

Debunking Immigration Myths

Myth: Immigrants don't pay taxes.

Most immigrants, whether documented or not, pay taxes like everyone else:

Payroll taxes. Many undocumented workers have payroll taxes—Social Security and Medicare— withheld by their employers, even though undocumented workers will not receive any benefits from these programs. In 2003, the government collected an estimated \$7 billion in Social Security taxes from 7.5 million workers and their employers in which the Social Security numbers did not match the taxpayer identification number. This dollar amount has more than tripled in the last decade.¹

Sales tax. Undocumented immigrants pay sales tax when they shop, just like everyone else.

Property tax. Whether they rent or own homes, undocumented immigrants pay property tax. Homeowners pay the tax directly, but renters pay property taxes indirectly, since landlords set rents at rates that allow them to pay taxes on their rental units.

Myth: Immigrants take more in government services than they pay for in taxes.

A large body of evidence concludes that undocumented immigrants are net contributors to the U.S. economy, providing much more in taxes paid and work provided than they receive in public benefits. A recent paper of the National Immigration Law Center, "Paying Their Way and Then Some,"² reviews studies from disparate sources that reinforce this conclusion.

Undocumented immigrants probably pay more in taxes per person than people who are legal

¹ Jane Guskin and David Wilson. *The Politics of Immigration*, The Monthly Review Press, March 2007

² National Immigration Law Center, "Paying Their Way and Then Some: Facts About the Contributions of Immigrants to Economic Growth and Public Investment," September, 2006. Contact Tyler Moran, moran@nilc.org for a copy of this study.

immigrants or native-born Americans of the same income level. Low-income families generally get back money from their federal income tax returns, because of the Earned Income Tax Credit. Undocumented immigrants are not eligible for this tax credit.

A 2006 study conducted by Texas State Comptroller Carole Keeton Strayhorn, a Republican, concluded that undocumented immigrants generated \$1.58 billion in state revenues, and received only \$1.16 billion in state services. The report also found that "the absence of the estimated 1.4 million undocumented immigrants in Texas in fiscal 2005 would have been a loss to our gross state product of \$17.7 billion."³

Myth: Immigrants take American jobs.

According to a 2007 report by the President's Council of Economic Advisers, "immigrants not only help fuel the Nation's economic growth, but also have an overall positive effect on the income of native-born workers."⁴

The conservative Alexis de Tocqueville Institution released a report that concluded that immigrants "create at least as many jobs as they take."⁵ They do "take" jobs, but they also buy goods and services, thus creating more jobs and contributing to overall economic growth.

If undocumented immigrants sometimes bring down wages (this is minimal, and mostly in low-skill, low-wage jobs), it is primarily because of the fact that

³ Carole Keeton Strayhorn, Texas Comptroller, *Special Report: Undocumented Immigrants in Texas: A Financial Analysis of the Impact to the State Budget and Economy*. Austin, TX: December 2006, p. 1.

⁴ President's Council of Economic Advisors, "Immigration's Economic Impact" 2007, http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/cea/cea_immigration_062007.html

⁵ Richard Vedder, Lowell Gallaway, and Stephen Moore, "Immigration and Unemployment: New Evidence," Alexis de Tocqueville Institution, Arlington, VA (Mar. 1994) See also: Richard Vedder, "Immigration Doesn't Displace Natives," Wall Street Journal, March 28, 1994, p. A12

they lack legal status – these workers are exploited and constantly threatened with the possibility of deportation. They are thus forced to put up with low pay and poor conditions. Most studies show that legalization would raise wages in these types of jobs, because workers could organize for better pay and employers could not scare immigrants into accepting poor wages and conditions.

Myth: Immigrants don't want to learn English or become Americans.

Just like immigrants before them, today's immigrants want to learn English. Within 10 years of arriving in the U.S., more than seventy-five percent of immigrants speak English well. Ninety-one percent of second generation immigrants speak English fluently or nearly fluently.⁶

Myth: There are many more immigrants today than there were one hundred years ago.

Today there are proportionately fewer immigrants. In 2002, eleven and a half percent of the U.S. population was born in another country; in the early twentieth century, it was about fifteen percent.⁷

Myth: Most immigrants cross the border illegally.

Approximately seventy-five percent of immigrants currently have legal permanent visas; of the twenty-five percent that are undocumented, forty percent overstayed temporary visas.⁸

⁶ Shirin Hakimzadeh and D'Vera Cohn, "English Usage Among Hispanics in the United States," Pew Hispanic Forum, Dec. 6, 2007. <http://pewhispanic.org/reports/report.php?ReportID=82>, American Immigration Lawyers Association, Myths & Facts in the Immigration Debate", 8/14/03, adapted from "10 Myths About Immigrants," Sojourners Magazine, July 2006, <http://www.sojournal.net/index.cfm?action=magazine.article&issue=soj0607&article=060711> and "Countering the Myths" from Justice for Immigrants, of The Catholic Campaign for Immigration Reform

<http://www.justiceforimmigrants.org/myths.html>

⁷ <http://www.census.gov/prod/2002pubs/censr-4.pdf>

⁸ Department of Homeland Security

<http://uscis.gov/graphics/shared/statistics/index.htm>

Myth: Immigration reform cannot happen in an election year.

Every major piece of immigration reform of the last few decades was passed in an election year,⁹ including:

- Refugee Act of 1980
- Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986
- Immigration Act of 1990
- Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996

Many of these bills were controversial and came together at the last minute. The public outrage over SB1070 in Arizona and President Obama's July 1, 2010 commitment to comprehensive immigration reform may provide an opening for real reform to pass. But only if we take action!

⁹ Meissner, Doris. "5 Myths about Immigration." *Washington Post*, May 2, 2010