

Ten Myths About Immigration in the United States (Tolerance.org)

Here are a few of the most frequently heard misconceptions—along with information to help you and your students separate fact from fear.

Myth: Most immigrants are here illegally.

Truth: With so much controversy around the issue of undocumented immigrants, it's easy to overlook the fact that most of the foreign-born people living in the United States have followed the rules and have permission to be here. Of the more than 41 million foreign-born people living in the United States in 2013, about 30 million were naturalized citizens, permanent residents and legal residents. Eleven million were unauthorized immigrants. Of those who did not have authorization to be here, about 40 percent entered the country legally and then let their visas expire.

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

For about the first 100 years, the United States had an “open immigration system that allowed any able-bodied immigrant in,” explains immigration historian David Reimers. The biggest obstacle would-be immigrants faced was getting here—some even resorted to selling themselves into indentured servitude to do so. Today, there are many rules about who may enter the country and stay legally. Under current policy, many students' immigrant ancestors who arrived 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.

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 and offered a job by a U.S. employer, (2) escaping political persecution, (3) joining close family already here, or (4) winners of the green-card lottery.

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

“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, one-half of those older than 5 speak English “very well” according to research by the independent, nonpartisan 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.”

Ask students what it means to blend in to American society. Nearly 655,000 people became naturalized citizens during the 2014 fiscal year. They had to overcome obstacles like getting here, finding a job, tackling language barriers, paying naturalization fees, dealing with a famously lethargic immigration bureaucracy and taking a written citizenship test. This is not the behavior of people who take becoming 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.

Immigrants take good jobs from Americans.

According to the Immigration Policy Center, a nonpartisan 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. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, close to 26 million foreign-born people, or 17 percent of the country's labor force, worked in the United States in 2014. These

workers are more likely to be employed by the service industry, while native-born workers are more likely to hold jobs in management, professional, sales and office occupations.

To fill the void of low-skilled American workers, 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 bring crime.

Nationally, from 1990 to 2010, the violent crime rate declined almost 45 percent and the property crime rate fell 42 percent, even as the number of undocumented immigrants more than tripled. According to the conservative Americas Majority Foundation, crime rates from 1999 to 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 residents 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—when they buy or rent a house, or rent an apartment. The U.S. Social Security Administration estimated that in 2013 undocumented immigrants—and their employers—paid \$13 billion in payroll taxes alone for benefits they will never get. They can receive schooling and emergency medical care, 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 1890, when the foreign-born constituted nearly 15 percent of the population. By 2012, about 13 percent of the population was foreign-born. At the start of the recession in 2008, the number of undocumented immigrants coming into the country actually dropped, and in more recent years, that number is stabilizing with little change.

Many people also accuse immigrants of having “anchor babies”—children 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. That is true. But immigration judges will not keep immigrant parents in the United States just because their children are U.S. citizens. In 2013, the federal government deported about 72,410 foreign-born parents whose children had been born here. These children must wait until they are 21 before they can petition 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.

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. However, some states—like Arizona—have criminalized an immigrant's mere presence.