

Undocumented Immigrants: Myths and Reality

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Myth #1: Undocumented immigrants come to the United States to get welfare.

Undocumented men come to the United States almost exclusively to work. In 2003, over 90 percent of undocumented men worked—a rate higher than that for U.S. citizens or legal immigrants (Passel, Capps, and Fix 2004). Undocumented men are younger, less likely to be in school, and less likely to be retired than other men (Capps et al. 2003). Moreover, undocumented immigrants are ineligible for welfare, food stamps, Medicaid, and most other public benefits (Fix, Zimmermann, and Passel 2001).

Myth #2: Undocumented immigrants all crossed the Mexican border. Between 60 and 75 percent of the more than 10 million undocumented immigrants entered illegally and without inspection—mostly across the Mexican border. The other 25 to 40 percent entered legally and subsequently overstayed visas or otherwise violated the terms of their admission (Passel 2005).

Myth #3: Undocumented immigrants are all single men. Over 40 percent of undocumented adults are women, and the majority (54 percent) of undocumented men live in married couples or other families (Passel 2005). Fewer than half of undocumented men are single and unattached.

Myth #4: Most children of the undocumented are unauthorized. In fact, two-thirds of all children with undocumented parents (about 3 million) are U.S.-born citizens who live in mixed-status families.

Myth #5: A large share of schoolchildren are undocumented. Nationally in 2000, only 1.5 percent of elementary schoolchildren (enrolled in kindergarten through 5th grade) and 3 percent of secondary children (grades 6–12) were undocumented. Slightly higher shares—5 percent in elementary and 4 percent in secondary schools—had undocumented parents.

Myth #6: Undocumented immigrants do not pay taxes. Undocumented immigrants pay the same real estate taxes—whether they own homes or taxes are passed through to rents—and the same sales and other consumption taxes as everyone else. The majority of state and local costs of schooling and other services are funded by these taxes. Additionally, the U.S. Social Security Administration has estimated that three quarters of undocumented immigrants pay payroll taxes, and that they contribute \$6–7 billion in Social Security funds that they will be unable to claim (Porter 2005).

References

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