

## GRAY MATTERS

# Internet hoaxes and immigration statistics

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Some of our wisest readers have fallen for the Internet hoax that refuses to die - the allegation that members of Congress don't support Social Security because they don't pay into it.

This hasn't been true since 1983, when members of Congress, the president and virtually every government employee were shifted from the federal retirement plan to Social Security.

Now, as part of the heated debate over immigration, mythmakers would have you believe the estimated 11 million illegal immigrants living among us are about to overwhelm Medicaid, Medicare, the welfare rolls and Social Security. Before you fall for it, remember the mythmakers (or their forebears) are the same people who warned against the tides of immigration that instead have enriched us.

Where would New York and Long Island be without waves of new people coming to our shores? Yet here is a screed from something called the "U.S. Border Patrol": "Illegal immigration is the biggest threat to America ... the politicians are afraid to take action for fear of offending legal immigrants who are registered to vote."

The fact that legal immigrants vote should be applauded as a requisite of good citizenship. But the so-called Border Patrol, a conservative, private anti-immigration group not connected to the government, doesn't see it that way. What's worse, it screams, the illegal immigrants, mostly from Mexico, get library cards for identification and open bank accounts. These latter-day haters of the foreign-born add this dash of poison: "We must take our country back ... before there is another 9/11."

A new Bureau of Labor Statistics report that found the jobless rate among immigrants for 2005 was 4.6 percent, lower than the 5.2 percent for native-born Americans, is the latest evidence that immigrants have come to the United States to work, not sponge off our welfare system.

Indeed, according to the Pew Hispanic Center, a nonpartisan research group based in Washington, D.C., the wish to work rather than be unemployed in Mexico "seems to be

the primary reason the estimated 6.3 million undocumented migrants from Mexico have come to the U.S." With help from family and friends who preceded them, newcomers soon find jobs.

As a result, according to Princeton University sociologist Douglas Massey, 62 percent of illegal workers have taxes withheld from paychecks and 66 percent pay into Social Security. In 2004, illegal workers paid more than \$7 billion into Social Security and \$1.5 billion to Medicare. Yet, until or unless they become citizens, they won't collect. As Massey reported, "These workers seldom use social services for fear of getting busted."

The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, a Washington-based research organization, tells me illegal immigrants last year again contributed more than \$7 billion to Social Security, or about 10 percent of its intake, and \$2 billion to Medicare, without receiving benefits. Yet, according to the Virginia-based **National Foundation for American Policy**, another nonpartisan research group, the Social Security system would benefit if illegal workers became citizens.

According to a report based on data from the Social Security Administration, a boost in legal immigration could give the system up to \$216 billion more over the next 75 years and increase the ratio of young workers contributing to the system as compared to retirees. Stuart Anderson, a former immigration service adviser, said new immigrants would be paying into the system for 40 years before drawing benefits. "Legal immigration benefits the Social Security system," he said.

There is another urban legend that you may encounter, that thousands of illegal Mexican immigrants will collect Social Security. As the Border Patrol Alert says: "It's hard to believe, but officials of the Social Security Administration and the State Department are working on an agreement to use money from the Social Security trust fund to pay Mexicans who have worked in the U.S., most of them illegally." This is hard to believe because it's not quite true.

The U.S. has "totalization agreements" with 21 countries, mostly in Europe but including South Korea, Chile, Australia and Japan. They are intended to coordinate their Social Security programs so that citizens of these countries who work in the U.S., and Americans who work abroad, don't have to pay Social Security taxes in both countries. The agreement also protects benefits for U.S. workers dividing careers among these countries.

According to the House Ways and Means Committee, more than 94,000 beneficiaries receive more than \$15 million a month under current totalization agreements, and U.S. companies save about \$800 million a year by not paying foreign Social Security taxes. Congress must approve these agreements, but none ran into trouble until June 2004, when the United States completed an agreement with Mexico.

It is identical to all others, but the disparity in wages and the large numbers of illegal cross-border workers generated the charge that illegal Mexican workers will drain Social

Security. The Government Accountability Office - the investigative arm of Congress - and Social Security estimated the cost to the system, \$525 million a year, would have a "negligible long-range effect" on the trust fund and would save 3,000 U.S. workers in Mexico \$140 million over five years. The totalization agreement with Mexico awaits congressional action, but U.S. law still bars aliens living here illegally from collecting Social Security benefits as the debate wears on.

Find out more from Social Security, at [www.ssa.gov](http://www.ssa.gov), and learn about the Internet hoaxes that are intended to undermine faith in the system, as well as other urban legends, at [www.snopes.com](http://www.snopes.com).

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