

Guest Commentary: Let's keep being a nation of immigrants

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My ancestors were undocumented.

They left the Scottish highlands in the 1700s and 1800s out of desperation. Thousands of Scots had been evicted by the British, their clan systems smashed, their little rocky plots of land confiscated. Some were literally starving, some were fleeing war. In short, these people had nowhere to go, no way to work, no place to farm, nothing to eat. They didn't want to leave home — but they had to.

My people were almost certainly a scruffy bunch. But no one checked their papers when they arrived. No one put my ancestors in cages or raided their workplaces. No one took their children away. Our borders were wide open until 1875, when Congress passed the Page Act, which barred Chinese women from entering the country. It was the first U.S. law to restrict immigration.

The U.S. is no longer a safe haven for immigrants. In fact, a sizable minority of Americans have been persuaded that immigrants are evil. They are called criminals, drug dealers, “bad people” who take our jobs and suck up our social services.

How can this be happening in our “nation of immigrants”? The overwhelming majority of today's immigrants are just like my forebears: They are simply looking for refuge, for safety and a better life for themselves and their children.

Immigrants are not “bad people.” They are not robbing us, they are enriching us — and the evidence is clear as a bell.

Immigrants are law-abiding people. Immigrants are much less likely than native-born Americans to be convicted of a crime, according to a study by the libertarian Cato Institute. What's more, when researchers looked at crime rates for 200 metropolitan areas over the last several decades, they found that the 10 places with the largest increases in immigrants all had lower levels of crime in 2016 than in 1980. A 2018 survey that examined years of research on the immigrant-crime connection concluded that an overwhelming majority of studies found either no relationship between immigrants and crime, or found that immigrants actually revitalize the communities they join.

Immigrants do not overuse social services. In truth, undocumented workers underuse social services. Undocumented immigrants contribute an estimated \$11.74 billion to state and local economies each year — yet are not eligible for many of the federal or state benefits that their tax dollars help fund. (They should receive these benefits, which they have earned. It's also in the public interest to make sure everyone has health care.)

Immigrants strengthen the economy. The children of immigrants are economic engines: They contribute more in taxes during their work life than other native-born Americans. Researchers have found that communities with immigrants see improved economic growth, innovation and entrepreneurship — with little to no negative long-term effects on the overall wages or employment of native-born workers.

As fellow humans, we owe immigrants refuge. We also owe them refuge because increasingly they are trying to escape situations that we Americans helped create. For example, Central Americans are now fleeing drought, a symptom of a global climate crisis that was overwhelmingly caused by fossil fuel emissions from the U.S. and other industrialized countries. (The U.S. has put more greenhouse gases into the atmosphere than any other nation on earth, yet countries that have contributed next to nothing to the crisis are feeling the heaviest consequences.)

Here in upstate New York, we should welcome immigrants not just for their sake, but for our own. Because we need immigrants here. This area is aging and losing population. We need the hopefulness, fresh energy, hard work, and enthusiasm of immigrants. We need their kids in our schools. We need them to pay taxes and ensure the health of our Social Security system. We need them to enrich our communities and enliven our local culture.

Over two centuries ago, my ancestors came here in desperate need and found an open door. I have no business slamming the door on others.