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Man with Police ICE vest escorts handcuffed man.

Agents with the Immigration and Customs Enforcement detain a man after conducting a raid at the Cedar Run apartment complex in Denver Feb. 5. (OSV News/Reuters/Kevin Mohatt)

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New data shows that the number of immigrants lacking permanent legal status in the U.S. is much lower than the Trump administration claims, and "talk of an invasion is overblown," said J. Kevin Appleby, senior fellow for policy and communications at the Center for Migration Studies of New York.

Appleby, who served as the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' director of migration policy and public affairs 1998-2016, shared his thoughts in an email to OSV News about a recently released journal article by his CMS colleague Robert Warren.

Research by Warren, published in the Journal on Migration and Human Security, found that the total number of what he called the "undocumented population" in the U.S. reached 12.2 million in 2023.

That number is far lower than the 15 to 20 million that Trump has threatened with mass deportation.

But, said Appleby, "it is in their (the Trump administration's) interest to push the higher numbers to justify a mass deportation campaign."

In fact, Appleby said that, "almost half of the 20 million number used by immigration opponents have some type of legal status."

According to Warren's article, the number of people in the U.S. without authorization increased by about 2 million from 2020 to 2023, with 13 countries accounting for the most growth (1.9 million).

Mexico topped the list at 350,000, with a combined total of 620,000 from four Central American nations: El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua.

Six South American nations — Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Venezuela — saw 690,000 of the growth, with China and India, at a combined total of 200,000.

California, Florida, New York and Illinois all experienced increases in their respective numbers of individuals without permanent legal status.

Data from the Department of Homeland Security showed that arrivals at the U.S.-Mexico border "dropped steadily in the second half of FY (fiscal year) 2024 and have continued to drop in the interim," Warren said in his article.

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Citing his previous research, Warren said, "If that decline continues, overstaying temporary visas will likely again become the primary contributor to undocumented population growth over the next several years, as it was in the recent past."

That development, in turn, "would diminish the case for continuing construction of a costly border wall," he wrote.

Warren's research was based on data collected by the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey, and includes people in the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals and Temporary Protected Status, or TPS, programs, as well as "most of the people that have entered asylum backlogs or received humanitarian

parole status since 2021," according to the article.

However, tracking future numbers could become more difficult because the surveys that collect the necessary information could be affected by anticipated federal agency budget and personnel cuts, Warren said.

So far, the 2025 arrest and removal numbers "have so far fallen well short of the administration's mass deportation projections," he wrote.

At the same time, Warren, "the number of noncitizens counted in the ACS could still decline sharply due to this initiative."

That decline would be "difficult but important to understand," he said, due to "the myriad connections and contributions of undocumented residents to US families, the economy, and communities."

Research would then be required to determine if any such decline was due to deportations, emigration out of the U.S., fear of responding to surveys, or a combination of those and other factors, Warren said.

Catholic social teaching on immigration balances three interrelated principles — the right of people to migrate in order to sustain their lives and those of their families; the right of a country to regulate its borders and control immigration; and a nation's duty to regulate its borders with justice and mercy.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church states that "the more prosperous nations are obliged, to the extent they are able, to welcome the foreigner in search of the security and the means of livelihood which he cannot find in his country of origin."

The church has also made clear human laws are also subject to divine limits knowable to human reason. St. John Paul II's 1993 encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* ("Splendor of Truth") and 1995 encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* ("The Gospel of Life") both quote the Second Vatican Council's teaching in *Gaudium et Spes*, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World. They name "deportation" among various specific acts "offensive to human dignity" that "are a disgrace, and so long as they infect human civilization they contaminate those who inflict them more than those who suffer injustice, and they are a negation of the honor due to the Creator."

"What is important to understand is that the large majority of the undocumented population has lived in the U.S. for years and built equities in the country," Appleby

said. "From a Catholic teaching perspective, they should be allowed to pay a penalty and be put on a path to citizenship, so they and their U.S. citizen children can continue to contribute to their communities."