



# MISPERCEPTIONS

## ABOUT IMMIGRATION

TO THE US:

WHAT  
THE EVIDENCE  
SHOWS



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ARTICLE

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BY CAROLA SUÁREZ-OROZCO

Director, Immigration Initiative at Harvard

IMMIGRATION INITIATIVE AT HARVARD



## **MISPERCEPTIONS ABOUT IMMIGRATION TO THE U.S: WHAT THE EVIDENCE SHOWS**

Carola Suárez-Orozco, Director, Immigration Initiative at Harvard  
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Immigration has been a cornerstone of the American story, shaping our nation's identity, values, and progress. Yet misconceptions about immigration persist, fueled by rhetoric that dehumanizes immigrants and stokes unwarranted fears. Today, as in the early 20th century, immigrants are falsely portrayed as invaders threatening American jobs, values, and security.<sup>1</sup> However, credible research from leading organizations paints a very different picture - one of immigrants as vital contributors to our economy, culture, and communities.

Today, a quarter of the children in the U.S. have at least one immigrant parent.<sup>1</sup> The misperceptions about immigration they encounter routinely in multiple contexts foster hostile social contexts about themselves and their families serve to foster hostile social contexts that can undermine the self-esteem, identity formation, and sense of belonging of immigrant-origin youth.<sup>2</sup>

Drawing on the best evidence from such reputable research sources as the [National Academy of Sciences](#), the [National Science Foundation](#), the [Migration Policy Institute](#), the [Pew Research Center](#), the [Cato Institute](#), [The Lancet](#), among other, this compilation aims to normalize and humanize immigration, recognizing it as an integral part of our nation's past, present, and future.

### **Perception: The U.S. is being overrun by immigrants.**

#### **The Evidence:**

- According to the most recent data, there were approximately 46.2 million immigrants living in the United States as of 2022.<sup>3</sup>
- In terms of absolute numbers, the U.S now has more immigrants than ever before. It also has more immigrants than any other country.<sup>4</sup>
- However, the percentage of the U.S. population that is foreign-born today (13.7%) is comparable to what it was during the peak years of European immigration to the U.S. between 1880-1920 when it reached nearly 14%.<sup>5</sup>

- Percentage-wise, the U.S. has significantly fewer immigrants than 34 other nations (e.g., Hong Kong-39.2%; Australia-30.3%; Canada-21.4%<sup>7</sup> Germany—19.1%; Ireland-17.8%).<sup>6</sup>

**What this means:** *The U.S. has more immigrants in absolute numbers than ever before and more than any other country. However, as a percentage of the population, the current proportion of immigrants (13.7%) is similar to historical levels seen in the early 20th century and lower than many other countries today.*

## **Perception: The United States has the most open immigration policy in the world.**

### **The Evidence:**

- Historically, immigrants were banned from entering the U.S. based on **“moral character”** (e.g., banning criminals, anarchists, and polygamists), **health concerns** (e.g., tuberculosis, cholera), and **race** (e.g., the Chinese Exclusion Act).<sup>7</sup> Today, U.S. immigration law has become highly restrictive—(likened to the Prohibition)<sup>8</sup> and “second only to tax law”<sup>9</sup> in its complexity.
- The U.S. takes in significantly fewer immigrants **per capita** than most other O.E.C.D nations.<sup>10</sup>
- There are few ways to enter the U.S. legally, and each pathway is highly constricted both because of numerous restrictions as well as because inadequate funding is allocated to staff the processing of applications.<sup>11</sup>
- The **four categories to gain lawful permanent residence** are:<sup>12</sup>
  - **Family-based**—American citizens and green card holders can technically sponsor a family member. However, family-based migration is limited by law to less than 500,00 per year. This pathway is *extremely slow* with people waiting *decades* to sponsor a single relative from Mexico, India, the Philippines and many other countries.<sup>13</sup>
  - **Employment-based**—An American firm can sponsor skilled workers if they can demonstrate that no one already in the country can do the job. This pathway is limited to 140,000 per year.<sup>14</sup>
  - **Lottery-based**—This program, started in 1980, allows 50,000 lottery applicants per year to secure lawful permanent residence once vetted. to enter by lottery.<sup>15</sup> In 2017 there were 23 million applicants for those 50,000 slots.<sup>16</sup>
  - **Humanitarian Relief**— In 2024, nearly **300 million** people worldwide will be forcibly displaced and in need of humanitarian assistance and protection due to conflicts, climate emergencies, and other drivers.<sup>17</sup>
    - The term "forced displacement" encompasses both refugees fleeing persecution based on protected identities as defined by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) after WWII, as well as migrants compelled to leave their homes due to other factors like climate change, natural disasters, or generalized violence.<sup>18</sup>

- In the media and political discourse, the labels "refugee" and "migrant" are often interchangeably and somewhat arbitrarily applied.<sup>19</sup>
- To be granted refugee status in the U.S., an individual must demonstrate a well-founded fear of persecution based on one of those five protected categories (race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, and political opinion).<sup>20</sup>
- The U.S. has set quotas of **125,000** refugees (as narrowly defined by the UNHCR standards) per year. This represents about **0.1%** of the global total need.<sup>21</sup> In 2023, less than half of these allocated spots were resettled in the U.S.<sup>22</sup>

***What this means:*** *U.S. immigration law is highly restrictive and complex, with the country taking in significantly fewer immigrants per capita than most other O.E.C.D nations and offering limited pathways for legal entry, each with its own constraints and challenges.*

**Perception: The problem is “illegal” immigration. We are facing a border crisis. Why don’t folks take legal pathways?**

**The Evidence:**

- Current U.S. immigration laws and policies provide few opportunities for most prospective immigrants to enter the country legally, leading some to enter or remain without legal status.<sup>23</sup>
- Most immigrants today are here with some form of recognized documentation status.<sup>24</sup>
  - Nearly half (49%) of the foreign born are naturalized citizens and another 24% are lawful permanent residences.<sup>25</sup>
  - Another 4% are in the U.S. on various types of visas, including temporary visas for tourists, international students, and skilled workers.<sup>26</sup>
- Over the last decade, visa overstays have surpassed illegal border crossings as the primary source of newly undocumented immigrants in the United State.<sup>27</sup> Yet public attention and funding is largely focused on controlling the Southern border.
  - The U.S. government has invested massive resources into border security and enforcement in recent decades, while the immigration system for processing legal entries and asylum claims remains underfunded. The FY 2024 budget for U.S. Customs and Border Protection (\$19.934 billion) is nearly three times larger than the total budget for U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (\$6.9 billion).<sup>28</sup>
  - Increased border security measures have led to a rise in cartel-controlled human smuggling and a tragically high number of migrant

- deaths at the U.S.-Mexico border, with U.S. Border Patrol statistics indicating nearly one death per day in the Southwest border region.<sup>29</sup>
- Roughly a quarter of immigrants currently in the U.S. are undocumented. The best current estimates-based Department of Homeland Security<sup>30</sup> and 2021 American Community Survey<sup>31</sup> data suggest that the undocumented population is about 11.2 million.
    - This number is constantly fluctuating as folks are entering and leaving (either by choice or because they have been deported). However, the roughly 11 million figure has remained remarkably stable over the last decade.<sup>32</sup>
    - Undocumented folks come from all over the world.<sup>33</sup>
    - An estimated 800,000 to 1.3 million undocumented immigrants arrived as children and have undergone part or all of their schooling in the U.S. From 2012 to 2017 many qualified for protections under the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program providing a 2-year renewable reprieve from deportation and authorization to work after a stringent vetting process. At its height, an estimated 800 thousand participated in the program; as of March 2023, there were about 580,000 active DACA recipients, with the majority being in their 20s, having arrived in the U.S. around age seven on average.<sup>34</sup>
    - Since 2017, as the DACA program has faced legal challenges, no new applications have been accepted. This means a growing number of “Dreamers” who have turned 15 in recent years have been unable to apply for DACA protections and work authorization despite meeting the program’s eligibility criteria.<sup>35</sup> Without legislative action to provide a permanent solution, these young immigrants remain in legal limbo, unable to fully contribute their talents to the only country many of them have ever known as home.
    - Two-thirds of undocumented immigrants have been in the U.S. for over ten years establishing deep roots in their communities.<sup>36</sup>
    - Many – an estimated 6.1 million—have formed families and have citizen-born children.<sup>37</sup>
    - An estimated 16.2 million people live in “mixed-status families” – in which one or more family members are U.S. citizens or permanent residents/green card holders and some are undocumented without legal immigration status.<sup>38</sup>

***What this means:*** *Most immigrants in the U.S. have some form of legal status, and visa overstays now surpass illegal border crossings as the primary source of newly undocumented immigrants. Current U.S. immigration laws provide few opportunities for most prospective immigrants to enter the country legally, leading some to enter or remain without documentation. The government invests massive resources into border security while the immigration system for processing legal entries and asylum claims remains underfunded. The undocumented population has remained stable over the last decade,*

*with most having deep roots in the U.S., forming mixed-status families, and arriving as children. Many qualified for DACA protections, but recent legal challenges have left a growing number of "Dreamers" in limbo, unable to apply despite meeting eligibility criteria.*

### **Perception: We are facing an “invasion” of “undesirable” immigrants.**

#### The Evidence:

- **Range of Education and Skills:** Today’s immigrants bring to the nation an array of skills and educational levels.
  - As of 2018, **32%** of all immigrant adults (12.6 million people) had a bachelor's degree or higher, similar to the 33% rate among U.S.-born adults.<sup>39</sup>
    - Nearly half (47%) of immigrants who have arrived in the last five years are college-educated, up significantly from 1980, when only 7.0% of immigrants held a bachelor's degree and 8.7% held a postgraduate degree.<sup>40</sup>
  - Our health care industry is highly reliant on immigrants. For example, 26% of U.S. physicians, 16% of Registered Nurses, and 39% of home health aides were foreign-born.<sup>41</sup>
  - In the STEM field, over 45% of computer and math scientists with doctorates are foreign born.<sup>42</sup>
  - High-skilled professionals, after migrating, often take jobs at lower skill levels as their credentials and training are not recognized in the workplace; an estimated 2 million immigrants are under-employed.<sup>43</sup>
  - Less educated immigrants tend to fill niches in the labor force where there are shortages including low-skilled labor-intensive work (e.g., in hospitality, food services, manufacturing, and meatpacking) and seasonal agricultural work.<sup>44</sup>
- **Criminality:** Many claim or worry that immigrants are more likely to commit crimes or engage in terrorism than non-immigrants.
  - Immigrants, in fact, have significantly lower crime, arrest, and incarceration rates than folks who are U.S. native-born.<sup>45</sup>
  - Places with more immigrants have lower crime rates, and the crime rate in the US started to drop as immigration rose.<sup>46</sup>
  - There is no established connection between immigration (documented or undocumented) and heightened risks of terrorist acts.<sup>47</sup> The Department of Homeland Security's 2024 Homeland Threat Assessment, while noting the potential for terrorists to exploit migration flows, does not identify immigration as a top terrorism concern. The assessment focuses more on domestic violent extremists, including those motivated by racial or ethnic hatred.<sup>48</sup>
- **Health:** Likewise, some have voiced concerns about the physical and mental health of recent migrants.
  - Immigrants generally are healthier than non-immigrants and have lower mortality rates than the general population for most disease

categories. There is no systematic association between migration and importation of infectious diseases, and the risk of disease transmission from migrating populations to host populations is generally low.<sup>49</sup>

- First-generation immigrants, tend to have lower rates of mood, anxiety, and substance use disorders compared to the U.S.-born population.<sup>50</sup>
- However, specific immigrant subgroups, such as refugees and asylum seekers, are at higher risk for mental health conditions like depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) compared to the general population.<sup>51</sup> This is often due to pre-migration trauma and stressors.

**What this means:** *Today's immigrants bring a diverse array of skills and educational levels to the U.S., with nearly half of recent immigrants being college-educated. Immigrants fill critical roles in healthcare, STEM, entrepreneurship, the service industry, and other sectors. Immigrants have significantly lower crime, arrest, and incarceration rates than U.S.-born individuals, and there is no established connection between immigration and heightened risks of terrorist acts.*

**Perception: Immigrants are more likely to take advantage of public assistance benefits than the native-born population.**

**The Evidence:**

- Immigrants rely significantly less on welfare than native-born Americans.<sup>52</sup>
- Undocumented immigrants are generally ineligible for federal public benefit programs, such as Supplemental Security Income (SSI), Medicaid, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, sometimes referred to as food stamps). These programs have strict eligibility requirements that include proof of qualifying lawful immigration status.<sup>53</sup>
- Even after obtaining lawful permanent resident status (also known as a green card) immigrants are typically subject to a "five-year bar." This means they must wait five years after receiving their green card before becoming eligible for federal means-tested public benefits like Medicaid, the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP), TANF, SNAP, and SSI.<sup>54</sup>
- Only a small subset of immigrants qualify for these benefits—such as refugees, asylees, and victims of domestic violence and trafficking.<sup>55</sup>
- Further, like all other residents, immigrants (including undocumented immigrants) pay federal, state, and local taxes throughout the U.S. This includes income taxes and payroll taxes that are automatically deducted from wages, as well as sales and property taxes paid by those who purchase goods or own homes.<sup>56</sup>

**What this means:** *Immigrants rely significantly less on welfare than native-born Americans, with undocumented immigrants being generally ineligible for most federal public benefit programs. Even after obtaining lawful permanent resident status, immigrants are typically subject to a "five-year bar" before becoming eligible for federal means-tested public benefits. Furthermore, immigrants, including undocumented immigrants, pay federal, state, and local taxes throughout the U.S.*

### **Perception: Immigrants hurt our economy.**

#### **The Evidence:**

- According to a comprehensive study by the National Academy of Sciences, immigration has an overall positive fiscal impact on the long-term U.S. economy.<sup>57</sup> Indeed, the evidence shows that a more significant number of immigrants leads to greater economic growth, higher wages, and increased innovation.<sup>58</sup>
- First-generation immigrants are primarily of working ages and participate in the workforce at very high rates.<sup>59</sup>
- Immigration reduces the cost of goods and services like childcare, food, house cleaning, and construction.<sup>60</sup>
- Immigrants primarily take jobs that complement native-born workers, although they may slightly lower wages for a small percentage of low-skill workers, particularly prior immigrants and U.S.-born high school dropouts.<sup>61</sup>
- Immigrants account for a high proportion of entrepreneurs, patent filings, and STEM graduates.<sup>62</sup> For example, over 75% of patents from top U.S. universities come from foreign-born innovators.<sup>63</sup>
- Immigrants are more likely to start businesses. They own 25% of new firms and employ nearly 8 million American workers.<sup>64</sup>
- Immigrants (including undocumented immigrants) contribute to the U.S. economy through the taxes they pay. An analysis of the 2022 American Community Survey (ACS) found that immigrants in the United States contribute \$382.9 billion to federal taxes and \$196.3 billion in state and local taxes.<sup>65</sup>
- The fiscal impacts of the first-generation vary by level of government. First-generation immigrants have a net positive effect at the federal level. However, they are more costly at the state and local level due to their children's participation in education. Notably, this varies by state—these costs are most pronounced in states with large populations of lower-income, less-educated immigrants (like Florida or Texas) while states (like California and New Jersey) with more educated, higher-earning immigrants, see more positive fiscal impacts.<sup>66</sup>
- This investment pays off by the second-generation. The children of immigrants, are among the most vital contributors in the U.S. paying more in taxes due to higher education and incomes.<sup>67</sup>

**What this means:** *Immigration has an overall positive fiscal impact on the U.S. economy, leading to greater economic growth, higher wages, and increased innovation. While the fiscal impacts of first-generation immigrants vary by level of government and state, with some costs associated with education at the state and local level, this investment pays off by the second generation, as the children of immigrants are among the strongest fiscal contributors in the U.S. due to their higher education and incomes.*

**Perception: Immigrants do not want to learn English.**

**The Evidence:**

- A 2019 Migration Policy Institute report found that 47% of all immigrant adults in the U.S. have limited English proficiency (LEP), meaning they speak English less than very well.<sup>68</sup>
- Studies have consistently shown that concerns about immigrants and their children not learning English are misplaced. The evidence indicates that the vast majority of immigrants to the United States, as well as their offspring, do acquire English language skills over time.<sup>69</sup>
- Immigrants today are learning English at faster rates than earlier waves of immigrants.<sup>70</sup> Studies tracking language acquisition across multiple generations from various countries consistently show a rapid shift towards English dominance, with the home language often lost by the third generation.<sup>71</sup>
- Immigrants report recognizing the importance of learning English.<sup>72</sup> They also report encountering many adversities due to early language barriers, including limitations in their social and family life, reduced access to health care, barriers to economic opportunities, and discriminatory experiences.<sup>73</sup>
- There is a much higher demand for English classes than funding or learning opportunities. Growing demand for ESL classes and cutbacks in funding have reduced the availability and caliber of adult ESL services in many areas with waiting lists of 3 years mainly in urban centers.<sup>74</sup> Even when English classes are available, however, some immigrants cannot attend due to working multiple jobs, lack of transportation, or lack of childcare.

**What this means:** *Research shows that the vast majority of immigrants and their children do acquire English language skills over time, often at faster rates than earlier waves of immigrants. Immigrants recognize the importance of learning English and report facing numerous challenges due to language barriers, but the demand for English classes often exceeds the available funding and learning opportunities.*

**Perception: Immigrants and their children will never assimilate, acculturate, or integrate.**

**The Evidence:**

- In 2016, National Academy of Sciences conducted a comprehensive study led by leading social scientists to consider “[The Integration of Immigrants into American Society](#).”<sup>75</sup>

- The report highlights significant intergenerational progress in educational attainment among children of immigrants. Second-generation individuals from most immigrant groups meet or exceed the educational levels of third-generation native-born Americans. The college educated children of immigrants performed exceptionally well.
- Immigrant men have higher employment rates compared to their native-born counterparts, particularly among those with lower education levels. Further, foreign-born workers' earnings improved the longer they resided in the U.S., although this varied by ethnicity and race.
- Immigrant families tended to have lower divorce rates and higher rates of two-parent households compared to native-born families, providing a stable environment for children.
- The children of immigrants show significant improvement in occupational status compared to their parents. For example, by the second-generation, Mexican and Central American men move into professional or managerial positions at notable rates.
- While new immigrants often begin residing in segregated “immigrant neighborhoods,” over time, immigrants and their descendants become less segregated from the native-born population, integrating into diverse neighborhoods.
- Children of immigrants often pursued citizenship and participated in civic activities, indicating their integration into the country’s political fabric.
- The report acknowledged, however, that undocumented immigrants and those with precarious legal statuses face considerable challenges that serve to hinder their integration and that of their children.
- In 2023, economists Ran Abramitzky and Leah Boustan, released an innovative and comprehensive analysis in [Streets of Gold: America's Untold Story of Immigrant Success](#). The researchers analyzed the economic mobility of immigrants and their descendants by comparing different cohorts of immigrants – those arriving in the early 20th century vs. the late 20th century — using historical records, big data, and econometric analytic strategies.<sup>76</sup>
  - The study found that that immigrants, both past and present, face initial economic challenges upon arrival but achieve significant upward mobility over time. Further, the children of immigrants today, like those of previous generations, attain higher education and income levels than their parents, demonstrating a pattern of intergenerational progress.
  - Immigrants have historically and continue to contribute to American culture, enriching it with diverse traditions, cuisines, and innovations. The cultural integration of recent immigrants follows similar patterns, with significant contributions to the arts, sciences, and technology.
  - Immigrants in the past tended to live in ethnic enclaves initially but gradually moved into more diverse neighborhoods as they assimilated economically and socially. Recent immigrants also start in ethnic neighborhoods but move to more integrated areas over time as they

achieve economic stability, reflecting similar residential integration patterns.

- Immigrants also experienced significant social mobility, historically, moving from low-skilled labor to middle-class status within a few generations. Recent immigrants exhibit similar social mobility, with many achieving middle-class status and beyond within a generation or two, indicating successful integration into the country's socio-economic fabric.
- Historically, the children of immigrants often surpassed their parents in educational attainment, a trend that continues today. The book highlights that second-generation immigrants today are more likely to attain higher education levels than their parents, similar to the patterns observed among European immigrants in the early 20th century. The educational attainment of the children of recent immigrants is on par with or exceeds that of native-born Americans, indicating successful assimilation into the educational system.
- The authors concluded that supporting education, employment, and social integration are crucial for the successful assimilation of immigrants, both historically and today. It suggests that current integration policies can benefit from lessons learned from historical immigrant experiences.

**What this means:** *There is a strong pattern of intergenerational progress and integration among immigrant families in the United States. Both historically and in recent times, immigrants and their children typically achieve higher levels of education, income, and occupational status compared to their parents as well as their peers. Over time, immigrants integrate into diverse neighborhoods and show high levels of civic engagement and responsibility. The evidence suggests that with the right educational opportunities, the children of immigrants can thrive and make significant contributions to American society.*

## **IN CLOSING**

Immigration has been a defining element of the American narrative throughout history and continues to shape our nation today. Despite Americans often viewing past immigration positively, they frequently exhibit ambivalence or outright rejection toward contemporary immigrants. However, historical evidence demonstrates that immigration has been integral to the nation's development and identity.

**Intergenerational Progress and Integration.** Current research underscores that today's immigrants, much like previous generations, are demonstrating similar patterns of intergenerational progress and integration. Over time, immigrants and their children typically achieve higher levels of education, income, and occupational status compared to their parents and peers. They launch new companies at twice the rate of native-born citizens, fill essential workforce needs, and contribute extensively to the economy as

workers, business owners, taxpayers and neighbors. They also integrate into diverse neighborhoods and show high levels of civic engagement and responsibility.

**Supporting the Children of Immigrants.** The proliferation of misperceptions about immigration creates a hostile environment of reception that is detrimental to the healthy development of the one quarter of children in the U.S. growing up in immigrant families. Media and online disinformation and political rhetoric about migration frequently depict migrants as a threat, fueling anti-immigrant policies. This subjects immigrant-origin children to hostile social environments in their neighborhoods and schools, increasing the developmental risks they experience and limiting their access to needed resources, even for the many who are U.S. citizens.

Actively countering misperceptions is essential to foster a more welcoming society that enables immigrant-origin children to reach their full potential. The evidence presented here has important implications for children and youth from immigrant families. Immigrants and their children have an overwhelmingly positive effect on American society. With the right support and opportunities, particularly in education, the children of immigrants can thrive and make significant contributions to American society.

However, to ensure their successful integration and well-being, it is crucial to address the unique challenges they face, such as acculturative stress, barriers to accessing resources, and attacks on their place and belonging in society. Practitioners and policymakers should create inclusive and welcoming environments that foster the social, educational, and economic integration of these newest members of our society. This begins by reframing the debate away from divisive narratives and ensuring that the children of immigrants continue the long-standing tradition of intergenerational progress and integration that has defined the American immigrant experience.

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