

Immigration Myths and Facts

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Myths About Immigration to the United States

➤ **Myth: Immigrating to the United States for work or family is easy.**

Fact: Even though the U.S. economy relies on millions of undocumented laborers, every year only 5,000 green cards are available for low-skilled workers.¹ The number of visas for highly-skilled workers who contribute heavily to U.S. global competitiveness is declining.² Furthermore, families wait years for reunification. Spouses and minor children of green card holders wait one to two years to join family members in the United States.³ Siblings of U.S. citizens wait 9-19 years for visas.⁴

➤ **Myth: Most immigrants are here illegally.**

Fact: Out of roughly 31 million foreign-born residents in the United States, 66% are living in the country with lawful immigration status. The remaining 34% are undocumented.⁵ An estimated 40% of people who live in the United States without lawful status enter the United States through legal channels but overstay their visas.⁶

➤ **Myth: Immigrants give birth to children in the United States to prevent the U.S. government from deporting the undocumented parents.**

Fact: When an undocumented immigrant gives birth to a child in the United States, that child automatically becomes a U.S. citizen.⁷ Undocumented parents are at risk of being arrested, detained and deported. Between 1998 and 2007, the federal government estimates that it deported more than 108,000 parents of U.S. citizen children.⁸ If a U.S. child wants to petition for his or her foreign-born parents, U.S. immigration law requires the child to be 21 years old before filing the petition.⁹

¹ "Breaking Down the Problems: What's Wrong with Our Immigration System?" (Immigration Policy Center, Oct. 2009), http://immigrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/docs/Problem_Paper_FINAL_102109_0.pdf (accessed April 22, 2010).

² Greenstone, Michael and Adam Looney. "Ten Economic Facts about Immigration." The Hamilton Project. September 2010. <http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/rc/reports/2010/09_immigration_greenstone_looney/09_immigration.pdf

³ *Visa Bulletin* vol. IX, no. 24, (Department of State, September 2010), http://www.travel.state.gov/visa/frvi/bulletin/bulletin_5113.html (accessed September 18, 2010).

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Michael Hofer, Nancy Rytina, and Bryan C. Baker. "Estimates of the Unauthorized Immigrant Population Residing in the United States: January 2009," policy directorate (Department of Homeland Security, Office of Immigration Statistics, January 2010), http://www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/statistics/publications/ois_ill_pe_2009.pdf (accessed April 22, 2010).

⁶ Remarks by John Morton, Assistant Secretary for Homeland Security for Immigration and Customs Enforcement before the House Homeland Security Committee, March 24, 2010.

⁷ U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service.

<http://www.uscis.gov/portal/site/uscis/menuitem.eb1d4c2a3e5b9ac89243c6a7543f6d1a/?vgnextoid=a2ec6811264a3210VgnVCM100000b92ca60aRCRD&vgnnextchannel=a2ec6811264a3210VgnVCM100000b92ca60aRCRD> (Accessed August 18, 2010)

⁸ U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service.

<http://www.uscis.gov/portal/site/uscis/menuitem.eb1d4c2a3e5b9ac89243c6a7543f6d1a/?vgnextoid=a2ec6811264a3210VgnVCM100000b92ca60aRCRD&vgnnextchannel=a2ec6811264a3210VgnVCM100000b92ca60aRCRD> (accessed August 18, 2010)

⁹ U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service. February 2010. "A Guide to Naturalization M-476" <http://www.uscis.gov/files/article/chapter4.pdf>

➤ **Myth: Immigrants come to the United States and then bring their extended families join them, causing a chain of migration to the U.S.**

Fact: Immigration law allows U.S. citizens to petition for their spouses, children, parents, and siblings. Green card holders may petition for their spouses, unmarried adult children and parents, but not their siblings or married adult children.¹⁰ There are currently millions of family members waiting to be reunified with their close family members in the United States, some of whom face waits of years, even decades.¹¹

➤ **Myth: All migrants come to the United States voluntarily.**

Fact: Many migrants do choose to come to the United States of their own free will. These immigrants often migrate because they cannot see a future in their home countries due to economic poverty and violence, or they seek to join family members. Others, however, have been forced to flee their home countries due to persecution. These migrants are called refugees or asylum-seekers. To be granted refugee¹² or asylee¹³ status in the United States, individuals must prove that they have a “well-founded fear of persecution” if they return to their home country, based on five protected categories: religion, political opinion, membership of a particular social group, race or nationality. If the migrants meet this definition, the federal government grants them protection and they are provided with work authorization with an eventual path to U.S. citizenship.¹⁴

Myths About Immigrant Integration

➤ **Myth: Immigrants don’t want to learn English or become citizens.**

Fact: 55% - 69% of immigrants who live in the United States already speak “good” to “excellent” English.¹⁵ Many adult immigrants want to become proficient in English, but funding for English as a Second Language (ESL) programs has not kept pace with the demand. As a result, in many cities, there are wait lists of one to three years for adult ESL classes.¹⁶ In addition, in 2009, the U.S. government declined 1,046,539 applications for naturalization.¹⁷ This shows not only the desire of immigrants to become citizens, but also the challenges they face in achieving citizenship.

➤ **Myth: Immigrants today do not integrate into American culture, unlike previous generations of immigrants.**

Fact: Recent immigrants and their children are integrating into the U.S. economy in a similar fashion to previous immigrant families. While first-generation immigrants tend to be employed in narrow economic sectors, their children engage in broader professional fields that closely resemble those of U.S.-born citizens.¹⁸ More than 90% of the children of first generation

¹⁰ Frequently Asked Questions on Family Immigration” *Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service*, Oct. 2009.

<http://www.lirs.org/atf/cf/%7Ba9ddb5e-c6b5-4c63-89de-91d2f09a28ca%7D/FACTSHEETFAMILYBASEDUSIMMIGRATION.PDF>

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² “Definitions and Obligations: Refugee.” *United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees*, 2010 <http://www.unhcr.org/au/basicdef.shtml> (accessed Oct. 12, 2010)

¹³ “Asylum Law, Asylum Seekers and Refugees: A Primer” *TRAC Immigration*, 2006. <http://trac.syr.edu/immigration/reports/159/> (accessed October 12, 2010)

¹⁴ “Resettling Refugees in America” *U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants*.

<http://refugees.org/article.aspx?id=1092&rid=1176&subm=40&area>About%20Refugees> (accessed October 12, 2010)

¹⁵ Laura E. Hill, Magnus Lofstrom, and Joseph M. Hayes. “Immigrant legalization: Assessing the Labor Market Effects,” report (Public Policy Institute of California April 2010), http://www.ppic.org/content/pubs/rb/RB_410LHRB.pdf (accessed April 26, 2010).

¹⁶ “Breaking Down the Problems: What’s Wrong with Our Immigration System?” (Immigration Policy Center, Oct. 2009), http://immigrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/docs/Problem_Paper_FINAL_102109_0.pdf (accessed April 27, 2010).

¹⁷ *2009 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics*, (Department of Homeland Security, April 2010), 51,

http://www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/statistics/publications/natz_fr_2009.pdf (accessed April 22, 2010).

¹⁸ Michael Greenstone and Adam Looney. “Ten Economic Facts About Immigration.” *The Brookings Institute*, Sept. 2010.

immigrants speak English, regardless of their country of origin.¹⁹

➤ **Myth: Immigrants are uneducated.**

Fact: In 2008, 30.6% of all employed immigrants who recently arrived to the United States had at least a bachelor's degree.²⁰ More than 1.3 million (1 in 5) college-educated immigrants living in the United States are unemployed or are underemployed in positions such as taxi drivers, dishwashers and security guards. Many educated immigrants are unable to make full use of their academic and professional credentials. In order to resume their former career paths, they must complete expensive and lengthy recertification processes.²¹

➤ **Myth: Immigration leads to an increase in crime and violence.**

Fact: Crime rates are lowest in states with the highest immigration growth rates. From 1999 to 2006, the total crime rate declined 13.6% in the 19 highest-immigration states, compared to a 7.1% percent decline in the other 32 states.²² In Arizona, the state's overall crime rate dropped 12% in 2009 and between 2004 and 2008, it decreased by 23%.²³ Research also shows that the incarceration rate for native-born men age 18-39 has been five times *higher* than the rate for immigrant men. Even with increased immigration, the violent crime rate in the United States has declined 34.2% and the property crime rate has fallen 26.4%.²⁴ According to U.S. Census data, native born citizens are five times more likely than immigrants to be in a correctional facility or mental hospital.²⁵

Myths About Immigration and the U.S. Economy

➤ **Myth: Immigrants take jobs away from Americans.**

Fact: Between 2000 and 2005, the availability of native-born low-wage workers declined by approximately 1.8 million.²⁶ In the same period, the number of low-wage immigrant workers increased by 620,000, thus offsetting the total decline by about a third.²⁷ More recently, a series of reports found that there is little apparent relationship between immigration and unemployment rates of native-born workers at the regional, state, or county level.²⁸ Reports have additionally found that, generally, immigrant labor is differentiated and complementary to native labor.²⁹ As a result, in the short run, there is limited competition and in the long run, increased job opportunities may arise for native workers.³⁰ Ultimately, immigrants have a positive effect on native workers – they raise average wages and lower the prices of goods and services.³¹

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ "The Economic Blame Game: US Unemployment is Not Caused by Immigration," (Immigration Policy Center, Nov. 19, 2009), http://www.immigrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/docs/Economic_Blame_Game_111909.pdf (accessed April 27, 2010).

²¹ Jeanne Batalova and Michael Fix. "Uneven Progress: The Employment Pathways of Skilled Immigrants in the United States," report (Migration Policy Institute, October 2008), 1, <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/pubs/BrainWasteOct08.pdf> (accessed March 12, 2009).

²² Richard Nadler. "Immigration and the Wealth of States," (Overland Park, KS: Americas Majority Foundation: January 2008), p. 9. <http://www.amerimaj.com/ImmigrationandWealth.pdf> (accessed April 28, 2010).

²³ Tim Padgett, "The 'Dangerous' Border: Actually One of America's Safest Places," *Time*, July 30, 2010, <http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,2007474,00.html> (accessed September 18, 2010).

²⁴ Rubén G. Rumbaut and Walter A. Ewing. "The Myth of Immigrant Criminality and the Paradox of Assimilation: Incarceration Rates among Native and Foreign-Born Men," (Immigration Policy Center, American Immigration Law Foundation, Spring 2007), p. 6-10.

[http://www.immigrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/docs/Imm%20Criminality%20\(IPC\).pdf](http://www.immigrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/docs/Imm%20Criminality%20(IPC).pdf) (accessed April 28, 2010).

²⁵ Michael Greenstone and Adam Looney. "Ten Economic Facts About Immigration." *The Brookings Institute*, Sept. 2010.

²⁶ Randolph Capps, Karina Fortuny, Michael E. Fix. "Trends in the Low-Wage Immigrant Labor Force, 2000-2005," report (Urban Institute, March 2007), <http://www.urban.org/publications/411426.html> (accessed April 27, 2010).

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Rob Paral & Associates. "The Unemployment and Immigration Disconnect: Untying the Knot Part I of III," (Immigration Policy Center, May 2009), <http://www.immigrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/docs/Part%20I%20-%20Unemployment%20Disconnect%20%2005-19-09.pdf> (accessed April 27, 2010).

²⁹ Greenstone and Looney.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

➤ **Myth: Immigrants don't pay taxes.**

Fact: All immigrants pay taxes. Even undocumented immigrants pay sales taxes and real estate taxes (either directly as homeowners or indirectly through rent). The Social Security Administration estimates that 50-75% of unauthorized immigrants pay federal, state, and local taxes, including Medicare³² and \$6–7 billion in Social Security taxes that will never benefit them.³³ In addition, an April 2010 study found that 90% of the surveyed migrants had paid taxes prior to receiving a green card.³⁴

➤ **Myth: Immigrants come to the United States to get welfare and are a drain on the federal government budget.**

Fact: Research shows that taxes paid by both legal and undocumented immigrants exceed the costs of the services these migrants utilize.³⁵ Many documented immigrants are prohibited from receiving most federal government benefits for five years after they arrive in the United States. They work and pay taxes, but do not receive benefits. Undocumented immigrants can receive emergency medical care and schooling for children, but cannot receive welfare, food stamps or Social Security.³⁶ Cost estimates by the Congressional Budget Office in 2007 show that immigrants pay more in taxes than they consume in benefits.³⁷

➤ **Myth: Immigrants are a drain on the economy.**

Fact: Approximately 26 million immigrants currently residing in the United States arrived after the age of 18 and are in prime working age. They represent roughly \$2.8 trillion to U.S. taxpayers, who receive the benefit of their labor without the cost of their education.³⁸ One such benefit is Social Security. As a result of increased immigration, Social Security's finances have improved.³⁹ Over the past two decades, immigrants have played a central role in the cycle of the economic growth of cities. Cities with thriving immigrant populations – with both high-earning and lower-wage workers – generally prospered the most.⁴⁰ Research also shows that immigrants are 30 percent more likely than U.S.-born citizens to form new businesses and are 3 times more likely to file patents, creating jobs, increasing innovation, stimulating U.S. economic activity.⁴¹

➤ **Myth: Immigrants send all their money back to their home countries.**

Fact: While many immigrants do send money back to their families in other countries, they contribute to the U.S. economy in other ways. Through consumer spending and entrepreneurship, immigrants contribute \$162 billion in tax revenue to federal, state and local governments.⁴²

³² "The Impact of Unauthorized Immigrants on the Budgets of State and Local Governments," (Congressional Budget Office Dec. 2007), <http://cbo.gov/ftpdocs/87xx/doc8711/12-6-Immigration.pdf#page=5> (accessed April 26, 2010).

³³ Eduardo Porter, "Illegal Immigrants Are Bolstering Social Security with Billions," *New York Times*, April 5, 2005, <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/04/05/business/05immigration.html> (accessed April 27, 2010).

³⁴ Laura E. Hill, Magnus Lofstrom, and Joseph M. Hayes. "Immigrant legalization: Assessing the Labor Market Effects," report (Public Policy Institute of California April 2010), http://www.ppic.org/content/pubs/rb/RB_410LHRB.pdf (accessed April 26, 2010).

³⁵ Greenstone and Looney.

³⁶ "Separating Fact from Fiction: Refugees, Immigrants and Public Benefits," Immigration Fact Check (Immigration Policy Center of the American Immigration Law Foundation, September 8, 2008), <http://www.immigrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/docs/RefugeesImmigrantsandPublicBenefits9-8-08.pdf> (accessed April 26, 2010).

³⁷ Michael Greenstone and Adam Looney. "Ten Economic Facts About Immigration." *The Brookings Institute*, Sept. 2010.

³⁸ "It's Tax Time! Immigrants and Taxes: Contributions to State and Federal Coffers," Immigration Fact Check (Immigration Policy Center of the American Immigration Law Foundation, April 2008), <http://www.immigrationpolicy.org/index.php?content=fc080412> (accessed March 12, 2009).

³⁹ Greenstone and Looney.

⁴⁰ Julia Preston. "Workforce Fueled by Highly Skilled Immigrants," *New York Times*, April 15, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/16/us/16skilled.html>

⁴¹ Michael Greenstone and Adam Looney. "Ten Economic Facts About Immigration." *The Brookings Institute*, Sept. 2010.

⁴² AILA InfoNet Doc. No. 09021836 (American Immigration Lawyers Association, Feb. 18, 2009), <http://aila.org/content/default.aspx?docid=28041> (accessed April 27, 2010).