

Ten Myths About Immigration

Teaching Tolerance

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

When students make statements that are unfounded, one response is to simply ask, "How do you know that's true?" Whatever the answer—even if it's "That's what my parents say"—probe a little further. Ask, "Where do you think they got that information?" or "That sounds like it might be an opinion, not a fact." Guide students to find a reliable source for accurate information and help them figure out how to check the facts.

1. Most immigrants are here illegally.

With so much controversy around the issue of immigrants who are undocumented, it's easy to overlook the fact that most of the foreign-born people living in the United States followed the rules and have permission to be here. Of the more than 43 million foreign-born people who were living in the United States in 2014, around 44 percent were naturalized U.S. citizens. Those who were not naturalized were either lawful permanent residents, also known as green-card holders (27 percent of all foreign-born people), or immigrants who were unauthorized (some 11 million people, representing 25.5 percent of all foreign-born people). Although it is not known exactly what percentage of that 11 million originally entered legally with valid visas and let their visas expire (experts estimate it to be approximately 40 percent), it is known that—by far—the nation with the most visitors who do not leave at the end of their authorized stays is Canada.

2. It's easy to enter the country legally. My ancestors did; why can't immigrants today?

If you hear students making this statement, ask them when their ancestors immigrated and if they know what the entry requirements were at the time. For about the first 100 years, the United States had an "open immigration system that allowed any able-bodied immigrant in," according to immigration historian David Reimers. Back then, the biggest obstacle that would-be

immigrants faced was getting here. Some even sold themselves into indentured servitude to do so. Today, however, many rules specify who may enter and remain in the country legally. There is also a rigorous process for obtaining documentation to enter the United States as a resident, including applying for immigrant visas and permanent resident/green-card status. Many students' immigrant ancestors who arrived between 1790 and 1924 would not have been allowed in under the current policy. Generally, permission to enter and stay in the country as a documented immigrant is limited to people who are highly trained in a skill that is in short supply here and have been offered a job by a U.S. employer, are escaping political persecution, are joining close family already here or are winners of the green-card lottery.

3. Today's immigrants don't want to learn English.

While most first-generation immigrants may speak their first language at home, 35 percent of those age 5 or older speak English “very well” and 21 percent speak it “well,” according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Nearly 730,000 people became naturalized citizens during the 2015 fiscal year. They had to overcome such obstacles as traveling to the United States, finding a job, tackling language barriers, paying naturalization and lawyers' fees and dealing with an ever-changing immigration bureaucracy. Immigrants must speak, read, write and understand the English language, not only for the naturalization application process, but also so they can pass a 100-question civics test that has both oral and written components.

It's also worth discussing with students that the current demand for English instruction is greater than the services available in many parts of the country. Also explore with them false assumptions about “today's” immigrants versus those who arrived in prior generations. For example, ask students to find out how long it took their ancestors to stop using their first language. “Earlier immigrant groups held on to 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.”

4. Immigrants take good jobs from U.S. citizens.

Ask students what kinds of jobs they think immigrants are taking. According to the American Immigration Council, a nonpartisan group, research indicates there is little connection between immigrant labor and unemployment rates of native-born workers. Two trends—better education and an aging population—have resulted in a decrease in the number of workers born in the United States who are willing or available to take low-paying jobs. Across all industries and occupations, though, immigrants who are naturalized citizens and non-citizens are outnumbered by workers born in the United States.

Another version of this myth is that it is undocumented immigrants who are taking jobs. However, the U.S. civilian workforce included 8 million unauthorized immigrants in 2014, which accounts for only 5 percent of the entire workforce. Compared with their small share of the civilian workforce overall, immigrants without authorization are only overrepresented in service, farming and construction occupations. This may be due to the fact that, to fill the void of low-skilled U.S. workers, employers often hire undocumented immigrant workers. One of the consequences of this practice is that it is easier for unscrupulous employers to exploit this labor source, paying immigrants less, refusing to provide benefits and ignoring worker-safety laws. On an economic level, U.S. citizens benefit from relatively low prices on food and other goods produced by undocumented immigrant labor.

5. “The worst” people from other countries are coming to the United States and bringing crime and violence.

Immigrants come to this country for a few primary reasons: to work, to be reunited with family members or to escape a dangerous situation. Most are couples, families with children, and workers who are integral to the U.S. economy. Statistics show that immigrants are less likely to commit serious crimes or be behind bars than native-born people are, and high rates of immigration are associated with lower rates of violent crime and property crime. For instance, “sanctuary counties” average 35.5 fewer crimes per 10,000 people compared to non-sanctuary counties. This holds true for immigrants who are documented and undocumented, regardless of their country of origin or level of education. In other words, the overwhelming majority of immigrants are not “criminals.”

According to the American Immigration Council: “Between 1990 and 2013 the foreign-born share of the U.S. population grew from 7.9 percent to 13.1 percent and the number of unauthorized immigrants more than tripled. ... During the same period, FBI data indicate that the violent crime rate and property crime rate declined 48 percent ... [and] 41 percent [respectively].” The truth is, foreign-born people in the United States—whether they are naturalized citizens, permanent residents or immigrants who are undocumented—are incarcerated at a much lower rate than native-born Americans.

6. Undocumented immigrants don’t pay taxes and burden the national economy.

Ask students to name some ways U.S. residents pay taxes. They might come up with income tax or sales tax. Immigrants who are undocumented pay taxes every time they buy taxable goods such as gas, clothes or new appliances (depending on where they reside). They also contribute to property taxes—a main source of school funding—when they buy or rent a house or apartment. A 2017 report from the Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy highlights that undocumented immigrants pay an estimated \$11.74 billion in state and local taxes a year. The U.S. Social Security Administration estimated that in 2010 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. Under the 1996 welfare law, most government programs require proof of documentation, and even immigrants with documents cannot receive these benefits until they have been in the United States for more than five years.

7. The United States is being overrun by immigrants like never before.

From 1890 to 1910, the foreign-born population of the United States fluctuated between 13.6 and nearly 15 percent; the peak year for admission of new immigrants was 1907, when approximately 1.3 million people entered the country legally. In 2010, about 13 percent of the population was foreign-born. Since the start of the recession in 2008, the number of immigrants without documentation coming into the country has fallen each year and, in more recent years, the number has stabilized. Many people claim that immigrants have “anchor babies”—an offensive term for giving birth to children in the United States so that the whole family can stay in the country (and a narrative that contributes to the myth that the immigrant population is exploding).

According to the 14th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, a child born on U.S. soil is automatically a U.S. citizen. However, 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 72,410 foreign-born parents whose children had been born in the United States. U.S. citizens must be at least 21 before they can petition for a foreign-born parent to receive legal-resident status. Even then, the process is long and difficult. In reality, there is no such thing as an “anchor baby.” The vast majority of the 4 million immigrant adults without documentation who live with their children who were born in the United States have no protection from deportation.

8. We can stop undocumented immigrants coming to the United States by building a wall along the border with Mexico.

Ask students, “How do you think immigrants come to the United States?” Immigrants who enter the United States across the United States-Mexico border without authorization could be from any number of geographical areas. The majority of unauthorized immigrants in the United States are from Mexico, but their estimated number—5.8 million in 2014—has declined by approximately 500,000 people since 2009. In 2014, 5.8 million Mexican immigrants were living in the United States without authorization, down from 6.9 million in 2007. Additionally, the number of immigrants from nations other than Mexico who are living in the United States without authorization grew to an estimated 5.3 million in 2014. Populations of immigrants who are undocumented increased from Asia, Central America and sub-Saharan Africa. So, a wall along the border with Mexico would not “stop” undocumented immigrants from coming to the United States. Building a wall or fence along the entire Mexico border is unlikely to prevent unauthorized entry. Details aside, history has shown that people have always found ways to cross walls and borders by air and sea as well as over land.

9. Banning immigrants and refugees from majority-Muslim countries will protect the United States from terrorists.

A recent executive order, issued by President Donald Trump in March 2017, blocked the entry of citizens from six Muslim-majority countries for 90 days, ostensibly to protect Americans from terrorism. The title of this executive order, “Protecting the Nation From Foreign Terrorist Entry Into the United States,” seems to equate the people most affected by the ban—Muslims—with the term *foreign terrorists*, implying that barring Muslims from entry would protect the United States from harm. However, between 1975 and 2015, no fatalities have been committed in the United States by foreign-born extremists from the countries covered by the executive order. According to Alex Nowrasteh, an immigration expert at the Cato Institute, “[Between 1975 and 2015], the annual chance of being murdered by somebody other than a foreign-born terrorist was 252.9 times greater than the chance of dying in a terrorist attack committed by a foreign-born terrorist.”

10. Refugees are not screened before entering the United States.

Ask students what the screening process is for refugees. Refugees undergo more rigorous screenings than any other individuals the government allows in the United States. It remains an extremely lengthy and rigorous process, which includes multiple background checks; fingerprint tests; interviews; health screenings; and applications with multiple intelligence, law enforcement and security agencies. The average length of time it takes for the United Nations and the United States government to approve refugee status is 18 to 24 months.