

Common Myths about Immigrants and Immigration in Tennessee

Myth #1: Undocumented immigrants are criminals. In fact, unlawful presence in the United States is a civil violation of federal law, not a crime. Therefore, undocumented immigration status does not make someone a criminal. While some public figures claim that immigrants are filling our jails, many of those same individuals support legislation that turns everyday activities into crimes—like driving to work or renting an apartment. According to U.S. Census data, immigrants have the lowest rates of imprisonment for criminal convictions in American society (Migration Policy Institute). The incarceration rate of the US born (3.51) is four times the rate of the foreign-born (.086). Between 1990 and 2004, the number of foreign-born in Tennessee increased by 267%; but in the last ten years, the overall crime rate has actually decreased, and the rate of violent crime decreased by more than 5% (Tennessee Bureau of Investigation).

Myth #2: Undocumented immigrants aren't willing to play by the rules or wait their turn in line. In fact, no such line exists for essential low-skilled immigrant workers. Our economy relies on an estimated 485,000 new, low-skilled immigrant workers each year, but our immigration system provides only 5,000 visas (Pew Hispanic Center). That is a huge discrepancy between what our economy needs and what our immigration system allows. Undocumented immigrants come to this country to perform needed work and provide for their families, and do so through a broken immigration system. Undocumented immigrants themselves are the most vocal advocates for a reformed immigration system that is safe, legal, and orderly.

Myth #3: Immigrants don't pay taxes. In fact, Tennessee government is funded by sales and property taxes. Everyone pays these taxes, and the TN Comptroller reports that "Unauthorized aliens contribute to state and local revenue through sales tax, property tax included in rents and other consumption taxes" (TN Comptroller Report on immigration). Despite the legal obstacles, an estimated 60% of undocumented immigrants also pay federal income tax without access to the many federal programs they fund (Pew Hispanic Center). Undocumented workers also pay an estimated \$7 billion in Social Security and \$1.5 billion in Medicare taxes a year, with little hope of ever receiving benefits (Social Security Administration). By the end of the 2000 tax year, there was \$374 billion in the Social Security Suspense Fund from undocumented workers. A 2006 Texas study found that undocumented workers contribute considerably more in taxes than they receive in public benefits, on the order of \$400 million a year (Texas Comptroller). A University of Georgia study released in August found that Hispanic buying power in Tennessee has increased 833% since 1990, increasing sales tax contributions and strengthening the overall tax base (University of Georgia).

Myth #4: Immigrants take jobs away from US-born Americans and hurt the economy. In fact, the US economy increasingly requires foreign, low-skilled workers, as the US-born workforce becomes older, better educated, and less willing to take these jobs. In 1960, half of all American men dropped out of high school and joined the low-skilled labor force; now the number is about 15% (Manhattan Institute). According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, there will be 10 million unfilled jobs in the United States by 2010, primarily in low-wage service industries (Financial Times). A 2006 Texas study found that without undocumented workers, Texas would lose \$17.7 billion of their gross state product every year (Texas Comptroller). Between 1990 and 2000, the foreign-born population of TN increased by 168%, and the unemployment rate decreased from 5.3% to 4.0% (US Census/TN Dept of Labor and Workforce Development). The TN Comptroller reported in August that "unauthorized aliens are not taking jobs or significantly affecting American workers' wages" (TN Comptroller Report on immigration).

Myth #5: Immigrants come to Tennessee for public benefits like TennCare. In fact, immigrants have come to Tennessee to work, not to get public benefits. Undocumented immigrants have no access to TennCare, except for emergency care and vaccinations. There are an estimated 100,000 undocumented immigrants in Tennessee, and only 60 received emergency TennCare in a sample month (Congressional Testimony, TennCare Deputy Commissioner). Even for lawful permanent residents, there is a five-year waiting period for most state and federal benefits. U.S. citizen children living with immigrant parents are eligible for some benefits, but they use them less often than children of the US-born, and their participation in the Food Stamps program has decreased by 35% between 1994 and 1999 (Urban Institute)

Myth #6: Immigrants don't want to learn English and need government encouragement. In fact, within ten years of arrival, more than 75% of immigrants speak English well. For long-term immigrants, less than 3% are unable to speak English well (National Academy of Sciences). Today's immigrants understand that learning English is vital to full participation in society, and are learning English just like immigrants of the past. The best way to help immigrants learn English is to enable them to work and interact with native speakers, and to improve ESL programs in public schools and local communities.

Myth #7: Our immigration system can be fixed with local enforcement of federal immigration law. In fact, effective local law enforcement depends on developing trust with the community, not doing the job of the federal government. The Major Cities Chiefs of Police reject any new role in immigration enforcement because it would compromise their primary mission: to ensure the safety of our communities (MCCP statement on immigration). If the police asked every victim of a crime for immigration papers, immigrant victims would cease to report crimes, making them easy targets, increasing the overall crime rate, and putting every Tennessean at greater risk. State and local attempts to fix a federal problem promise instead to create a patchwork of inconsistent laws across the nation, divide our communities, threaten public safety, and escalate anti-immigrant sentiment and discrimination.