



Scalise's claim that unauthorized immigrants are getting priority for vaccination misses the point

Steve Scalise stated on February 2, 2021 in an interview on Fox News:

“Now (Biden) is saying that people who came here illegally can jump ahead of other Americans who have been waiting to get the vaccine.”

Victoria Knight

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During a Feb. 2 interview on Fox News, Rep. Steve Scalise, R-La., claimed President Joe Biden was allowing unauthorized immigrants to move ahead of American citizens to get their covid-19 vaccines.

"Now (Biden) is saying that people who came here illegally can jump ahead of other Americans who have been waiting to get the vaccine," said Scalise, the No. 2 Republican leader in the House.

Lauren Fine, a spokesperson for Scalise, said the representative was referring to a Feb. 1 statement from the Department of Homeland Security. It said the agency "encourages all individuals, regardless of immigration status, to receive the COVID-19 vaccine once eligible under local distribution guidelines."

Since supply is limited, wrote Fine in an emailed statement, "for every vaccine an illegal immigrant gets, that's one an American citizen waiting in line is not getting. If you're an American citizen that's currently in a group that can't get the vaccine yet, you're now behind in the line to an illegal immigrant in a group that can get one."

Considering the DHS statement, other press statements and executive plans, the Biden administration has certainly been vocal about its position that all immigrants should be able to get this shot.

But, we wondered, does allowing this population access to the vaccine mean they are being invited to step in front of American citizens in the queue?

We asked the experts.

The gist of Biden's policies

The Biden administration released a national COVID-19 strategy plan during the president's first week in office. The administration, according to the document, is "committed to ensuring that safe, effective, cost-free vaccines are available to the entire U.S. public — regardless of their immigration status."

The plan directs federal agencies to take action to ensure everyone living in the U.S. can access the vaccine free of charge and without cost sharing.

During a [Jan. 28 press briefing](#), White House press secretary Jen Psaki said the administration feels "that ensuring that all people in the United States — undocumented immigrants, as well, of course — receive access to a vaccine, because that, one, is morally right, but also ensures that people in the country are also safe."

The DHS statement also specified that the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency wouldn't conduct enforcement operations at or near vaccination sites or clinics.

The Biden administration didn't respond to a request to clarify its position on unauthorized immigrants' access to vaccines in relation to Scalise's claim. But, based on publicly available information, it is clear the administration wants immigrants to have access to the vaccine. However, no statement or provision in the administration's policies indicates they should "jump" ahead of other Americans.

Public health experts across the board criticized Scalise for his statement, in effect saying he was missing the point.

"The line is not drawn by your immigration or legal status," said [Dr. Ranit Mishori](#), senior medical adviser for Physicians for Human Rights, a nonprofit that investigates the health consequences of human rights violations. "It's drawn by your vulnerability, your potential for exposure and your risk."

[Jeffrey Levi](#), a professor of health policy and management at George Washington University, said Scalise's claim misrepresents what Biden is trying to do.

"They are simply saying that if an immigrant falls within a category that is currently prioritized (e.g., a health care worker or someone over a certain age), they should not be excluded from getting the vaccine," Levi wrote in an email. "It does not put an immigrant ahead of a prioritized category."

[Samantha Artiga](#), director of racial equity and health policy at Kaiser Family Foundation, a nonpartisan health policy organization, had a similar take. (Kaiser Health News is an editorially independent program of KFF).

"The policies clarify that all people in the U.S. are eligible for vaccinations regardless of their immigration status and encourage immigrants to get vaccinated when they become eligible based on their local guidelines," she wrote in an email. "They do not prioritize immigrants."

[Dr. Jeffrey Singer](#), a senior fellow in health policy with the Cato Institute, a free-market think tank, said the Biden plan is just following standard public health policy and epidemiological principles.

"Trying to place an emphasis on immigration status might be a good way to press people's buttons to get a sound bite on television," said Singer. "But immigration status is really irrelevant when we're prioritizing people. It doesn't matter where you come from. If you're here in the U.S., you should get vaccinated."

Part of the essential workforce

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's independent Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices recommended in December that states should first prioritize vaccinating health care workers and residents and staff members of long-term care facilities. The next priority group, according to ACIP, should be people ages 75 and older and other front-line essential workers who are not in health care. The Biden administration also recently recommended the age category be lowered to include all seniors, age 65 and older. However, states are free to create their own vaccine distribution plans and decide what groups will get vaccinated first.

Unauthorized immigrants make up significant percentages of the workforces deemed "essential" by ACIP. For example, KFF reports that noncitizens (a broad group that could include immigrants in the country lawfully) constitute 22% of all food production workers, 8% of workers in long-term care facilities and 5% of health care workers who have direct patient contact.

The Migration Policy Institute estimated in a February report the number of unauthorized immigrants who qualify as essential workers ranges from 1.1 million to 5.6 million, depending on how essential workers are defined. The institute also reported about 49% of the estimated 2.4 million farmworkers in the United States were unauthorized immigrants as of 2016.

And it's important those groups get vaccinated regardless of immigration status, not just as a good public health practice, but also from an ethical and humane perspective, said Dr. Georges Benjamin, executive director of the American Public Health Association.

"It has obviously been a long-standing public health principle that infection anywhere affects the health of everyone," said Benjamin. "It is also of the highest ethical standards to make sure everybody gets vaccinated and gets treated for infectious disease."

Benjamin added that many unauthorized immigrants who work in essential roles are the foundation keeping society functioning during the pandemic, such as restaurant workers and caretakers.

"They're at higher risk because they're out and about and they can't shelter at home," said Benjamin. "At the end of the day, if we did not vaccinate them and they could not go to work, our economy would totally collapse."

Plus, 70% to 90% of the population needs to be vaccinated to reach herd immunity in the U.S.

"As long as this doesn't happen, it doesn't matter who is vaccinated," said Mishori. "To reach herd immunity in the U.S., everyone regardless of their immigration status, needs to get vaccinated."

"Viruses don't know the legal status of their victims," Mishori added.

One other note is that the population in question is small compared with the total U.S. population. About 11 million unauthorized immigrants live in the U.S., making up about 3% of the total U.S. population of about 330 million.

Our ruling

Scalise said it is Biden's policy that "people who came here illegally can jump ahead of other Americans who have been waiting to get the vaccine."

The Biden administration has made it clear that unauthorized immigrants are eligible to receive the vaccine if they are part of a priority group, such as health care workers or seniors. That does mean some unauthorized immigrants who meet specific vaccination criteria for job duties or age could receive a shot before American citizens who do not meet those requirements. This is in keeping with long-standing public health practices.

But Scalise was misrepresenting Biden's policy when he suggested that unauthorized immigrants are being prioritized over American citizens or can jump the vaccination line. Eligibility for the vaccine is based on job and age categories — period. Under the Biden approach, immigration status is not a qualifying or disqualifying factor.

His statement contains an element of truth but ignores critical facts that would give a different impression. We rate this claim Mostly False.

Our Sources

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