

City of Immigrants Myths and Misconceptions

*Below are some common misunderstandings about the history of immigration to the United States. Each of the bolded statements is **incorrect**.*

1. **Myth: Immigrants all came to the United States for the same reason: to earn money and become prosperous.**

Many people from other countries came to the United States because they thought they could have better jobs and make more money than they could in their home countries. But not everyone who came to the U.S. was there just for money. For example, more than 2 million Russian Jews left their home country in the late 1800s and early 1900s because they were facing a lot of mistreatment and violence. They hoped to find safety and peace in the United States.

2. **Myth: All immigrants wanted to permanently stay in the United States.**

Immigrants didn't always plan to stay in the United States forever. Sometimes, they came here for a little while and then went back to their home countries. Some men, in particular, would come to the U.S. to work for a year or two and then go back to be with their families with the money they earned. It was hard to track the number of immigrants who returned to Europe, so we do not know exactly how many did.

3. **Myth: Immigrants had to follow a lot of rules and regulations to be admitted to the United States.**

Before the year 1924, it wasn't too hard for most people to get in, except for Chinese immigrants who were not allowed in starting in 1882. People from Eastern and Southern Europe who came between 1880 and 1924 only had to give a little bit of information about themselves. But upon arriving in the U.S., they could be sent back if they were sick, disabled, or involved in things like anarchism or political extremism. Still, not many immigrants were turned away. At Ellis Island, only two percent were sent back before World War I. After the war, new laws were enacted to limit how many people could come to the U.S., and these laws stayed in place until 1965.

4. **Myth: Ethnic names were often changed at Ellis Island.**

Many families today claim that immigrant names were "Americanized" as their ancestors entered through Ellis Island, but there is no evidence to support these claims and significant evidence to refute it. Immigration officers at Ellis Island did not record the names of new arrivals; they simply checked the names of immigrants against the ship's manifest list.

5. **Myth: Immigrants at the turn-of-century all wanted to Americanize.**

Some people argue that immigrants nowadays want to keep their own language and traditions instead of adopting the language, customs, and habits of life in the United States, and they point to past immigrant groups as examples of those who wanted to become more "American." But this comparison doesn't tell the whole story. In the early 1900s, immigrants from southern and eastern Europe often lived in neighborhoods with

City of Immigrants Myths and Misconceptions

people from their own countries, so they could keep their languages and customs for as long as possible. Becoming more "American" usually happened with their children or with immigrants who came to America when they were young.

6. **Myth: All ethnic neighborhoods (or ghettos) were bad for immigrants.**

The Lower East Side, New York's main immigrant neighborhood, became known for its extreme overcrowding and poverty. However, living in ethnic neighborhoods like the Lower East Side also had some benefits. These close-knit communities helped immigrants in different ways. They could help them find a place to live, get a job, find their family or friends, and create places for cultural, social, and religious activities that were helpful to new immigrants.