

# U.S. Immigration: 8 Facts You Should Know

In an age of disinformation and bigotry, misconceptions about immigrants and anti-immigrant hate have spread throughout American politics and society. As a result, this country has seen a concerning uptick in rhetoric, policies, and social movements that threaten to or directly harm immigrants and refugees. This resource contains information and sources that set the record straight and will hopefully help mitigate the damage caused by disinformation about immigrants.

*The following are basic well-documented facts about immigrants, each discussed in more detail below:*

- Immigrants do not endanger public health.
- Immigrants cannot vote until they become citizens.
- Immigrants create jobs and improve the United States economy.
- Most immigrants in the United States hold lawful status.
- Throughout U.S. history, the percentage of immigrants has remained steady.
- Immigrants are less likely than U.S.-born citizens to commit crimes or become incarcerated.
- Immigrants are usually ineligible for social service benefits.
- Terrorists have rarely entered the country illegally via the U.S.-Mexico border.

## **Fact: Immigrants do not endanger public health.**

People who vilify immigrants and blame them for the United States' problems claim that they bring diseases into the U.S. from beyond our borders. **There is no evidence that immigrants have been the source of any modern disease outbreaks in the U.S.**

When the COVID-19 pandemic broke out in 2020, policies attempting to bar immigrants and refugees from entering into the United States were based on unfounded grounds of public health concerns and fear of spreading COVID-19. As the pandemic took hold, [health experts stressed](#) that continuing immigration and asylum processing would not further spread the coronavirus, but rather that closing the border would actually negatively affect public health by contributing to overcrowding on both sides of the border. Moreover, prior to entry into the U.S., immigrants are [required to undergo a medical examination](#) to screen for certain communicable diseases.

## Fact: Immigrants cannot vote until they become citizens.

Politicians and others who want to restrict immigration claim that undocumented immigrants are able to vote. **Immigrants – including undocumented immigrants – cannot register to vote until they gain citizenship**, regardless of whether a state issues them a driver's license. [Sixteen states and the District of Columbia](#) permit undocumented immigrants to obtain state identification cards in the form of driver's licenses, and all states issue identification documents to immigrants who hold temporary and permanent visas. These licenses provide a valid identification and promote public safety but do not entitle immigrants to vote in elections.

To vote, all states but one require that a person first register to vote. and in order to do that, an applicant must attain and affirm their U.S. citizenship. **There are many serious safeguards in place to ensure that only citizens can vote**; that anyone who attempts to subvert this rule is subject to severe punishment; and that any such attempts never result in the counting of unauthorized votes.

## Fact: Immigrants create jobs and improve the United States economy.

Some people seek to exploit misunderstandings of the U.S. labor market and tax system by stoking concerns that more immigrants means fewer jobs and less access to social programs for citizens. [In fact, immigrants help create new jobs.](#) In addition to buying U.S. and local products, which helps create jobs, immigrants often start their own businesses. States with large numbers of immigrants report lower unemployment rates for everyone.

In 2019, immigrants collectively paid more than \$492 billion in taxes, including [more than \\$30 billion in taxes paid by undocumented immigrants.](#) Everyone pays sales taxes on goods they purchase and property taxes on the homes they buy, and [more than half](#) of all undocumented immigrant households file income tax returns using Individual Tax Identification Numbers.

## Fact: Most immigrants in the U.S. hold lawful status.

Some individuals and anti-immigrant activists claim that most immigrants in the U.S. did not go through a legal process to live here. In fact, [the large majority of immigrants \(77%\) have lawful status.](#)

In 2017, [45% of immigrants were naturalized citizens and 27% were lawful permanent residents](#) (sometimes referred to as Green Card holders). The [remaining 28%](#) of immigrants are refugees and asylum seekers, people who are in the U.S. on temporary visas (including student and work visas), and undocumented immigrants.

As of 2019, there were an estimated [10.5 million to 12 million](#) undocumented immigrants living in the U.S., or less than 4% percent of the nation's population.

## Fact: Throughout U.S. history, the percentage of immigrants has remained steady.

Those aiming to sow fear about the rising number of immigrants in the U.S. often cite misleading, out-of-context statistics. While [there are more immigrants living in the U.S. than ever before](#), there are also [more people living in the U.S. than ever before](#). **The percentage of immigrants in the overall population is not much different than many other times throughout our history.**

In fact, the percentage of immigrants in the U.S. is about the same now as it was over a hundred years ago. Today, immigrants make up approximately [13.7%](#) 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 this process has always been true regardless of the country of origin, race, or religion of the immigrants. There is no reason to believe today's immigrants are any different.

## Fact: Immigrants are less likely than U.S.-born citizens to commit crimes or become incarcerated.

Some claim that immigrants do not abide by the law. They cite anecdotal evidence or individual cases where immigrants have done something unlawful and use these cases to cast all immigrants as criminals. **Study after study has shown 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 between 1990 and 2016, the violent crime rate in the U.S. during that time plummeted [48 percent and the property crime rate dropped by 41 percent](#). More recent [population](#) and [crime](#) data from the Pew Research Center reveals the continuation of this trend. [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 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.

## Fact: Immigrants are usually ineligible for social service benefits.

Some suggest that immigrants use too many public benefits or take advantage of the social safety net provided to citizens. In fact, most immigrants who come to the U.S. work hard to take care of their families and themselves. Moreover, many studies have shown that, on average, immigrants pay more in taxes than they receive in benefits.

With very few exceptions (such as access to medical care for victims of human trafficking), **undocumented immigrants, temporary residents, and even newly-arrived permanent residents are not eligible for federal**

**public benefits such as Social Security, Medicaid, Medicare, and food stamps.** Green card holders generally are not entitled to these benefits until they have been in the country in permanent resident status for five years or longer. This means that many immigrants have contributions to these programs deducted from their paychecks but cannot access the benefits. According to a 2018 study by the CATO Institute, eligible immigrants [use 27% fewer benefits](#) relative to people of similar incomes and ages born with U.S. citizenship.

The \$2 trillion 2020 [CARES Act](#), which gave financial relief in light of COVID-19 to most taxpayers, excluded millions of immigrants without a Social Security Number from receiving stimulus checks – though many immigrants pay taxes and continue to work in essential jobs including healthcare.

## **Fact: Terrorists have rarely entered the country illegally through the U.S.-Mexico border.**

Those looking to blame immigrants for national security issues exaggerate the risk of political extremists entering the U.S. from Mexico. **There is little credible evidence that terrorists are routinely entering the U.S. through the border with Mexico.** To date there have been [zero deaths or injuries on U.S. soil](#) as a result of acts committed by terrorists illegally crossing the U.S.-Mexico border, while the domestic threat has been steadily growing for years. Between 2002 and 2018, [90% of Islamist extremist plots and attacks in the United States](#) were carried out by U.S. citizens or individuals living in the country with lawful permanent or temporary status. In 2019, of the nine individuals arrested for plotting attacks linked to Islamist extremism, [seven \(78%\) were U.S. citizens](#). Furthermore, domestic extremism, which poses the greater threat to people living in the United States, is [primarily driven by right-wing extremists and particularly white supremacists](#), many of whom hold specifically anti-immigrant beliefs.

According to a [report released by the U.S Department of State, Bureau of Counterterrorism in 2019](#), “Counterterrorism cooperation between Mexico and the United States remained strong in 2019. There was no credible evidence indicating international terrorist groups established bases in Mexico, worked directly with Mexican drug cartels, or sent operatives via Mexico into the United States.”

One recent exception was the arrest of two individuals on the terror watchlist attempting to cross the border [in early 2021](#). Notably, both of these individuals were caught and stopped from crossing the border.