



# IMMIGRATION POLICY CENTER

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*...providing factual information about immigration and immigrants in America*

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## **Separating Fact from Fiction: Refugees, Immigrants and Public Benefits**

Not all emails are equal or even accurate. Anti-immigrant activists like to stir up anger by distorting the facts with dishonest claims. They say immigrants get more benefits than Americans. Here are the quick facts (read below for the details) that they don't tell you:

- *Immigrants here legally are prohibited from receiving most federal government benefits for at least five years after they arrive in the U.S. They work and pay taxes, but don't receive benefits.*
- *Immigrants here without papers can get emergency medical care and that's about it. No welfare, no food stamps, no Social Security.*
- *Refugees receive limited benefits for limited periods of time. They don't get more than an American who is similarly qualified. And they have time limits on all the benefits they receive.*
- ***THE BOTTOM LINE: In no case can an immigrant get more SSI or Social Security than a U.S. citizen who is eligible for the same program.***

### **Who Are Refugees and Why Do They Get Special Treatment?**

The U.S. accepts a small number of refugees into the U.S. each year. The U.S. carefully screens refugees to ensure that they are legitimately in need of protection. Examples of refugees include: Albert Einstein, Madeleine Albright, Henry Kissinger, and Olympic track and field athlete Lopez Lomong.

In the last few years the U.S. has accepted approximately 45,000 refugees per year (far below the allowable ceiling of 70,000). This is only a tiny percentage of the world's 14 million refugees. As a long-standing policy, the U.S. has offered some initial support to refugees because they have fled oppression and persecution, and often arrive with little more than the clothes on their back.

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It is in our nation's interest to remain a role model and a beacon of hope to those fleeing political or religious oppression, while at same time ensuring that we do not create dependency on public services. That is why refugees may be eligible to receive a limited number of public benefits immediately upon entering the U.S., if they meet all the eligibility requirements, but they remain eligible for a limited amount of time only. This allows them to get on their feet, but does not allow refugees to become dependent on public benefits.

### ***Legal Immigrants Are Restricted from Receiving Most Federal Benefits***

Federal law imposes harsh restrictions on legal immigrants' eligibility for public benefits. Most documented immigrants cannot receive federal Medicaid, TANF, food stamps, or SSI during their first five years in the U.S., and their access is highly restricted until they become U.S. citizens, regardless of how much they have worked or paid in taxes.

### ***Undocumented Immigrants Are Not on the Welfare Wagon***

While undocumented immigrants are able to receive emergency medical care and a few other public benefits that are in the interest of public health and safety (such as immunizations), they are NOT eligible for federal programs such as Social Security, Supplemental Security Income (SSI), and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), health care (Medicaid and Medicare), or food stamps.

### ***Refugees, Social Security, and Supplemental Security Income (SSI)***

Social Security and SSI are two very different federal programs with very different eligibility requirements. A small number of people may be eligible for both, provided they meet the strict eligibility requirements of both programs, but most people do not receive both.

- **Social Security benefits are based on a person's work history, not on need.** Citizens and lawfully-present immigrants, including refugees, with sufficient work history who retire or become disabled can get a certain amount of Social Security per month, based on complicated formulas related to their past earnings. Immigrants DO NOT receive any more Social Security than citizens with the same work and earning history.
- **SSI, by contrast, is based on need.** SSI provides a basic monthly income to qualified people who are age 65 or older, disabled, or blind. Low-income citizens and some long-term legal immigrants may qualify for the program. Elderly, disabled, or blind refugees can qualify for SSI benefits for a limited number of years if they meet all of the eligibility criteria. After they exceed their time, they have to get off the program or naturalize and become citizens. No matter who the immigrant is, however, he or she NEVER receives any more SSI assistance than an elderly, blind, or disabled U.S. citizen who qualifies for the program.