

# What is something important, about which nearly everybody is wrong?

## The importance of Immigration and its misconceptions

By Rong Zhang

Consider the question: how much of your country's population do you believe are immigrants? The average American thinks that 32% of their compatriots are immigrants.<sup>(1)</sup> But this is far from the truth, as immigrants only account for 13.7% of the U.S. population.<sup>(2)</sup> This discrepancy reflects a broader misunderstanding of immigration and its effects.

Immigration, defined as the act of permanently relocating to a foreign nation has a significant impact on society, causing transformative changes to our economic, cultural<sup>(3)</sup> and social landscape.<sup>(4)</sup> Thus, in an era of rapidly increasing globalization where the relevance of immigration is ever-growing the importance of developing a nuanced, factual understanding of this topic becomes more vital than ever.

### **Why engage in discourse on immigration?**

Immigration has a profound influence on society, economics and culture. Many argue that immigration plays a prominent role in contributing to the economy, through filling labour gaps,<sup>(5)</sup> boosting tax revenue<sup>(6)</sup> and catalysing innovation.<sup>(7)</sup> Research conducted over time offers robust evidence that immigrants often take up roles that are challenging to fill, expanding the economy and creating additional employment opportunities.<sup>(8)</sup> By increasing the size of the work force, the presence of immigration leads to exponential economic growth through tax revenue, higher productivity and a larger workforce. This fact is affirmed by a 2007 Migration Watch study which discovered that immigrants arriving in the UK between 1998 and 2005 increased GDP by 3.1%.<sup>(9)</sup>

Additionally, highly skilled immigrants<sup>(10)</sup> frequently contribute more in taxes than they consume in government services,<sup>(11)</sup> supporting and stimulating their local economy rather than burdening it. In 2012, an LSE study discovered that 53% of immigrants in the UK arriving that year had education up to the age of 21 or later, compared to 20% of the UK population, demonstrating the immense value they bring to a skilled workforce.<sup>(12)</sup>

Immigration also causes significant cultural implications. In today's increasingly globalized world, multiculturalism<sup>(13)</sup> as encouraged by immigration drives innovation<sup>(14)</sup> and progress through the combination of unique languages, traditions, and perspectives. Over the past two decades, 69% of countries have become more multicultural due to an increase in

international immigration, fostering societal progress through diversity<sup>(15)</sup> <sup>(16)</sup>. Having a diverse society is incredibly beneficial. It allows for a range of unique viewpoints, which can encourage innovative ideas and increase productivity. According to Gartner, diversity can enhance productivity and efficiency by up to 30% <sup>(17)</sup> Ultimately due to the cultural richness brought by diversity, unique languages, traditions, and perspectives that foster multiculturalism are brought which drive societal innovation and progress.

Despite this, views on immigration remain prevalent and powerful. In some labour markets <sup>(18)</sup> and economies, critics argue that the influx of immigrants lowers wages and reduces job availability <sup>(19)</sup> for local populations. A 2007 study by the Bank of England revealed that every 10% increase in immigration led to a 0.31% decline in average UK wages <sup>(20)</sup>. Such facts often fuel misconceptions about immigrants 'stealing' jobs, leading to starkly negative perceptions of immigrants and their influence on modern society. <sup>(21)</sup>

### **So why is public perception often skewed regarding immigration?**

This misunderstanding largely stems from the intentional misinformation <sup>(22)</sup> and misuse of facts for personal or political gain. By controlling the presentation of reality through data, prominent public figures and influential parties create views to drive hidden agendas. <sup>(23)</sup> In 1997, only 3% of the UK public cited immigration as a key issue. By the 2016 EU referendum, this figure had climbed to 48% in less than two decades. <sup>(24)</sup> Over the years, immigration has come to dominate and distort social and political debate. Unfortunately, this is not an occasional deviation but a pervasive reality. In the subject of immigration, vast numbers of facts and statistics seen by the public have been misused or weaponized in some manner to advocate a particular viewpoint. <sup>(25)</sup>

In December 2022, the UK's current prime minister Rishi Sunak proclaimed that the party had successfully halved the backlog of asylum claims since Labour was in power. This statistic was positioned to further the political agenda of Sunak in December 2022, but was later disproven by Sir Robert Chote, the chair of UK Statistics Authority, who refuted this claim by highlighting the backlog of over 160,000 claims under the current government, compared to the ~19,000 before Labour was voted out in the 2010 election <sup>(26)</sup>. Chote cited a deliberate oversight by Sunak by using two completely different sources and samples in his statement, falsifying the comparison between two statistics that were measured differently to suggest that his party had outperformed Labour in handling asylum claims.

In another case, the UK Migration Observatory stated that a 1% increase in immigrants, proportional to the UK population, led to an average 0.6% decline in wages <sup>(27)</sup>. This statistic was from a UCL research paper that identified the statistic as the median, which does not represent all the data as it does not take into account of the value of each observation, thus leading to a manipulated perspective. <sup>(28)</sup>

Furthermore, social media often further amplifies inaccurate information through echo chambers <sup>(29)</sup> and social media influencers who mislead the people who trust or believe

them. In 2018, Charlie Kirk, the founder of Turning Point USA, falsely claimed that illegal immigrants from Mexico, Nicaragua, Guatemala, and El Salvador were “twice as likely” to commit crimes as U.S-born citizens in Texas <sup>(30)</sup>. Yet, data from the Texas Department of Public Safety showed substantially lower crime rates among illegal immigrants than native-born citizens across various felony and offenses, <sup>(31)</sup> including shoplifting, <sup>(32)</sup> drug trafficking <sup>(33)</sup> and assault.<sup>(34) (35)</sup>.

A similar misconception and fear perpetuated by the idea of ‘criminal migrants’ <sup>(36)</sup> is the increased likelihood of terrorism associated with immigrants <sup>(37)</sup>. For instance, in the US, roughly 40% of people believe that immigrants will increase the risk of terrorism in their country <sup>(38)</sup> however the reality tells a very different story, with a mere 0.000029% of illegal immigrants that entered the U.S. between 1975 and 2017 becoming terrorists, equating to about one terrorist per 3.5 million illegal immigrants, legal immigrants notwithstanding <sup>(39)</sup> In fact, immigrants are less likely to be incarcerated than natives. According to a study done by Cato Institute, 1.53% of Americans were incarcerated while only 0.85 percent of immigrants were, showing that they are less likely to commit crime. <sup>(40)</sup>

Earlier, I also cited a 2007 Bank of England study claiming that a 10% immigration increase led to a 0.31% wage reduction. However, that statistic, presented on the cusp of the 2008 financial crisis, <sup>(41)</sup> overlooks critical elements like a global recession, declining trade union membership <sup>(42)</sup> and lower bargaining power for workers <sup>(43)</sup> at the time. Delving deeper, the study itself concludes that while the inflow of migrant workers correlated with an average wage reduction, immigrants likely contributed to ‘reduced inflationary pressures’ <sup>(44)</sup> and ‘improved workings of the labour market’ by lowering the natural rate of unemployment <sup>(45)</sup>. From this source, we can tell that the relationship between immigration and reduced wage can be easily reframed as minor or even ‘wrong’, misconstrued due to oversights and misunderstandings relating to the conclusion of the study, as well as external factors influencing the outcome of the research, showing the importance and need for diligent analysis of all ‘truths’ and facts when making an informed and balanced decision.

Such misuse of information can impact policymaking. In 2016, Australian politician Pauline Hanson, <sup>(46)</sup> leader of the One Nation party, <sup>(47)</sup> returned to the political landscape with a divisive statement, asserting that Australia was ‘in danger of being swamped by Muslims’, <sup>(48)</sup> suggesting through inflammatory remarks that Muslims were incapable of assimilating into Australia’s secular society. Citing no credible sources, she further claimed that unemployment rates, prison populations, and organised crime rates were ‘two to three times higher’ among the Muslim population. Hanson weaponized fear-inducing rhetoric and baseless facts to further her political agenda, which included advocating for a net-zero immigration policy <sup>(49)</sup> and withdrawing Australia from the United Nations’ 1951 Refugee Convention <sup>(50)</sup> – a key document that presents a country’s legal obligations to safeguard refugees. <sup>(51)</sup> Her unfounded assertions about immigration highlight the alarming influence misinformation can wield, and the impact it has in shaping public opinion and altering policy direction dramatically.

More famously, misinformation fueled former U.S. President Donald Trump's campaign against immigration. Capitalizing on the fear of immigrants, Trump vowed to build a wall on the U.S.-Mexico border and introduced a slew of restrictive immigration policies. For example, Trump claimed that illegal immigrants had committed 292,000 crimes in Texas between 2011 and 2018.<sup>(52)</sup> However, he failed to disclose that the figures cited only referenced arrests, not convictions, thus inflating public perception of immigrant criminality.

Trump's tenure saw the introduction of the infamous 'Muslim Ban',<sup>(53)</sup> an executive order that banned citizens from seven predominantly Muslim countries from entering the U.S. The ripple effects of this policy were immediate and far-reaching, causing global airport chaos, separation of families, deportation of students attending American universities, and the disruption of lives of professionals with valid U.S. working visas. Beyond the immediate turmoil, the ban also had longer-term societal impacts, feeding into Islamophobic sentiments, creating an environment of fear and discrimination against Muslim communities within the United States, and contributing to a 15% rise in anti-Muslim hate crimes in 2017.<sup>(54)</sup>

Though the Muslim Ban has since been revoked and efforts have been made to reunite the separated families under the Biden administration, the societal and psychological impacts of these policies continue to resonate, underscoring the extensive influence that misinformation and distorted perceptions about immigration can have on real-world policies and people's lives.

Ultimately, immigration is a complex topic that is both polarizing and vital. A 2003 Trade Union Congress report argued that the 'blurring by media and governments of the distinction between refused asylum seekers, illegal working, illegal entry, and criminal activity such as trafficking' fed a general suspicion around all immigrants.<sup>(55)</sup>

Misconceptions about immigration can result in misguided policies, social disharmony, and missed opportunities for societal growth. Inflated immigrant numbers can fuel unnecessary fear and resentment, causing societal division and stoking biases. Misunderstandings about immigrants' economic impact can lead to policies that unnecessarily restrict immigration, limiting potential economic growth.

Additionally, flawed perceptions about the cultural impact of immigration can inhibit the growth of multicultural societies and the benefits they provide. Therefore dispelling falsehoods about immigrants' criminal tendencies is essential to mitigate bias and discrimination.

In conclusion, immigration is a prominent topic that is frequently misunderstood. The vast discrepancies between reality and public perception concerning the number of immigrants regardless of their motivation, their economic contribution, and their cultural influence necessitate an accurate understanding to inform better policymaking, promote social harmony and appreciate diversity in our increasingly globalized world. Just as the base of the Statue of Liberty proclaims, "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to

breathe free” and Britain’s proud history of hospitality towards immigrants. <sup>(56)</sup> This starts with acknowledging these misconceptions and actively working towards rectifying them.

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