

Common Myths About Undocumented Immigrants

Myth: Undocumented immigrants do not want to be legal residents.

Fact: Immigrants come to the U.S. for a variety of reasons — to reunite with family or to find better employment opportunities — and would prefer to do so through legal channels. However, the U.S. immigration system is extremely limited, and undocumented immigrants in the U.S. cannot simply apply for a visa and obtain legal status.

Myth: Undocumented immigrants are lazy.

Fact: Ninety-six percent of undocumented men living in the U.S. are employed, which exceeds the labor force participation rate of legal immigrants and U.S. citizens by 15 percentage points.¹ Many work two or more jobs. It is clear that employment is a major driving force behind undocumented migration; many industries, such as restaurants, hotels, and agriculture, report that they rely on these hardworking migrants.

Myth: Undocumented immigrants take jobs from Americans.

Fact: Immigrant labor is needed to fill jobs in the U.S. that an older, more educated American workforce is not willing to fill, especially at the low wages and poor working conditions many unscrupulous employers offer.² Currently, there are approximately nine million undocumented workers in the U.S. filling important gaps in the labor market. There is substantial evidence that their presence in the labor force creates jobs and strengthens local economies.

Myth: Undocumented immigrants do not pay taxes.

Fact: Undocumented immigrants pay taxes in a number of ways, including income and sales tax. The majority of undocumented immigrants pay

income taxes using Individual Taxpayer Identification Numbers (ITINs) or false Social Security numbers. All immigrants, regardless of status, will pay on average \$80,000 per capita more in taxes than they use in government services over their lifetime.³ The Social Security system reaps the biggest windfall from taxes paid by immigrants; the Social Security Administration reports that it holds approximately \$420 billion from the earnings of immigrants who are not in a position to claim benefits.⁴

Myth: Undocumented immigrants drain the welfare system.

Fact: Undocumented immigrants are ineligible for the vast majority of state and federal benefits and are only eligible for those that are considered important to public health and safety. In fact, many legal immigrants are also ineligible for most federal benefits. As a result, health care spending for immigrants is approximately half that of citizens.⁵

Myth: The best way to stop undocumented migration is by increasing enforcement.

Fact: Between 1986 and 2002 the number of border enforcement agents has tripled, the number of hours they spent patrolling the border grew by a factor of approximately eight, and the Border Patrol's budget has increased tenfold. At the same time, the number of undocumented immigrants in the U.S. has continued to increase.⁶ Support is growing for a more comprehensive approach to immigration control which combines smart enforcement with measures to create a legal path for those who come to the U.S. to work, and those who are already in the workforce.

1 Passell, Jeffrey S., Randolph Capps, and Michael E. Fix, *Undocumented Immigrants: Facts and Figures*. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute, January 2004.

2 Paral, Rob, "Essential Workers: Immigrants are a Needed Supplement to the Native-Born Labor Force." Washington, DC: Immigration Policy Center, March 2005.

3 Smith, J.P. and B. Edmonston, *The New Americans: Economic, Demographic, and Fiscal Effects of Immigration*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 1997.

4 *Testimony on the "ITIN" and Social Security Number Misuse*, presented by Patrick P. O'Carroll, Jr., Social Security Administration, Office of the Inspector General, to the House Committee on Ways and Means, Subcommittee on Oversight, Subcommittee on Social Security, U.S. House of Representatives, Washington, DC, March 24, 2004, www.ssa.gov/oig/communications/testimony_speeches/03102004testimony.htm.

5 Mohanty, Sarita A, Steffie Woolhandler, David U. Himmelstein, Susmita Pati, Olveen Carrasquillo, and David H. Bor. "Health Care Expenditures of Immigrants in the United States: A Nationally Representative Analysis." *American Journal of Public Health*, Vol. 95, No. 8, August 2005.

6 Massey, Douglas, "Beyond the Border Buildup: Towards a New Approach to Mexico-U.S. Migration." Washington, DC: Immigration Policy Center, September 2005.