

# *Background: Immigration Reform*

The United States is a nation founded by immigrants. Of course, before Europeans arrived in the "New World," Native Americans were already here, but the United States of America was formed primarily by immigrants who often left their homelands in pursuit of a better life and/or to flee religious persecution. The Statue of Liberty has long been this nation's great symbol of freedom and hope for immigrants who arrived by ship through New York City ports. "Bring me your tired and your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free" was the message of welcome associated with the Statue of Liberty.

Sadly and ironically, the U.S. also has a tragic history of discrimination against new immigrants, discrimination most often carried out by the descendants of former immigrants. This dark cloud continues today as many U.S. citizens call for the imprisonment and deportation of Latin Americans who have crossed our southern border in search of better lives for their families in the wake of overwhelming global poverty.

This year's Peace Booth petition is calling for comprehensive immigration reform that will lead to the kinder and gentler treatment of our Latino sisters and brothers as well as others who come across our borders seeking relief from poverty and oppression.

It is important to separate fact from fiction in the debate over immigration reform.

## ***MYTH: Undocumented immigrants take jobs away from U.S. citizens.***

***FACT:*** Research shows immigrants supplement rather than displace U.S. workers because they often fill jobs that U.S. citizens don't want, and these jobs are often available in areas that lack enough workers to fill low skilled jobs. In addition, the U.S. Department of Labor predicts a shortage of up to 2 million workers to fill low skilled jobs by 2015. Declining fertility rates are also leading to U.S. worker shortages, which will likely lead to higher demand for immigrant labor.

## ***MYTH: Undocumented immigrants drain public resources.***

***FACT:*** According to the National Research Council, "Immigrants make a net financial contribution to the U.S. economy," and the economic benefits of immigration run as high as \$10 billion per year, including the \$7 billion immigrants contribute to Social Security benefits annually.

## ***MYTH: Immigrants are responsible for increased crime.***

***FACT:*** Immigrants commit fewer crimes than native-born Americans. Although the undocumented immigrant population doubled from 1994 to 2005, violent crime dropped by 34 percent and property crimes decreased by 32 percent in that same time period. Harvard sociologist Robert Sampson has found that first-generation immigrants are 45 percent less likely to commit violent crimes than "Americanized, third-generation immigrants."

## ***MYTH: Latinos can come to the U.S. legally, but choose not to.***

***FACT:*** It is close to impossible for Latin Americans to receive permission to come to the U.S. legally. Economic necessity is NOT considered grounds to immigrate to the U.S. and in the aftermath of 9-11, legal immigration has been severely curtailed.

At present, the United States is using an "enforcement-only" policy to stop immigration at the border and to deport undocumented immigrants already living here. INS raids often sweep up a family's breadwinner, leaving spouses and children in severe economic distress when a loved one is deported. In addition, two-thirds of the children displaced by INS raids are U.S. citizens. The Peace Booth also opposes the use of 287 (g), a federal program in which local law enforcement, working in cooperation with Immigration Control and Enforcement (ICE), arrest and deport undocumented immigrants for traffic offenses and other minor crimes. These arrests and deportations occur in many North Carolina communities. We also believe that immigration status should not exclude a person from obtaining a driver license or from attending North Carolina's colleges and universities.

We also call on citizens to educate themselves about how U.S. "free trade" policies have contributed to rather than reduced poverty rates throughout Latin America.

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Immigration is a complex issue, but in tough economic times, the United States should continue to maintain a compassionate and just policy toward those who cross our borders in hopes of attaining a life free of poverty and oppression.