

NPR/Kaiser/Kennedy School Poll

Immigration

Summary of Findings

The public's views on immigration are significantly less negative than they were in the months after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. Forty-one percent of the public now says that legal immigration to the United States should be decreased. This is much lower than the 59 percent that CBS News and the *New York Times* found when they asked the same question in December 2001. It is also lower than the 50 percent recorded by CBS News in 1996, when anti-immigration feelings also were running high.

Today, nearly as many people (37 percent) say legal immigration should be kept at its present level as say it should be decreased (41 percent). While only 18 percent say that legal immigration should be increased, immigrants are much more likely than non-immigrants to say that (39 percent-15 percent). Immigrants (18 percent) are also much less likely than non-immigrants (44 percent) to say legal immigration should be decreased. Immigrants and non-immigrants are equally likely to say that immigration should be kept at its present level.

Although non-immigrants are more likely to think that legal immigrants have been good for the U.S. economy than they are to think legal immigrants have been bad for the economy (38 percent-26 percent, with 31 percent saying they have made no difference), they have very negative views of illegal immigrants. Nearly three-fifths of non-immigrants (59 percent) say illegal immigrants have hurt the national economy, and only 14 percent say they have helped it (23 percent say they have made no difference). And 54 percent of the public believes that most recent immigrants are in the country *illegally*, which may affect their perceptions of the effects of immigration as a whole.

Indeed, those who think most recent immigrants to the United States are here illegally have more negative views of immigration and immigrants than do those who think most are here legally. For instance, compared with people who think most recent immigrants are here legally, those who think most recent immigrants are here illegally are more likely to believe that there are too many immigrants in the U.S. today (62 percent-39 percent); that immigrants today are a burden on the country (59 percent-35 percent); that recent immigrants take jobs from Americans who want them (54 percent-40 percent); that most recent immigrants do not pay their fair share of taxes (71 percent-43 percent); that legal immigration should be decreased (43 percent-33 percent); and that the federal government is not tough enough on immigration (73 percent-47 percent).

On a local level, 71 percent of non-immigrants say there are at least some illegal immigrants in their communities, and 44 percent of this group (31 percent of all non-immigrants) say they have been bad for the area. However, most people do not think illegal immigrants comprise a majority of the immigrants in their area; among the 91 percent of non-immigrants who say there are any immigrants at all in their city, town, or metropolitan area, a majority (56 percent) say most of them are legal.

Although attitudes are less negative than they have been in years, many negative attitudes toward immigration persist. Overall, the public is divided on whether the large influx of recent immigrants has been good or bad for the country, with 30 percent saying good, 39 percent saying bad, and 28 percent saying it hasn't made much difference. Although 42 percent

of non-immigrants say recent immigrants work harder than most other Americans, more than a third (35 percent) say they love America less. Immigrants again see things differently from non-immigrants. Fifty-six percent of them say recent immigration has been good for the country, and only 16 percent say it has been bad. By contrast, less than half as many non-immigrants (25 percent) say recent immigration has been good for the country, and more than twice as many (43 percent) say it has been bad. However, non-immigrants have a less negative take on the immigrants living nearby. As mentioned above, they are likely to believe that most of them are legal, and a majority (54 percent) believes legal immigrants haven't made much difference to their area.

About half (51 percent) of non-immigrants say that recent immigrants take jobs away from Americans who want them, though few say they or a family member have lost a job to an immigrant (12 percent) or not gotten a job because it was given to an immigrant instead (15 percent). Non-immigrants who think recent immigrants do take jobs from Americans are more likely to think that the economy is only fair or poor (75 percent-62 percent) and that their own finances are only fair or poor (61 percent-48 percent); they are also more likely to have no college education (58 percent-46 percent), more likely to be lower income (40 percent-28 percent earn less than \$30,000 per year), and more likely to think the federal government isn't tough enough on immigration (80 percent-44 percent).

Americans express ambivalence, if not downright unease, about the cultural impact of immigration. Many non-immigrants believe immigrants are changing American culture and values when they ought to be adopting them. Respondents were asked whether they believed the U.S. is a country with a basic American culture and values that immigrants take on when they come here, or whether it is a country made up of many cultures and values that change as new people come here. Sixty-four percent of non-immigrants say it is the latter, with 34 percent saying the former. Asked, however, what kind of country the U.S. *should* be, the numbers essentially reversed, with 62 percent saying it should be a country with a basic American culture and values, and 33 percent saying it should be a country made up of many cultures and values. Immigrants agree with non-immigrants on what kind of country the U.S. *is*, but disagree on what kind of country it *should* be. Immigrants like things the way they are, with 57 percent saying the U.S. should be a country made up of many cultures and values.

	Non-Immigrants		Immigrants	
	The U.S. is:	The U.S. should be:	The U.S. is:	The U.S. should be:
A country with a basic American culture and values that immigrants take on when they come here	34	62	36	39
A country made up of many cultures and values that change as new people come here	64	33	61	57

Generally, native-born Americans with higher levels of contact with immigrants have more positive views of immigrants and immigration than those with less contact. To determine non-immigrants' contact with immigrants, we looked at two measures. The first focused on location. Using the *INS Yearbook of Immigration Statistics 2002*, which includes data

on legal immigrants over the last five years and estimates of illegal immigrants, we identified states with high, medium, and low proportions of immigrants. The second measure was based on respondents' own answers about whether they have friends who are immigrants, work closely with immigrants, etc.

Although there are not statistically significant differences on every question, in many places there are. For instance, non-immigrants with high contact with immigrants and living in states with high immigrant populations are

- More likely to say that immigration in recent years has been a good thing for the country;
- Less likely to say that immigrants take jobs away from Americans who want them;
- More likely to say that recent immigrants are unfairly discriminated against;
- Less likely to say that recent immigrants do not pay their fair share of taxes;
- More likely to say that immigrants today strengthen the country and less likely to say that they are a burden on the country; and
- Less likely to say that the federal government is not tough enough when it comes to immigration.

	Non-Immigrant Total	Contact		State Population	
		High	Low	High	Low
Recent immigration bad for U.S.	43	32	51	37	47
Recent immigrants take jobs	51	37	59	46	56
Recent immigrants discriminated against	40	50	29	46	37
Recent immigrants do not pay fair share of taxes	62	56	68	58	66
Immigrants strengthen U.S.	42	58	32	49	37
Immigrants burden U.S.	52	37	62	46	57
Government not tough enough	66	59	72	63	69

The public is concerned about illegal immigration and wants the government to crack down. The survey asked a number of specific questions about illegal immigrants, who are also called “undocumented workers” because they do not have the papers allowing them to live and work here legally. Nearly seven out of 10 (69 percent) adults — 72 percent of non-immigrants and 48 percent of immigrants — say they are very or somewhat concerned about illegal immigration. What concerns them? Fewer non-immigrants (45 percent) are concerned about immigrants taking jobs from Americans than about other things. More are concerned that taxpayers have to pay too much to provide services like schools and health care (63 percent) to illegal immigrants, that “too many people are coming into the country” (59 percent), that “the wrong kinds of people are coming into the country” (54 percent), and that “illegal immigration increases the likelihood of terrorism” (56 percent). For immigrants who are concerned about illegal immigration, the biggest concern is that illegal immigration is dangerous for immigrants; 43 percent of immigrants say that is a concern.

About two-thirds (66 percent) of non-immigrants say the federal government isn’t tough enough on immigration, and 55 percent say the government should spend more to prevent illegal immigrants from coming into the country. (Immigrants again have a different take on this. Fewer than half as many (26 percent) say the federal government isn’t tough enough on immigration,

and 34 percent say the federal government should spend more to prevent illegal immigrants from coming into the country. Interestingly, asked specifically about whether the government should spend more money to prevent illegal immigrants from crossing the *Mexican* border, 46 percent say it should. That is much closer to the 53 percent of non-immigrants who say that.)

Most of the public, including most non-immigrants, believes that neither legal nor illegal immigrants are more likely to commit crimes than anyone else.

Immigration is not a particularly partisan issue, and the president's proposal to deal with it draws stronger opposition than support. Although Republicans and Democrats do differ on some of their attitudes about immigration and immigrants, the differences are not nearly so wide as on other issues. And there is *no* significant difference between Democrats and Republicans over whether recent immigration to the United States has been good or bad for the country or whether recent legal or illegal immigrants have helped or hurt the economy. Indeed, leaders of both parties tend to favor some kind of guest-worker program as the best solution to the problem of illegal immigration. We asked specifically about President Bush's plan, which would allow some illegal immigrants currently in the U.S. to legally stay in this country for several years as long as they hold jobs that no U.S. citizen wants. The plan would require these immigrant workers to return to their countries after their time under this program had expired. There is a partisan difference in support (58 percent of Republicans support it, compared with 33 percent of Democrats), though we should note that the question specifically mentioned President Bush; his opponent, Sen. John Kerry, also supports some kind of guest-worker program. Overall, 44 percent of the public (51 percent of immigrants and 42 percent of non-immigrants) supports the proposal; 52 percent opposes it (39 percent of immigrants and 55 percent of non-immigrants).

Opposition to the Bush plan does not seem to be overwhelming until you look at the salience numbers. The political danger of going ahead with a guest-worker plan seems much higher than any danger from doing nothing. Nearly three-quarters (73 percent) of those who oppose the plan, or 38 percent of the public overall, say they would be upset if it does go into effect; less than half as many of those who say they support the plan would be upset if it doesn't go into effect (36 percent of those who support the plan, or 16 percent of the public overall). Even among Latinos there is no great passion for the plan. While 61 percent say they favor the Bush plan, just half of that group, or about 30 percent of all Latinos, say they would be upset if it doesn't go into effect.

One further note on this issue: Most people do not think that most of the guest workers will return to their country of origin when they are required to do so. Overall, nearly three-quarters (72 percent) say the workers will not return. Even among supporters of the plan, 61 percent say the workers will not return.

The Immigrant Experience

This survey included interviews with 784 immigrants. The purpose was not only to have enough immigrants to be able to compare them with non-immigrants, but also to have enough immigrants to be able to compare them with each other — those who arrived recently with those who arrived earlier, those who are well-educated with those who are not, those who are wealthy with those who are poor, etc. Most important, we took care to get enough immigrants from five different areas to be able to compare them with each other: Mexico, South and Central America,

East Asia, the Middle East and North Africa (except Israel), and Russia and Eastern Europe. Here are highlights of our findings:

Immigrants views differ from non-immigrants. When asked about attitudes toward immigrants, the effects of immigration, and immigration policy, the views of immigrants, perhaps not surprisingly, often differ greatly from the views of native-born Americans. For example (we have referenced some of these above)

- Immigrants are more likely than non-immigrants to say that immigrants strengthen the country because of their hard work and talents (81 percent-42 percent), rather than burden the country because they take jobs, housing, and health care (15 percent-52 percent);
- They are more likely to say immigrants work harder than other Americans (71 percent-42 percent);
- They are more likely to say recent immigrants have been unfairly discriminated against (61 percent-40 percent);
- They are more likely to say immigrants pay their fair share of taxes (64 percent-28 percent);
- They are more likely to say that on balance, recent immigration has been good for the country (56 percent-25 percent);
- They are less likely to say recent immigrants take jobs away from Americans (17 percent-51 percent);
- They are less likely to say that the federal government is not tough enough on immigration (26 percent-66 percent); and
- They are less likely to want the government to spend more to keep illegal immigrants out of the country (34 percent-55 percent).

Immigrants keep some ties to their home country, though not as much as some believe. Three out of five (60 percent) non-immigrants believe that recent immigrants send most of the money they earn in the U.S. back to the country they came from. Three out of five immigrants (61 percent) say they do not regularly send any money back. Recent immigrants, those who arrived in the United States in the last 10 years, are more likely to send money back than immigrants who arrived earlier (47 percent-33 percent), but even among them, 52 percent say they do not regularly send money back to their country of origin.

Only 6 percent of immigrants say they return to their country of origin every few months; 35 percent say they return every year or two, and 33 percent say they have never been back. While 30 percent of immigrants say they would like to move back to their country of origin someday, 58 percent say they do *not* want to move back. However, it is interesting to note that of the 51 percent of immigrants who are U.S. citizens, 22 percent say they want to move back some day. As for cultural connections, 83 percent of immigrants say it is at least somewhat important to keep the culture and traditions of their country of origin. Moreover, 69 percent of married immigrants are married to someone from their country of origin. But only 28 percent of unmarried immigrants say it is important to marry someone from their country of origin.

Immigrants like the economic opportunities in America, but some are ambivalent about the culture. The survey asked immigrants a series of questions about whether certain things were better in the United States, better in the country they came from, or about the same. A majority of immigrants say that opportunities to get ahead (84 percent), women's legal rights (71

percent), and treatment of the poor (62 percent) are better in the United States. A plurality (47 percent) say the schools are better in the United States. But nearly half (47 percent) say that the strength of the family is better in the country they came from, and they are evenly divided about whether the moral values of the society are better here or in the country they came from (28 percent each), with 38 percent saying they are about the same. A plurality also say that safety from crime (43 percent) and relations between different races and ethnic groups (41 percent) are about the same here and in the country they came from.

Here are details:

	Better in United States	Better in country you came from	About the same	Don't know
Opportunities to get ahead	84	5	10	1
Women's legal rights	71	7	19	3
Treatment of poor	62	17	16	6
Schools	47	33	15	5
Strength of the family	28	47	23	3
Safety from crime	34	19	43	4
Moral values of society	28	28	38	6
Relations between races/ethnic groups	37	17	41	4

About three in 10 immigrants (30 percent) report having faced discrimination in housing, jobs and public services because they are immigrants. Thirty-nine percent of this group report feeling more discrimination since the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. About one out of five immigrants (19 percent) report experiencing discrimination from police officers because of their immigrant status. Sixty-four percent of this group report feeling more discrimination since September 11, 2001.

Immigrants are more likely than native-born Americans to say immigrants must believe in God to really be part of American society. Asked whether immigrants need to believe in God to really be part of American society, a majority of both immigrants and non-immigrants say no. However, immigrants are twice as likely as non-immigrants (47 percent-22 percent) to say yes. Immigrants are *not* more likely than non-immigrants to report that they personally are religious; approximately the same proportion of immigrants and non-immigrants (84 percent-85 percent) say that religion is important in their daily lives.

Mexicans and Central/South Americans differ markedly from other immigrants in many respects. The differences with other immigrants fall in five main areas:

1. *Demographics:* Mexicans and Central/South Americans are less likely to be citizens, less likely to say their economic situation is good, more likely to send money back to their country of origin, and more likely to have a spouse or partner from the same country than other immigrants.
2. *General attitudes towards immigrants:* Mexicans and Central/South Americans express slightly more favorable attitudes toward immigrants and immigration in general than do

other immigrants. For instance, they are more likely to say immigrants strengthen the country, and more likely to say they learn English within a reasonable amount of time.

3. *Attitudes toward illegal immigrants:* Immigrants from Mexico and Central/South America are more likely to believe that most recent immigrants are here illegally and that illegal immigrants help the economy, and they are less concerned about illegal immigration.
4. *Policy:* Mexican and Central/South American immigrants are more likely than other immigrants to say the government is too tough on immigration, and that it should spend less on preventing illegal immigration.
5. *Comparison of conditions in U.S. to home country:* Mexican and Central/South American immigrants are more likely than others to say that a variety of things are better in the U.S. than in their home country, including the schools, treatment of the poor, moral values, women’s rights, and opportunities to get ahead.

Here are details of Mexican and Central/South American immigrants who say conditions in the United States are better than in their country of origin. They are compared with the responses of all other immigrants. Mexicans and Central/South Americans do not differ from each other in a statistically significant way, except in their answer about the strength of the family.

	Mexican immigrants	Central/South American immigrants	All other immigrants
<i>Percent saying better in the U.S.:</i>			
Opportunities to get ahead	94	89	80
Women’s legal rights	83	78	65
Treatment of the poor	76	69	54
The schools	63	54	38
The strength of the family	42	24	22
Safety from crime	41	44	29
The moral values of the society	38	28	24
Relations between races/ethnic groups	38	32	38

Children of immigrants have views more like native-born Americans. On virtually all questions, children of immigrants look like other native-born Americans. There are a few differences, which may come from their close association with immigrants. For instance, they are more likely than other non-immigrants to believe that

- Recent immigrants are more hard-working than other Americans (59 percent-40 percent);
- The federal government is too tough on immigration (12 percent-6 percent);
- Most recent immigrants do not learn English within a reasonable amount of time (68 percent-56 percent); and
- Recent legal (34 percent-22 percent) and illegal (17 percent-8 percent) immigration has been good for their communities.

In cases where they differ from other non-immigrants, children of immigrants generally fall somewhere between immigrants and non-immigrants whose parents are not immigrants.

Generation 1.5. This study also looked at people often called “Generation 1.5” — that is, people who arrived in the United States at age 10 or younger, meaning that they probably

received much if not most of their education in this country. We compared them with immigrants who arrived at an older age and with native-born Americans. Generation 1.5 immigrants express attitudes that are closer to those of non-immigrants than to those of immigrants who arrived in the U.S. after age 10. Specifically, Generation 1.5 immigrants are more likely than their counterparts who arrived at older ages to express negative attitudes about immigrants and immigration. For instance, while two-thirds (68 percent) of immigrants who arrived after age 10 say that most immigrants pay their fair share of taxes, just over a third (37 percent) of Generation 1.5 immigrants, and fewer than three in 10 (28 percent) non-immigrants, agree. Similarly, while one in five (20 percent) immigrants who arrived after age 10 says that the federal government is not tough enough on immigration, two-thirds (68 percent) of Generation 1.5 immigrants, and a similar share (66 percent) of non-immigrants agree.

Methodology

The NPR/Kaiser/Kennedy School Immigration Survey is part of a series of projects of National Public Radio, the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, and Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government. Representatives of the three sponsors worked together to develop the survey questionnaire and to analyze the results, with NPR maintaining sole editorial control over its broadcasts on the surveys. The project team includes:

From NPR: Marcus D. Rosenbaum, Senior Editor; Megan Meline, Assistant Editor.

From the Kaiser Family Foundation: Drew Altman, President and Chief Executive Officer; Matt James, Senior Vice President of Media and Public Education and Executive Director of kaisernetwork.org; Mollyann Brodie, Vice President, Director of Public Opinion and Media Research; and Elizabeth Hamel, Senior Research Associate.

From the Kennedy School: Robert J. Blendon, a Harvard University professor who holds joint appointments in the School of Public Health and the Kennedy School of Government; Stephen R. Pelletier, Research Coordinator for the Harvard Opinion Research Program; John M. Benson, Managing Director of the Harvard Opinion Research Program; and Elizabeth Mackie, Research Associate.

The NPR/Kaiser/Kennedy School Immigration Study was conducted by telephone May 27 – August 2, 2004 among a nationally representative sample of 1888 respondents 18 years of age and older. A total of 1104 interviews were completed with non-immigrants, and a total of 784 interviews were completed with immigrants. The fieldwork was conducted by ICR/International Communications Research of Media, PA. The margin of sampling error (at a 95 percent confidence level) is +/-3 percentage points for the total population; +/-3 percentage points for non-immigrants; and +/-5 percentage points for immigrants. For results based on subsets of respondents the margin of error is higher. Note that sampling error is only one of many potential sources of error in this or any other public opinion poll.

[Click here for a detailed methodology.](#)