

America is Immigration

Asian-American, Cuban-American, European-American, African-American, Mexican-American" ... "different backgrounds, different cultures, but all united by the fact that when the hyphen is eliminated we are all Americans.

Over the years the United States has been called a nation of immigrants. The fact that we are a melting pot for so many different cultures, races, and religions makes us unique in the world. It is also what has helped mold our national character. For more than 300 years, various ethnic, cultural, and social groups have come to our shores to reunite with their loved ones, to seek economic opportunity, and to find a haven from religious and political persecution. They bring their hopes, their dreams, and, in turn, contribute, enrich, and energize America.

And yet, today, we are witnessing television shows that vilify newcomers as scam artists, news stories that showcase the growing backlash against immigration, and politicians and reporters who make no distinction between immigrants entering the country legally or illegally. Unfortunately, much of what we are reading, hearing, and seeing is based on fiction, not fact. So what is the true story?

Less than a million immigrants arrive in the United States each year. Of these, 700,000 enter as lawful permanent residents and another 100,000 to 150,000 enter legally as refugees or others fleeing persecution. Undocumented immigrants constitute only 1% of the total U.S. population and, contrary to popular belief, most of these immigrants do not enter the United States illegally by crossing our border with Canada or Mexico. Instead most immigrants here illegally, 6 out of 10, enter the U.S. legally with a student, tourist, or business visa and become illegal when they stay in the United States after their visas expire.

Most legal immigrants, about 8 out of 11, come to join close family members. Family-sponsored immigrants enter as either immediate relatives--spouses, unmarried minor children, parents-- of U.S. citizens, or through the family preference system, for relatives of permanent residents and siblings of U.S. citizens. While there are unlimited number of visas issued for immediate relatives of U.S. citizens, INS data shows that only around 235,000 visas have been issued annually in this category in recent years. The family preference system is far more restrictive and limits the number of visas issued in its four categories to a total of 226,000 per year. In addition, the waiting period for a visa can very long. For example, a sibling of a U.S. citizen who applies today to immigrate to this country could get a visa 30 years from now.

It is easy to see that family reunification is the cornerstone of our legal immigration policy. It is truly one of the most visible areas in government policy in which we support and strengthen family values. We acknowledge that family unification translates into strong families who build strong communities.

The second priority of our legal admissions system allows employers to bring in a relatively small number of skilled workers from overseas when there are no qualified Americans available to fill the job. This doesn't mean that we shirk our responsibility to educate and train those already here. It only means that we recognize the need to be able to attract talented and hardworking individuals from all corners of the world and to acquire often needed expertise and experience.

This concept is not new. Throughout our history we have relied on the strength, expertise, and special skills of foreign workers and immigrants to build this country. As early as 1610 Italian craftsmen were brought to the New World by the Virginia Colony to start the glass trade. In the mid- 1800s American manufacturers advertised in European newspapers offering free passage to any man willing to come to the United States to work for them. Immigrant workers have altered American life and their contributions were, and still are, significant to the economic growth of our nation.

Finally, American immigration policy fulfills our commitment to religious and political freedom. "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free," is not rhetoric, it is America's pledge to ensure that those brave men and women who face the prospect of ethnic cleansing, religious oppression, torture, and even death have a haven. Because this country was founded in large part by those who fled various kinds of political and religious persecution, it has become of our historical responsibility to serve as an advocate for human rights.

Five Immigration Myths Explained

Regardless of the reasons for immigrating, myths still abound regarding immigrants once they arrive in the United States. Now's the time to separate some of this fact from fiction.

Myth Number 1: Immigrants take jobs away from Americans.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Studies have shown that quite the opposite is true: Immigrants create jobs. Specifically various recent studies have shown that:

- Immigrants are more likely to be self-employed and start new businesses. Small businesses, 18 percent of which are started by immigrants, account for up to 80 percent of the new jobs available in the United States each year.
- Slightly more than 10 percent of the U.S. industrial workforce, or roughly 2.2 million Americans, are employed by foreign companies doing business in the United States. Additionally, the top 105 multinational corporations doing business here have U.S. affiliates

that are so large they would qualify for the Fortune 500 list solely on the basis of their stateside operations.

Myth Number 2: America is being overrun by immigrants.

This, unfortunately, is another case where perception is out of sync with reality. To be sure, the number of immigrants living in the United States is larger than ever before, but these numbers are relatively small as a percentage of the population. More importantly, the percentage of immigrants in the total population has decreased. So far, no single decade has topped 1901-1910 for immigration admissions. Further, even though the United States has one of the world's most generous refugee resettlement programs, less than 1.5 percent of the world's refugee population finds its way to the United States.

Perhaps the misperception regarding numbers of immigrants rests in the fact that in the 1980s, three-quarters of all immigrants entering the United States settled in just six states: California, New York, Texas, Florida, New Jersey, and Illinois. Also, the vast majority of immigrants settle in urban areas. In 1990, 93 percent of foreign-born Americans lived in metropolitan areas, compared with 73 percent of native-born Americans.

Myth Number 3: Most immigrants are a drain on the U.S. economy.

Once again, nothing could be further from the truth:

- Immigrants collectively earn \$240 billion a year, pay \$90 billion a year in taxes, and receive \$5 billion in welfare.
- New immigrants must prove that they won't be a burden before they are allowed to enter the United States. Compared to the native-born population, immigrants are more likely to be employed, save more of their earnings, and are more likely to start new businesses.
- Immigrants have a slightly higher per capita income than natives and a slightly lower household income. But, their income levels rise over time: Among those entering before 1980, median household income in 1989 was \$35,733 (vs. \$30,176 for natives) and per capita income was \$19,423 (vs. \$14,367 for natives).
- Non-refugee immigrants of working age are less prone to welfare than natives.

Myth Number 4: Immigrants aren't really interested in becoming part of American society.

All evidence points to the contrary. Immigrants are very interested in being part of our society. In fact, the grandparents and parents of immigrant children have expressed some concern that their youngsters are assimilating too quickly.

- Immigrants want to learn and speak English. Reports from throughout the United States indicate that the demand for classes in English as a second language far outstrips supply. After 15 years in America, 75 percent

of Spanish-speaking immigrants speak English on a regular basis. The children of immigrants, although bilingual, prefer English to their native tongue at astounding rates.

- Immigrants and refugees intermarry outside their group at a rate of 1 in 3. The rate is even higher, 1 out of 2, for their children.

Myth Number 5: Immigrants contribute little to American society.

Baloney. Besides their significant economic contributions, immigrants continually have helped shape and mold the fabric of our society.

- Immigrants, for the most part, are firm believers in family unity. They are more likely than natives to live in families: 76 percent vs. 70 percent. They also tend to have more children: 2.25 vs 1.93. Immigrants are more likely to be married: 60 percent vs. 55 percent. Only 8 percent of immigrants are divorced or separated compared to 11 percent of natives.
- Immigrants recognize the value of an education. While many lack a high school education, they are just as likely as natives to hold a college degree: 20 percent. That rate rose during the 1980s: Among those admitted in 1987-1990, 29 percent held a college degree. Immigrants are also twice as likely as natives to hold Ph.D.'s.
- Immigrants respect the law as much, if not more, than native born Americans. They are less likely than natives to be confined to a state prison. Among the five states with the most immigrants —California, Florida, Illinois, New York, Texas— only New York has a greater share of immigrants in its prisons than in its general population.

So, who are these people we call immigrants? They could be your parents, your grandparents, your teachers, your friends, your doctors, your policemen, your grocer, your waiter, your cook, your babysitter, your gardener, your lawyer, your favorite actor, actress, or sports hero, your mayor, your congressman or senator, your shopkeeper. Immigrants permeate the fabric of America. They are an integral and important part of our society, its goals and its values. They are the backbone that helps make this country great. They are what sets us apart from every nation in this world. In short, they are us.

Legal Immigration to the United States

Legal immigration to the United States totals approximately 800,000 per year. Family-sponsored immigrants total 480,000 each year. These immigrants are:

- Immediate Relatives of U.S. Citizens (spouses, children and parents of U.S. citizens (no numerical limit, approximately 220,000 to 240,000 per year);
- Unmarried Adult Children of U.S. Citizens (23,400);

- Spouses and Children of Lawful Permanent Residents (87,900);
- Unmarried Adult Children of Lawful Permanent Residents (26,300);
- Married Adult Children of U.S. Citizens (23,400);
- Brothers and Sisters of U.S. Citizens (65,000)

Employment-based immigrants total 140,000 each year. These are primarily skilled professionals with exceptional ability and other priority workers, immigrating to jobs for which U.S. Department of Labor has certified that no qualified U.S. worker is available.

Diversity immigrants total 55,000 per year under the present lottery system that makes immigrant visas available to nationals from "undersubscribed" countries.

Refugee admissions are determined annually. They presently total approximately 120,000, with nearly half

these numbers being assigned to nationals from the former Soviet Union and one-third to Southeast Asian refugees.

The leading source countries for legal immigration are

1. Mexico (91,000),
2. Vietnam (78,000),
3. the Philippines (59,000), and
4. the republics of the former Soviet Union (44,000).*

The leading source countries for refugee admissions are the republics of the former Soviet Union (62,000).*

Nearly three-fourths of all new immigrants intend to reside in six states: California, New York, Texas, Florida, New Jersey, and Illinois.

Undocumented immigration total approximately 300,000 annually, according to the INS. One half of these undocumented immigrants arrive in the U.S. legally and overstay their non-immigrant visa.

** Based on 1992 figures; all others are current.*

Source: AILA (American Immigration Lawyers Association); www.aila.org
 Information also available at: www.usagreencardcenter.com