



Immigration, Hunger, and Opportunity

Bread for the World sees global progress against poverty as a great exodus from hunger. We know that international migration is often part of this exodus—as people move across national borders to escape poverty and improve their livelihoods. While reducing poverty may not be the primary goal of most contemporary immigration policy reform efforts, it should certainly be one of its explicit objectives.

The United States Is a Nation of Immigrants

The United States has played an important role in the global exodus from hunger. Most of the nation's population has come from waves of hopeful immigrants. Notable exceptions are Native Americans and the Africans who were brought to the Americas as slaves.*

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, a flood of immigrants came from Ireland, Italy, and Eastern Europe, often fleeing poverty and persecution. While their lives improved in the United States, immigrants also faced rejection for speaking different languages and practicing different religions.

Non-European immigrants faced some of the harshest discrimination. Asian immigrants, for example, have faced laws barring them from travel, forbidding them from marrying European-Americans, and tolerating violence against them.

Despite hostility and difficulties that often accompany immigration, studies consistently indicate that immigration contributes to U.S. economic growth and higher incomes for most Americans, including those born here.

Most Current Immigration Comes From Latin America

In recent decades most immigrants to the United States have come from Latin America. This is particularly true for unauthorized immigration. More than 80 percent of all unauthorized immigrants to the United States come from Latin America, with 60 percent coming from Mexico. The forces pushing immigration are clear. According to the World Bank, 51 percent of Mexican citizens live below that nation's poverty line. The highest number of undocument-



Monica Rodriguez/Getty Images

ed Mexican immigrants to the United States comes from the poorest regions, where poverty averages 61 percent.

Central America—comprising Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Belize, Costa Rica, and Panama—is the second largest source of unauthorized immigration to the United States. In those countries, poverty, malnutrition, and food insecurity are entrenched. More than 70 percent of rural Guatemalans and Hondurans live below their national poverty lines. In Nicaragua 45 percent of the population lives on less than \$1 a day.

Immigrants Face Poverty in the United States

While they earn more money in the United States than in their home countries, unauthorized immigrants suffer disproportionately from food insecurity and poverty once they arrive. While legal immigrants, refugees, and guest workers all face challenges, no group of immigrants is more harmed by hunger and poverty than those without documentation. Lack of legal status contributes to their economic insecurity and exploitation. It also means that they have limited access to the social safety net in the

United States. Thirty-four percent of U.S.-born children of unauthorized immigrant adults live in poverty. This is almost double the 18 percent rate for the children of U.S.-born adults.

Poverty persists in spite of those immigrants having higher workforce participation rates than either citizens or legal immigrants. Our economy depends upon the hard work of undocumented immigrants, but does not adequately compensate them. According to the Department of Labor, at least half of farm workers are undocumented. “If you didn’t have these folks, you would be spending a lot more—three, four or five times more—for food, U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack has said. Yet, in some unauthorized immigrant communities more than half the population is food insecure. Food insecurity tends to be particularly high among rural unauthorized immigrant communities. The most impoverished of all immigrants often can’t afford the food that they harvest with their own hands.



Immigration Reform Fits Bread’s Policies

Because a substantial percentage of undocumented immigrants in the United States live in poverty and because legalization would help them escape hunger, immigration reform fits Bread for the World’s domestic agenda. We advocate for legislation that ensures a place at the table for everyone in the United States, regardless of legal status. And we anticipate that hundreds of thousands of people would be lifted out of hunger and poverty almost immediately if they are given a pathway to citizenship.

Immigration reform also fits Bread’s international agenda. We add specific value to the immigration reform discussion by focusing on its root causes: hunger and poverty in home countries. Our longstanding advocacy for poverty-focused development assistance is one way that we help moderate the flow of immigrants to the United States. Significantly, international development was an important component of the last major immigration reform—during the Reagan administration. Policy makers recognized that investments in immigrant-sending countries would reduce the push and increase political stability and markets for U.S. exports.

Bread for the World supports efforts that reduce hunger in the United States and abroad. This can be accomplished by extending legal status to undocumented immigrants in the United States while providing development assistance to countries with high poverty rates.

Endnotes

* In addition, several territories, such as Florida, Louisiana, Alaska, California, and Hawaii, were added through wars, purchase, or treaties.