arrivals[5] | Percent who overstayed in 2014 |
| | | 2012 | 2013 | | |
	(1)	*(2)*	*(3)*	*(4)**	*(5=1/4)*
All countries	-	-	-	-	-
Mexico	42,100	125,200	105,700	121,500	34.7%
El Salvador	3,100	23,000	30,900	28,400	11.0%
Guatemala	5,400	21,000	20,300	21,700	24.9%
Honduras	4,100	15,100	22,800	20,000	20.4%
Nicaragua	1,200	3,000	1,000	2,100	56.3%
Dom. Rep.	7,000	9,800	14,600	12,900	54.4%
All other countries	-	-	-	-	99.9%

* Column 4 = average of columns 2 and 3 divided by .95. See text.
Source: Column 1, DHS (2015); columns 2 and 3, CMS estimates consistent with Warren (2016)

In Table A-1, the overstay rates in column 5 refer to arrivals *in 2014*. It would not be appropriate to use these rates for *all* years of entry because the rates are subject to change over time. The estimates in column 5 of Table A-1 were used along with an earlier estimate of percent overstays — 16 percent for Mexico in 1996 — to derive the percent who overstayed in previous years, as described below and as illustrated in Table A-2.

Table A-2 below shows how the overstay rates were derived for each year of entry. The estimates of entries in 2014 are from Table A-1, column 5. The figures for 2005 were derived on the assumption that the *percentages* of overstays among all arrivals were considerably lower in 2005 than in 2014. The basis for that assumption is the changing relationship between overstays and EWIs after 2005, as shown in Figure 1. Until 2005, the two trend

5 Arrivals in 2012 and 2013, as adjusted, were used for 2014 because they were the two most recent full years of estimates available. It is possible that arrivals from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras in 2014 were higher than the numbers shown in Table A-1. As shown in Table A-5, reasonable alternative data and assumptions would have little effect on the final results. For example, increasing the numbers for these three countries by 50 percent (that is, the numbers in column 4 of Table A-1) would reduce the percentage of overstays in the total population in 2014 from 41.6 to 41.2 and reduce the percentage of overstays in Florida from 61.2 to 60.5 (see Table A-5).

lines were relatively parallel, with EWIs exceeding overstays. That pattern changed fundamentally after 2005 as the arrival of EWIs fell rapidly and overstays remained fairly level (Figure 1).

Table A-2. Estimated Percent of the 2014 Undocumented Population that Overstayed, by Country of Origin and Year of Entry

Year	Mexico	El Salvador	Guatemala	Honduras	Nicaragua	Dom. Rep.	All other
2014	**34.7%**	**11.0%**	**24.9%**	**20.4%**	**56.3%**	**54.4%**	99.5%
2013	32.7%	10.4%	23.5%	19.3%	53.1%	51.4%	99.5%
2012	30.8%	9.8%	22.2%	18.1%	50.0%	48.3%	99.5%
2011	28.9%	9.2%	20.8%	17.0%	46.9%	45.3%	99.5%
2010	27.0%	8.5%	19.4%	15.9%	43.8%	42.3%	99.5%
2009	25.0%	7.9%	18.0%	14.7%	40.6%	39.3%	99.5%
2008	23.1%	7.3%	16.6%	13.6%	37.5%	36.3%	99.5%
2007	21.2%	6.7%	15.2%	12.5%	34.4%	33.2%	99.5%
2006	19.3%	6.1%	13.8%	11.3%	31.3%	30.2%	99.5%
2005	**17.3%**	**5.5%**	**12.5%**	**10.2%**	**28.1%**	**27.2%**	99.5%
2004	17.2%	5.5%	12.5%	10.2%	28.1%	27.2%	99.5%
2003	17.0%	5.5%	12.5%	10.2%	28.1%	27.2%	99.5%
2002	16.9%	5.5%	12.5%	10.2%	28.1%	27.2%	99.5%
2001	16.7%	5.5%	12.5%	10.2%	28.1%	27.2%	99.5%
2000	16.6%	5.5%	12.5%	10.2%	28.1%	27.2%	99.5%
1999	16.4%	5.5%	12.5%	10.2%	28.1%	27.2%	99.5%
1998	16.3%	5.5%	12.5%	10.2%	28.1%	27.2%	99.5%
1997	16.1%	5.5%	12.5%	10.2%	28.1%	27.2%	99.5%
1996	**16.0%**	5.5%	12.5%	10.2%	28.1%	27.2%	99.5%
1982-1995	**16.0%**	5.5%	12.5%	10.2%	28.1%	27.2%	99.5%

Source: 2014 percentages are from Table A-1; 2005 percentages assume that 2005 percentages were half of 2014 percentages; percentages for 2006 to 2013 for each country were computed by extrapolation; percentage for Mexico in 1996 from Warren (1997); and, percentages for Mexico from 1997 to 2004 were computed by extrapolation. See the section below, "Sensitivity of the Estimates to Alternative Assumptions," to see how changes in these assumptions would affect the estimates of percent overstays.

The rates shown in Table A-2 were multiplied by the CMS estimates of the undocumented population, by single years of entry, to derive the total number of overstays in the 2014 population. The results are shown in Table A-3. About 4.5 million, or almost 42 percent of the total undocumented population in 2014, were overstays. The figure for Mexico was 18.4 percent, an increase of 2.4 percentage points over the estimate of 16 percent for 1996 estimated by Warren (1997).

Table A-3. Estimated Number and Percent Overstays in the Total Undocumented Population in 2014, by Country of Origin

Numbers in thousands; rounded independently.

Country	Undocumented population in 2014	Estimated overstays	Percent overstays
All countries	**10,912**	**4,545**	**41.6%**
Mexico	5,990	1,105	18.4%
El Salvador	631	41	6.5%
Guatemala	499	74	14.8%
Honduras	349	44	12.6%
Nicaragua	62	20	32.1%
Dominican Republic	179	63	35.3%
All other	3,202	3,198	99.9%

Source: Center for Migration Studies.

Estimates of the percent overstays in each state were derived by multiplying the rates shown in Table A-3 by the total number of undocumented residents from each country residing in the state in 2014. Table A-4 illustrates the computation of percent overstays for Florida. The same procedure was repeated for every state.

Table A-4. Estimation of Percent Overstays in Florida

Numbers in thousands; rounded independently.

Country of origin	Undocumented population in 2014	Percent over-stays from Table A-3	Estimated number of overstays	Percent overstays in Florida
	(1)	*(2)*	*(3)=1 x 2*	*(4)=3/1*
Total	**711**	**-**	**435**	**61%**
Mexico	177	18.4%	33	-
El Salvador	22	6.5%	1	-
Guatemala	48	14.8%	7	-
Honduras	48	12.6%	6	-
Nicaragua	25	32.1%	8	-
Dom. Rep.	18	35.3%	6	-
All other	374	99.9%	374	-

Source: Center for Migration Studies.

Sensitivity of the Estimates to Alternative Assumptions

Table A-5 below shows how the estimates presented here would be affected by alternative data or assumptions. The estimates of percent overstays in the total population and in Florida would increase or decrease by just a few percentage points if the rather extreme alternative data or assumptions shown in the first column of Table A-5 had been used.

Table A-5. Effects of Alternative Data or Assumptions on Estimates of Percent Overstays

Alternative data/assumption	Type of data	Original	Alternative
DHS overstays for 2014 *reduced* by 20%	Total percent overstays	41.6%	40.1%
	Estimate for Florida	61.2%	59.8%
DHS overstays for 2014 *increased* by 20%	Total percent overstays	41.6%	43.2%
	Estimate for Florida	61.2%	62.5%
For countries other than Mexico, assume that the 2014 overstay rates are applicable to *all* years of entry.	Total percent overstays	41.6%	43.1%
	Estimate for Florida	61.2%	63.8%
For the five countries other than Mexico, *increase* DHS overstays in 2014 by 50%	Total percent overstays	41.6%	42.8%
	Estimate for Florida	61.2%	63.2%
For the five countries other than Mexico, *decrease* DHS overstays in 2014 by 50%	Total percent overstays	41.6%	40.5%
	Estimate for Florida	61.2%	59.1%
For El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, *increase* recent arrivals (Table A-1) by 50%	Total percent overstays	41.6%	41.2%
	Estimate for Florida	61.2%	60.5%

Source: Center for Migration Studies

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