



Immigration - Time for a New Approach

December 2, 2012

- [Immigration](#)
- [Civic Engagement](#)

Share

- [pdf](#)
- [twitter](#)
- [facebook](#)

Following the 2012 elections, leaders in both parties are talking about reforming immigration. Walls and repression do not work. SSN scholars tell us why they backfire – and suggest constructive ways to welcome new arrivals as full participants in U.S. society and politics.

Latino voters played a major role in the 2012 election, overwhelmingly supporting President Barack Obama and other Democrats. That has inspired some leading Republicans to call for rethinking their party's get-tough approach to regulating immigration and handling millions of undocumented immigrants who now live and work in the United States.

For years, [Congress has been stalemated](#) by partisan divisions on immigration, as SSN scholar [Katherine Fennelly](#) of the University of Minnesota documents. With the House in Republican hands and the Senate led by Democrats, stalemate may continue during 2013 and 2014. But there may also be a new opening for legislators in both parties to calmly consider important facts about immigration and immigrants. In thought-provoking briefs, SSN scholars lay out key facts and explode

misleading myths.

WALLS DO NOT KEEP IMMIGRANTS OUT

Leading scholars [Douglas S. Massey](#) of Princeton and [David FitzGerald](#) of the University of California, San Diego summarize crucial research findings on immigration and efforts to manage it. See [Massey's brief here](#) and [FitzGerald's brief here](#). As both of these SSN scholars spell out, despite ever-more-costly efforts at border enforcement, determined immigrants still arrive from Mexico; they get across the border on the second or third try, if not on the first. As enforcement has been ramped up at key urban crossings, determined immigrants pay high fees to "coyotes" who guide them across the frontier in remote locations, and more people die in the desert while trying to enter the United States.

Tough border enforcement in recent years has also made it very difficult for migrants to go back and forth regularly between jobs in the United States and family homes in Mexico or Central America - which many prefer to do, because they are initially just looking to supplement family incomes. The unintended effect of tough border enforcement has been to prompt migrant workers who might have stayed only temporarily in the United States to instead bring their families to join them and move far from the border to build new lives in states and communities all across the country. Ironically, get-tough policies designed to shelter native U.S. communities from "too much" immigration have backfired to produce permanent new immigrant clusters in many midwestern and southern places.

With jobs scarce during the sharp U.S. economic downturn of the last few years, fewer newcomers have arrived. Net immigration in the southwest is now zero (or a bit below that) as more people return to Mexico and other countries of origin. But previous arrivals are still here. The United States currently has about eleven million undocumented immigrants permanently working and living in many states and communities. These people are settled in to workplaces and neighborhoods. They are becoming Americans and not going anywhere.

Presidents of both political parties have proposed paths for undocumented settled residents to earn legal status and citizenship, but Congress has not acted. It has even rejected efforts to pass the so-called DREAM Act to ease the path to citizenship for young undocumented immigrants brought to this country as children. As [Rob Glover](#) of the University of Maine explains, [President Obama's effort to deal with](#)

[these young undocumented people through administrative rules](#) is at best a short-term solution. Efforts to address the poignant situation of undocumented young people trying to make a transition to adulthood in the only homeland they have ever really known are bound to be revived soon. Perhaps measures to help young undocumented residents will become a first step toward more comprehensive reforms that include a path to legal citizenship for their parents as well.

STATE AND LOCAL EXPERIENCES

We can learn a lot about the ways new immigrants fit into American society by looking at experiences in various U.S. states and localities. With the federal government unable to pass comprehensive reforms, states and localities have taken various steps, ranging from welcoming the newcomers to efforts at coercion and exclusion. SSN scholars have done original research in many local settings to see what lessons can be learned.

Crime and policing have attracted research attention. As [Ernesto Castaneda](#) and [Josiah Heyman](#) of the University of Texas at El Paso show, immigrants are relatively law-abiding and [cities with high concentrations of newcomers tend to be safer overall](#) than cities with non-immigrants of comparable economic status.

Undocumented immigrants, in particular, are anxious to avoid police attention. [Andrew Papachristos](#) of Yale University and [David Kirk](#) of the University of Texas at Austin agree that immigrants are inclined to be law-abiding and show that [coercive approaches by local police can undercut the normal willingness of immigrants to cooperate with authorities](#) in efforts to make their communities safer for everyone.

When large numbers of immigrants newly arrive in towns and cities, tensions with native residents often arise in neighborhoods and workplaces. Prejudice and efforts to exclude newcomers recurrently happen – but there are also many instances of local officials and native citizens reaching out to help and encourage new immigrants, as [Helen Marrow](#) of Tufts University documents in her research on [North Carolina communities](#) with many recent arrivals, including documented and undocumented immigrants employed in poultry processing plants.

At the University of Minnesota, [Katherine Fennelly](#) and her students have discovered similar complexities in their studies of [immigration in the Midwest](#). Urban and suburban natives may be unperturbed by immigration, but [Midwesterners living in rural areas](#) are especially likely to find the newcomers worrisome. Yet even in small

towns and cities, there are many hopeful instances of community-building and cooperation to bridge divides between natives and immigrants.

Some U.S. cities have gone the extra mile to reach out to undocumented immigrants, by providing social services that state and federal governments are legally barred from offering. As Helen Marrow shows, the city of San Francisco offers urban identity cards to undocumented residents and provides them with primary health care through city-funded clinics. This effort is seen not only as a matter of social justice, but also as a way to promote general public health. Informal outreach by health care providers happens in many localities, but few towns and cities are likely to have as much political consensus in favor of funded services for undocumented immigrants as liberal San Francisco. Even in that metropolis, Marrow shows, efforts to deal with serious illnesses of undocumented people are still frustrated by state and federal legal barriers to offering specialized hospital services or long-term care.

One key indicator of immigrant integration into U.S. life is whether children and young people are enrolled in school. [Elizabeth Ackert](#) of the University of Washington has looked at [school enrollment for children of Mexican origins in different U.S. states](#), comparing traditional destinations such as California, Texas, and Illinois to many other states where immigrants have recently settled. She finds that the failure of Mexican immigrant children to enroll in school is a bigger problem in states with many recent arrivals, and also in states that generally do a relatively poor job of enrolling children and young people from all backgrounds in their schools. Effective institutions matter for everyone, in short.

Even where legal immigrant residents are concerned, some states try to save money by restricting access to medical care. In a compelling [OpEd in the Bangor Daily News](#), [Rob Glover](#) of the University of Maine argues against his state's recent efforts to reduce care for legal immigrants through the Medicaid program called "MaineCare."

The United States has a long history of treating immigrants harshly in state and local welfare systems, especially people of color. [Cybelle Fox](#) of the University of California, Berkeley tells this compelling story in her recent book on [race and immigration in the U.S. welfare state](#).

LESSONS FROM CANADA

Ultimately, the United States will need to devise new and improved national policies to regulate the arrival of modern immigrants – and to make sure that immigrants who come are welcomed and smoothly incorporated into our vibrant, diverse nation. Leaving millions of people living in the legal shadows certainly will not work – for the immigrants themselves or for our society, economy, and democracy.

The United States can learn much from Canada, our sister "nation of immigrants" to the North. As [Irene Bloemraad](#) of the University of California, Berkeley has documented in depth, Canada [does more to actively incorporate immigrants](#), smoothing their path to full participation in community life and politics as well as in workplaces. As a result, legal immigrants more quickly become full citizens in Canada than they do in the United States.