

Three Myths that Distort US Debate on Immigration

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In this past election, Trump’s supporters embraced his calls for increasing immigration restrictions in a country that already has restrictive immigration policies. Now that he is in office, President Trump is planning to “publicize crimes by undocumented immigrants; strip such immigrants of privacy protections; enlist local police officers as enforcers; erect new detention facilities; discourage asylum seekers; and, ultimately, speed up deportations.”

The fear of immigration is commonly based on three basic assumptions: “immigrants are not assimilating into our culture,” “illegal immigrants are hurting our economy and stealing our jobs,” and “illegal immigrants are criminals and terrorists.” All of these assumptions are myths.

Myth #1: Immigrants are not assimilating to our culture

Those who support restrictive immigration policy believe that current immigrants are changing our values and our politics, and are not assimilating like the previous generations of immigrants.

Assimilation is a process that takes time, but the claim that current generations of immigrants are not assimilating like they did in the past is false. Recent research from the National Academies of Sciences shows that current immigrants are assimilating as well as or better than previous generations.

Some Americans are concerned that immigrants are more inclined to support leftist views. However, like Americans, a plurality of immigrants identify as independent. Although immigrants tend to lean Democrat when they must choose between the two parties, this is primarily due to the Republican Party’s anti-immigration stance.

When it comes to specific policy issues, immigrants, like Americans, tend to align with the moderate position like the rest of America. For example, immigrants do not disproportionately support a larger welfare state, as Republicans claim. A Cato Institute study shows that 1st generation non-citizens and naturalized immigrants hold similar moderate policy positions as native citizens.

Myth #2: Illegal Immigrants Hurt our Economy and Steal our Jobs

The economic benefits of immigration, both legal and illegal, are vast. Immigrants fill shortages in the job market and pay taxes.

Some immigration opponents claim that they are a drain on government programs. However, research shows that immigrants contribute more in taxes than they receive in government benefits. Although the variables are too ambiguous to have a definite answer on whether they have a positive or negative impact on government spending, the positive economic benefits are unambiguous.

Since 2012, Mexican workers have been leaving the U.S. at a higher rate than they are arriving. This drop in Mexican immigration has had a negative effect on our economy. The National Association of Homebuilders estimated that the number of unfilled construction jobs in the U.S. almost doubled between 2014 and 2016.

The lack of available talent to fill these jobs has led to increased construction costs and depressed home building. Allowing only 5,000 working visas for foreign immigrants seeking lower-skilled jobs year-round makes it difficult to find legal workers.

Five years ago, 53 percent of skilled-trade workers were more than 45 years old, and nearly 20 percent were aged 55-64. The skilled-trade workforce continues to increase. Trump's plan for stronger immigration restrictions and deportations will only exacerbate labor shortage problems in the skilled trades.

Myth #3: Immigrants are Criminals and Terrorist

Research shows immigrants and illegal immigrants are less likely to be criminals than the native-born. Immigration surged in the 1990s as the crime rate plummeted. In fact, higher immigration can correlate with lower crime rates, because an influx of low-crime immigrants added to the population creates a lesser chance to encounter a criminal.

The dramatic decrease in crime in Buffalo is a good example. In the run-down areas of west side Buffalo where Bangladeshi immigrants arrived, crime fell by 70%. Denise Beehag of the International Institute of Buffalo told NPR that immigrants, “were pretty much the only group that was moving into the west side of Buffalo.”

Also, immigration is not affecting the likelihood of being attacked by terrorist. Your chance of being murdered by anyone is 1 in 14,000. A Cato study found that over the last 41 years, your chances of being killed by a foreigner in a terrorist attack are 1 in 3.6 million per year. The chance of being murdered in an attack committed by an illegal immigrant is much less likely, 1 in 10.9 billion.

You are more likely to win the lottery (1 in 258.9 million) or die in a plane crash (1 in 11 million) than be murdered in a terrorist attack by an illegal immigrant.

Anti-immigration policies are based on myths about immigrants and their contributions to our country. We cannot claim to be the land of the free by closing our borders to those seeking to improve their lives by economically serving ours.