



MANHATTAN INSTITUTE FOR POLICY RESEARCH



**NATIONAL IMMIGRATION FORUM**

To Embrace & Uphold America's Tradition as a Nation of Immigrants

*Report of Findings from October 2005 Poll of  
Undocumented Immigrants*

**March 30, 2006**



**Bendixen &  
Associates**

*Executive Summary*

In-person interviews were conducted between October 11<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> of 2005 with 233 undocumented immigrants from Latin America. The interviews took place in Los Angeles, Chicago and Miami and were conducted in Spanish. What follows is a summary of the key findings from the poll, a complete analysis of the poll can be found in the full report.

- The overwhelming majority of undocumented immigrants interviewed said that if the United States Congress approved a new law that would allow the undocumented to legalize their status, they would make an effort to become legal.
- More than four-fifths of the undocumented immigrants interviewed indicated that they would comply with a new law that would require them to go to a government office, admit that they were here illegally and provide accurate personal information. They would also agree to be fingerprinted for a criminal background check, to pay a fine of \$1,000, to enroll in a class to learn English, and to notify the government of any change of address.
- Approximately two-thirds of the undocumented immigrants interviewed indicated that they would comply with a new law that required them to pay taxes they owed and to prove that they had worked in this country since they arrived.
- The overwhelming majority of Mexican undocumented immigrants came to the United States to work. Latin American undocumented immigrants contribute to the American workforce in a wide variety of areas – no less than 41 different jobs were named as the main type of work done by the 233 people interviewed in the study.
- Most Latin American undocumented immigrants believe in the *American Dream* and would become American citizens if it was possible.
- An overwhelming majority of undocumented immigrants indicated that it was better to come to the United States legally rather than illegally. They reported that they would live and work in the United States for the rest of their lives if they could find a way to legalize their status.
- Undocumented immigrants from Latin America unanimously say they want to learn to speak English.
- Ninety percent of the undocumented immigrants interviewed had never been arrested.
- Two-fifths of undocumented immigrants would return to their home country permanently if they could not find regular employment in the United States.

## Methodology

The Statue of Liberty campaign commissioned Bendixen & Associates, a public opinion research firm in Coral Gables, Florida, to conduct a poll of undocumented immigrants from Latin America who are living in the United States. Due to the complexity and sensitivity of both the sample and the subject matter, special methodological arrangements were made to ensure that 1) the data could be compiled at all, 2) the respondents did not feel threatened or fearful, and 3) the results would be sound and accurate.

To this end, a 2-stage sample design was employed to conduct in-person interviews in undocumented immigrant communities in Los Angeles, Miami and Chicago. The first stage of the sample design is a cluster sample wherein three cities with significant undocumented immigrant populations were selected. Then, within the three selected cities, clusters were identified where the interviews would be conducted. The clusters selected for the sample were specific communities within each city with a high concentration of undocumented immigrants.

Within the identified clusters, tremendous efforts were made by interviewers to conduct interviews with as many undocumented immigrants living in each community as possible. To achieve this, a random sample of undocumented immigrants completed interviews at a number of locations within each cluster. Both work locations and social gathering locations were used as interview sites to ensure that a variety of interviewees would participate and that those interviewees would be representative of the overall population of undocumented immigrants in each of the cities selected for the sample. Some of the locations where interviews were conducted include: construction sites, restaurants, bus stops, remittance sending sites, hotels, factories, churches, child care facilities, hair and nail salons, gas stations and offices. In addition to these locations, many of which are typical of places used for in-person, cluster sample interviewing, interviews were also conducted at an additional location unique to the population being studied. In each of these communities, there are gathering areas where undocumented immigrants congregate to await being picked up for day labor; interviews for this study were conducted at these gathering sites. All interviews were conducted between October 11<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> of 2005 in Spanish by trained interviewers. A total of 233 interviews were conducted – 84 in Los Angeles, 82 in Miami, and 67 in Chicago.

Every effort was made to reduce sampling error as much as possible and the demographic statistics gathered in this study are consistent with those found in past studies, which further increases our confidence that the sample is representative of the undocumented immigrant populations in each of the cities studied.

The margin of error for the full sample of 233 interviews is 6.5 percentage points.

One additional methodological note bears mentioning. As can be seen in the topline, several of the responses to questions in the survey yielded an agreement rate of 90 percent or greater and in some cases a 98 or 99 percent agreement rate was found. Basic sampling theory states that homogeneous populations produce samples with smaller sampling errors than do heterogeneous populations. So that if there is a high level of agreement with a certain statement (say 98 or 99 percent agreement) it would be extremely unlikely for any type of sampling to misrepresent the extent of that agreement.\*

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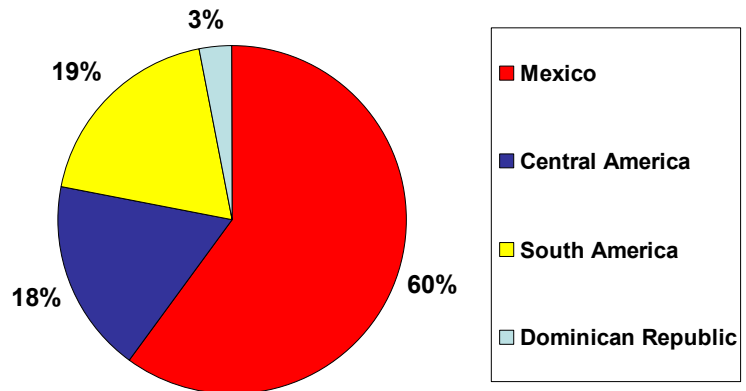
\* Babbie, Earl, *Survey Research Methods*. (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1990)

**Demographic Profile**

In an attempt to better understand the undocumented immigrants in the United States, a series of personal information questions were asked of respondents. From this series of questions, we have been able to learn about their language skills and willingness to learn English, their reasons for coming to the United States, the documents that they possess, their police records, their work habits, and their plans for the future. The undocumented immigrants were also asked about their age, country of origin, and years in the United States so that the survey could be analyzed demographically. These results give us additional confidence that the sample interviewed is representative of the undocumented immigrant population of the United States.

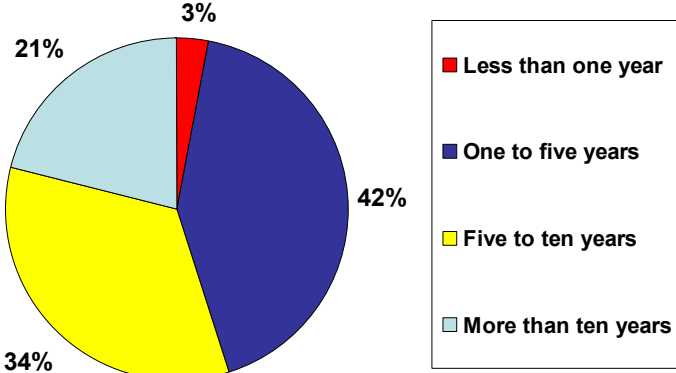
Three-fifths of those interviewed are undocumented immigrants from Mexico. Another fifth are from countries in Central America (El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala and Nicaragua), while the remainder are mostly from the Andean countries of South America (Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Venezuela) and the Dominican Republic.

**Country of Birth**

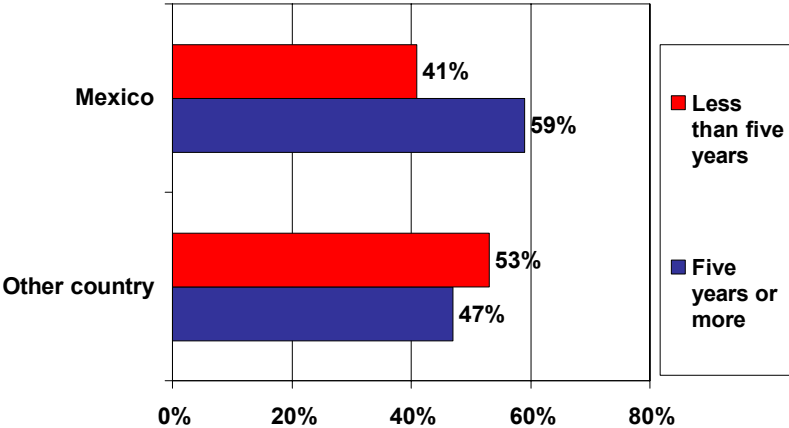


Undocumented immigrants in Los Angeles, Chicago and Miami have been in the United States for varied amounts of time. Approximately half of them have been in the United States for 5 years or more. The other half have been here less than 5 years, but the bulk of those interviewed have been here for at least a year. On average, Mexican undocumented immigrants have been in the United States slightly longer than undocumented immigrants from other Latin American countries.

## Residency in the United States

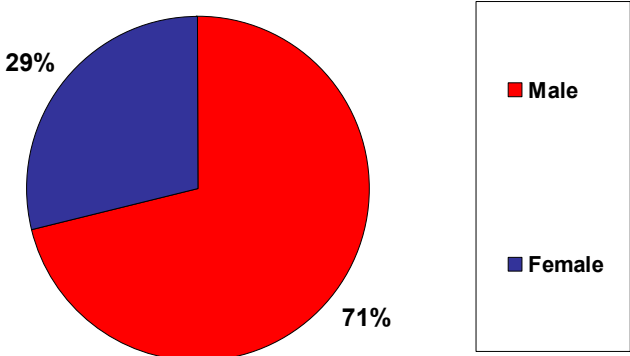


## Residency in the United States *By Country of Birth*

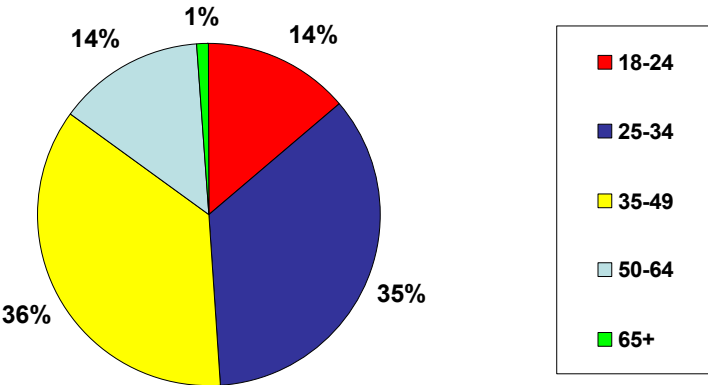


Most of the undocumented immigrants interviewed are young and male. About seven-in-ten of those interviewed are men and the other third women. About half of the respondents are between 18 and 34 years old, another third are between 35 and 49 years old and about one-sixth are over 50 years of age. It should be noted that undocumented women are somewhat underrepresented in this study because of their greater reluctance to agree to an interview. They were more cautious than their male counterparts about discussing their immigration status and their lives in general.

### Gender

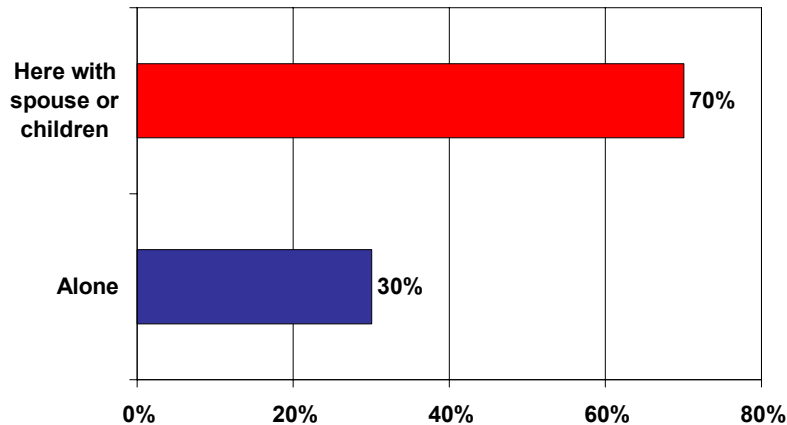


### Age



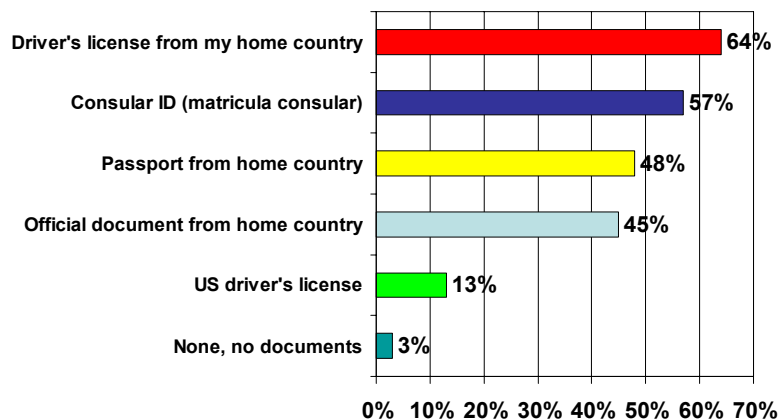
According to our study, the great majority of undocumented immigrants have at least some family here with them in the United States – their husband, wife and/or children, while about one-third of the undocumented are here alone.

## Are you here with your spouse or children or are you here alone?



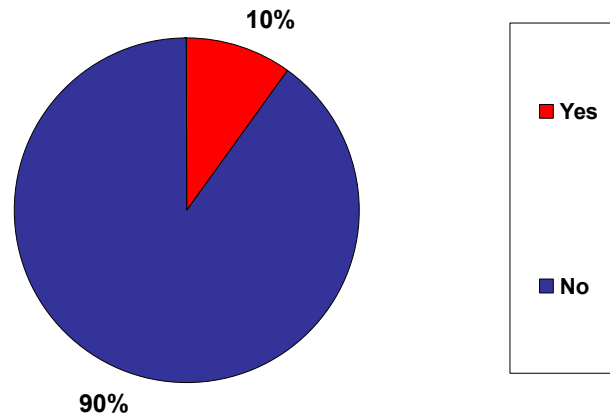
About two-thirds of undocumented immigrants have a driver’s license from their home country, while about one-eighth have driver’s license issued in the United States. About half of the undocumented immigrants interviewed have a passport from their country of origin. Forty-five percent reported having an official document from their home country like a birth certificate or a voter card. Nearly six-in-ten Mexican immigrants have a “matricula consular” - the identification card issued by Mexican Consulates in the United States. Many others mention that they also have a copy of their birth certificate and/or a voter card from their home country. A very small percentage say they have no personal identification documents at all.

## What personal identification documents do you have?



Very few of those interviewed have ever had any trouble with the law in the United States. Only one-tenth say they have been arrested and the charges in these cases were public drunkenness, driving under the influence, and disturbing the peace.

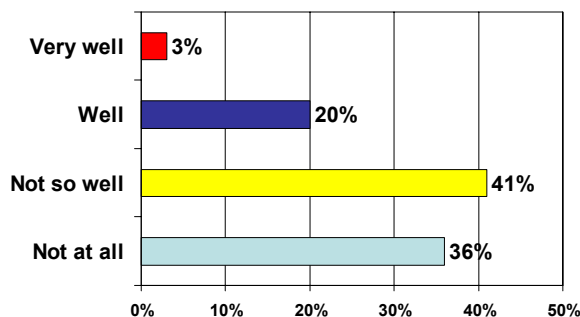
## Have you ever been arrested by the police in the United States?



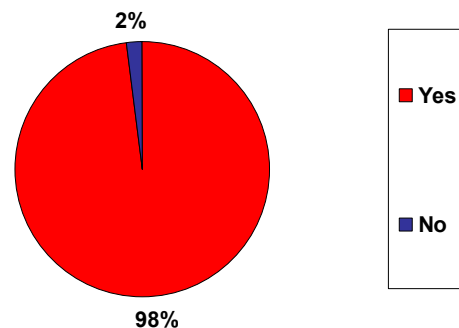
### English Language Ability

When it comes to speaking English, over three-quarters of undocumented immigrants say that they do not speak it well or even at all. About a quarter of those interviewed say they can speak English well, but very few of those can speak it very well. **However, undocumented immigrants from Latin America unanimously say they want to learn to speak English.** In fact, about two-thirds have already “attempted to learn” English. Three-quarters of those interviewed say that there are classes available in their community where people can learn to speak English.

### How well would you say that you speak English?



### Would you like to learn to speak English?

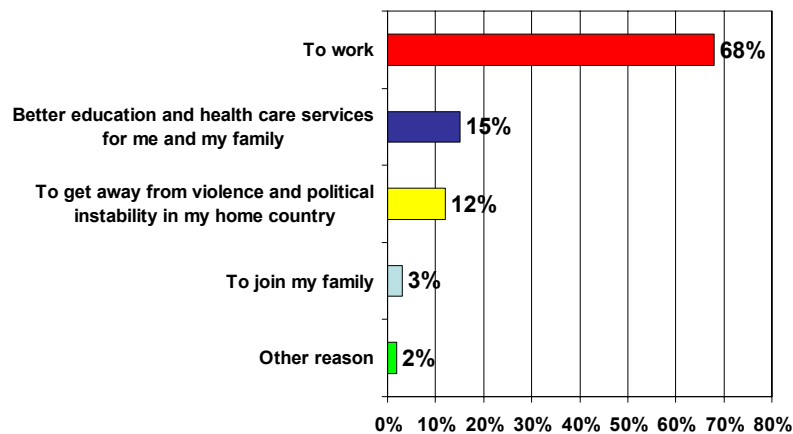




## Work

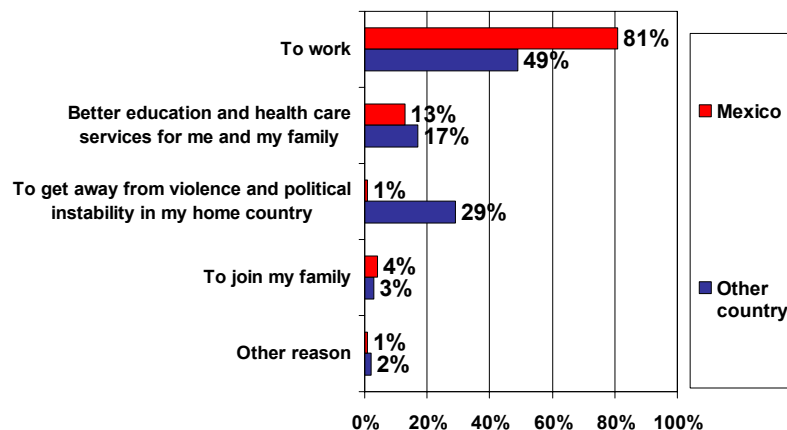
This poll clearly indicates that the overwhelming majority of Mexican undocumented immigrants came to the United States to work. Half of Latin Americans from other countries also say that they came to the United States to work but nearly a third, mostly from South and Central American countries, said that the main reason they came to the United States was to get away from the violence and political instability in their home country. About one-seventh of Mexicans and one-sixth of other Latin American undocumented immigrants said that they came to this country to get better education and health care services for themselves and their families while a very small number of those interviewed said their main reason for coming was to join their family.

## Why did you come to the United States?



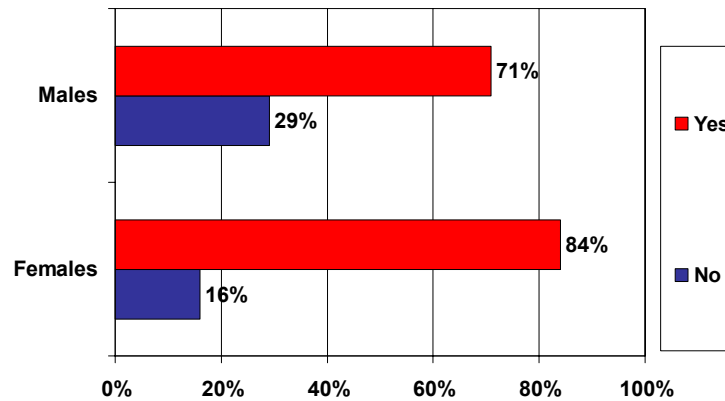
## Why did you come to the United States?

### *By Country of Birth*



Three-quarters of those interviewed say that they work on a regular basis, while the large majority of the others had been in the United States for less than two years and had only been able to find part-time work. Undocumented women appear to have been more successful at obtaining full-time employment than their male counterparts. Nevertheless, it is clear from the comments of the overwhelming majority of the undocumented immigrants interviewed that finding a full-time job is one of their most important goals.

## Do you work on a regular basis?

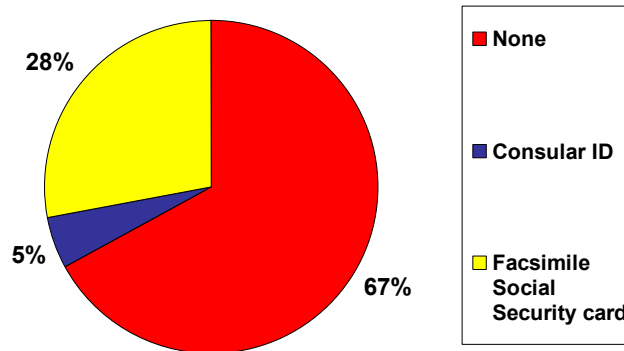


It is clear from this study that these undocumented immigrants contribute to the American workforce in a wide variety of other areas. The following is a list of the type of work that undocumented immigrants reported being involved in.

- Mechanic
- Construction worker
- Masonry worker
- Driver
- Maid
- Restaurant worker / cook / waitress
- Cleaning service worker
- Landscaping worker
- Agriculture worker
- Business owner
- Baker
- Salesperson
- Cashier
- Church worker
- Parking attendant
- Hotel worker
- Elderly care worker
- Hairdresser
- Child care worker
- Textile industry worker
- Manicurist
- Musician
- Factory worker
- Office worker / secretary
- Computer instructor
- Electrician
- Gas station attendant
- Insurance agent
- Maintenance worker
- Masseuse
- Painter
- Plumber
- Real estate agent
- Roof repairman
- Retail worker
- Television repairman
- Upholstery worker
- Security system installer
- Seamstress
- Print shop worker
- Aluminum industry worker

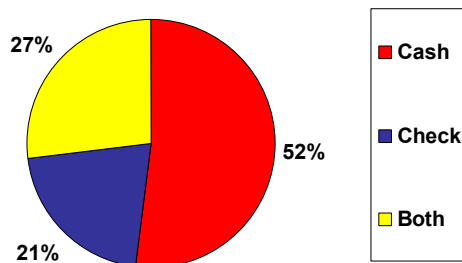
The majority of working undocumented immigrants say they do not need to show their employer any type of identification documents before they are given a job. About a quarter say that they show a “facsimile” Social Security card and a very small number say they show their employer a “matricula consular.”

### What documents do you need to show your employer before you are given a job?

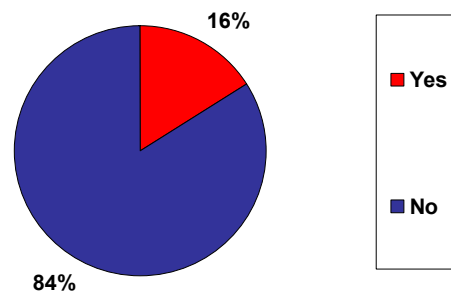


About half of the undocumented say that they are paid in cash by their employers, while about one-fifth say they are paid mostly by check. The others say that it depends on the job. Considering the way most employers pay them, it is not surprising that only one-sixth of the undocumented immigrants we interviewed file a tax return with the Internal Revenue Service every year.

### Do you get paid mostly in cash or by check?

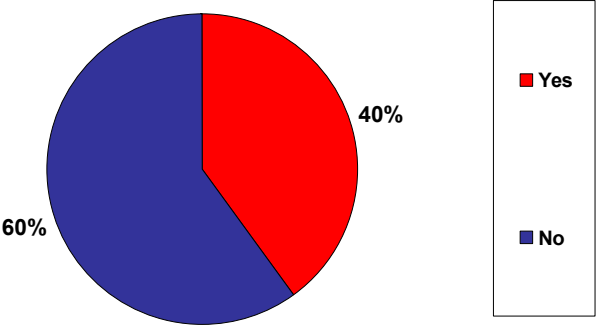


### Do you file a tax return with the Internal Revenue Service every year?



The finding that most of the undocumented immigrants come to the United States to find work is reinforced by the fact that two-fifths of those interviewed said they would return to their home country if they could not find regular employment in the United States.

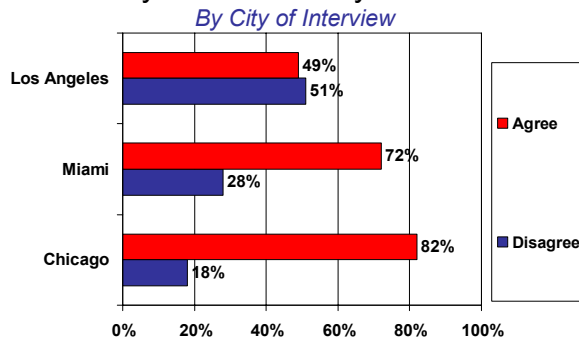
Would you return to your home country if you could not get work in the United States on a regular basis?



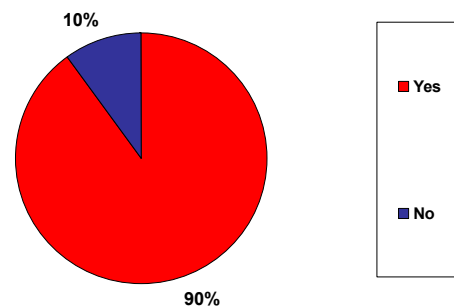
## The American Dream and Legal/Illegal Status

**Most Latin American undocumented immigrants believe in the American Dream.** Two-thirds of those interviewed say that they agree that the United States is a great country because if you work hard you can succeed. Nevertheless, there were important differences on this question depending on the city where the undocumented immigrant was interviewed. Only half of those in Los Angeles, where there are many reported cases of abuse against undocumented workers, agreed with the statement while the overwhelming majority of those interviewed in Chicago and Miami did so. **Furthermore, nearly all would become an American citizen if it was possible.**

The United States is a great country because if you work hard you can succeed.



If it was possible, would you become a citizen of the United States?



## Quotes from Respondents

*“The American Dream means that I can provide for my family and I can achieve that in the United States.”*

*“The United States is the greatest country in the world.”*

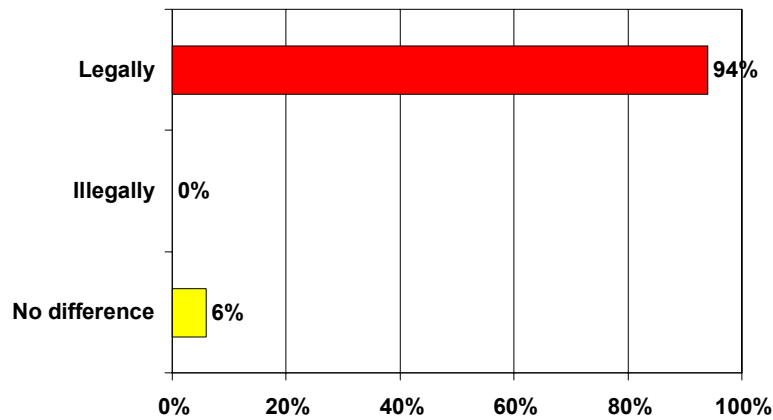
*“The United States is the land of opportunity – if you work hard, you can succeed.”*

*“The future of my family is assured in the United States.”*

*“The American Dream is the reason I came to the United States.”*

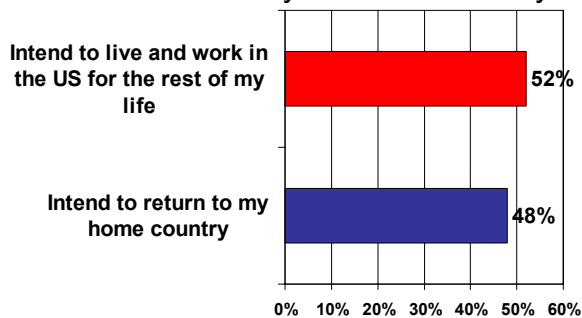
Overwhelmingly, undocumented immigrants say that it is better to come to the United States legally rather than to come illegally. In fact, none of those interviewed said that coming to this country illegally is better than coming through legal channels. A very small minority said that it doesn't make much of a difference whether one comes here legally or illegally.

**Based on your personal experience, is it better to come to the United States legally, illegally or does it not make much of a difference?**

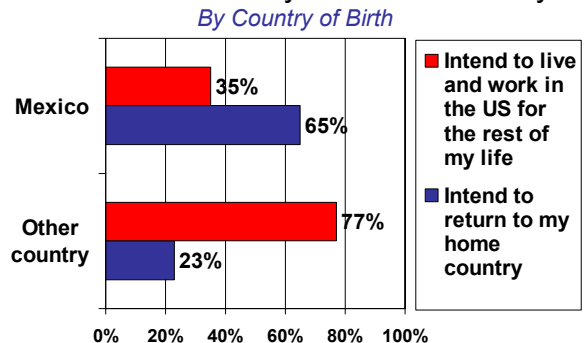


About half of the undocumented immigrants interviewed in this study say they intend to live and work in the United States for the rest of their life, while the other half say they plan to return home within the next ten years. Mexicans are a lot more likely to say that they plan to return to their country in the coming years than their counterparts from other Latin American countries.

**Do you intend to live and work in the United States for the rest of your life or do you intend to return to your home country?**

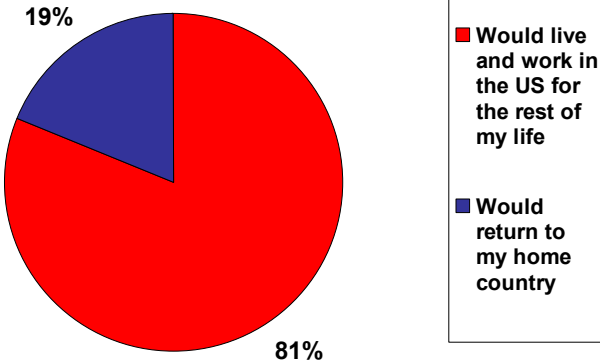


**Do you intend to live and work in the United States for the rest of your life or do you intend to return to your home country?**



**It is important to note that the overwhelming majority of the undocumented from both Mexico and other Latin American countries indicate that they would live and work in the United States for the rest of their lives if they could find a way to legalize their status.**

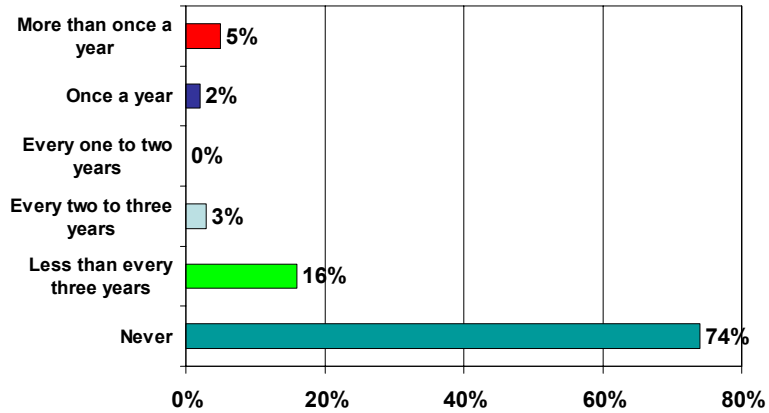
**If you were able to legalize your status, would you live and work in the U.S. for the rest of your life?**



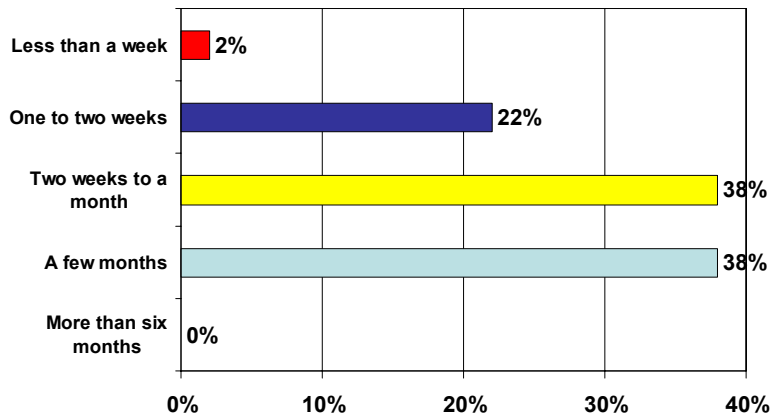
## Traveling Home

The great majority (74 percent) of undocumented immigrants say they never travel back to their home country. Most of those who do travel back home do so less than every three years. About a third of those who travel back home stay there for two weeks to a month each visit and another third stay for a few months at a time.

### How often do you travel back to your home country?



### How long do you usually stay when you travel back to your home country?

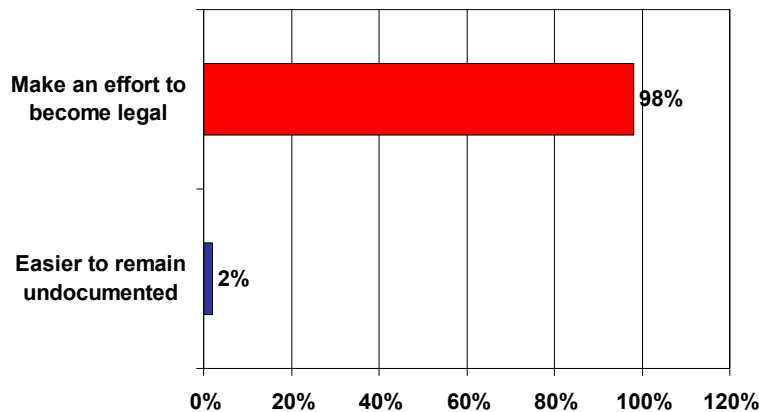




## Immigration Policy

In the second part of the survey, interviewees were told about a “new immigration law” being considered by the United States Congress. The interviewers explained that the legislation proposed would allow undocumented immigrants to legalize their status if they were willing to comply with certain requirements. The study shows clear and widespread support for the legislation among the undocumented and an overwhelming willingness to comply with the majority of the proposed requirements. **In fact, to say that undocumented immigrants would like to take steps to legalize their status is a gross understatement. Roughly every person interviewed said that if the United States Congress approved a new law that would allow the undocumented to legalize their status, they would make an effort to become legal.**

If the government of the U.S. approved a new law that would allow the undocumented to legalize their status, would you make an effort to become legal or is it easier to remain undocumented?



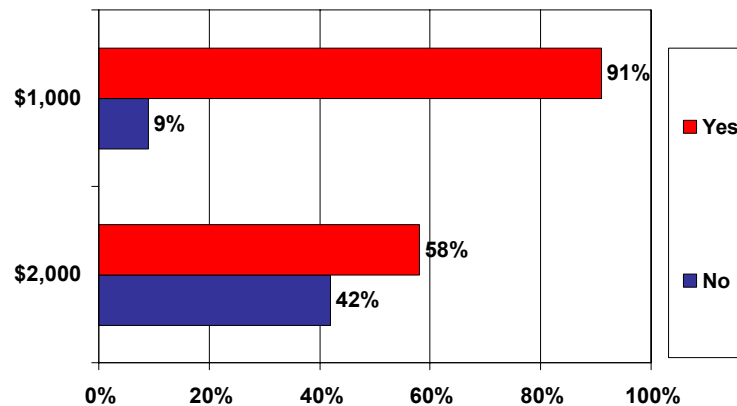
The “requirements” that the overwhelming majority of the undocumented indicated they would comply with are:

- Going to a government office and admitting they were here illegally and providing accurate personal information **(94 percent)**
- Being fingerprinted and receiving a criminal background check **(96 percent)**
- Paying a fine of \$1000 **(91 percent)**
- Enrolling in a class to learn English **(87 percent)**
- Notifying the government of any change of address **(99 percent)**

A majority of immigrants also indicated that they would comply with the following requirements:

- Pay any taxes owed **(70 percent)**
- Prove that you have worked in the United States since they arrived **(64 percent)**
- Pay a \$2,000 fine **(58 percent)**

Would you be willing to pay a fine to the government as a condition to begin the process of legalizing your status?

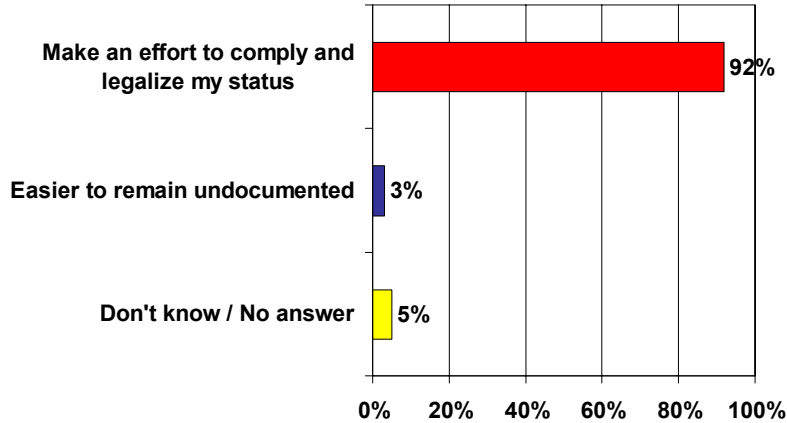


It is clear that these requirements would be extremely unlikely to be met with any opposition by undocumented immigrants. Many are anxious to legalize their status and clearly see the requirements mentioned above as an acceptable means to that end.

As reported above, the majority say they would be willing to pay any taxes they owe and would be able to prove that they have worked in the United States since they arrived. The project interviewers report that a significant percentage of the undocumented that cannot prove their work history cites the nature of their employment and the fact that many of them have always been paid in cash. Their comments also suggest that the undocumented would comply with this “requirement” if they were given some direction as to how they might go about proving their employment history. Additionally, when it comes to paying back taxes, those that said that they could not comply mentioned two major reasons. Most complain that they would have problems computing their tax debt because of cash payments for their work and their lack of records. Others say that they would be unable to pay them because of their financial situation.

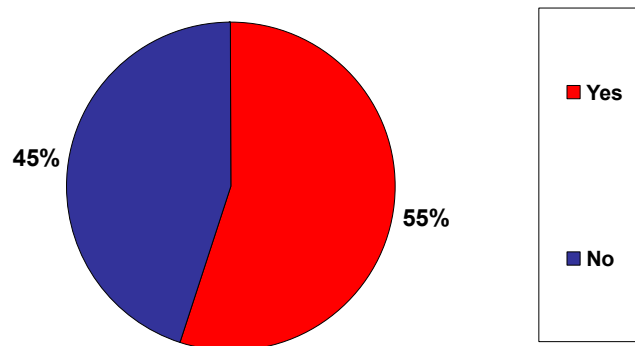
At the end of the interview process and after being told about each of the “new immigration law requirements” mentioned above, there was still nearly unanimous agreement among the undocumented immigrants interviewed that they would make an effort to legalize their status if the new law were put into effect.

The new law would require you to report to a government office and give them your personal information, to agree to a criminal background check, to prove that you have worked in the U.S., to pay a fine, to enroll in an English class, to pay any taxes that you owe and to notify the government of any change in your address. If this is approved, would you make an effort to comply, or is it easier to remain undocumented?



The level of support and enthusiasm for the proposed “new immigration law” is evidenced by the fact that a majority of the undocumented immigrants interviewed indicated that if this proposed legislation was approved by the Congress, they would support the deportation of those who chose not to comply with the new law.

If the new law is approved by the Congress of the U.S. and the undocumented can legalize their status by complying with its requirements, would you support the deportation of those that chose not to comply with the new law?



### **Interviewer Comments**

In a study such as this one, it is often helpful to receive comments from the interviewers as to their impression of each of the interviewees and of how the interviewing process went. Often times, the interviewers can get a reading about the overall state-of-mind or attitude of the interviewee that may not otherwise be captured in the specific questions that make up the survey instrument. This study was no exception; the comments recorded by the interviewers offer unique insight as to what the overall feeling about the proposed legislation is among Latin American undocumented immigrants. On many occasions, the interviewer quotes the respondent as the best way to summarize the tone and content of the conversation.

By and large, interviewers said that they felt the interviewees were being honest and sincere in their answers to the questions. Virtually no interviewer got the impression that the immigrants being interviewed were trying to mislead in any way or that what they said was disingenuous.

*“This person was sincere. She doesn’t think the law will come about, but would abide by it.”*

*“The respondent was very sincere. He wants to get his documents in order so that he can get a driver’s license.”*

*“The person was sincere. He wants to regularize his status so that he can get a higher salary.”*

*“Very sincere respondent. He wants the freedom to come in and out of the country.”*

*“The person was sincere but has doubts about the new law.”*

*“The person was sincere and trusts the government.”*

At the same time though, many of those interviewed conveyed a fear or mistrust of the U.S. government. In fact, one comment made several times by interviewers was that the respondent was being sincere, but did not trust the government. Along these lines, several undocumented immigrants do not think that the government will really do anything to improve the situation for them. Although many thought that the legislation outlined in the study was a great idea, they had little confidence that it would ever make it through the channels of government to become a reality. Interestingly, a couple of interviewers noted that some of the respondents specifically mentioned the *War on Terror* and believe that it has greatly complicated the situation for undocumented immigrants in the United States.

*“This person is sincere, but is afraid of the government.”*

*“He needs to see to believe.”*

*“She likes the new law, but doesn't think the government will make the effort.”*

*“He doesn’t think the government will approve that law.”*

*“She doesn’t think the government will do anything to legalize the undocumented aliens.”*

*“He would like to believe in the government, but has doubts.”*

*“Person thinks the new law is good, but doesn't believe it will become a reality.”*

*“He won't believe in the new law until he sees it.”*

*“The war on terror has complicated everything.”*

*“Terrorism has complicated everything.”*

*“I am afraid of the authorities.”*

*“He was hesitant about government. His cooperation depends on the guarantees.”*

*“She thinks legalization will be difficult because of the events in recent years.”*

Despite the lack of trust and fear of the government, many interviewees also noted that there was a great deal of excitement about the legislation and that many were hopeful that such a law would be passed. Some even said that they did believe in the government and had faith that such a law could be passed, however these comments were greatly outnumbered those that reflected fear and mistrust of the government.

The prospect of becoming legal was thrilling for many interviewees. A handful of interviewees said that it was about time that the government did something for the undocumented immigrants in this country. A few mentioned that if the government does pass legislation, it will be a slow process and may take years to have a working system in place.

*“He is hopeful that the law will come about.”*

*“She thinks the results will come about slowly, but has hope.”*

*“This law would give her a lot of joy and peace of mind.”*

*“He would stay here if the new law is approved.”*

*“He would make any sacrifice necessary to comply with the new law.”*

*“She hopes that something like this will be done.”*

*“He thinks that it may take a long time.”*

*“He would legalize his status if the law passes.”*

*“He would trust the government if it approves the new law.”*

*“He was excited about the new law.”*

*“The government should approve the new law quickly.”*