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Immigration 101—Los Mitos y la Realidad

1. Most immigrants come to this country legally.

True. There are over 33 million immigrants in the US. About 75% of the immigrants who are not naturalized citizens in this country are Legal Permanent Residents and have a visa. Of the 25% that are undocumented, about 40% entered the country legally and overstayed their temporary visas. (US Census and DHS yearbook)

2. Immigrants don't pay taxes.

False. All immigrants contribute to this country's tax base. They pay income, property, sales, and other taxes. Contrary to popular belief, undocumented immigrants also pay income taxes, as evidenced by the SSA's "earnings suspense file" (taxes that couldn't be matched to workers' names and social security numbers). This pot increased by \$20 billion in the 1990's. (Cato Institute, Urban Institute, SSA)

3. Recent immigrants, because they are generally low skilled and undereducated, harm the economic opportunities of low skilled, undereducated US citizens.

False. Most labor economists agree that immigrants tend to complement rather than compete with American workers, both at the high and low skill levels. US workers, if displaced, tend to find better jobs at comparable or higher wages. The American economy, expanded by the consumption of the immigrants themselves, creates as many jobs as there are workers willing to work so long as labor markets remain flexible and open to all workers on an equal basis. (David Card, Gianmarco Ottaviano, Giovanni Peri, Open Letter to Congress by 500 US Economists)

4. It is illegal for undocumented immigrants to work in this country.

False. Although undocumented immigrants are not legally authorized to live here, they are not violating any law by working in this country. Since 1986, it has been illegal for employers to hire them.

5. Lax border enforcement has led to high undocumented immigration.

False. In the last 20 years, Border Patrol's budget has increased ten fold and the number of uniformed officers patrolling the borders has grown to 10,000. Since, 1992, the cost of making an arrest along the border has increased from \$300 to over \$1,700. Despite the border enforcement buildup, there has been a decrease in the likelihood of migrant apprehension at the border and a significant increase in undocumented immigration. (Cato Institute; Andreas, Peter. 2000 *Border Games: Policing the US-Mexico Divide*)

6. Immigrants are less likely to commit crimes and enter the criminal justice system.

True. Despite prevalent myths and stereotypes about immigrants' criminal conduct and their flooding of our jails, studies indicate that the rate of incarceration of foreign-born individuals is well below that of native-born ones (0.68% vs. 3.51%). Studies also show that incarceration rates increase in subsequent generations. (Ruben Rumbaut-UCI).

7. On the whole, immigrants utilize the public welfare and health care system at a much lower rate than native-born US citizens.

True. Use of public benefits by documented immigrant families is well below that of native-born citizens. Low-income native citizens use TANF and Medicaid at a much higher rate than immigrants. Moreover, recent studies conclude that although immigrants pay Medicare, payroll and other taxes, they receive less than half as much health care as native-born families. (Urban Institute; Brookings Institute; American Journal of Public Health)

8. Native-born Hispanics in New Mexico by and large support immigration and immigrants' rights.

True. Although there has been no major polling of Hispanics' views regarding recent Latino immigrants, New Mexico, with a high Hispanic population of 43.6%, has historically boasted the most progressive policies in the country for undocumented immigrants. Hispanic politicians and policy-makers at the local and state level have generally spearheaded or voted in favor of policies aiming to protect and benefit immigrants—with little to no opposition from their constituents.

9. Most US voters support legalization for the 12 million undocumented immigrants living in this country and support future immigration.

True. Several national polls conducted by a wide array of reputable pollsters, indicate that about two-thirds of voters, although very concerned about homeland security, support a broad legalization program for undocumented immigrants who work, pay taxes and have no criminal record. These same polls indicate that voters would like to see the institution of future worker visa programs. Surprisingly, recent AP-Ipsos polling found that, despite an increasingly caustic public debate on immigration reform, US citizens were more tolerant of immigrants in May of 2006 than they were two years ago. Those who said immigrants are having a good influence in the US rose 10 percent points from May of 2004. (National polls compiled by the National Immigration Forum)

10. International migration is primarily caused by the lack of economic development in migrants' home countries and because of wage disparities.

False. International migrants do not originate in the world's poorest nations, but in those that are developing and growing. The initiation of economic development in migrants' home countries and the structural changes it triggers causes increased migration to occur. Moreover, although wage disparities do constitute one factor in migrants' decision to emigrate, households generally use international migration as a tool to overcome failed, missing or nascent markets for insurance, capital, and credit at home. (Douglas S. Massey, 2002, *Beyond Smoke and Mirrors: Mexican Immigration in an Era of Economic Integration*)