

How We See Immigration — and Why We're Wrong

Time Thursday, Feb. 03, 2011 - By Eben Harrell

From Arizona to Amsterdam, immigration remains one of the most contentious and divisive debates for Americans and Europeans alike. It is also, it seems, a debate fueled by large-scale misconceptions on both sides of the Atlantic. A new survey released Thursday has found that Americans and Europeans both tend to greatly overestimate the immigrant population in their home countries — but, when armed with accurate population figures, they hold significantly more lenient views towards migrants.

In the U.S., for instance, the average resident believes that 39% of the U.S. population was born abroad; the real figure is less than 14%. When told the correct figure before they answered a question about acceptable immigration levels, however, respondents were 20% less likely to say that there are "too many" immigrants in their country than residents who weren't primed with the accurate stat. Similar discrepancies exist in the U.K., France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Spain, according to a survey of 6,000 people in the U.S., Canada and six European countries carried out by the U.S.-headquartered transatlantic think-tank The German Marshall Fund (GMF).

Americans are also ill-informed about illegal immigration; 58% of those polled said that most immigrants did not have legal residency. In fact, illegal immigrants comprise less than one-third of the migrant population in the U.S.

These results, experts say, show what a vexing issue immigration can be for policy makers both in Europe and the U.S., where concerns over labor-market competition, assimilation and crime have led many citizens to demand tougher immigration laws and enforcement. In the GMF survey, majorities in the U.S. (73%), the U.K. (70%), Spain (61%), France (58%) and the Netherlands (54%) felt their government was doing a poor job managing immigration.

"This discrepancy is clearly a problem," says Susan Martin, the director of the Institute for the Study of International Migration at Georgetown University who reviewed the survey results before publication. "It's hard to measure the appropriate response to calls among your constituents to drop the admission numbers for immigrants if people would be happy if they knew how many people were actually coming in. So the lesson here should be that there is so much more we can do to inform the public about immigration trends."

The survey also reveals how Europeans and Americans hold different anxieties surrounding immigration. Americans tend to worry about the economic effects, while European concern centers around the integration of immigrants into their host nation's culture. Around two-thirds of U.S. respondents felt that immigrants benefit more from social-security measures than they contribute in taxes, for instance, which was significantly higher than most European countries included in the poll. Europeans, on the other hand, are concerned that immigrants — particularly Muslims — are not integrating well. Only 41% of Germans felt that immigrants were well-assimilated into German society, and that figure dropped to 25% when participants were asked specifically about Muslim immigrants. Almost 60% of Americans, on the other hand, felt that immigrants have integrated well into U.S. culture.