

Myths and Facts about Immigrants and Immigration

Myth #1: Immigrants are overrunning our country, and most are here illegally.

The Facts:

It is true that there are more immigrants living in the U.S. than ever before. However, the *percentage* of immigrants in the overall population is not much different than many other times throughout our history. Today immigrants make up approximately 13.5% of the total U.S. population. From 1900 to 1930, immigrants made up between 12% and 15% of the population, and similar spikes occurred in the 1850s and 1880s. During those periods immigrants successfully became part of U.S. society, helping to build the thriving and diverse country we have now, and there is no reason to believe today's immigrants will be any different.

More than sixty percent of immigrants in the United States today have lived here for at least 15 years, and the large majority (76%) of immigrants have lawful status. Of the approximately 43.7 million immigrants in the U.S. in 2016, 20.2 million (approximately 44.7 percent) were naturalized citizens. Together, lawful permanent residents (sometimes referred to as green card holders), people in the United States on temporary visas including student and work visas, refugees and people seeking asylum, and undocumented immigrants made up the remaining 55.3 percent of immigrants.

In 2016, there were 10.7 million undocumented immigrants living in the U.S., or less than 3.5 percent of the nation's population. This represents a significant decrease (13%) from the 12.2 million undocumented immigrants in the U.S. in 2007, and is the lowest total since 2004.

Myth #2: Immigrants bring crime and violence to our cities and towns.

The Facts:

Recently, public figures have claimed that immigrants are “killers” and “rapists,” bringing crime to the U.S. Study after study has shown, however, that immigrants—regardless of where they are from, what immigration status they hold, and how much education they have completed—are less likely than native-born citizens to commit crimes or become incarcerated. According to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, while the overall percentage of immigrants and the number of undocumented immigrants in the U.S. both increased sharply between 1990 and 2010, the violent crime rate in the U.S. during that time plummeted 45 percent and the property crime rate dropped by 42 percent. Studies have consistently found that immigrants are less likely to be incarcerated than native-born Americans and that there is a negative correlation between levels of immigration and crime rates. Other studies have in fact found that crime rates are lowest in

states with the highest immigration growth rates, and that states with larger shares of undocumented immigrants tend to have lower crime rates than states with smaller shares.

Myth #3: Immigrants hurt our country financially by taking jobs and services without paying taxes.

The Facts:

Though some people claim that immigrants are taking job opportunities away from people born in the U.S., immigrants actually help to create new jobs. In addition to buying U.S. and local products, which helps create jobs, immigrants often start their own businesses. In fact, immigrants are twice as likely to start businesses as citizens born in the U.S., and companies owned by immigrants are more likely to hire employees than companies owned by native-born citizens. States with large numbers of immigrants report lower unemployment rates for everyone.

Immigrants collectively pay between \$90 and \$140 billion each year in taxes, and a recent study found that undocumented immigrants alone pay approximately \$11.64 billion in taxes each year. Moreover, undocumented immigrants nationwide pay an estimated 8 percent of their income in state and local taxes (their effective state and local tax rate), which is higher than the effective tax rate of the top 1 percent of all taxpayers in the U.S.

Everyone pays sales taxes on goods they purchase and property taxes on the homes they buy or rent, and more than half of all undocumented immigrant households file income tax returns using Individual Tax Identification Numbers.

Myth #4: Immigrants are coming to the U.S. to obtain welfare and other benefits.

The Facts:

Most immigrants who come to this country work hard to take care of their families and themselves. Many studies have shown that on average immigrants pay more in taxes than they receive in benefits, meaning the taxes they pay more than cover the cost of things like public education and healthcare.

With very few exceptions (such as access to medical care for victims of human trafficking), undocumented immigrants are not eligible for federal public benefits such as Social Security, Medicaid, Medicare and food stamps. In addition, most immigrants with lawful status are not entitled to these benefits until they have been in the country for five years or longer. This means that Social Security is often being deducted from immigrants' paychecks but they cannot access those benefits. According to a 2018 study by the CATO Institute, eligible immigrants use 27% fewer benefits relative to U.S. natives of similar incomes and ages.

Myth #5: Immigrants are coming to the U.S. with the express purpose of having babies here.

The Facts:

The Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution says that “All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the state wherein they reside.” People commonly refer to this right as “birthright citizenship.” Some claim that undocumented immigrants come to the U.S. to take advantage of this right. Research consistently shows, however, that the vast majority of immigrants (both with lawful status and those who are undocumented) come to the U.S. for economic opportunity or to flee violence or poverty in their birth countries. Immigration trends—both over the last few decades and throughout history—show that immigration increases when the U.S. economy is booming and it decreases when the U.S. economy is doing less well, supporting the findings that people come for economic opportunity.

If people were coming to the U.S. with the express purpose of having children here, we would expect to see at least the same number of women as men. There are many more young immigrant men coming to the U.S., however, than young women.

Under U.S. law, U.S. citizens cannot petition for a green card for a foreign parent until they turn 21. In the meantime, the parent would have to live as an undocumented immigrant, often in very difficult conditions. When asked why they come to the U.S., undocumented immigrants consistently cite other reasons for migrating, not the desire to have a baby here.

Myth #6: Immigrants are bringing diseases into the U.S.

The Facts:

Although people have claimed that undocumented immigrants have brought diseases to the U.S., including measles, hepatitis C, HIV, tuberculosis, and even Ebola, the allegations are not supported. There is no evidence that immigrants have been the source of any modern outbreaks in the U.S. According to the World Health Organization, 113 countries, including many countries in Latin America, have higher vaccination rates for 1-year-olds than the U.S. Mexico, for example, has a 99 percent vaccination rate for measles while Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador have around a 93 percent vaccination rate. The vaccination rate in the U.S., by comparison, is approximately 92 percent. The vast majority of immigrants arriving in the U.S. have been screened for health issues.

Myth #7: Terrorists are infiltrating the U.S. by coming across the border with Mexico.

The Facts:

There is no credible evidence that terrorists are entering the U.S. through the border with Mexico. In 2014, the Department of Homeland Security noted that “the suggestion that individuals that have ties to ISIL have been apprehended at the southwest border is

categorically false, and not supported by any credible intelligence or facts on the ground.” And, according to a more recent report released by the U.S Department of State, Bureau of Counterterrorism in 2017, “Counterterrorism cooperation between the Mexican and U.S. governments remained strong. There are no known international terrorist organizations operating in Mexico, no evidence that any terrorist group has targeted U.S. citizens in Mexican territory, and no credible information that any member of a terrorist group has traveled through Mexico to gain access to the United States.” In fact, the vast majority of U.S. residents linked to terror since 2002 are U.S. citizens.

Myth #8: All undocumented immigrants sneak across the Mexican border.

The Facts:

Although many people commonly think of undocumented immigrants as people who have snuck across the Mexican border, current estimates suggest that somewhere between one third and one half of undocumented immigrants in the U.S. have overstayed their visitor, student or work visas. That means that they entered the U.S. with lawful documentation and only later became undocumented.

Myth #9: We can stop undocumented immigrants coming to the U.S. by building a wall along the border with Mexico.

The Facts:

A wall or a fence along the entire border with Mexico would be impractical and very likely ineffective. The border between the U.S. and Mexico is almost 2,000 miles long. It spans difficult terrain, including deserts and mountains. Rivers flow along two thirds of the border. Much of the area is private property, which the government would have to buy from the owners to build a fence or wall, and many do not want to sell the land. The logistics alone make building a wall very difficult, if not impossible.

From the Great Wall of China to the Berlin Wall, history shows us that people find ways to cross walls. Experts predict that a wall along the entire length of the border would lead coyotes—human smugglers who charge migrants high rates to cross the border—to dig tunnels and create breaches. This would increase smuggling prices, making the process simply more lucrative for those exploiting migrants.

As long as there is poverty, violence and persecution in other parts of the world, people will continue to come to the U.S. to seek a better life, no matter how big a wall we build. The U.S. prides itself on being a “nation of immigrants,” and on the values of fairness and equality. It is possible to create a process for addressing immigration that treats immigrants with dignity and respect instead of as criminals.

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