



Immigrants and Immigration: Answering the Tough Questions

“But they came here illegally!”

Response 1: That assumes the system works. The immigration system has not been reformed in decades to meet the real needs we have as a country—as families, businesses or workers. When you have laws that don’t match reality—think about Prohibition!—then you have to change the laws. Imagine how it must feel to be a mother who has to wait a decade to be with her child.

Response 2: The reality is that the laws we have don’t make any sense, and they are not in sync with our real needs as a country. We know, in the history of America, we’ve had times when we’ve had bad laws and have needed to agitate to change them. Dr. Martin Luther King said “An unjust law is no law at all.” And Gloria Steinem said, “Law and justice are not always the same thing. When they’re not, the first step is changing the law.”

The Facts: Our system is broken. We need reform so that our immigration laws match our values and economic needs.

On families: Any system that keeps families separated for years – like a Filipino mother who won’t be reunited with her child for over a decade – is wrong. Spouses and siblings can wait years to join their loved ones in the US. Our family values should mean strong families – not separated ones.

On jobs: Immigrants make up huge percentages of many of our critical industries. Our economy depends on their work. But again, our system does not match the reality on the ground. The number of visas available every year is out of balance- for example, 5,000 low-skilled visas are provided a year when 400,000 American jobs requiring low-skilled workers are created annually.

On “cutting in line”: It is only fair that immigrants earning legalization must wait in line behind people that have been waiting in the legal backlog for years. We must address the backlogs as part of any comprehensive immigration reform package.

“We have plenty of unemployment in the country today—if we got rid of immigrants, there would be more jobs for Americans.”

Response 1: We know it’s a tough economic time for everyone. The reality, though, is immigrants do jobs that are not necessarily jobs that laid-off American workers would take or in the same places where laid-off American workers live. Someone who has lost their engineering or sales job probably won’t want to take a job picking apples. We need workers with lots of different skills and experiences to build our country together.

Response 2: The truth is that immigrant workers and their families, like all other workers, also create jobs by contributing to the economy through consumption and creating demand for goods (which requires workers to generate them); creating corresponding jobs whether that’s supervisory positions at a poultry plant or corresponding medical or research support staff for an immigrant scientist or the same kind of positions in the community that we all need in daily life like teachers, grocers, day care helpers, or mechanics.



And immigrant workers are not responsible for the massive job loss that has been happening. We are in the middle of a global economic crisis and everyone—immigrants and native born, in America and overseas— are feeling the effects.

The Facts: Immigrants—especially undocumented immigrants—are working in jobs and sectors of the economy that natives have gradually left or may be reluctant to re-enter. Even in a recession, job competition shifts slowly where the work is seasonal, far away or where there is limited ability to move up. Immigrants generally have been more able to move across sectors of the economy (for example, from construction to agriculture).

Stephen Levy, Director and Senior Economist of the Center for Continuing Study of the California Economy, has said that even as unemployment rises, there are not enough unemployed Californians to fill all jobs that would be vacated if every illegal immigrant were fired.

“Our economy is in trouble. We can’t afford to provide services to Americans—and immigrants just drain the economy.” OR “Immigrants don’t pay taxes—they don’t really contribute.”

Response 1: Our economy is in trouble. And the fault in that lies with the big companies who didn’t take care of their workers and communities. Now, we need every single person to pitch in. Immigrants—like all of us—buy things, live in houses, and drive cars. They are really contributors to the economy—all the research shows that their contributions through taxes and spending are critical to propping up this tough economy.

Response 2: Immigrants – including most undocumented immigrants who get paychecks – have taxes automatically deducted just like you. And everyone pays sales tax. Undocumented immigrants pay into Social Security and Medicare – and are unlikely ever to claim those benefits. These social security tax contributions are actually supporting the baby boomers who are now retiring. And if you’re worried about tax fraud, there are much bigger offenders committing tax fraud than immigrants—look at Bernie Madoff!

The Facts: Immigrants are estimated to contribute over \$133 billion in taxes every year, and former Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan said that our social security system would collapse without the contribution of immigrants. Undocumented immigrants contribute at least \$7 billion every year to programs they can’t claim benefits from. In the state of Washington it’s estimated that immigrant households paid \$1.48 billion in state taxes in 2007.

“Immigrants are taking American jobs.”

Response: Jobs don’t have names on them. The question isn’t about whose jobs, it’s about more jobs. We need more jobs, better jobs and worker retraining, rather than arguing over who is taking the limited, low-wage jobs that exist right now.

The Facts: Our workforce needs immigrant labor. Our workforce is highly educated and increasingly older, which means fewer native-born workers. Our economy won’t be able to maintain more than a 3% annual growth rate in the next decade without growing the labor force with immigrants.

The other need is to raise the minimum wage so that the jobs that immigrants are taking pay better and can attract native-born workers. Right now, immigrants largely take jobs that native-born workers won’t do at the current wages.



“Undocumented immigrants drive down wages.”

Response 1: For many people the increase in immigrants has actually had a positive effect on American’s wages. Unfortunately some Americans, particularly those without a high school diploma, have seen a decrease in wages.

Response 2: The US economy would grind to a halt without the labor of undocumented immigrants, but their status leaves them vulnerable to exploitation by unscrupulous employers, and that *does* drive down wages. We need to legalize undocumented workers so they will have full rights and protections on the job – and to crack down on unscrupulous employers who pay poverty wages. If there is a class of workers in this country who are afraid to go to the authorities to report crimes (including problems at work) it affects all of us at our jobs, the same way that not reporting a robbery can make it more difficult for the police to solve a string of robberies.

The Facts: Immigrants are not the cause of low wages – an increasingly corporate-friendly Congress which has not made meaningful progress to ensuring that American workers make living wages is what is driving down all our wages. Undocumented immigrants are the most vulnerable, because they lack full worker rights and labor protections.

“Immigrants won’t learn English.”

Response: Immigrants want to learn English – without English, a trip to the store, reading mail, or talking to their children’s teacher becomes much more difficult.

Response: Actually immigrants are learning English. Today's immigrants are transitioning to speaking English more quickly than immigrants at any other time in U.S. history.

The Facts: English is the dominant language in the United States – and immigrants want to learn because they know it will improve job prospects and let them communicate in our society. The real problem is that English language programs are dramatically underfunded and hard to get into. There are over 90,000 new immigrants on language class waiting lists across the country, and over 3,000 in King County. If we want new immigrants to learn English, we need to give them the opportunity.

“Immigrants take my family's share of social services.”

Response: Immigrants, including most undocumented immigrants, have taxes automatically deducted just like you. And everyone pays sales tax. Those taxes pay for schools and roads, and go into Social Security – which undocumented immigrants will never be able to collect.

Especially in this economic climate, social services funding continues to be cut. We should be talking about a bigger pie, not fighting over the scraps of a shrinking one.



The Facts: Studies have shown repeatedly that immigrants provide a net economic benefit—calculated to be as much as \$10 billion every year. A 2009 study in Washington found that immigrant families consumed less public assistance than native-born families, except for food stamps.

“Immigrants raise crime rates.”

Response: Immigrants are actually less likely to commit crimes than Americans. Immigrants settling in a neighborhood have often been responsible for revitalizing a neighborhood and consequently lowering crime. In fact, America is getting safer. During the same period that immigrants began to settle in new spots across the US violent crimes and property crimes across the nation decreased.

The Facts: Numerous studies show the rate of crime among immigrants is lower than that of native-born Americans.

“We can keep immigrants out by building better walls.”

Response: Do you know what Secretary of Homeland Security Janet Napolitano said? “You show me a 50 foot fence and I’ll show you a 51 foot ladder.” There are twice as many border patrol agents today, and ten times as much money being spent than in 1995 – and immigrants still come to this country. That says our system is broken, and building a wall won’t fix it.

The Facts: Recent economic and foreign policies have contributed significantly to the causes of migration worldwide. For example, following the passage of NAFTA, undocumented immigration rose 60% as more than 1.3 million Mexican farmers were driven out of business because of US subsidies that under-priced Mexican agricultural products. Similarly, the U.S. war on Iraq has created over two million refugees who now have no choice but to migrate.

WE NEED COMPREHENSIVE IMMIGRATION REFORM, WHICH:

- Provides a clear and earned path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants, with full labor and civil rights
- Clears immigration backlogs, so that millions of family members who have filed legal applications can be processed and reunited
- Ensures a future flow of workers that has full labour protections and worker rights
- Ensures due process rights within the immigration system
- Promotes immigrant integration
- Enhances our nation's security and safety with a sensible enforcement policy
- Protects fundamental rights for all



Sources:

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Stuart Anderson: *The Contribution of Legal Immigration to the Social Security System*

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