

Study: Valley's unauthorized immigrants mostly long-term residents from Mexico

By Andrea Castillo

- The Valley's unauthorized immigrants

A new report provides a data portrait of unauthorized immigrants in the central San Joaquin Valley's most populous counties.

Finding	Fresno County	Tulare County
Born in Mexico/Central America	90%	97%
In U.S. for more than five years	82%	87%
Under 35 years old	58%	55%
College-age, not enrolled in college	75%	81%
Limited or no English proficiency	65%	65%
Work in agriculture	44%	57%
Live at or above the poverty level	53%	58%
Lack health insurance	56%	57%

Source: Migration Policy Institute

Among undocumented immigrants in the central San Joaquin Valley, most were born in Mexico, have lived in the United States for more than five years, don't speak much English and live in poverty.

For people who keep up with immigration in the Valley, those statistics might not be a surprise.

Last week, Migration Policy Institute released [detailed county-level profiles](#) of unauthorized immigrants across the country. The institute analyzed the immigrant populations of 24 counties in California, including Fresno and Tulare, for sociodemographic data such as health care coverage, educational attainment and English proficiency. They also included estimates for Fresno, Tulare and Madera counties of immigrants qualifying for deportation relief under [President Barack Obama's executive action](#) announced last November.

According to the data, an estimated 18,000 young unauthorized immigrants in Fresno, Tulare and Madera counties could qualify for Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, a federal program that halts their deportation and grants them three-year renewable work permits if they meet certain criteria. Another 50,000 undocumented parents of U.S. Citizens and legal residents could qualify in the tri-county area for a new similar program.

Those eligible for relief constitute 48% of the unauthorized population in Madera County, 51% in Fresno County and 58% in Tulare County.

[Obama's action](#) allows around 5 million undocumented immigrants to remain in the U.S. Most of those — undocumented parents of children with legal status — would be eligible for deportation relief and three-year renewable work permits if they pass background checks, pay taxes and prove that their child was born before the

date of the executive order. The plan also expands the number of young immigrants who qualify for deferred action.

Nearly [3.2 million immigrants in California](#) lack legal status, according to the institute. They make up more than 8% of the state's population.

Senior policy analyst Jeanne Batalova said the 94 counties profiled are home to nearly two-thirds of the country's unauthorized immigrants. The Valley's undocumented immigrants are, predictably, a more rural population, with 44% in Fresno County and 57% in Tulare County working in agriculture. Some may not apply for the immigration programs, she said, if they live farther away from sources of information or can't afford the application fee.

On the other hand, Batalova said, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals was somewhat of a training ground for local governments, community organizations and immigrant advocates. The program allowed them to test out how efficient their services and outreach capabilities were. She said many found that they didn't know much about the unauthorized populations they were trying to reach.

"That was another reason we wanted to provide the details at the county level," she said, "so a variety of stakeholders can understand the population and reach out."

Jesus Martinez, a Fresno-based consultant with the Immigrant Legal Resource Center, sees it differently. For those working with undocumented immigrants in the Valley, none of the institute's findings were new. He said they reinforce the thought that unauthorized immigrants here are predominantly Mexican, young, have lived in the U.S. a long time, are low-income and have lower education levels than other immigrants in the country.

Martinez said that's because most job opportunities for undocumented immigrants in the Valley are agriculture-related. He coordinates a coalition called the [Central Valley Immigrant Integration Collaborative](#), helping undocumented immigrants obtain driver's licenses under Assembly Bill 60 and apply for deferred action, among other things.

"These documents we're seeing right now give us an idea of the challenges we have to serve this population that has been neglected for so long by an immigration system that is broken," he said. "We need to enable them to come out of the shadows."

Batalova said there's a difference between being eligible and actually applying for the immigration programs. Slightly more than half of the nearly 1.5 million young immigrants estimated to be eligible for deferred action have applied in the last three years.

It's difficult to predict how many undocumented parents will apply for the new program Obama announced in November, she said, because there are too many variables. Among the challenges, she said, attitudes are more negative toward the new program than Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals; the older population is likely more disconnected from information centers; and proving their presence in the U.S. could be difficult to establish if employers are reluctant to provide documents admitting they hired unauthorized immigrants.

"That raises a lot of warning signs for those asking and providing documents," she said. "I'm sure that in many families, they are facing a very difficult decision (about whether to) give all their information to a government that may change its mind in exchange for deferred deportation for three years."

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