



NEW YORK CITY COMPTROLLER  
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# Facts, Not Fear

## How Welcoming Immigrants Benefits New York City

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### Background

#### **Busting Myths about Immigration**

As New York City welcomes over 100,000 new arrivals seeking asylum, it is critical to ground conversations on immigration in facts, not fear. This fact sheet seeks to provide accurate information on key questions.

## FACT: Immigrants benefit our economy, irrespective of their status

Immigrants strengthen our economy as workers, entrepreneurs, taxpayers, and consumers:

- Immigrant New Yorkers are more likely to be [employed](#),<sup>1</sup> are more likely to [create jobs](#)<sup>2</sup> by starting a business, and contribute billions of dollars to our New York economy in [spending power and tax revenue](#).<sup>3</sup>
- In 2021, immigrant New Yorkers [paid](#)<sup>4</sup> \$61 billion dollars in taxes and constituted \$138 billion dollars in spending power.
- When New York City faced abandonment and fiscal crisis in the 1970s, a strong wave of immigration contributed to public safety, increased the city's population, and [boosted public revenues](#).<sup>5</sup>
- Our upstate neighbors [Rochester, Syracuse, and Utica](#)<sup>6</sup> experienced an economic revitalization after welcoming new arrivals, who have opened new businesses, contributed to population growth, [rebuilt homes](#),<sup>7</sup> and contributed [millions in taxes and spending power](#).<sup>8</sup>

Welcoming asylum seekers is a net positive to the economy.

- Conservative estimates have found that a 10% reduction in asylum seekers in one year would be a [\\$8.9 billion loss](#)<sup>9</sup> to the U.S. economy and over \$1.5 billion in lost tax revenue over five years.

Undocumented immigrants<sup>10</sup> support economic growth, pay taxes, and keep our city and economy running as essential workers.

- Although they are ineligible for Social Security, Medicaid, and most public benefits, undocumented immigrants help [sustain](#)<sup>11</sup> these vital entitlement programs by contributing billions of dollars into [Social Security](#)<sup>12</sup> and billions more into local, state, and federal taxes.
- In 2021, undocumented immigrants [contributed](#)<sup>13</sup> \$30.8 billion in total taxes nationally, including \$18.6 billion in federal income taxes and \$12.2 billion in state and local taxes.
- In New York State, undocumented immigrants [paid](#)<sup>14</sup> \$3 billion in taxes.
- Undocumented immigrants make up approximately 3.2 percent of the U.S. population, but [4.4 percent](#)<sup>15</sup> of the country's workforce.
- Undocumented immigrants are the backbone of many vital industries across New York. 70% of undocumented workers in New York are [essential workers](#).<sup>16</sup>

## FACT: Immigrants drive workforce growth

New immigration helps the U.S. economy [compensate](#)<sup>17</sup> for declining birth rates, slow population growth, and residents moving out of the city. If not for immigrants, the [U.S. workforce would be shrinking](#):<sup>18</sup>

- Immigrant workers currently constitute about [18% of the U.S. workforce](#),<sup>19</sup> a record high. In New York City, immigrants comprise 36% of our population and [43% of our workforce](#).<sup>20</sup>
- Immigrant workers [do not take jobs away](#)<sup>21</sup> from native-born workers.
- Immigrants are more likely to be [entrepreneurs](#)<sup>22</sup> than native-born Americans. Evidence has shown that immigrants actually [create more jobs than they take](#).<sup>23</sup>
- The data is mixed on whether immigration has an impact on wages, with most studies finding [wage impacts are small](#),<sup>24</sup> and outweighed by other factors. Public policies such as [minimum wage increases](#),<sup>25</sup> [pay parity](#),<sup>26</sup> and support for unionization have far more impact on wages in lower-paying sectors.
  - Providing more pathways to legal status for undocumented workers will help [raise wages for everyone](#).<sup>27</sup>

The United States is currently facing a labor shortage:

- Right now, the [latest data](#)<sup>28</sup> shows that we have 9.5 million job openings in the U.S., but only 6.5 million unemployed workers. That means, if every unemployed worker found a job, there would still be 3 million job openings.
  - According to the [U.S. Chamber of Commerce](#),<sup>29</sup> the vast majority of states have more job openings today than before the pandemic, while labor force participation remains below pre-pandemic levels.

New York City's workforce has [shrunk](#)<sup>30</sup> since the pandemic. Growing our workforce by welcoming new arrivals will help address labor shortages and bolster our city's post-pandemic economic recovery:

- While New York City enjoys a much [higher labor participation rate](#)<sup>31</sup> than many other parts of the country, New York City has lost [over 100,000](#)<sup>32</sup> workers since February 2020.
- New York State continues to see labor shortages in sectors such as [home health care](#).<sup>33</sup>
- The [job openings rate](#)<sup>34</sup> in New York is still above [pre-pandemic levels](#);<sup>35</sup> in a recent special survey, New York State businesses [reported](#)<sup>36</sup> approximately 4% of their total jobs are currently unfilled, compared with pre-pandemic job openings constituting about 2% of their overall workforce.
- The New York State Department of Labor has identified [39,456 jobs](#) open to migrants and asylum seekers in New York.<sup>37</sup>

## FACT: Seeking asylum is lawful immigration

Arriving at the border to ask for asylum is lawful immigration. Every asylum seeker, no matter what country they are from, has a right to have their claims heard and adjudicated through our immigration system.

- The right to seek asylum in the U.S. is enshrined under federal law. 8 U.S.C. § 1158(a)(1). This right to seek safety from persecution is also guaranteed under [international law](#).<sup>38</sup>
- The first step in seeking asylum, as required by [statute](#),<sup>39</sup> is *arriving in the United States*.
- Asylum seekers may apply for asylum [regardless of how they arrived](#)<sup>40</sup> in the U.S. - whether they presented themselves to authorities at the southern border, arrived at an airport, or otherwise.

Every asylum seeker should be welcomed with dignity and have a fair chance to have their asylum claims heard.

- Policies aimed at [detering](#)<sup>41</sup> people from seeking asylum have [never stopped immigration](#).<sup>42</sup> People fleeing for their lives will always need asylum, no matter how cruelly we treat them.
- Individuals and families from all over the world are fleeing persecution, torture, violence, and instability in their home countries.
  - Many of the asylum seekers who have reached New York City come from countries, such as [Venezuela](#),<sup>43</sup> [Mauritania](#),<sup>44</sup> and [Haiti](#),<sup>45</sup> where the U.S. Department of State has identified prevalent human rights abuses, including torture, false imprisonment, and slavery.

## FACT: The federal government can and should do more to help local governments and asylum seekers

- While comprehensive immigration reform is needed to address the root causes of a broken immigration system, the federal government can and should do more to support cities welcoming new arrivals.
- The federal government can provide [more funding](#)<sup>46</sup> and flexibility in reimbursing localities for the cost of providing shelter, case management, workforce development, and legal services.
- When war broke out in Ukraine, we saw [what our federal government can do](#)<sup>47</sup> when we decide to compassionately welcome people who have been displaced by turmoil.
- Under [federal law](#),<sup>48</sup> asylum applicants are not eligible for work authorization until six months after they file their asylum applications. The federal government can increase

access to work authorization for new arrivals by expanding [humanitarian parole](#)<sup>49</sup> and [Temporary Protected Status](#)<sup>50</sup> designations.

- Providing more lawful immigration pathways reduce unlawful immigration. Between 2022 and 2023, illegal crossings from Ukrainians, Haitians, Venezuelans, Cubans, and Nicaraguans [sharply decreased](#)<sup>51</sup> after lawful pathways to entry through [humanitarian parole](#)<sup>52</sup> were implemented for those countries.

## FACT: This is not an unprecedented surge in immigration

While New York City is seeing an [unprecedented number](#)<sup>53</sup> of asylum seekers relying on the City's shelter system, the U.S. and New York City have seen periods of comparable or greater growth in our immigrant population in the past:

- The immigrant population in the U.S. has only risen marginally since 2021 -- the growth of our immigrant population in 2022 is 2 million [less than](#)<sup>54</sup> what the U.S. Census Bureau previously projected.
- The period from 2012 to 2022 saw [slower growth in the immigrant share of the population](#)<sup>55</sup> than the 2000s, 1990s, 1980s and 1970s.
- In the 1990s, the U.S. immigrant population grew exponentially. The number of immigrants in the U.S. [grew](#)<sup>56</sup> from 19 million to over 30 million between 1990-2000, an almost 5% increase in immigrants as a share of the total U.S. population.

The undocumented population in the U.S. has largely remained stable over the past 15 years.

- The undocumented population peaked in 2007. The number of undocumented immigrants in the U.S. [rose](#)<sup>57</sup> from an estimated 3.5 million people to a high of 12 million people between 1990 and 2007.
- Since 2007 until 2021, the undocumented population in the United States has [remained stable](#).<sup>58</sup> It has not grown, but rather hovered around 11 million people nationwide for the last 15 years.
- The undocumented population in New York City has been [declining](#)<sup>59</sup> over the last decade. Approximately 476,000 undocumented immigrants lived in NYC in 2019, the most recent year data is available, as compared to 504,000 in 2018.

## FACT: The world is experiencing a global refugee crisis

Though New York City has seen periods of comparable or greater growth in our immigrant population in the past, it is important to understand current increases in a global context. The world is currently experiencing a global refugee crisis – more people have been forced to leave their home countries than ever before.

- Globally, [over 100 million people](#)<sup>60</sup> have been displaced due to armed conflict, instability, and violence. That includes [over 6 million Ukrainians](#)<sup>61</sup> displaced by Russian invasion and [over 7 million Venezuelans](#)<sup>62</sup> displaced by economic collapse.

The duty to welcome displaced people has disproportionately fallen on countries other than the U.S.:

- The vast majority, [76%](#),<sup>63</sup> of displaced people are hosted by low- and middle-income countries, not countries like the U.S.
- About 6 million out of the over 7 million [displaced Venezuelans](#)<sup>64</sup> have migrated to other Latin American or Caribbean countries.
- Three countries whose populations are a mere fraction of the U.S. total population, Turkey, Iran, and Colombia, [host the most refugees in the world](#).<sup>65</sup> Colombia, which has a population of about 51 million, has taken in 2.5 million displaced people.

## FACT: New York City is the greatest immigrant city the world has ever seen

- New York City has a rich history of welcoming immigrants and was once the epicenter of mass migration to the U.S.:
  - It has been estimated that close to [40 percent of all current U.S. citizens](#)<sup>66</sup> can trace at least one of their ancestors to Ellis Island.
  - More than [12 million people](#)<sup>67</sup> entered through Ellis Island between 1892 and 1954. NYC's population [increased](#)<sup>68</sup> by over 1.3 million people from 1900 to 1910.
  - In just one day in 1907, over [11,000 immigrants](#)<sup>69</sup> entered New York City through Ellis Island.
  - Today with twice as many people as in 1907, New York City welcomes up to [600 migrants a day](#)<sup>70</sup> seeking shelter.
- New York City is still a city of immigrants. Over 3 million New York City residents are immigrants, comprising about [40% of our city's population](#).<sup>71</sup>
- New York City has the largest number of people of Bangladeshi, Colombian, Chinese, Dominican, Ecuadorian, Ghanaian, Guyanese, Haitian, Indian, Irish, Italian, Jamaican, Jewish, Nigerian, Pakistani, Russian, Senegalese, and Ukrainian descent in the U.S.

## Endnotes

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