

5 Immigration Myths

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Top Line

This paper addresses 5 common myths about immigration in the US. For each myth it will cover why some people incorrectly believe it, what the facts say, and how this should inform policy progress. The myths discussed are:

1. Most immigrants come to the US illegally.
2. Immigrants take American jobs and drive down wages.
3. Immigrants are a burden on the welfare system and state budgets.
4. Immigration creates high rates of crime.
5. Immigrants pose a threat of terrorism.

Immigration is a complex issue, and we need leaders who will base policy decisions on solid facts, not myths.

Backup

1. Most immigrants come to the US illegally.

- a. A common misconception about immigration is that most immigrants are in the US illegally. Polling from Pew has found 42% of people believe this. (1)
- b. In 2019 there were approximately 45 million immigrants in the US. That represents 13.7% of the US population (the record high is 14.8% in 1890). An estimated 11 million, or roughly 24%, of the total foreign-born population is undocumented. That means over 75% of immigrants are here legally. (2)
- c. The focus of political debates around undocumented immigration obscures the fact that the vast majority of immigrants are here legally. Our focus should be on how to improve our immigration system to facilitate immigrants' preferred choice, which is legal migration.

2. Immigrants take American jobs and drive down wages.

- a. Some economists have argued that immigration reduces wages by increasing the labor supply and taking lower wage jobs. (3)
 - This view has been promoted by Republican politicians in recent years to advocate against legal immigration. (4)
 - A majority of Americans (55%) believe that immigrants are good for the economy, but 37%, including 60% of Republicans, think that immigration drives down wages. (4)
- b. This view is based on a simple and theoretical model of the economy that does not account for the full effect of immigration. (3)
 - Research looking at 27 studies over more than 20 years found that immigration generally has a very small effect on wages. 19 out of the 27 studies found that a one percent increase in immigration had between a -0.1 and 0.1% effect on wages.
 - When accounting for specialization of workers and how firms respond to immigration (for example investing in more resources so they can hire more people and increase production), researchers found that immigration increases overall productivity.
- c. Immigrant workers have a positive effect on the economy and do not drive down wages for native-born workers. The US should promote immigration of both high-skilled and lower skilled workers.
 - The H-1B program gives temporary visas to highly educated (at least bachelor's degree) immigrants who work in "specialty occupations." This program is in high demand by employers and has been shown to boost innovation and growth for companies. (5)
 - Research has shown that, historically, low-skill immigrants like farm workers have a positive effect on wages. Research analyzing the Bracero program, which gave visas to farm workers, found that when the program was ended wage growth slowed in places that had used the program relative to places with no exposure. (6)

- Low-skill immigrant workers are core to essential industries in the US. Immigrants without a college degree make up 36% of workers in the farming, fishing, and forestry industry, as well as building and maintenance industries. They also make up around 1 in 4 workers in the textile, food, accommodation, construction, and administrative support industries. (7)
 - Specifically in agriculture, immigrants make up 73% of workers with undocumented immigrants comprising an estimated 50% of total agriculture laborers. Improving work authorization for low-skill workers would have a range of economic benefits. (8)

3. Immigrants are a burden on the welfare system and state budgets.

- a. The Trump Administration, likely using a report from the Center for Immigration Studies, (which the Southern Poverty Law Center has designated as a hate group) said that half of immigrants receive welfare benefits. (9)
- b. That study, and others like it, have been shown to be misleading. They use broad definitions of welfare, for example including free and reduced lunch at schools which is not traditionally included in welfare analysis and is an automatic program, not one people apply for. They also fail to account for the taxes that immigrants pay to fund programs like social security. (10)
 - Research has found that immigrants are no more likely to use social services than native born people when accounting for income, and researchers have estimated that immigrants will be essential to keeping social security solvent, adding \$611 billion over the next 75 years.
 - Many undocumented workers pay federal taxes by using invalid social security numbers or alternative tax identification. However, they are not eligible for almost any federal benefits, including social security. The IRS estimates that undocumented workers pay over \$9 billion in taxes every year and will never receive benefits. This provides an important funding source for Social Security. (11)
- c. **Immigrants, both documented and undocumented, pay more into our tax systems than they use in services.**
 - This happens because verification standards are low for employers but high for federal programs, so undocumented immigrants can use fake documentation to get a job but not government benefits. (11)

- However, policies like the “Public Charge Rule” have been used in recent years to exclude low-income migrants and have had a chilling effect on migrants using social services they pay into. The Public Charge rule excludes immigrants who would qualify for and potentially use welfare or other needs based public services. This rule has also discouraged many legal migrants from using services they qualify for because they fear jeopardizing their immigration status. (12)
- Low-income immigrants have high employment rates, and their children show substantial upward mobility. One study found that almost 90% of immigrants using public assistance were employed or married to someone who was employed in 2015. Another study found that between 1994 and 1996 36% of new immigrants did not have a high school education. 20 years later, only 8% of the second generation did not have a high school diploma. (7)

4. Immigration creates high rates of crime

- a. Polling has found that 42% of Americans think immigrants increase crime. (13)
- b. However, research on data in Texas found that the crime rate for undocumented immigrants was around half that of the native-born population, and the rate for documented immigrants was only one third the rate of native-born people. (13)
- c. Additionally, the period between 1990 and 2013 saw the immigrant population share almost double and the undocumented immigrant population triple, yet violent crime fell almost 50% and property crimes fell over 40%. (14) More immigration has not caused higher rates of crime – in fact, the opposite is true.
- d. Excluding immigrants based on the idea they commit more crimes does not reflect the data. Multiple studies have shown that immigrants are less likely to commit crimes or end up in prison compared to native born populations.

5. Immigrants pose a threat of terrorism.

- a. Trump Administration and Department of Homeland Security officials pointed to statistics showing they stopped more than 3,700 ‘known or suspected’ terrorists as evidence of a security threat at the southern border. (15)

- b. However, Immigrants, and foreign nationals in general, have not posed a major threat of terrorism after 9/11.
- In the post 9/11 visa vetting system only one radicalized terrorist entered for every 29 million visa or status approvals. Only one failure from 2002 to 2016 resulted in an attack on US soil, so one deadly terrorist entered out of 379 million visa or status approvals. (16)
 - Research has found that there is no relationship between immigration, documented or undocumented, and terrorist incidents, number of radicalizations, or terrorism convictions. (17)
 - After 9/11 through 2021, 107 people have been killed by jihadist terrorists, and only one of those attacks was orchestrated by a foreign terrorist group. Domestic far-right wing terrorists have killed 122 people in that same time period. The threat of terrorism, from any source, is home grown, not foreign terrorists. (18)
- c. Excluding immigrants or limiting the number of refugees on the basis that they pose a risk of terrorism is not justified by the evidence. Our vetting system can prevent terrorists from entering the US. Law enforcement and researchers are increasingly bringing attention to the fact that the focus on minimal foreign born terrorism has shifted resources away from the growing threat of domestic far-right terrorism. (17)

Immigration is popular across the political spectrum and is core to our nation's founding.

- i. “Immigrants make America stronger. Not only do immigrants support us—immigrants are us. Our families and our communities, our congregations and our schools, our businesses large and small have been built and sustained through the inclusion of immigrants.” – 2020 Democratic Platform (19)
- ii. “Our identity as a nation, unlike other nations, is not determined by geography or ethnicity, by soil or blood ... This means that people of every race, religion, and ethnicity can be fully and equally American. It means that bigotry or white supremacy in any form is blasphemy against the American creed.” – George W. Bush (20)
- iii. “When foreigners after looking about for some other Country in which they can obtain more happiness, give a preference to ours, it is a proof of attachment which ought to excite our confidence and affection.” – James Madison (21)

More Information

1. National Immigration Forum Advocacy Resources:
<https://immigrationforum.org/article/advocacy/>
2. More background on debates over immigration:
<https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/us-immigration-debate-0#chapter-title-0-3>
3. Methodology for estimating the undocumented immigrant population:
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/09/02/heres-how-we-can-be-confident-that-there-are-11-million-undocumented-immigrants-in-the-u-s/>
4. Background on issues within our immigration system:
<https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/why-don%E2%80%99t-they-just-get-line>

[Here](#) is the full report from the CATO Institute that lays out some of these myths and more

Sources

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12. KFF, 2022 Changes to the Public Charge Inadmissibility Rule and the Implications for Health Care, May 5, 2022, <https://www.kff.org/racial-equity-and-health-policy/issue-brief/2022-changes-to-the-public-charge-inadmissibility-rule-and-the-implications-for-health-care/>
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