

A Place to Call Home:

What Immigrants Say Now About Life in America

Executive Summary

 PUBLIC AGENDA

Carnegie Corporation of New York



Introduction

As the United States begins another effort to overhaul immigration policy, it only makes sense to listen to the people who will be most affected by it: immigrants. To craft a just and practical policy, we need to see America through the immigrant's eyes. That's true whether you favor an open door or a higher fence. You can't hope to implement sound strategies unless you understand what brings people to the United States and what they think about the nation once they get here.

That's what Public Agenda hopes to accomplish with *A PLACE TO CALL HOME: WHAT IMMIGRANTS SAY NOW ABOUT LIFE IN AMERICA*, the follow-up to our pioneering 2002 survey of immigrants, *NOW THAT I'M HERE*. In *A PLACE TO CALL HOME*, we've extended our sampling to gain a more detailed view of Hispanics and Muslims. Just as important, we can now see trend data on how immigrants view a tumultuous period in history.

Our survey focused on key questions, such as:

- ★ Do immigrants still see America as the land of opportunity?
- ★ How has the sagging economy and heated immigration debate affected their outlook?
- ★ What reform proposals do they favor?
- ★ What barriers do they face?
- ★ How much discrimination do they encounter?
- ★ Given the chance, would they do it all again?

This report was based on a national telephone survey of 1,138 foreign-born adults. The margin of error is plus or minus 4 percent, although the margin is higher when comparing subgroups. There are plenty of methodological hurdles in interviewing this population. As in our prior study, we limited our definition of immigrants to people born outside the United States and, in order to capture their recollections of coming to America, we excluded anyone who emigrated under 5 years of age. And as before, we conducted the telephone survey in English and Spanish.

This time, we also wanted to take a closer look at particular ethnic groups that are often overlooked because of their relatively small size in the United States, including Middle Easterners, South and East Asians, as well as Central and South Americans. We also made efforts to capture the views of undocumented immigrants. The survey was preceded by six focus groups conducted in sites across the country as well as 12 in-depth interviews with immigration experts in academic, public policy law and community outreach.

A PLACE TO CALL HOME was prepared for the Carnegie Corporation of New York.

Part I: The Right Move

Overall, immigrants say they're quite satisfied with life in the United States, for themselves and their children. Discrimination against immigrants doesn't seem to be part of their daily lives, because while majorities say it exists, majorities also say they haven't experienced much discrimination personally. Right now, the biggest concern for immigrants is much the same as for native-born Americans: the economy and their own financial well-being. The economic tumult in our society is shaping some of their perceptions—and motivations.

- ★ More than 7 in 10 (71 percent) report that if they could do it all over again, they'd still come to the United States; indeed, equally large numbers (70 percent) say that they intend to make the United States their permanent home. That goes for their children as well. About three-quarters of immigrant parents (74 percent) say it's unlikely their children will want to live in their birth country, with a strong 58 percent saying it's "very unlikely."
- ★ Strong majorities say that the United States does a better job than their birth country when it comes to offering the opportunity to earn a good living (88 percent), having a trustworthy legal system (70 percent), making good health care available (67 percent) and maintaining a good education system (62 percent).

Immigrants believe discrimination is commonplace, but the numbers seem stable, and most say it happens to “the other guy.”

Although our survey finds that immigrants recognize discrimination in the American experience, it isn’t necessarily a substantial part of their personal experience.

- ★ More than 6 in 10 immigrants, 63 percent, say there’s at least some discrimination against immigrants in the United States today. One in five, 22 percent, says there’s “a great deal” of discrimination. And 43 percent say there’s at least some discrimination against people from their birth country (15 percent say “a great deal”).
- ★ However, only 9 percent of immigrants say that they have personally experienced “a great deal” of discrimination, with another 16 percent reporting that they experienced “some.” The number of those who have personally experienced “a great deal” or “some” discrimination does not vary by immigration status, religion, level of English-language ability or country of origin.

The government’s immigration services get better marks than they did seven years ago.

- ★ Among those who have dealt with “U.S. immigration services” in the last ten years, there is a 10-point rise in the number of people giving them positive ratings (from 48 percent to 58 percent).
- ★ There is a 10-point increase in the number of immigrants who have had dealings with immigration services who also say that it is easy to get information about immigration and naturalization issues from the government (58 percent).

Immigrants who are legal residents but not citizens gave government immigration services about the same positive ratings as citizens.

There is a drop in overall satisfaction among immigrants with life in the United States since 2002, and economics seems to be driving it.

- ★ Although an overwhelming 87 percent say they’re happy with life in the United States, there’s been a significant drop in enthusiasm. In 2002, 55 percent said that they were “extremely happy,” compared with only 34 percent now.

- ★ Fewer say they’d “do it all over again,” from 80 percent in 2002 to 71 percent now.
- ★ Six in ten (63 percent) immigrants cite the economy as the most important problem facing the nation, far ahead of any other issue. To some extent, these numbers match surveys of the general public over the past year.
- ★ Those who think it is “extremely important” for immigrants to stay off welfare has dropped from 73 percent in 2002 to 63 percent today. There’s also an increase in the number of immigrants who said that qualifying for government programs like Medicaid or food stamps is a major reason for becoming a citizen. Only 36 percent of immigrants say that this is a major reason to pursue citizenship, but this is 14 points higher than when we asked in 2002.
- ★ If anything, economic concerns are stronger among more recent and undocumented immigrants. Newer immigrants (those who arrived in 2001 or later) are more likely to cite getting a job (82 percent to 65 percent) and being eligible for government programs (46 percent to 31 percent) as major reasons to become citizens. Eighty-six percent of undocumented immigrants (15 percent of our sample) cite the economy as their number one concern (compared with 59 percent of legal residents).

Part 2: Fitting In

Most immigrants say that they have become comfortable in the United States quickly, yet ties to their birth countries have become stronger since 2002, particularly among recent immigrants. Most of the immigrants we surveyed either were citizens already or were in the process of being naturalized. For most of them, citizenship was seen as a practical step. So is learning to speak English, with most immigrants reporting that it is difficult to get ahead or keep a job without language skills.

- ★ More than three-quarters of immigrants (77 percent) say that it takes fewer than five years to “feel comfortable here and part of the community,” and nearly half (47 percent) say it took fewer than two.
- ★ Such easy comfort with their adopted home generally isn’t being propelled by money or a common language. Just more than three quarters said that they came to the United States with “very little money,” and only 20 percent say they had “a good amount of money to get you started.” Some 45 percent say that they didn’t speak English at all, an increase of 10 points since 2002.

Immigrants report closer ties to their birth country than they did seven years ago. They spend more time with people from their birth country and are more likely to call home and send money.

- ★ Half of the immigrants we surveyed (51 percent) say they spend “a lot” of time with people from their birth country, a jump of 14 points from 2002.
- ★ The number of immigrants who tell us that they call home at least once a week rose 12 points (40 percent from 28 percent). This may be partly because telecommunications is better and cheaper than even a few years ago. Cell phones are common, international calling is less expensive and innovations like Skype and instant messaging make it easier to keep in touch.
- ★ While there’s been no real change in the number of immigrants who say they send money to their birth country regularly, the number who say they do so “once in a while” increased 14 points, to 44 percent. And the number who say they never send money fell from 55 percent to 37 percent.

Significant numbers of immigrants came to the United States without being able to speak English, and more than half still consider their language skills fair or poor. However, they consider speaking English important for getting ahead, and most say they’ve taken classes to improve their ability.

- ★ Just more than half (52 percent) of immigrants who come to the United States knowing little or no English report that they can read a book or newspaper “a little” or “not at all.” Even more of them, 63 percent, consider their ability to speak English to be “fair” or “poor.”

- ★ More than half of immigrants (52 percent) say it is “very hard” to get a job without knowing English (although, interestingly, that’s a 10-point decline from 2002), and more than half (56 percent) say that the United States should expect all immigrants to learn English.
- ★ Seven in ten of those who came to this country knowing very little or no English at all say that they’ve taken classes to improve their English, a jump of 23 percent from 2002. Nearly three-quarters (74 percent) of immigrants overall say that it is more important for schools to teach immigrant children English as quickly as possible than it is to teach them other subjects in their native language.
- ★ Despite this, English isn’t the primary language in many immigrant homes. Nearly two-thirds (64 percent) of those who came to the United States speaking little or no English say that they mostly speak their native language at home, a 25-point increase from 2002.

Growing numbers of immigrants cite practical reasons for seeking U.S. citizenship: Securing stronger rights and protections and the ease with which they are able to get a job are just as important as showing commitment and pride in America.

- ★ In our survey, 46 percent of those we spoke to say that they are not U.S. citizens, and 15 percent say they are undocumented. Of the noncitizens who are legal residents, 87 percent say they are either in the process or planned to become citizens in the future.
- ★ The top considerations when considering citizenship are obtaining the right to vote and “better legal rights and protections,” both at 78 percent. “Showing commitment and pride” came in at 71 percent, while “making it easier to get certain jobs” and not worrying about immigration status both came in at 69 percent.
- ★ Economic and practical considerations play a much bigger role in seeking citizenship than in 2002. There are 14-point increases in those who say getting certain jobs and making it easier to travel are major reasons to become citizens. Qualifying for government programs like Medicaid and food stamps also saw a 14-point increase, although, as noted, this still remains last on the overall list of reasons, at 36 percent.

Part 3:

Common Threads, Different Voices

Although there are common themes among immigrants, certain groups do have unique perspectives. We chose to look at two groups, immigrants from Mexico and immigrants who identify themselves as Muslims, as these groups are at the forefront of immigration policy and perceptions. Mexican immigrants are more likely to say they're happy in the United States, but also significantly more likely to perceive discrimination against immigrants. They're also more likely to be lower-income and perhaps face more language barriers. Muslims, by contrast, are less likely to report discrimination and overwhelmingly more likely to say the United States will be their permanent home.

Mexican immigrants are more likely to say the United States is a better place to raise children and are less likely to speak English when they arrive. Overwhelming numbers say that the United States is a better place to make a living than their birth country.

- ★ Two thirds of Mexican immigrants say the United States is a good place to raise children compared with 50 percent of all other immigrants.
- ★ An overwhelming 96 percent say that the United States is a better place to earn a good living than is their birth country. That's particularly noteworthy, because Mexican immigrants tend to be lower-income and more concerned about the economy. A staggering 9 in 10 say that they came to the United States with "very little money."

Mexican immigrants express particularly strong concerns about discrimination.

- ★ Three-quarters of Mexicans say that there is at least some discrimination toward immigrants, 18 points higher than other immigrants.
- ★ Some 73 percent of Mexicans say that there is at least some discrimination toward people from their birth country, 42 percentage points higher than other immigrants.

- ★ Yet Mexicans are no more likely to report experiencing discrimination themselves than are other immigrants. Nearly a quarter, 24 percent, say they have personally experienced either a great deal or some discrimination because they are an immigrant (7 percent say "a great deal").

Mexican immigrants are even more likely to cite the practical side of citizenship.

- ★ Among Mexicans, 92 percent cite the attainment of better legal rights as a major reason to become a citizen, compared with 72 percent of other immigrants.
- ★ Nearly as many, 87 percent, cite not having to worry about immigration status as a major reason, compared with 62 percent of all other immigrants.
- ★ Eighty-six percent of Mexicans cite the ease with which they are able to obtain certain jobs as a major reason, compared with 62 percent of other immigrants.
- ★ Seventy-eight percent cite easier travel in and out of the United States, compared with 59 percent of other immigrants.
- ★ Sixty-nine percent of Mexicans say that the ability to bring other family members to the United States is a major reason, compared with 41 percent of other immigrants.

Muslim immigrants in America do not feel disaffection with the nation—far from it. If anything, their embrace of the United States and their expressions of patriotism are stronger than those exhibited by other groups.

- ★ Six in ten Muslim immigrants, 61 percent, report that they're "extremely happy" in the United States, compared with only 33 percent of other immigrants.
- ★ A stunning 92 percent of Muslims say that the United States will be their permanent home, compared with 69 percent among other immigrants. Muslims are more likely to give the United States higher ratings than their birth country on key questions, such as having a free and independent media. (Seventy-nine percent say the United States does a better job on this compared with 54 percent of other immigrants.)

★ Perhaps most striking, given the debate over whether Muslims have been unfairly targeted in the “war on terror,” is that Muslims are also more likely to say there is no (or only a little) discrimination against immigrants in general in the United States (63 percent of Muslims compared with 32 percent of others). Only 19 percent of Muslims say there is at least some discrimination against people from their home country compared with 35 percent of all other immigrants, and 1 percent of Muslims say that they have experienced “a great deal” of personal discrimination while 25 percent say they’ve experienced “some” discrimination.

When it comes to plans for reform, most immigrants strongly support bringing illegal or undocumented immigrants into the mainstream, including a guest worker program and a “path to citizenship” for illegal immigrants with a clean record. But one size does not fit all. Older immigrants and those from certain regions of the world are more skeptical of these ideas.

- ★ Fifty-seven percent of immigrants believe that illegal immigrants do become productive citizens, a finding that may drive attitudes on other questions. But the results depend very much on the immigrant’s own background.
- ★ Not surprisingly, of course, undocumented immigrants themselves are much more likely to believe this (74 percent). So do 72 percent of Mexican immigrants. It’s perhaps significant that Mexicans report having more contact with undocumented immigrants, with more than half saying most of the immigrants they know are here illegally.

★ Fewer immigrants from other backgrounds share this positive view of illegal immigrants. For example, 48 percent of South Asian and Middle Eastern immigrants say that illegal immigrants become productive citizens, while only 39 percent of East Asian immigrants agree. Immigrants older than 50 are also less likely to say this.

★ Seven in ten (72 percent) say that the government should offer a way for illegal immigrants with no criminal record and who have shown a commitment to the United States to become citizens. Only 21 percent oppose that policy, saying it would “reward people who broke the law.”

★ Mexicans and other Latin Americans are even more likely to support a path to citizenship, at 84 percent for Mexicans and 81 percent for other Latin Americans. Support among other groups is lower, with 62 percent of Middle Easterners, 54 percent of East Asians and 48 percent of South Asians in favor. Support also declines as people grow older: 85 percent of 18-to-29-year-olds favor the path to citizenship, but only 56 percent of those 65 and older do.

★ Our survey found that immigrants overwhelmingly support a guest worker plan, with 84 percent agreeing (and 61 percent agreeing strongly with the proposal). But South Asians (75 percent), Middle Easterners (76 percent) and East Asians (69 percent) were less likely to favor this. Mexicans were even more supportive, with 92 percent in favor and 73 percent strongly in favor.

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Founded in 1975 by social scientist and author Daniel Yankelovich and former U.S. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, Public Agenda works to help the nation’s leaders better understand the public’s point of view and to help average citizens better understand critical policy issues. Our in-depth research on how citizens think about policy has won praise for its credibility and fairness from elected officials from both political parties and from experts and decision makers across the political spectrum. Our citizen education materials and award-winning website, publicagenda.org, offer unbiased information about the challenges the country faces. Twice nominated for the prestigious Webby award for best political site, Public Agenda Online provides comprehensive information on a wide range of policy issues.

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