

BEYOND BORDERS

Honoring our human dignity

**Separating fact from fiction
about immigrants in the U.S.**



**American Friends
Service Committee**



American Friends Service Committee

The American Friends Service Committee is a Quaker organization founded in 1917 that includes people of various faiths who are committed to social justice, peace, and humanitarian service. Throughout its history, AFSC has stood with immigrants and refugees in the United States and internationally. Guided by the Quaker belief in the infinite worth of all people and by faith in the power of love to overcome violence and injustice, AFSC supports the rights and dignity of all immigrants, regardless of their legal status.



Immigrants are our neighbors, co-workers, friends, and members of our families. Their labor helps put food on everyone’s table. They belong to local school boards and city councils. They’ve made many significant contributions to U.S. culture and the arts. And the vast majority of us are building on the hopes and aspirations of immigrant ancestors who came here looking for a better life.

Yet talk-show hosts and politicians continue to churn out scare stories about our “broken border.” Their spin creates the impression that undocumented immigrants “take our jobs” and strain social services such as health care and education. Meanwhile, the many benefits we all reap from immigration go unacknowledged or are pushed aside in favor of sound bites that spread fear and confusion.

At the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), a Quaker peace and social justice organization, we believe that the focus should be on the root causes of problems such as unemployment and the lack of health care coverage for millions of people in this country. Such root causes include failed economic policies, reckless military ventures, and the politics of division.

We need to understand why people come to the United States and what the best research shows about the effects immigrants have on our economy and society. This will help us develop approaches that respect the inherent human dignity in each of us.

Most immigrants want to stay with and provide for their loved ones

The growth of undocumented migration is a worldwide phenomenon that represents a desperate response to desperate circumstances. Millions of people are dislocated by war, persecution, civil strife, and unjust global economic policies that impoverish entire nations and force individuals to leave their homes in order to survive. While some people migrate to the U.S. for political or religious reasons, the majority come to work and reunite with family members.

DID YOU KNOW?

Under the North American Free Trade Agreement, approved in 1994, the Mexican government agreed to continue phasing out subsidies for subsistence farming and for the consumption of tortillas, Mexico's traditional staple food. Mexican researchers estimate that these changes have forced as many as two million Mexican subsistence farmers to leave their homes because they can no longer make a living.¹

The concept of "illegality" or who is "legal" is directly tied to how the government chooses to allow people to obtain

documentation. U.S. laws have excluded a shifting roster of groups from citizenship (e.g., African-Americans, Native-Americans), and banned or severely curtailed immigration from China, Southern Europe (e.g., Italy), Mexico, and the Philippines, to name a few. Each excluded group, meanwhile, has fought to be recognized as part of this country and as people with rights.²



Photo: Terry Foss

The Cabrera family in Newark, NJ.

U.S. laws and regulations make it nearly impossible to obtain permanent residency/U.S. citizenship

The laws that govern the immigration process today are grossly inadequate. Those who immigrate out of economic necessity, for example, have almost no way to obtain legal status in the U.S. Adjusting one's immigration status is also costly and can take years, even decades.

DID YOU KNOW?

- ▶ Exorbitant immigration fee hikes of up to 80 percent went into effect in July 2007. The fees are keeping many low-income, working, and moderate income immigrants from obtaining residency (green cards).³
- ▶ Applications for permanent residence (green cards) from people with family members in the U.S. can take years—and sometimes decades—to even be considered. For example, Mexican children over 21 whose parents are U.S. citizens can wait up to 16 years to be eligible to submit their applications. Siblings of U.S. citizens from the Philippines can wait more than 20 years.⁴



Photo: Martin Cuevas

Rally for immigrants' rights in Fresno, CA.

Immigrants add to the economic vitality of the nation

During difficult economic times, immigrants—especially undocumented immigrants—are often blamed for job losses, lower wages, and higher consumer prices. However, far more economic damage is inflicted by factors such as new technologies, foreign trade, the diminishing presence of unions, and the decline in the value of the minimum wage.⁵

Furthermore, undocumented immigrants pay nearly \$1.5 billion into Medicare and \$7 billion into the Social Security system every year, yet are ineligible for most public benefits (e.g., cash assistance, food stamps, and Social Security payments).⁶

DID YOU KNOW?

- ▶ In 2005, immigrant households and businesses paid approximately \$300 billion in federal, state, and local taxes: \$165 billion in federal income taxes, \$85 billion in state and local income taxes, and \$50 billion in business taxes.⁷
- ▶ Depending on their skills and level of education, each immigrant pays, on average, between \$20,000 and \$80,000 more in taxes than s/he consumes in public benefits.⁸



Photo: Terry Foss

Immigrants speak up for their rights during the Advocacy Days in Washington, D.C. (2007).



Photos: (clockwise from top) Persian dance troupe (Fresno, CA); youth activists (Austin, TX); learning their rights (Miami, FL).

Immigrants contribute to the social fabric of our communities

Across the country, immigrants are helping to revitalize both urban and rural communities through their entrepreneurship and involvement in local culture and politics. In addition, immigrants raise the demand for goods and services. Contrary to the views of some pundits, surveys and studies show that immigrants want to learn English and are doing so in large numbers.

DID YOU KNOW?

- 🔊 Undocumented immigrants contribute an estimated \$400-\$460 billion to the U.S. gross domestic product and \$250-\$290 billion to U.S. personal consumption spending.⁹
- 🔊 Many immigrants want to become proficient in English; the demand for English classes nationwide far outstrips supply.¹⁰ Furthermore, an overwhelming number of second- and third-generation immigrants speak English. For example, 88 percent of U.S.-born Latinos speak English very well. Among later generations of Latino adults, the figure rises to 94 percent. Reading ability in English shows a similar trend.¹¹

Punitive policies and unworkable laws are trampling immigrants' rights and hurting everyone

When efforts to develop fair and humane immigration policies fell apart in 2007, the government's primary response was to step up Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids and detention of immigrants. These punitive measures destroy communities and drive immigrants further underground. The forced separation of families also has led to growing poverty and psychological trauma. In addition, measures such as mandatory electronic employment verification undermine the privacy of every person and their civil liberties, and are so fraught with systemic errors that many people are wrongly flagged as ineligible to work.¹²

DID YOU KNOW?

- ▶ The “secure border initiative” announced in 2005 called for building 700 more miles of fence along the U.S.-Mexico border. Yet numerous studies and estimates show that a fence will not significantly reduce the flow of undocumented immigrants. A fence will, however, lead to more deaths along the border, be enormously expensive to build (\$3 to \$9 million per mile), and damage the environment.¹³
- ▶ In 2006, ICE detained approximately 257,000 individuals on immigration violations. More than 272,000 people were deported from the U.S. by either ICE or Customs and Border Patrol.¹⁴



Photo: Pedro Pires

U.S.-Mexico border fence in Imperial Beach, CA.

Real challenges need real solutions

AFSC's work with immigrant communities is based on our belief in the infinite worth and inherent dignity of every human being. Our goal is to create a society where everyone's gifts are celebrated, regardless of their immigration status.

To this end, we should stop blaming immigrants for our economic and social problems so that we can address urgent issues in ways that benefit everyone. For example, we should:

- increase the federal minimum wage.
- enforce laws guaranteeing the right to organize unions and bargain collectively.
- provide more opportunities for better education and training.
- offer more meaningful support to working people, such as universal health insurance, child care, and parental leave.
- enforce wage and hour laws and safety protections.
- enact fair economic trade policies.

Developing fair and humane immigration policies—including a focus on family reunification and an end to immigration raids and detention—would benefit all workers by bringing undocumented workers out of the shadows.

How do we honor the human dignity in each of us? We can start by coming together to address the root causes, and the considerable costs, of inequality and injustice.

More information and resources about the effects immigrants have on the economy and social fabric of the United States are available on the AFSC website at www.afsc.org/ImmigrantsRights

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AFSC Principles for Comprehensive Immigration Reform

Toward humane and fair immigration policy

- 1. Respect for the civil rights and all human rights of immigrants.**
- 2. Inclusive and coordinated measures that support immigration status adjustment for undocumented workers.**
- 3. Support for the distinctly important and valuable role of family ties by supporting the reunification of immigrant families in a way that equally respects both heterosexual and same-sex relationships.**
- 4. Humane policies that protect workers and their labor and employment rights.**
- 5. Measures that reduce backlogs that delay the ability of immigrants and refugees to become U.S. permanent residents, citizens, and full participants in the life of the nation and of their communities.**
- 6. The removal of quotas and other barriers that impede or prolong the normalization of immigration status.**
- 7. Guarantees that no federal programs, means-tested or otherwise, will be permitted to single out immigrants or refugees for exclusion.**
- 8. Demilitarization of the U.S.-Mexico border and respect and protection of the region's quality of life.**
- 9. International economic policies (including "free trade" agreements) that are consistent with human rights, fair trade, and sustainable approaches to the environment and economic development.**



The American Friends Service Committee's **Project Voice** is a nationwide immigrants' rights initiative that works to influence and help shape the national agenda for immigration policy and immigrant rights. **Project Voice** stands with immigrant and refugee communities nationwide in their struggle for recognition and respect—because justice, liberty, and dignity aren't privileges, they're inherent human rights.



**American Friends
Service Committee**

**Project Voice
National Office**
1501 Cherry Street
Philadelphia, PA 19102-1403
(215) 241-7124

ProjectVoice@afsc.org
www.afsc.org/ImmigrantsRights

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