

Immigrants Age Too: Projections of the Magnitude of the U.S. Undocumented Adult Population

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Introduction

Currently, there are an estimated 11 million undocumented migrants in the United States. Until now, demographers and policymakers have not explored a sense of the size the aging undocumented population in the U.S. nor evaluated how quickly they are aging. This information can become important to better understand and plan for the needs of aging populations (economic needs, health needs, etc.). This essay utilizes a common projection method, the cohort component method, to create projections of the undocumented adult population.

Why This Is Important?

Knowing the pace and size of the aging undocumented population is important for several reasons, outlined below:

- Undocumented individuals are excluded from federal programs designed to be a safety net for older individuals in the United States.
 - Including retirement pensions, as well as disability income programs administered by the Social Security Administration.
- Organizations that offer individuals private retirement accounts may need to adapt to the needs of undocumented migrants, such as finding ways to provide services to individuals who only have an ITIN (individual taxpayer identification number) and may not have a Social Security number.
- Healthcare organizations that are currently safety nets for undocumented immigrants need to plan to create gerontological-focused programs designed to service an aging population.

Projections about the emergence of the aging undocumented population can help inform planning efforts in public and private spheres.

The Inputs to Make Projections

In order to make projections, I use data on mortality from the 2014 National Vital Statistics Report by the Center for Disease Control (CDC).¹ Baseline population estimates are derived from the Migration Policy Institute 2014 report

¹ CDC Vital Statistics Report. https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr66/nvsr66_04.pdf

(Table 1).² Since I am focused on the undocumented population, births are not of relevance because births in the U.S. do not add to the pool of undocumented individuals. A more detailed description of the specific projection approach is in the Appendix section of this essay.

Table 1

BASELINE ESTIMATES OF THE UNDOCUMENTED POPULATION IN THE U.S. BY AGE GROUP, 2014

	2014 Estimates
16 to 24	866,000
25 to 34	1,653,000
35 to 44	3,094,000
45 to 54	2,708,000
55+	1,551,000

Source: Migration Policy Institute 2014 estimates.

Projections of the Aging Undocumented Population

From 2014 to 2023, the number of undocumented adults who are 55+ will increase by 104%. By 2041, there will be close to 4 million in that age category (see Table 2). Those who are 65 or older will reach close to 3 million in 2041 (see Table 2). By 2023, those in ages 45-54 will reach an all-time high (see Figure 1). Overall, trends show that over the span of the next couple of decades, a major shift in the demography of undocumented adults will unfold.

Notwithstanding out migration or mortality rates that differ from those in the U.S. population, and in migration, the results shed light on a possible scenario and invites an intellectual discussion on what the undocumented population will look like in terms of age composition in the next decades.

Table 2

PROJECTIONS USING DISTINCT MORTALITY REGIMES BY AGE GROUP AND PROJECTION YEAR

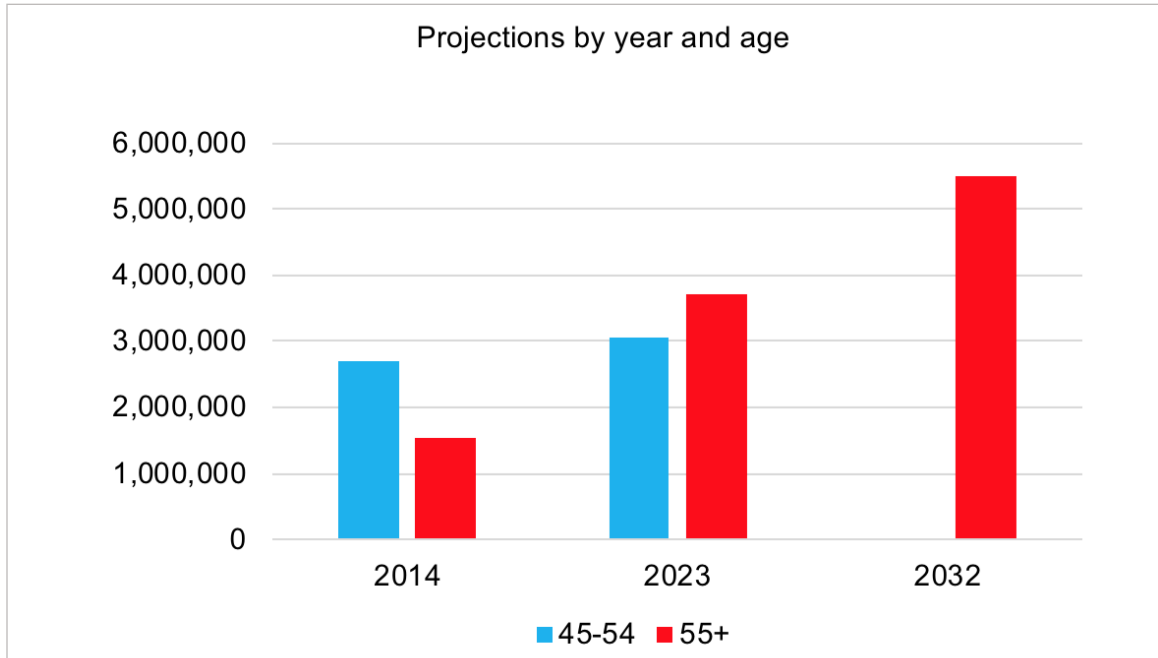
Age Groups by Mortality Regime	2023	2032
U.S. mortality rates		
45 – 54	3,053,563	
55 – 64	3,640,110	2,977,009
65+	1,006,116	2,365,264
Hispanic/Latino mortality rates		
45 – 54	3,066,353	
55 – 64	2,660,168	3,012,191
65+	1,045,577	2,498,156
White mortality rates		
45 – 54	3,054,232	
55 – 64	2,641,448	2,979,171
65+	1,006,529	2,367,373

My projections indicate that under a specific set of assumptions (net migration of zero at each age, for example), the undocumented population reflects an age structure that will include a high proportion of people in ages 45-53

² Migration Policy Institute (MPI) analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data from the 2014 American Community Survey (ACS), 2010-2014 ACS pooled, and the 2008 Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) by James Bachmeier of Temple University and Jennifer Van Hook of The Pennsylvania State University, Population Research Institute.

and over 55 in the coming decades. Regardless of mortality regime applied to the undocumented population estimates, these projections remain relatively similar. In interpreting projections, it is important to understand and appreciate that the goal of these projections is not to be precise. A priority is to engage in an exercise with a set of assumptions in order to learn about a process. In this case, we learn that we are on the horizon of an aging foreign-born undocumented population if the assumptions hold true.

Figure 1
PROJECTIONS OF UNDOCUMENTED POPULATION WHEN APPLYING HISPANIC/LATINO MORTALITY RATES



The growth rate of the undocumented population between ages 45-54 is about 12% and that of those 55+ is about 13% between the years 2014 and 2023. In addition, the growth rate of those 55+ from year 2014 to 2032 is about 25% (Table 3 has specific growth rates).

Table 3
GROWTH RATES BASED ON PROJECTIONS BY MORTALITY RATE REGIME AND PROJECTION YEAR

Mortality Rates Applied	Age	2023	2032
All U.S.	45 – 54	1.42	
	55+	15.01	13.58
Hispanic/Latinos	45 – 54	1.47	
	55+	15.44	14.18
White	45 – 54	1.42	
	55+	15.02	13.60

Other Considerations

It is important to note that the approach taken to get projections in this essay follow strict assumptions about migration flows. For some countries such as Mexico, this is suitable as the net migration is zero but this is not the

case for other countries. In addition, individuals who fall out of status (e.g. expired visa) may further add noise to these projections. Without considering out migration, projections may be overstated.ⁱ Deportation and voluntary outmigration may decrease the undocumented population. Some deportees are also likely to try to migrate to the U.S. again, often because their partners and children are there.ⁱⁱ Migratory flows are complex.

Conclusions and Key Takeaways

- Existing estimates of the undocumented population in 2014 indicated that about 1,551,000 undocumented immigrants are aged 55 years old and over. I have shown that the number of aging undocumented adults is projected to double from 2014 to 2023 based on a simple projection method.
- We can expect that the aging of the undocumented population will create an unexpected demand for older age services.
- Since undocumented individuals cannot receive Social Security benefits (even if they may have contributed portions of their paycheck), how they will sustain themselves is an urgent question. A recent study showed that older undocumented Hispanic/Latinos at times do not save for retirement and may have plans to move back to their home country as well as work past retirement age.ⁱⁱⁱ
- Many will remain in the United States. Planning for their needs will become important in this decade and those to come.
- Older age immigrants have limited access to healthcare^{iv} but may experience a greater need for them as they age. Health organizations need to plan and support older-aged undocumented immigrants in the U.S. with aging-specific care.
- Knowing the magnitude of the aging undocumented population is important to prepare the resources necessary to serve the needs of this population.

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Appendix: Methodology

Populations change for 3 primary reasons: birth, death, and migration. In this essay, births are not relevant, deaths are taken into account, and in/out migration estimates are not currently considered but will be taken into account in the coming months. Thus, for the projection results, an assumption is that net migration is zero for the undocumented population at each age group. That is, there is an equal number of individuals who enter and exit the undocumented population space. This assumption will be relaxed in later iterations of the analyses. Utilizing the 2014 life table from the CDC, survival ratios were created for nine-year intervals, which are the intervals for which estimates of the undocumented population was available. The survival ratios are calculated for the population ages 16-55+. These rates were developed using the nL_x+n/nL_x formula and the T_{n+x}/T_x was used for the open age interval. Projected survivors are the product of the baseline and survival ratios. This was repeated iteratively for each projection interval forward. The assumptions of the cohort component method used in this essay are that survival rates of the undocumented population: 1) are not distinct from that of the U.S. population and 2) remain unchanged over time.^[1]

ⁱ Bean, Frank D., Rodolfo Corona, Rodolfo Tuiran, and Karen A. Woodrow-Iafield. 2001. "Circular, Invisible, and Ambiguous Migrants: Components of Difference in Estimates of the Number of Unauthorized Mexican Migrants in the United States." *Demography* 38(3):411–22.

ⁱⁱ Amuedo-Dorantes, Catalina, Thitima Puttitanun, and Ana P. Martinez-Donate. 2013. "How Do Tougher Immigration Measures Affect Unauthorized Immigrants?" *Demography* 50(3):1067–91.

ⁱⁱⁱ Torres, Alfredo, Rubi Becerril, and Alfredo Torres. 2016. *Elderly Undocumented Latinos and Their Retirement Strategies*.

^{iv} Torres, Alfredo, Rubi Becerril, and Alfredo Torres. 2016. *Elderly Undocumented Latinos and Their Retirement Strategies*.