Estimating the Number of Illegal Immigrants Who Might Get Covid Relief Payments

By Steven A. Camarota

During the debate over the Covid relief bill Sen. Durbin (D-Ill.) stated that "Undocumented immigrants do not have Social Security numbers, and they do not qualify for stimulus relief checks." This is incorrect; we estimate that there are 2.65 million illegal immigrants who have Social Security numbers that allow them to receive stimulus checks. We estimate that 2.1 million of these individuals have incomes low enough to qualify for checks, and they have 1.1 million U.S.-born dependent children. As a result, illegal immigrants could receive an estimated $4.38 billion in cash payments from the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021.

Among the findings:

- There are 653,000 illegal immigrants with Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) and 411,000 with Temporary Protected Status (TPS). These individuals have work authorization, which comes with a valid Social Security number allowing them to receive a Covid stimulus check.

- In FY 2020, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) issued 882,000 work authorizations and Social Security numbers to other illegal immigrants. Among the categories eligible are adjustment of status, suspension of deportation, and asylum applicants, as well as those given withholding of removal, deferred action (non-DACA), and parolees.

- All of the above categories, as well as others, can be described as aliens temporarily present without status. These individuals are in the country illegally and could be required to leave. Yet, under the current system, they are still given work authorization and Social Security numbers, allowing them to receive cash payments such as the Earned Income Tax Credit and Covid relief checks.

- In addition to the nearly two million illegal immigrants issued work authorization and Social Security numbers by USCIS, the Social Security Administration (SSA) has previously estimated that 700,000 illegal immigrants use stolen identities and Social Security numbers (SSNs).

- In total, we estimate that there are 2.65 million illegal immigrants with Social Security numbers that allow them to receive Covid stimulus checks.

- Based on their characteristics, we estimate that 2.1 million of these illegals have incomes that allow them to qualify for Covid payments. Those with qualifying incomes also have 1.1 million U.S.-born dependent children.

- In total, illegal immigrants could receive an estimated $4.38 billion in stimulus checks from the new Covid relief bill — $2.85 billion directly, and another $1.53 billion on behalf of their children.

- Not included in these numbers are an estimated (by SSA) 600,000 former guestworkers employed illegally who use the Social Security number issued to them when they were in status. Although they should not be eligible for checks, we have been unable to determine what steps the government takes to actually prevent them from receiving payments. The same is true for the 1.8 million illegal immigrants SSA has estimated use Social Security numbers and names that do not match.

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Who Gets Stimulus Checks?

The $1.9 trillion American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 signed into law on March 11 by President Biden provides $1,400 stimulus checks to individuals making up to $75,000 a year or heads of households who make up to $112,500. For married couples filing jointly, both would qualify for $1,400 checks if they make up to $150,000. The program has a very quick phase-out. Individuals who make $75,000 to $80,000 will receive less than $1,400 as will couples making $150,000 to $160,000 a year and heads of households earning $112,500 to $120,000. In addition to the amounts for adults, parents will receive $1,400 for every child they claim as a dependent, including those over age 18 who are college students or those who are disabled. Stimulus checks will be based on either 2019 or 2020 taxes. Those who did not file a return in either of those years can still receive a stimulus check. Information from receipt of government benefits can be used to send out payments. Moreover, the IRS has set up a "Get My Payment" button on its home page that links to a form allowing anyone, including non-filers, to request a payment. It is available in seven different languages.

Illegals with Social Security Numbers Will Get Checks

Do Illegals Have SSNs? During the debate over the Covid relief act, the Congressional Record shows that Sen. Durbin (D-Ill.) stated that "Undocumented immigrants do not have Social Security numbers, and they do not qualify for stimulus relief checks, period." This was in response to Sen. Cruz (R-Texas) raising a concern that "every illegal alien in America" might receive a check. Both senators were wrong. As CNN's Facts First pointed out shortly after the exchange, there is no question that some, but not all, illegal immigrants have valid numbers. CNN observed it was a "small group", though they did not attempt to quantify the number. Of course, what constitutes a "small" number is subjective, but as we will see below the number of illegal immigrants with a valid Social Security number is more than 2.5 million. To receive stimulus checks, however, these individuals would also have to meet the income requirements of the relief bill.

An SSN Is Supposed To Be Required for Checks. The IRS is very clear on its website that to receive tax credits, such as the Earned Income Tax Credit, which is similar to a stimulus check, everyone "claimed on your taxes must have a valid Social Security number (SSN)." We assume in this analysis that this applies to stimulus payments from the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021. To be considered valid, the IRS states that an SSN must be: "Valid for employment". And the IRS goes on to state specifically this includes "Social Security numbers on a Social Security card that has the words, 'Valid for work with DHS authorization.'" This is the kind of number that is issued when U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) gives authorization to work to an alien. This is typically referred to as an employment authorization document (EAD) or "work permit".

Social Security Numbers Are Issued with EADs. USCIS states on its website that those who get work authorization, "will receive two documents — your Employment Authorization Document (EAD) … and in another envelope your SSN card." To be sure, many EADs and SSNs issued each year go to those with a legal right to be in the United States. But, as will be made clear below, a large number of EADs are given to illegal immigrants. The bottom line is that unless the IRS suddenly creates a new rule barring illegal immigrants from receiving payments and a procedure to implement such a policy, immigrants with valid Social Security numbers, a significant number of them in the U.S. illegally, will receive stimulus checks.

Estimated Number of Illegal Immigrants with Social Security Numbers

We use a variety of U.S. government sources to estimate the number of people living illegally in the United States who have Social Security numbers. While it may be surprising to some, there is no debate that there are large numbers of illegal immigrants eligible to work in the United States who have been issued Social Security numbers by the government. It may seem entirely incongruous that people living illegally in the United States have explicitly been given work authorization by the government, but that is in fact the case.

Asylum Applicants. One of the largest groups of illegal immigrants who have been given work authorization and Social Security numbers are asylum applicants. These are people living in the United States illegally who have applied for asylum. Typically, 180 days after applying for asylum, regardless of the underlying merits of their application, applicants may apply for work authorization and the accompanying Social Security number. These are not individuals who have been granted asylum by a judge. In fact, the vast majority of applicants will either abandon their claim or be found not to qualify for asylum.

Based on USCIS's tables showing EAD issuances, in FY 2020 183,820 initial EADs were approved for asylum seekers and an additional 258,123 EADs were renewed. This means that at the end of FY 2020 there were a total of 441,943 asylum applicants with employment authorization.[1] Adding initial EADs and approved renewals in the most recent fiscal year is a good way to estimate the number of asylum seekers who have Social Security numbers because almost all EADs for asylum applications last one year and need to be renewed annually.

DACA and TPS. Another large group of illegal immigrants with valid Social Security numbers are recipients of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA). There were 652,880 DACA recipients at the end of FY 2020, based on USCIS figures. DACA recipients receive EADs because one of the primary purposes of that program was to provide work authorization to the population of illegal immigrants who came at younger ages. As a result, virtually all DACA recipients are of working-age.[2] Like those with DACA, illegal immigrants granted Temporary Protected Status (TPS) also have EADs and Social Security numbers. Also like DACA recipients, nearly all of those with TPS are of working-age because one of the primary reasons for applying for TPS is to get an EAD that makes it possible to work legally in the United States.[3] The Congressional Research Service estimated in October 2020 that 411,326 individuals had TPS.[4]

Smaller Categories. There are a number of smaller categories of illegal immigrants who also receive EADs and Social Security numbers. While fewer illegal immigrants are given EADs in these individual categories than are asylum applicants or DACA or TPS recipients, taken together these smaller groups still represent a substantial number of illegals with Social Security numbers. Based on the USCIS published tables on EAD issuance cited above, we estimate that there are 440,109 illegal immigrants with EADs and resulting Social Security numbers in these categories.[5] Among the groups this includes are those who have applied for adjustment of status, suspension of deportation, and asylum, as well as those given withholding of removal, deferred action (other than DACA), and parolees. These EAD categories include A10, C09P, C10, C11, C14, and C18.[6] All of these can be described as aliens temporarily present without status under the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA).

Stolen Identities. For each of the categories discussed above, there exist recently published government numbers, so estimating the number of illegals with EADs and Social Security numbers is relatively straightforward. However, there are other illegal immigrants with Social Security numbers that are more difficult to estimate. In a 2013 report, the Social Security Administration estimated that there were 700,0000 illegal immigrants working in the United States with stolen Social Security numbers. If the SSN is valid and matches government records, then those illegal immigrants should be able to receive a stimulus check, assuming they meet the income requirements.

To be clear, the 700,000 illegal immigrants who have stolen identities are distinct from the 1.8 million additional illegal immigrants SSA estimated in the same report who are using Social Security numbers and names that do not match. The illegal immigrants with non-matching numbers presumably will not receive a check from the Treasury, though we cannot say with certainty that this is the case.

Total Number. The top of Table 1 adds all of the illegal immigrants with valid Social Security numbers together. It shows a total of 2.65 million illegal immigrants who have Social Security numbers and who might receive stimulus money. Of course, some illegal immigrants have incomes that are high enough to exclude them from receiving checks, so not all of these individuals will get checks. In the next section, we estimate the share of illegal immigrants with SSNs who have incomes that allow them to qualify for stimulus payments.

Table 1. Estimated Population of Illegal Immigrants with Valid Social Security Numbers

DACA recipients	652,880
TPS recipients	411,326
Asylum applicants	441,943
Other aliens temporarily present without status under the Immigration and Nationality Act*	440,109
Illegal immigrants with stolen identities	700,000
Total illegal population who can receive stimulus money	2,646,258

Other Categories of Illegal Immigrants with Social Security Numbers Who Might Receive Stimulus Checks

Former guestworkers who have overstayed	600,000
Illegal immigrants using SSNs and names that do not match	1,800,000

Source: Public-use USCIS tables on EADs issued in FY 2020 and Social Security Administration estimates of illegal immigrants working with SSNs. See text for more detail.

* This includes, but is not limited to, adjustment of status and suspension of deportation applicants, as well as those given withholding of removal, deferred action (non-DACA), and parolees.

Others Who Might Qualify for Checks. It should be added that SSA has estimated that there are [600,000](#) former guest-workers who are using a Social Security number that was issued to them when they enjoyed legal status. Technically, these individuals should not receive stimulus checks, though their names and numbers do match SSA records. These individuals do not have up-to-date work authorizations. Therefore, we do not include them in our estimates. But it is not entirely clear to us that the IRS and Treasury Department have the administrative capacity to exclude all of these individuals. If the IRS used the [SAVE system](#), then most of these individuals would be excluded from receiving payments. But we have not been able to verify that this is the case. Given the intense political pressure to dispense funds quickly, it is entirely possible that some share of these individuals could receive stimulus money.

Illegals with SSNs and Incomes Low Enough to Receive Checks

Estimated Illegal Immigrants in the ACS. We estimate the number of illegal immigrants in the Census Bureau's American Community Survey based on prior research. For an explanation of how we estimate illegal immigrants in Census Bureau data such as the American Community Survey (ACS), see [this report](#). Using our prior methodology to identify illegal immigrants, we further identify those within the illegal population who have DACA or TPS, or are asylum applicants. To identify DACA and TPS applicants in the data, we use their demographic characteristics, which have been well studied. Asylum applicants are a more challenging population to identify, but based on their characteristics, we feel we are able to obtain a rough estimate from the data. However, we have not developed a methodology for those in the smaller categories of aliens who are temporarily present without status under the Immigration and Nationality Act. This is a diverse group. Nor do we have a method for identifying illegal immigrants with stolen identities. For these two groups, we simply assume they have the same characteristics as the overall illegal alien population in terms of income and number of children.

Illegal Immigrants with Qualifying Incomes. We apply the income requirements for receiving payments under the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 for each of these subpopulations based on their characteristics in the American Community Survey. We find differences in income between the various groups of illegal immigrants who have Social Security numbers, as it relates to Covid relief payment eligibility. For example, we estimate that about 73 percent of DACA recipients qualify for checks compared to 84 percent of those with TPS and 76 percent of asylum applicants. We also find, not unexpectedly, that some groups, such as asylum applicants, tend to have fewer children, reflecting the fact that most have not been in the country that long.

Table 2 takes our results from the ACS and applies them to the number of illegal immigrants with SSNs shown in Table 1. For all five groups, we calculate the number with qualifying incomes up to $75,000 a year (or $150,000 for a married couple), between $75,000 and $80,000 a year (or $150,000 to $160,000 if married), and up to $112,500 if single and the head of a household, phasing out at $120,000. We do the same for their U.S.-born dependent children ages 21 and under.[7] For Covid stimulus payments received on behalf of dependent children, we exclude illegal immigrant children because IRS rules require a valid SSN to receive tax credits. It is possible that some young illegal immigrants have valid Social Security numbers, but we do not include them in our estimate because we think that number is small.

An Estimated $4.38 Billion in Payments. The bottom of Table 2 shows the total number of illegal immigrants (or dependent children) who have incomes that would allow them to receive Covid relief payments in 2021. We find that 2.06 million illegals with SSNs could receive Covid payments and that they have nearly 1.1 million U.S.-born children. This means that illegal immigrants could receive an estimated $4.38 billion in payments from the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021. Of course, most of the 10 to 11 million illegal immigrants estimated to live in the United States will not receive Covid relief payments, but a very large number can receive payments totaling billions of dollars. Whether this constitutes sound public policy is beyond the scope of this analysis. However, it is clear that the decision to create programs and give work authorization and Social Security numbers to millions of people who are in the country illegally has consequences, not the least of which is that billions of dollars from public coffers will be flowing to illegal immigrants from programs like the EITC and Covid relief.

It is not known for certain what share of illegal immigrants with Social Security numbers will actually receive their Covid stimulus payments. However, the system is highly automated. The government automatically sends money to millions of bank accounts used in prior tax returns. A [BLS survey](#) done a few weeks after the last stimulus package in 2020 was enacted found that the vast majority of Americans did get their stimulus checks or anticipated receiving them. As already indicated, the IRS on its home page has a button that links to a form allowing people, even those who have not filed a tax return, to apply for the money. The form is available in many different languages. Moreover, illegal immigrants who have taken the time and paid the money to secure work authorization seem likely to also be inclined to take the steps necessary to receive a Covid payment to which in most cases they are legally entitled, if one is not sent to them automatically.

Table 2. Number of Illegal Immigrants with Social Security Numbers and their U.S.-born Dependent Children (≤21) Whose Income Is Low Enough to Receive Stimulus Payments Under The American Rescue Plan Act of 2021

	Number with Income ≤$75,000 or ≤$150,000 if Married	Number with Income $75,000 to $80,000 or $150,000 to 160,000 if Married[1]	Number of Single Household Heads with Income $75,000 to $112,500[2]	Number of U.S.-Born Dependent Children in Families with Income ≤$75,000 or ≤$150,000 if Parents Are Married	Number of U.S.-Born Dependent Children in Families with Incomes of $75,000 to $80,000 or $150,000 to $160,000 if Parents Are Married[1]	Number of U.S.-Born Children in Households Headed by a Single Person with Income $75,000 to $112,500[2]	Total Qualifying for Payments
DACA recipients	454,169	17,109	4,139	219,860	277	7,740	703,294
TPS recipients	329,480	7,336	6,915	246,132	2,501	14,760	607,123
Asylum applicants	325,661	6,372	1,670	79,731	272	2,632	416,338
Other aliens temporarily present without status under the Immigration and Nationality Act[3]	340,912	7,797	3,159	193,552	1,537	6,361	553,319
Illegal immigrants with stolen identities	542,225	12,402	5,025	307,848	2,444	10,117	880,062
Total illegal population that can revive stimulus money	1,992,447	51,016	20,908	1,047,124	7,031	41,610	3,160,136
Total payments	**$2,789,426,011**	**$35,711,158**	**$27,838,703**	**$1,465,973,946**	**$4,921,718**	**$55,680,250**	**$4,379,551,785**

Source: This table takes the number of illegal immigrants with Social Security numbers shown in Table 1, and combines it with the income thresholds in the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 and an analysis of the 2018 American Community Survey to determine income. See text for more detail.

[1] As a simplifying measure, we assume that those in the income range where the payment phases out receive the middle value of $700.

[2] Includes a small number of illegal immigrants or their children with incomes from $112,500 to $120,000. We also assume these individuals receive the middle value of $700.

[3] This includes, but is not limited to, adjustment of status and suspension of deportation applicants, as well as those given withholding of removal, deferred action (non-DACA) and parolees.

Areas of Possible Error in This Analysis

Some Data Is Not Current. First, the data used to estimate the income and characteristics of illegal immigrants is from the 2018 American Community Survey, and conditions could have changed somewhat since then. Second, while some number of illegal immigrants have used stolen IDs in 2021, neither the SSA, whose estimates we used, nor any other federal agency of which we are aware, has published a newer estimate than the one SSA put out in 2013.

Those with Stolen IDs. As of this writing, we know very little about the demographics of illegal immigrants with stolen IDs. As a result, we do not have a way to estimate their income and number of dependents, beyond simply assuming that they have the same income and number of dependents as the overall illegal population. We also have not developed a methodology for estimating the characteristics of illegal immigrants in the ACS for aliens with EADs that we refer to as "aliens temporarily present without status under the INA". It is a relatively eclectic group. Like those with stolen identities, we assume their income and number of dependents are the same as the average illegal immigrant.

Does the IRS Actually Prevent Illegals from Getting Checks? Based on our conversations with congressional staff and others in the government, we have determined that the IRS does not use the SAVE program run by USCIS, which allows the agencies to verify the eligibility of applicants. It also does not use the Numident files, which contain the names and places of birth of people with Social Security numbers. Use of these tools could weed out a significant number of illegal immigrants from receiving the EITC and Covid relief. This would include the 600,000 former guestworkers that the SSA has estimated are using their previously valid Social Security numbers. These systems could also weed out former asylum applicants who had an EAD and SSN and have subsequently abandoned their applications or had their claim denied. This is also true of those with SSNs who were temporarily present without status in other categories who no longer enjoy that status. In our view, it seems very likely that a large share of these individuals will receive checks from the new relief bill. Though, to be conservative, we do not include them in our estimates.

The same set of issues applies to those illegal immigrants using SSNs whose names do not match. It is not clear how federal agencies actually go about making sure none of these individuals receive checks. In total, the number of illegal immigrants with non-matching or previously valid Social Security numbers runs into the millions. If only a modest fraction of these individuals incorrectly receive Covid checks, then the total dollar amount illegally flowing out of public coffers will be substantial.

End Notes

[1] Asylum seekers' applications for EADs are shown in the row labeled C08 in the first column, here.

[2] In 2017 the Pew Research Center estimated that only .5 percent were under age 16.

[3] In 2017, researchers at the Center for Migration Studies estimated that 97 percent of El Salvadorans with TPS (by far the largest group with this status) were age 25 and older, as were 98 percent of Hondurans and 78 percent of Haitians. These figures do not include those with TPS who are aged 16 to 24, who are also of working-age, who comprise the vast majority of the reminder of the TPS population.

[4] Our method of estimating asylum applicants with EADs/SSNs based on USCIS published tables cannot be used for those with TPS partly because, as USCIS states on its website: "When the Secretary of Homeland Security extends an expiring TPS designation ... the secretary may also automatically extend the validity of certain, specified expiring EADs associated with TPS." This is what typically happens. Since renewal of work authorization costs applicants several hundred dollars, many illegal immigrants with TPS choose not to renew and simply continue to work on their expired documents, which they are allowed to do. Links on the USCIS website for each country show expired EADs (e.g. El Salvador, Honduras, and Haiti). As result, unlike other groups with employment authorization, USCIS published tables do not reflect the full number of TPS recipients who have EADs and Social Security numbers valid for employment. It may be worth adding that when the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) estimated the fiscal drain caused by the Promise Act, they found that "nearly half a million people" had or were eligible for Temporary Protected Status (TPS) and could be legalized under that bill. This is somewhat larger than CRS's estimate, but the CBO estimate reflects the way the Promise Act was constructed and includes those who are eligible but do not have TPS.

[5] This estimate reflects the number of illegal immigrants in the categories listed who were approved for an initial EAD or a renewal in FY 2020.

[6] The first column in the USCIS published tables on EAD issuance shows the names of each category. Some of those in the categories included in our analysis receive work authorization that lasts longer than a year. So a full account would require adding multiple years together. But according to a 2018 USCIS report to Congress on EADs, the overwhelming majority of employment authorizations for illegal immigrants last only one year. The only significant exception is parolees (C11), whose EADs typically last two years. To be conservative, we assume one year of EAD approval to estimate the number of illegal immigrants with EADs and SSNs. Also, in an effort to be conservative in our approach, we do not include several tiny categories that also provide illegal immigrants with EADs and SSNs, (e.g. A02, A11, and C16).

[7] The row labeled, "Total illegal population who can receive stimulus money" in Table 2 shows that there are roughly .5 children for every adult with an SSN and qualifying income. This may seem like a low number given the relatively high fertility of illegal immigrants based on their countries of origin. However, it must be remembered that many illegal immigrants with children are married to each other, thereby significantly reducing the ratio of dependent children to adults. Second, some of those with SSNs do tend to have relatively more children, such as those with TPS. This is partly because this group has been living in United States for a significant amount of time. However, other groups that are mostly relatively recent arrivals, such as asylum applicants, have not had enough time to have large numbers of U.S.-born children. Also, we have not included the small number of older dependent children who are disabled, even though they are covered by Covid relief.