



Points of Migration

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Established in 1998 with a founding grant from the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, the Center is part of the Department of Sociology at Princeton University from which it promotes sociological and interdisciplinary research and exchange in its topical areas.

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Inside This Issue...

“Myths and Realities of Illegal Immigration”

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Myths and Realities of Illegal Immigration

On September 11th, 2001, over 1,500 undocumented migrants crossed the U.S. Mexican border in search of work. The same day, 19 immigrants with a grab bag of expired, fraudulent, and authorized visas hijacked airliners and crashed them into New York's Twin Towers, killing 3,000 people. Among the dead were native born Americans as well as immigrants representing 80 different nations.ⁱ These first casualties of the War on Terrorism were echoed two years later by José Gutiérrez, the first American soldier to die in the second Gulf War. He was a non-citizen Guatemalan who originally entered the United States illegally.ⁱⁱ

Those seemingly disparate facts are joined by a common thread: international migration. In an age where concerns about security and terrorism dominate political discussions, it is immigration that is shaping the national identity and economy of 21st century America. At the same time, unauthorized migration has been increasingly tied to national security, and as a result, it has become a more and more politically charged issue.

There is no connection between the motives that guided the immigrants behind the September 11th attack and those that propel undocumented, economically motivated immigrants from Latin America to enter the U.S. Nevertheless, in the public's mind the two phenomena are firmly linked. Securing the nation has become a pivotal goal in the war against terrorism.

Anxieties over national security have led to the introduction of new legislation to change in fundamental ways U.S. policies towards undocumented migration. Bills fall into two main categories: enforcement and legalization. The two represent not just different measures, but different visions about the future of the United States. Will this nation remain a welcoming haven for immigrants or will it follow a more restrictive path? In the years to come that question will be answered with momentous consequences for the society at large.



*Illegal immigrants wait to be processed in a holding cell at the Naco, Ariz., Border Patrol station.
(St Petersburg Times)*

As the debate over undocumented immigration heats up, exaggerations and myths obscure the facts at both ends of the ideological debate. Supporters of legalization tend to underestimate the costs of immigration reform. Those who oppose the regularization of immigrant status for nearly 12 million undocumented aliens often portray them in dehumanizing and inaccurate ways. The former see immigration as an unambiguous boon; the latter view it as an unmitigated evil. The purpose of this report is to compile the facts that are often lost in the emotional debate in the hope that they will help guide the design of policy.

Fiction: Current undocumented migration from Mexico represents an unprecedented phenomenon.

Fact: The U.S. and Mexico have a unique relationship given their shared border and history as well as large per-capita income differentials that propel people to move away from their country of origin in search of opportunity. Current migration from Mexico represents the latest stage in a continuous flow that has existed for about one hundred years. Barring some interruption during the 1920s, Mexican migration to the United States has been constant and closely linked to U.S. and Mexican development.

ⁱ United States Department of State. "The United States and the Global Coalition Against Terrorism."
<<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/pubs/fs/5889.htm>>

ⁱⁱ Honor the Fallen. "Marine Lance Cpl. Jose Gutierrez." *Military City* <<http://www.militarycity.com/valor/256506.html>>

Continued on next page...





The present wave of arrivals is less substantial than usually imagined. The number of immigrants from Mexico, as a percent of the national population, is now lower than the number from Ireland in the 1840s or from Southern Europe at the turn of the 20th century.

Fiction: Mexican immigrants have always been unwanted and uninvited.

Fact: Throughout history, the United States has encouraged Mexican immigration. In the early 20th century, American businessmen recruited Mexican “enganches” for agricultural work. By the 1940s the U.S. government not only implemented programs to increase the numbers of “bracero” migrants entering the U.S from Mexico but also encouraged them to participate in the war effort. The social networks created by these recruited migrants continue to facilitate the arrival of additional Mexicans to the United States.

Fiction: Mexican immigrants are invading America, quickly becoming a majority of the population in many U.S. areas.

Fact: Non-Hispanic whites will remain a majority in this country for the foreseeable future. Immigrants are increasingly moving away from traditional destinations like California and Texas, so their concentration is decreasing even as their number increases. Hispanics do, however, represent one-third of Americans between 18 and 25; undocumented immigrants have slowed the aging of the population and alleviated the negative effects that aging has on government services. Without immigrants, the United States population would be shrinking.

Fiction: Undocumented immigrants come from the poorest and least educated segments of Mexican society.

Fact: A major force propelling immigrants in their journey is not absolute poverty but the discrepancy between their aspirations and scant opportunities in their country of origin. Undocumented immigrants tend to be ‘self selecting’ for their ambition and work ethic. On the average, immigrants from Mexico have an eight-grade instruction level, which is above what most Mexicans reach in their own country.ⁱⁱⁱ Typically they have held jobs before migrating to the U.S. Unemployment rates among first-generation immigrants in America are almost nonexistent—more than 96% of working-age, undocumented migrants are employed.

Fiction: Mexican immigrants don’t learn English.

Fact: Mexican migrants learn English at similar rates than previous immigrants from other parts of the world. Although almost 75% of immigrants come with weak English skills, they learn the language quickly after arrival. By the second

generation, 90% of undocumented immigrants speak English “very well” and over half prefer English to their native tongue. Although an irregular immigrant status creates disincentives to learn English, undocumented migrants create far more demand for English language classes than are available. Throughout the nation English-as-a-Second-Language programs are oversubscribed.^{iv}

Fiction: Mexican immigrants are ethnically and culturally unlike previous immigrants.

Fact: Mexicans come from a nation with an imperfect but democratic tradition, a Christian religion, and a Western language. Yet again, cultural distinctiveness has never created insurmountable barriers for assimilation. Asian immigrants, especially Chinese, many of whom arrived illegally in the first place, have very different cultural backgrounds but are now considered a model minority.

Fiction: Mexican immigrants don’t assimilate.

Fact: Like previous groups of newcomers, undocumented migrants eventually assimilate. Hispanics, including undocumented immigrants, exhibit an intermarriage rate ten times those of white Americans. Mexicans in the U.S. increasingly see themselves as Americans, obtain naturalization and declare adherence to the American creed. Mexican Americans are fully represented in the Armed Forces and have died in the War against Terrorism.

Fiction: Undocumented and documented immigrants represent distinct populations.

Fact: Most immigrant families have a mixed legal status. 85% of families entering the U.S. illegally have at least one documented member, and 46% of native-born Mexican families have an undocumented member living in this country. Sixty-nine percent of all children born to undocumented immigrants are U.S. citizens.

Of the nearly 12 million illegal aliens estimated to be living in the U.S. about two million are children who entered the country at a young age with their parents. None of them made an independent decision to break the law; they speak English, and have grown up in this country. Yet they face limited educational and employment opportunities given their irregular immigrant status.

Fiction: Undocumented migration has been tied to terrorism.

Fact: Not a single terrorist has been caught crossing the U.S.-Mexican border. All 9/11 hijackers entered the country legally.

ⁱⁱⁱ Douglas S. Massey (2003) *Beyond Smoke and Mirrors: Mexican Migration in an Era of Economic Integration*. Russell Sage Foundation Press.

^{iv} Alejandro Portes and Rubén G. Rumbaut (2006) *Immigrant America: A Portrait*. University of California Press





Fiction: Undocumented migrants raise crime rates in the United States.

Fact: Immigrants appear to raise crime rates only when immigration violations are included in crime statistics. Most sentences being served by undocumented immigrants are short, indicating that their offenses are mostly not violent.

Fiction: Undocumented immigration is a serious crime.

Fact: Being an undocumented immigrant has been, until now, a civil, not a criminal violation.

Fiction: Increased funding of the border patrol deters and halts undocumented migration.

Fact: The United States has significantly increased border patrol funding, constructed barriers, and deployed new surveillance technology, without significantly affecting the rates of undocumented migration. With 11,000 agents and a \$3 billion budget, the border patrol is the second largest military force in the nation trailing only after the U.S. army. Yet it only catches one out of every four undocumented migrants who attempt crossing. The eightfold increase in funding for the border patrol since 1986 simply diverts migrants away from traditional entry points into more dangerous areas, a trend that has tripled the death rate at border crossings to over 300 a year.

Fiction: It is feasible to deport undocumented immigrants.

Fact: Physically removing undocumented immigrants would drain the treasury. The Center for American Progress estimates that the cost of mass deportation for over 10 million individuals would be \$206 billion over five years, even when assuming that 20% of immigrants would leave on their own.

Fiction: Migrants take jobs that hardworking Americans want.

Fact: Approximately 96% of working age migrants employed in the U.S. work largely in sectors that most Americans avoid. For the past three decades the United States has created millions of low paying, unskilled jobs in services and construction. That trend will continue in the foreseeable future. There will be far more positions open than there will be Americans with appropriate levels of education to fill them.

Fiction: Migrants don't contribute to our economy.

Fact: Although migrants from Mexico do send \$2 billion a year home in remittances, they also fuel economic growth. Undocumented migrants from Mexico spend the vast majority of the \$122 billion they earn in the United States.

Fiction: Immigrants lower wages for native-born Americans.

Fact: Undocumented migrants have a mixed effect on wages across America. Most immigrants do not compete for jobs directly with Americans. The National Academy of Sciences found that undocumented immigrants lower native wages by less than 1%. On the other hand, undocumented migrants lower the costs of services that all Americans use.

Fiction: Undocumented migrants use a disproportionate amount of government services.

Fact: Undocumented migrants use government services at very low rates. Less than 2% use direct payment welfare programs like Supplemental Security Income or Temporary Assistance to Needy Families. The only programs for which immigrants have higher use rates than the general population are subsidized school lunches and Medicaid, both of which are used overwhelmingly by legal residents on behalf of children.

Fiction: Undocumented migrants don't pay taxes.

Fact: Undocumented migrants pay more in taxes than they take out in government services. The Center for Migration Studies estimates that undocumented immigrants paid over \$16 billion in taxes in 2002—more than the budgets of most states. Migrants contribute \$7 billion to the social security system without drawing any major benefits. Over 66% pay income taxes, and almost all migrants pay state sales and excise taxes. Even without considering their positive economic effects, immigrants contribute \$5 billion more to government agencies than they take out.

Fiction: Migrant children are flooding our schools and lowering standards.

Fact: Paying for migrant education, like any investment in education, eventually pays off. It costs \$7,500 per year to educate undocumented immigrant children. At the same time, the Mexican government pays to educate citizens who leave and come to the United States—a form of subsidy. Immigrants have high drop-out rates and derive reduced benefits from their education, but this is largely a result of the limited opportunities created by their undocumented status.

— Alexander Barnard, Princeton University '09

