

TOP 5 IMMIGRATION MYTHS OF THIS CAMPAIGN SEASON:

Ending the Immigration Spin - Just the Facts

Immigration has already figured prominently in the Presidential primary campaigns and the issue is unlikely to fade from the limelight any time soon. Debates over immigration policy have always generated strong emotional reactions, but the intensity surrounding the current national debate has reached new levels. The rhetoric by some of the Presidential candidates and their supporters has moved from hyperbole to unbridled misrepresentation.

The American public is justifiably angry about undocumented immigration and the Federal government's failure to gain control over our borders. But if we ever hope to adopt a practical policy solution that restores the rule of law and advances the interests of our nation, we must untangle fact from fiction. Perpetuating myths and exploiting fears to drive policy are two sure-fire ways to make a bad situation worse.

As the campaign season rolls onward and the intensity of the debate escalates, five recurring myths must be dispelled to clear the way for honest dialogue.

MYTH #1: *Enforcement-only policies are a practical solution to the problem of undocumented immigration.*

FACTS: Policies geared only towards "sealing the border" or deporting the undocumented without reforming the immigration system and providing a path to legal status for undocumented immigrants already in the country would cost the nation hundreds of billions of dollars and have a devastating impact on vast swaths of the U.S. economy.

- A 2005 study from the Center for American Progress (CAP) estimates that it would cost between \$206 billion and \$230 billion over five years to deport all undocumented immigrants from the United States. Moreover, in a 2006 study, CAP calculates that removing all undocumented immigrants from the U.S. labor force would result in a shortfall of nearly 2.5 million less-skilled workers.
- As a 2006 report from the Pew Hispanic Center notes, there were 14.6 million people in families headed by undocumented immigrants as of March 2005, including 3.1 million U.S.-citizen children and 1.8 million undocumented children, as well as adult family members who are legally present in the United States. Attempting to deport all undocumented immigrants would therefore disrupt entire families and communities and decimate industries that depend heavily on immigrant workers, both legal and undocumented.
- The Pew report also estimates that the 7.2 million workers among the 11.5 undocumented immigrants in the United States as of March 2005—while accounting for 4.9 percent of the labor force as a whole—comprised 24 percent of all workers in farming, fishing, and forestry; 17 percent in building and grounds cleaning and maintenance; 14 percent in construction; 12 percent in food preparation and serving; and 9 percent in production occupations. Mass deportations therefore would have a

devastating effect on numerous industries, particularly given the small and shrinking number of younger native-born workers available to fill these kinds of less-skilled jobs.

MYTH #2: *Immigrant workers suppress the wages of American workers.*

FACTS: The overwhelming majority of economists agree that immigrants increase the economic productivity and thus the wages of natives.

- A 2006 study by University of California, Davis, economist Giovanni Peri found that because immigrant workers generally “complement”—rather than substitute for—native workers in terms of their education and skills, immigration tends to increase the productivity, and therefore the wages, of natives.
- As a result of this “complementarity,” the White House Council of Economic Advisers concluded in a 2007 report that roughly 90 percent of native-born workers experience wage gains from immigration, which total between \$30 billion and \$80 billion per year.

MYTH #3: *The nation spends billions of dollars on welfare for undocumented immigrants.*

FACTS: To the contrary, undocumented immigrants are not eligible to receive any “welfare” benefits and even legal immigrants are severely restricted in the benefits they can receive.

- As the Congressional Research Service points out in a 2007 report, undocumented immigrants, who comprise nearly one-third of all immigrants in the country, are not eligible to receive public “welfare” benefits—ever. Legal permanent residents (LPRs) must pay into the Social Security and Medicare systems for approximately 10 years before they are eligible to receive benefits when they retire. In most cases, LPRs can not receive SSI, which is available only to U.S. citizens, and are not eligible for means-tested public benefits until 5 years after receiving their green cards.
- A 2007 analysis of welfare data by researchers at the Urban Institute reveals that less than 1 percent of households headed by undocumented immigrants receive cash assistance for needy families, compared to 5 percent of households headed by native-born U.S. citizens.

A 2007 analysis of U.S. Census data by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities makes clear that it is the U.S.-born, U.S.-citizen children of undocumented immigrants who are eligible for programs such as Medicaid and the State Children’s Health Insurance Program (SCHIP). The analysis found that, between 1995 and 2005, the share of low-income, non-citizen immigrant children (either undocumented or legally present) who received Medicaid or SCHIP dropped from 36 percent to 30 percent. In comparison, there were increases in the Medicaid or SCHIP participation of low-income citizen children, whether they lived in immigrant-headed households or households headed by native-born citizens (rising from 45-47 percent in 1995 to 53-54 percent in 2005)

MYTH #4: *Undocumented immigrants are more likely to commit crimes than native-born citizens.*

FACTS: This is a frequently repeated claim, but the exact opposite is true: both undocumented and legal immigrants are significantly less likely to commit crimes than U.S. citizens.

- According to a 2007 study by University of California, Irvine, sociologist Rubén G. Rumbaut, among men age 18-39 (who comprise the vast majority of the U.S. prison population), the incarceration rate for the native-born (3.5 percent) was five times higher than the rate for immigrants (0.7 percent) in 2000.
- The study also found that incarceration rates were lower for immigrants from Mexico, El Salvador, and Guatemala—who account for the majority of undocumented immigrants. In 2000, only 0.7 percent of foreign-born Mexican men and 0.5 percent of foreign-born Salvadoran and Guatemalan men were in prison.
- A 2005 study by economists Kristin F. Butcher and Anne Morrison Piehl, released by the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago, concluded that lower incarceration rates among immigrants are not the result of deportation or the threat of deportation. Rather, immigrants are a “self-selected” group with “low criminal propensities.”

MYTH #5: *Immigrants don't “assimilate” into U.S. society.*

FACTS: Immigrants learn English and climb the socioeconomic ladder over time, and their children and grandchildren make even greater strides.

- A comprehensive 2007 study released by the Russell Sage Foundation found that:
 - Among Latino immigrants who arrived in California between 1960 and 1970, the poverty rate declined from 23.9 percent in 1970 to 16.8 percent in 1980 and 12.6 percent in 1990.
 - Latino immigrants in California exhibit exceptionally large gains in homeownership—a key indicator of entry into the middle class. Homeownership rose from 16.4 percent of Latino immigrant householders in California who arrived in the U.S. in the last 10 years to 64.6 percent among those who have lived here for 30 years or more.
 - Latino immigrants who arrived in the 1970s in California had a 16.3 percent homeownership rate in 1980, which rose to 33.6 percent in 1990, and then climbed to 51.9 percent in 2000.
- A 2007 study by the Pew Hispanic Center found that among “adult first-generation Latinos, just 23% say they can carry on a conversation in English very well. That share rises sharply, to 88%, among the second generation of adults, and to 94% among the third and higher generations.”

- According to a 2003 study from the RAND Corporation, “2nd and 3rd-generation Hispanic men have made great strides in closing their economic gaps with native whites. The reason is simple: each successive generation has been able to close the schooling gap with native whites which then has been translated into generational progress in incomes.