




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 during other large waves. Today immigrants make up about 12% 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. The U.S. successfully absorbed immigrants during those periods, and there is no reason to believe that we are being “overrun” today.

Of the 36 million immigrants in the U.S. today, two thirds (24 million) are here legally, and half of those with legal status (12 million) are U.S. citizens. There are an estimated 12 million undocumented immigrants in the U.S. Half (6 million) of these people entered the country legally as tourists, students or temporary workers and became “undocumented” when their papers expired and they didn’t leave the country. Undocumented immigrants make up about 4% of the overall U.S. population, and only 2% have crossed the border outside of legal channels.

 **Myth #2: Most immigrants aren’t interested in fitting into our society. They don’t want to learn English or become Americans.**

The Facts: Most immigrants, if given the opportunity, work hard to adapt to their new countries. More than 80% of immigrants say they have tried to learn English. After 15 years in the U.S., for example, 75% of Spanish-speaking immigrants speak English regularly; and 91% of their children and 97% of their grandchildren can speak English well. For many immigrants, however, there are barriers to learning a new language. Many work two or three jobs and don’t have enough time, money or child care to allow for classes. English language programs in the U.S. are often underfunded and hard to get into. It is estimated that more than 90,000 immigrants across the nation are on waiting lists to learn English.

Similarly, many immigrants seek citizenship despite difficult requirements and long delays—applications for citizenship sometimes take years to process. In 2007 the Department of Homeland Security received 1.4 million citizenship applications, and in recent years the number of new citizens has risen to the highest level in 25 years.

In addition, one out of every three immigrants marries outside of their national or ethnic group, and half of their children intermarry. Today’s immigrants are adjusting and blending into U.S. society at the same rate as past generations of immigrants.



Myth #3: Immigrants bring crime and violence to our cities and towns.

The Facts: Study after study shows that immigrants are less likely than native-born citizens to commit crimes, even though immigrants are more likely to live in poverty and have less than a high school education. About five times as many U.S.-born men as immigrants between the ages of 18 and 39 spend time in prison. One study found that almost 10% of U.S.-born versus just over 1% of immigrant male high school dropouts was in jail in 2000. Newly arrived immigrants are especially unlikely to be involved in crime, and teenage immigrants are less likely than native-born teens to be involved in delinquent behavior, such as violence and drug use.

Even as the U.S. experiences one of the largest spikes in immigration in many decades, crime rates across the country continue to go down. This is true even in cities with large immigrant populations, such as New York, Los Angeles, Chicago and Miami, and border cities like San Diego and El Paso. Those who try to blame immigrants for a supposed rise in crime are twisting the facts to stir up stereotypes and bias against immigrants.



Myth #4: Immigrants hurt our country financially by taking jobs and services without paying taxes.

The Facts: Though many people fear that immigrants are taking job opportunities away from natives, immigrants actually help to create new jobs. States with large numbers of immigrants report lower unemployment for everyone. Immigrants are more likely to be self-employed and start new businesses. 18% of small businesses, which provide up to 80% of the new jobs in the U.S. each year, are started by immigrants. Though an increase in immigrant workers sometimes drives down wages for working class people, immigrants help to lift wages for workers as a whole in the U.S.

Immigrants pay between \$90 and \$140 billion each year in taxes. More than half of all undocumented immigrants are believed to be working “on the books,” which means that they pay taxes on their salaries; and all people contribute by paying sales taxes on goods that they buy and property taxes on the homes they rent.

Studies show that immigrants pay \$20 to \$30 billion more in taxes each year than the amount of government services they use. While the cost of educating the children of immigrants may be high, many immigrants do not benefit from other support that citizens receive, such as food stamps and social security payments. In addition, immigrants are less likely to use services that may be open to them, such as health care. Overall, immigrants contribute more to the U.S. economy than they take.



Myth #5: Open borders and too many illegal immigrants make it more likely that the U.S. will suffer a terrorist attack.

The Facts: Since September 11th, some people have tried to link the “War on Terror” to the recent wave of immigration. The U.S. government passed laws after 9-11 treating immigrants—especially Muslim and Arab people—in hostile ways. For example, a “Special Registration” program was set up that required immigrant boys and men from certain countries to be fingerprinted, photographed and interviewed by immigration officers. In 2002, 400 immigrants who voluntarily showed up for registration in Los Angeles were held, not because they were violent criminals, but because their paper work was outdated. Some were placed in handcuffs and leg shackles, hosed down with cold water and forced to sleep standing up in overcrowded cells. Since 9-11, thousands of immigrants have been held without any proof that they were involved in terrorist activities. Many have been put on trial in secret courts without being allowed to talk to a lawyer or their family members.

These harsh actions against some immigrant groups have led to the capture of almost no terrorists, and are unlikely to have made our country any more secure. Terrorist attacks are committed by people of all backgrounds, including U.S.-born citizens as well as people from other parts of the world. One study of almost 400 terrorists showed that only 6% entered their host country illegally. Many experts believe that unfairly targeting immigrants actually causes us to be less safe by making immigrants afraid to contact the police with information about crimes. The truth is that the vast majority of immigrants are not criminals or terrorists. Most are law-abiding people who come here to work hard and make a better life for their families.



Myth #6: We can solve the problem of illegal immigration by building walls and increasing security.

The Facts: In 2006 Congress passed the Secure Fence Act, which provided \$3 billion for 700 miles of fencing stretching from California to Texas, designed to prevent illegal immigration from Mexico. The government also doubled the number of border patrol agents between 1995 and 2006, and increased the border security budget by over ten times during that period. Even with all of the new walls and policing, though, the number of undocumented immigrants in the U.S. increased from about 8 million in 2000 to 12 million in 2009.

Rather than stopping immigration, the extra security has pushed it to more dangerous and out-of-the-way places, leading to fewer arrests and triple the number of deaths at the border. These risky conditions also lead many immigrants—who might normally work in the U.S. only for a short time—to stay longer and bring their families with them.

As long as there is poverty and suffering 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. While no country can take in unlimited numbers of immigrants, wealthy nations have a responsibility to help those who are less fortunate. This is especially true when their policies add to hardships elsewhere, such as U.S. trade laws that drive Mexican farmers out of business or the war in Iraq, which has created millions of refugees. 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 managing immigration that treats immigrants with dignity instead of as criminals.

SOURCES

- American Civil Liberties Union. Immigration Myths and Facts, <http://www.aclu.org/immigrants/34870pub20080411.html>.
- Day Labor Research Institute. Top 10 Immigration Myths and Facts, <http://daylaborinfo.org/Documents/MythsandFacts.pdf>.
- Immigrants' List. The Immigration Debate: Myths vs. Facts, http://www.immigrantslist.org/pages/myths_vs_facts.
- McDaniel, Paul. How to Understand Ten Immigration Myths and Facts, http://www.ehow.com/how_4398118_understand-ten-immigration-myths-facts.html.
- Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund. Myths about Immigrants, <http://www.truthinimmigration.org/Myths.aspx>
- OneAmerica, With Justice for All. Myths and Facts on Immigration, <http://www.hatefreezone.org/article.php?id=203>.
- PBS In the Mix. Teen Immigrants: Five American Stories, http://www.pbs.org/inthemix/shows/show_teen_immigrants3.html.