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Illegal immigrant population drops in Va.

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Maryland ranks 10th, commonwealth 11th

Virginia was one of only three states to see a significant drop in its illegal immigrant population from 2008 to 2009, but it still ranked 11th in number of illegal immigrants in the state — with Maryland just in front at 10th.

The number of illegal immigrants in Virginia dipped from an estimated 300,000 to 240,000, while Maryland's held steady at 250,000, according to a report released Wednesday by the Pew Hispanic Center.

In the District, the estimated illegal immigrant population fell from 30,000 to 25,000, the report said.

Two-thirds fewer illegal immigrants flowed into the United States from March 2007 to March 2009 than from March 2000 to March 2005, according to the report by Jeff Passell and D'Vera Cohn.

There were an estimated 11.1 million illegal immigrants in the country in March 2009, down from 12.0 million in 2007, but up from 8.4 million in 2000.

"We've seen a reversal in what had been … long-term growth" in the unauthorized population, Passell said.

The number of unauthorized immigrants in Florida and Nevada also shrank from 2008 to 2009. Other states may have had declines, but they fell within the margin of error for the estimates, the report said. No state had a statistically significant increase from 2008 to 2009. The estimates were based on data from the Census Bureau's Current Population Survey.

Dan Griswold, director of the Center for Trade Policy Studies at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, said the economy was the major factor in the decline.



Four people walk away from a border fence after illegally crossing into the United States from Mexico.

“They don’t come here just to sit around and collect welfare,” he said. “They’re actually helping to smooth out our business cycle by their mobility.”

In March 2009, 7.8 million unauthorized immigrants were working, representing 5.1 percent of the labor force of 154.8 million people.

“We know &hellip that unemployment is very high in the U.S.,” Passell said. “We’ve seen in the past that flows have varied with the state of the U.S. economy.”

Another factor is that it is now more difficult and more dangerous for immigrants to sneak into the country, Passell said.

“We know that there’s been a ramp-up in enforcement, especially along the southern border, the last several years,” he said.

Passell noted that debate on immigration typically gets more heated when the economy’s in trouble.

The percentage of illegal immigrants in the labor force in D.C. and Maryland was slightly higher than the national average. Maryland’s 6.3 percent share was eighth in the country, and at 6.1 percent, D.C. was 10th. Virginia had an estimated 180,000 illegal immigrants in its labor force, or about 4.4 percent of the total.

California had the largest number of illegal immigrants in its labor force, at 1.8 million, and Nevada had the largest share, at 9.4 percent.

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