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## Seven Immigration Myths and Facts

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## Seven Immigration Myths and Facts

### Abstract

The AFL-CIO prepared *Seven Immigration Myths and Facts* addressing current immigration issues.

### Keywords

unions, labor movement, organizing, representation, AFL-CIO, immigration, public policy, enforcement, workers' rights, legislation

### Comments

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## Seven Immigration Myths and Facts

**Myth:** Immigration into the United States is bad for American workers.

**Fact:** Bad immigration policy, not immigration in and of itself, hurts American workers.

Many studies have determined that immigration does not negatively affect American workers, and several have found that immigration actually has a positive net effect for many native-born workers.<sup>1234</sup> That is because immigrants are both workers and consumers, and their presence in the United States increases demand for products and services within the United States, creating new jobs and boosting wages in the process.

However, the current broken immigration system does hurt American workers. The system of distributing a fixed number of work visas based on arbitrary quotas that are unresponsive to fluctuations in the U.S. economy's demand for labor creates incentives for millions of people to immigrate into the United States without legal authorization to do so. As a result, today there are between 10 and 12 million undocumented workers within the United States. Such workers are vulnerable to unscrupulous employers that take advantage of their undocumented status in order to avoid paying them prevailing wages or fulfilling basic health and safety standards. Because undocumented immigrant workers labor in industries right alongside documented immigrants and American-born workers, the exploitation of undocumented workers drives down standards for native-born workers as well.

This dynamic has increased in recent years, as enhanced focus on immigration enforcement has moved unauthorized workers further underground, lowering their pay, and creating a greater demand for unauthorized workers. When a business cuts costs by hiring unauthorized workers for lower wages, its competitors become more likely to hire unauthorized workers for lower wages, as well, in order to benefit from the same cost savings.<sup>5</sup> Documented immigrants, native-born workers, and undocumented immigrants alike lose out in this race to the bottom.

**Myth:** Enforcement-only approaches to dealing with the nation's immigration crisis such as increased border security and Arizona's "show me your papers law" can effectively keep undocumented immigrants out of the United States.

**Fact:** Enforcement-only approaches to dealing with the nation's immigration crisis have been proven to be expensive, ineffective, lethal, and have disastrous effects on workers' rights.

The number of unauthorized immigrants in the United States has increased dramatically since the early 1990s despite tens of billions of dollars of federal immigration enforcement spending. The U.S. Border Patrol's annual budget has increased by over 700% percent since 1992—the year before the current era of concentrated immigration enforcement along the U.S.-Mexico border. At the same time, the amount of money spent on each apprehension has increased by over 1,000%. The budget for U.S. Customs and Border Protection, the Border Patrol's parent agency within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), has increased nearly twofold, from

\$6.0 billion in 2003 to \$11.3 billion in 2009. And the budget for Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), DHS' interior-enforcement counterpart to Customs and Border Protection, has also increased by over 80%, from \$3.3 billion in 2003 to \$5.9 billion in 2009.<sup>6</sup>

Despite these massive budgetary increases, the unauthorized immigrant population of the United States has roughly tripled in size over the past two decades, from an estimated 3.5 million in 1990 to 11.9 million in 2008. The fact is that nearly all unauthorized migrants still eventually succeed in entering the United States. Indeed, one study showed that the vast majority of unauthorized immigrants—between 92 and 98 percent—keep trying to cross the border until they make it.<sup>7</sup>

While ineffective at stopping the migration of undocumented workers, the unintended consequence of enforcement-focused immigration policy has been to make the southwestern border more lethal. By channeling unauthorized migrants through extremely hazardous mountain and desert areas, rather than the relatively safe urban corridors used by migrants in the past, increased border-enforcement has resulted in the number of migrant deaths increasing twofold in the decade following 1995.<sup>8</sup> One report estimates that 5,607 migrants died while crossing the border between 1994 and 2008.<sup>9</sup>

Another consequence of the increased levels of immigration enforcement has been the undermining of labor rights. The U.S. government's single-minded focus on immigration enforcement without regard to violations of workplace laws has enabled employers with rampant labor and employment violations to thrive by employing undocumented workers who are terrified to complain about substandard wages, unsafe conditions, and lack of benefits, or to demand their right to bargain collectively.

Worst yet, there have been several documented cases of ICE and other government agencies directly undermining the assertion of labor rights. ICE has conducted high-profile workplace raids in the middle of Department of Labor and other agency investigations into labor and employment law violations. Similarly, ICE has cooperated with employer requests to verify workers' immigration status in the middle of workplace disputes, and in other instances government actors such as local law enforcement have interfered with workers' assertion of their labor rights, culminating in ICE arrests of the victimized workers.<sup>10</sup> These actions, illustrative of ICE's single-minded focus on immigration enforcement at all costs, have had the predictable effect of chilling the assertion and exercise of workplace rights, hurting all workers regardless of immigration status. "Show me your papers" laws like Arizona's SB1070 add yet another tool to corporate employers' anti-union, anti-worker tool belt.

**Myth:** Comprehensive immigration reform legislation which includes a pathway to citizenship for undocumented workers would further hurt the economy at a moment when our economy can least afford it.

**Fact:** Comprehensive immigration reform that creates a pathway to citizenship for unauthorized immigrants in the United States would be a boon to the economy and an integral piece of fixing the broken economy for all working Americans.

It has been estimated comprehensive immigration reform would yield at least \$1.5 trillion in cumulative U.S. gross domestic product over 10 years.<sup>11</sup> That's because by eliminating the undocumented underclass of workers that employers use to undercut wages and drive down standards, comprehensive immigration reform will ensure that all workers have full labor rights, which would result in higher wages across the board.

**Myth:** Immigrants commit crime at a higher rate than native-born Americans.

**Fact:** A century of research finds that crime rates for immigrants are actually lower than for native-born Americans.

Numerous studies by independent researchers and government commissions over the past 100 years repeatedly and consistently have found that immigrants are less likely to commit crimes or be behind bars than the native-born. In the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, during the previous era of large-scale immigration, various federal commissions found lower levels of crime among the foreign-born than the native-born. More recently, the U.S. Commission on Immigration Reform reached a similar conclusion in a 1994 report,<sup>12</sup> as did the U.S. Department of Justice in a 2000 report.<sup>13</sup>

Similarly, crime rates have declined most starkly in states with the highest immigration growth. From 1999 to 2006, the total crime rate declined 13.6% in the 18 highest immigrant destination states, compared to a 7.1% decline in the other 32 states.<sup>14</sup> According to the FBI, the four large U.S. cities (with populations of at least 500,000) with the lowest crime rates—San Diego, Phoenix, El Paso, and Austin—are all in border states and have high immigrant populations.<sup>15</sup>

**Myth:** Giving birth to a child within the United States allows undocumented immigrants quickly and easily become legal U.S. residents and avoid deportation.

**Fact:** Having American-born children does not give undocumented immigrants a free pass to legal status.

Under the 14<sup>th</sup> amendment, all babies born within the borders of the United States are U.S. citizens. However, citizen children cannot sponsor their parents for citizenship until they turn 21 years old. Furthermore, if a citizen child's parents were ever in the United States without legal status, they must return to their home country for 10 years before applying to immigrate to the United States legally. Therefore the "anchor baby" argument that pregnant mothers cross the border into the United States illegally in order to give birth and easily gain legal status through their citizen children is an illogical stretch, at best. Such mothers would have to be thinking twenty to thirty years in advance and anticipate spending ten years apart from their U.S. citizen children.

Similarly, being the parent of U.S. citizen children provides no protection against deportation. A January, 2009 study by the Department of Homeland Security Office of Inspector General found that more than 100,000 non-citizen parents of U.S. citizen children were deported from the United States between 1998 and 2007.<sup>16</sup> Many such deportations result in families being ripped apart, leaving U.S. citizen children and entire communities traumatized and vulnerable.

**Myth:** Immigrants and their children come to the United States in search of a free ride and are a drain on our social services and our economy.

**Fact:** The vast majority of immigrants come to the United States to work hard and take care of their families and themselves, and in doing so contribute more to government coffers than they use in social services.

Numerous landmark studies have found that immigrants generate public revenue that exceeds their public costs over time. Indeed, one study found that immigrants pay approximately \$80,000 more in taxes than they receive in state, federal, and local benefits over their life times.<sup>17</sup> Another study similarly concluded that “the long-run impact of immigration on public budgets is likely to be positive,” adding that “only a forward-looking projection of taxes and government spending can offer an accurate picture of the long-run fiscal consequences of admitting new immigrants.”<sup>18</sup>

Undocumented immigrants do not qualify and therefore cannot receive any public benefits beyond emergency services and public primary and secondary education. Undocumented immigrants do not qualify for food stamps, Social Security, Supplemental Security Income, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, Medicaid Medicare “Premium Free” Part A, public housing or Section 8 programs. Furthermore, legal permanent residents do not qualify for the abovementioned programs unless they have resided in the United States legally for at least five years.

Immigrant labor force participation is consistently higher than native-born, and immigrant workers make up a larger share of the U.S. labor force (14%) than they do the U.S. population (11%).<sup>19</sup> Due to their parents’ high rate of work-force participation, overwhelming majority of U.S. born children of immigrant parents (88%) live in working households. And despite the fact that such children are more likely to live in poverty than their peers whose parents were born in the United States, (20% vs. 16%) they are less likely than their peers to receive food stamps (14% vs. 17%).<sup>20</sup>

Simply put, immigrants do not come to the United States to have their children and take a handout for the U.S. government. The great majority of immigrants come to the United States to work and provide for themselves and their families.

**Myth:** Anti-immigrant politicians have the best interests of the American worker in mind.

**Fact:** The most rabidly anti-immigrant politicians in U.S. politics are also some of the most anti-worker politicians in the country. Many such politicians have skillfully diverted attention from their anti-worker agenda by drumming up anti-immigrant anxiety and fear in their constituents.

Every two years, one of the leading anti-immigrant groups, the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR), publishes a “Congressional Voting Report” evaluating whether Members of Congress have voted as they recommend. FAIR is no ordinary interest group, it has been designated a hate group by the Southern Poverty Law Center for its disturbing connections to white nationalist organizations and individuals and is part of a network of extremist organizations created by well-known white nationalist John Tanton. FAIR is also the organization behind the Coalition for the Future American Worker, a front group designed to put a “pro-worker” face on the anti-immigrant lobby’s anti-worker agenda.

Of the 87 Members of the U.S. House of Representatives who received an “A” from FAIR in the 110<sup>th</sup> Congress, 94% voted against the Employee Free Choice Act, 93% voted against equal pay for women, and 83% voted against extending unemployment compensation. It is therefore unsurprising that 93% of FAIR’s champions earned a grade of “F” from the AFL-CIO.

Despite efforts to couch their anti-immigrant policies in populist, pro-worker rhetoric, the truth is that many of the politicians that are the greatest opponents of immigrant workers are the greatest opponents of American workers as well.

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