

MYTHS and FACTS *on Immigration*

Hate Free Zone

As the immigration debate escalates, **myths abound** from those who talk tough, contending that immigrants hurt America and take more than they give. What are the **facts about immigration**? How do we begin to understand—and talk reasonably—about the truth about immigrants? Here are some of the most common myths about immigrants—and how to counter them.

MYTH: “Immigrants don’t pay taxes”

FACT: Documented immigrants and most undocumented immigrants pay both Federal and State income taxes that are automatically deducted from their paychecks. It is estimated that immigrants pay over \$133 billion in taxes every year. According to former Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan, our social security system would collapse without the contribution of immigrants. Undocumented immigrants contribute at least \$7 billion annually towards Social Security, even though they cannot claim any benefits without legal status. New legal immigrants will contribute approximately \$611 billion to our country over the next 75 years. Finally, remember that immigrants pay sales tax just like anyone else.

MYTH: “Immigrants won’t learn English”

FACT: The vast majority of new immigrants want to learn English—if given the opportunity. They know it improves their job prospects, allows them to communicate with their kids’ teachers and to get around. Unfortunately, the United States—unlike Europe—has never developed or adequately funded immigrant integration strategies that allow newcomers to integrate into society. English language programs remain dramatically under-funded and difficult to access. and makes it easier to live and work. Currently, it is estimated that there are a minimum of 90,000 immigrants on waiting lists to learn English across the country. Immigrants **want** to learn English—let’s give them the opportunity.

MYTH: “Immigrants are taking American jobs”

FACT: The question isn’t about whose jobs, it’s about more jobs. We need more jobs, better jobs and worker retraining, rather than arguing over who is taking the limited, low-wage jobs that exist right now.

The truth is that the American workforce needs immigrant labor. Because of aging, the number of native born Americans in the workforce is dropping. In the construction industry, for example, the average age is 49 years. The American economy won’t be able to maintain more than a 3% annual growth rate in the next decade without growing the labor force with immigrants.

The other need is to raise the minimum wage so that the jobs that immigrants are taking pay better and can attract native-born workers. Right now, immigrants largely take jobs that native-born workers won’t do at the current wages.

MYTH: “Immigrants drive down wages”

FACT: Immigrants don’t drive down wages. The real truth is that for the nine years prior to 2007, Congress and the President had kept the minimum wage stagnant, forcing the minimum wage down to be at the lowest level since World War II, adjusted for inflation. Even now, the minimum wage will increase only over the next two years to \$7.25, still far from enough to meet even the basic needs of a small family.

In addition, denying workers the right to form unions and weakening labor laws allows employers to take advantage of workers who cannot fight for strong collective bargaining agreements that provide better wages and benefits.

MYTH: “Immigrants usurp my family’s share of social services”

FACT: Immigrants give our country far more than they get back. Studies have shown repeatedly that they provide a net economic benefit—calculated to be as much as \$10 billion every year. The taxes they pay finance schools, health clinics and many public services.

As the rhetoric against “big government” and “social programs” intensifies, financing for social services continues to decrease and we all start to operate from a mentality of scarcity rather than abundance, fighting for the crumbs when we should be fighting for a bigger pie.

MYTH: “Immigrants raise crime rates”

FACT: Not true. Numerous studies show the rate of crime among immigrants is lower than that of native-born Americans.

MYTH: “We can keep immigrants out by building better walls”

FACT: Building border walls has never worked—and never will. Congress has passed laws that call for many hundreds of miles of new border walls at the high cost of billions. The government has increased spending on border security over ten times what it was in 1995 and more than doubled the number of border patrol agents. Despite all this, immigrants—both documented and undocumented—continue to come. The United States needs to acknowledge that the legal immigration system has to be fixed to reflect the needs of our economy.

The United States also needs to recognize that America’s recent economic and foreign policies have contributed significantly to the causes of migration worldwide. For example, following the passage of NAFTA, undocumented immigration rose 60% as more than 1.3 million Mexican farmers were driven out of business because of US subsidies that under-priced Mexican agricultural products. Similarly, the U.S. war on Iraq has created over two million refugees who now have no choice but to migrate.

For centuries, people have migrated—willingly and unwillingly—to America. They have come on slave ships, to escape economic hardship or political and religious persecution, or because they were recruited by America to do the hard jobs of building our transcontinental railroads or working in the fields. We need to live up to our history as a nation of immigrants.

Walls just don’t work, nor are they consistent with our American values.

MYTH: “Immigrants should follow the law and come here legally or pay the consequences”

Fact: That assumes we have a legal immigration system that actually works. The problem is that our immigration system is broken. It has never actually evolved to reflect the reality of America’s economic needs and our values. Consider these examples:

- Each year, the United States issues only 5,000 visas to low-skilled workers. However, each year, over 400,000 jobs in America are filled by low-skilled workers. The visa numbers that we allot should be rooted in the reality of our economic needs.
- Even people married to US citizens or permanent legal residents must wait years to join their immediate families. For example, a Filipino mother with a child over 18 years old may have to wait a decade or more.

Even for a spouse, it can sometimes take years. That's just not consistent with America's commitment to family values.

- Today, it is nearly impossible for most people who don't have immediate relatives or specialized skills to come here legally.

Fixing the legal immigration system so it is in line with our real needs allows for immigration to be orderly and sanctioned, with immigrants contributing fully to our democratic society.

MYTH: "There's no solution"

Fact: The solution is comprehensive reform of our immigration laws to include:

- Legalization of current undocumented immigrants with full labor and civil rights and a clear path to citizenship;
- Changes in the current legal immigration systems so that:
 - The current backlog of over 8 million people who've applied legally can be cleared;
 - Families can be reunified without waiting years;
 - Change US visa policies so ordinary working people who want to come here and live and work—at all skills levels—can do so without violating laws or risking their lives;
- Respect the rights of all immigrant workers—including those in temporary worker programs—so they can join unions and move from job to job;
- Protect due process and civil liberties rights of immigrants and within the immigration system so all have access to the same protections in the justice system;
- Change U.S. trade and foreign policy that focus on developing economies of other countries and preventing migration from war or trade policies;
- Coordinate state and federal strategies that support immigrant integration and full participation of immigrants in our economies, communities and our civic society.

Sources:

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