



The Truth about Ten Immigration Myths

Ever heard any of these? Here are the facts.

Myths about U.S. immigration are common. Rumors fly around the Internet. And even professional journalists who should know better keep the cycle of lies going. Here are a few of the most common misconceptions along with information to help you separate fact from fear.

Most immigrants are here illegally.

With so much attention given to the issue of undocumented immigrants, it's easy to overlook the fact that most of the foreign-born living in the United States have followed the rules and have permission to be here. Of the more than 31 million foreign-born people living in the United States in 2009, about 20 million are either citizens or legal residents. Of those who do not have authorization to be here, about 45 percent entered the country legally and then let their papers expire.

It's just as easy to enter the country legally today as it was when my ancestors arrived.

When did your ancestors immigrate? Do you know what the entry requirements were at the time? For about the first 100 years, the United States had an "open immigration system that allowed any able-bodied immigrant in," according to New York University immigration historian David Reimers. The biggest obstacle would-be immigrants faced was getting here. Today there are many rules about who may enter the country and stay legally. Under current policy, many immigrants who came to this country between 1790 and 1924 would not be allowed in today.

There's a way to enter the country legally for anyone who wants to get in line.

Do you know the rules to enter the country legally and stay here to work? The simple answer is that there is no "line" for most very poor people with few skills to stand in and gain permanent U.S. residency. Generally, gaining permission to live and work in the United States is limited to people who are: 1) highly trained in a skill that is in short supply here; 2) escaping political persecution; or 3) joining close family already here.

My ancestors learned English, but today's immigrants refuse.

How long did it take your ancestors to stop using their first language? "Earlier immigrant groups held onto their cultures fiercely," notes Reimers. "When the United States entered the First World War [in 1917], there were over 700 German-language newspapers. Yet, German immigration had peaked in the 1870s."

While today's immigrants may speak their first language at home, two-thirds of those older than 5 speak English "well" or "very well" according to research by the independent, non-partisan Migration Policy Institute. And the demand for adult ESL instruction in the United States far outstrips available classes.

Today's immigrants don't want to blend in and become "Americanized."

What does it mean to blend in to American society? In 2010, about 500,000 immigrants became naturalized citizens. They had to overcome obstacles like getting here, finding a job, overcoming language barriers, paying naturalization fees, dealing with a bureaucracy and taking a written citizenship test. This is not the behavior of people who take becoming an American lightly.

The reality is that the typical pattern of assimilation in the United States has remained steady, says Reimers. "The first generation struggled with English and didn't learn it. The second was bilingual. And the third can't talk to their grandparents." If anything, the speed of assimilation is faster today than at any time in our past, mainly because of public education and mass media.

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Immigrants take good jobs from Americans.

According to the Immigration Policy Center, a non-partisan group, research indicates there is little connection between immigrant labor and unemployment rates of native-born workers. Here in the United States, two trends—better education and an aging population—have resulted in a decrease in the number of Americans willing or available to take low-paying jobs. Between 2000 and 2005, the supply of low-skilled American workers slipped by 1.8 million.

To fill the void, employers often hire immigrant workers. One of the consequences, unfortunately, is that it is easier for unscrupulous employers to exploit this labor source and pay immigrants less, not provide benefits, and ignore worker-safety laws. On an economic level, Americans benefit from relatively low prices on food and other goods produced by undocumented immigrant labor.

Undocumented immigrants cause crime rates to go up.

Nationally, since 1994, the violent crime rate has declined 34 percent and the property crime rate has fallen 26 percent, even as the number of undocumented immigrants has doubled. According to the conservative Americas Majority Foundation, crime rates from 1999–2006 were lowest in states with the highest immigration growth rates. During that period the total crime rate fell 14 percent in the 19 top immigration states, compared to only 7 percent in the other 31. Truth is, foreign-born people in America—whether they are naturalized citizens, permanent resident or undocumented—are incarcerated at a much lower rate than native-born Americans, according to the National Institute of Corrections.

Undocumented immigrants don't pay taxes but still get benefits.

Undocumented immigrants pay taxes every time they buy gas, clothes, or new appliances. They also contribute to property taxes—a main source of school funding—if they buy or rent a house, or rent an apartment. The Social Security Administration estimates that half to three-quarters of undocumented immigrants pay federal, state and local taxes, including \$6 billion to \$7 billion in Social Security taxes for benefits they will never get. They can receive emergency medical care and schooling, but not welfare or food stamps.

The United States is being overrun by immigrants like never before.

As a percentage of the U.S. population, the historic high actually came in 1900, when the foreign-born constituted nearly 20 percent of the population. Today, about 12% of the population is foreign-born. Since the start of the recession in 2008, the number of undocumented immigrants coming into the country has actually dropped. Many people also accuse immigrants of having “anchor babies” who allow the whole family to stay. According to the U.S. Constitution, a child born on U.S. soil is automatically an American citizen. But immigration judges will not keep immigrant parents in the United States just because their children are U.S. citizens. Between 1998 and 2007, the federal government deported about 108,000 foreign-born parents whose children had been born here. These children must wait until they are 21 before they can petition the government to allow their parents to join them in the United States. That process is long and difficult. In reality, there is no such thing as an “anchor baby.”

Anyone who enters the country illegally is a criminal.

Is someone who jaywalks or who doesn't feed a parking meter a criminal? Only very serious misbehavior is generally considered “criminal” in our legal system. Violations of less serious laws are usually “civil” matters and are tried in civil courts. People accused of crimes are tried in criminal courts and can be imprisoned. Federal immigration law says that unlawful presence in the country is a civil offense and is, therefore, not a crime. The punishment is deportation.