

Understanding Anti-Immigrant Prejudice:

A Guide for Educators

Re-Imagining
MIGRATION 

Introduction: Breaking the Cycle

Anti-immigrant prejudice operates at multiple levels—individual attitudes, institutional practices, media narratives, and political discourse—creating conditions where immigrant-origin students, who comprise 26% of the U.S. school-age population, experience exclusion rather than belonging. This prejudice isn't just harmful to those it targets; it impoverishes entire communities by limiting civic participation, reinforcing false divisions, and preventing us from building the inclusive democracy we claim to value.

Schools sit at a critical juncture. They can reproduce these patterns of prejudice—through curricula that marginalize immigrant contributions, policies that create barriers for immigrant-origin families, or classroom cultures where some students are positioned as problems rather than assets. Or schools can interrupt these patterns by becoming what we call "belonging infrastructure"—systematic environments where all students experience dignity, where migration is understood as universal human experience, and where young people develop the tools to recognize and resist prejudice.

Breaking cycles of prejudice requires understanding how they form and persist. This isn't abstract theory—it's practical knowledge that helps educators make strategic choices. When you understand how economic scapegoating works, you can help students think critically about immigration claims. When you recognize how segregation reinforces prejudice, you can design classroom structures that create meaningful interaction. When you see how media frames shape attitudes, you can teach students to analyze what they consume.

This guide walks through key research on how anti-immigrant prejudice develops—economic scapegoating, social isolation, identity threat narratives, social learning patterns, media influence, policy signals, and historical amnesia. Each section explains the pattern, what research shows, why it matters for educators, and most importantly, what you can do about it. The research reveals that prejudice isn't inevitable—it emerges from specific, changeable conditions. And schools directly control many of those conditions.

You have more power than you might think to transform crisis into opportunity for building belonging.

Economic Scapegoating

The Pattern: During economic downturns or periods of anxiety, immigrants are frequently blamed for job loss, wage depression, and resource scarcity. This scapegoating often intensifies even when immigrants had no causal role in the economic challenges.

What Research Shows:

- Immigrants generally don't compete for the same jobs as native-born workers; they often fill labor market gaps in sectors experiencing shortages

- Economic research consistently demonstrates immigrants' net positive contributions to growth, innovation, and tax revenues
- The perception of job competition is most intense in communities with little actual immigrant presence—suggesting the fear is based on perception rather than experience

The Pedagogical Challenge: Economic scapegoating is a political strategy, not an inevitable response to hardship. Throughout history, political actors have deliberately redirected economic frustration toward immigrants and other marginalized groups to avoid accountability for policy failures or systemic inequities. This tactic works not because economically anxious people are more prejudiced, but because blaming immigrants offers a simpler explanation than examining complex economic systems.

Students need to recognize this pattern: When is immigration genuinely relevant to an economic issue, and when is it being used to deflect attention from other causes? Who benefits from framing immigration as an economic threat?

What You Can Do: Help students examine economic claims with evidence. Ask: What data supports this claim? Who benefits from this narrative? What alternative explanations exist? Teach students to distinguish between economic anxiety (which is real) and accurate identification of causes.

The Contact Hypothesis and Segregation's Role

The Pattern: Research shows that meaningful contact with immigrants *can* reduce prejudice, but the relationship is more complex than simple proximity. Contact alone isn't sufficient—and under certain conditions, demographic change can actually trigger increased prejudice before communities adapt.

What Research Shows:

The Importance of Quality Interaction: Pettigrew and Tropp's meta-analysis of 500+ studies with 250,000+ participants demonstrates that quality intergroup contact consistently reduces prejudice. But quality matters more than quantity—superficial or hierarchical interactions can reinforce rather than challenge prejudice.

The Demographic Change Paradox: Ryan Enos' research reveals that visible demographic change—even without direct competition or conflict—can increase prejudice among established residents. When people perceive rapid demographic shifts in their immediate environment, anxiety increases even if they have no negative interactions with newcomers.

Putnam's "Hunkering Down" Effect: Robert Putnam's work found that in the short term, rapid demographic change leads communities to "turtle in"—reduced trust, lower civic engagement, social withdrawal. This isn't permanent, but it's a real short-term response to perceived disruption of established social patterns.

The Pedagogical Challenge: Simply having diverse student bodies doesn't automatically reduce prejudice. If immigrant-origin students are present but marginalized, isolated, or framed as

problems to solve, their presence can reinforce rather than challenge prejudice.

Schools must intentionally create opportunities for quality interactions—exchanges where students genuinely learn from and with each other, rather than superficial mixing.

What You Can Do: Focus on creating meaningful opportunities for interaction:

- Collaborative projects where students work together toward shared goals
- Migration story exchanges that position everyone as having migration history
- Structured discussions that surface multiple perspectives
- Learning environments where all students are positioned as knowledge-holders

The goal isn't just mixing students—it's creating authentic opportunities for students to see each other's full humanity.

Cultural Threat Narratives

The Pattern: Anti-immigrant prejudice often manifests as concern that newcomers will "undermine" or "replace" existing culture. This reflects a zero-sum understanding of culture: for immigrants to maintain their heritage, native-born people must lose theirs.

What Research Shows:

- "Cultural threat" rhetoric rarely describes actual cultural practices; it's typically a proxy for racial, ethnic, or religious bias
- Societies don't have fixed cultures that can be "protected"—all cultures constantly evolve through exchange and innovation
- The most intense cultural threat rhetoric targets groups marked as racially or religiously different, regardless of their actual cultural practices

The Pedagogical Challenge: Students need frameworks for understanding how culture actually works. Culture isn't a finite resource. Italian Americans maintaining Italian heritage didn't diminish Irish Americans' ability to maintain theirs. Cultural exchange enriches rather than depletes.

What You Can Do: Examine how U.S. culture has always been shaped by migration and exchange. Help students recognize that practices they consider "traditionally American" often have immigrant origins. When cultural threat narratives emerge, ask students: What specific practices are supposedly threatened? What evidence supports this claim? How have previous generations of immigrants affected American culture?

Media Framing and Political Discourse

The Pattern: Media representation powerfully shapes immigration attitudes. News coverage disproportionately associates immigrants with crime, illegality, and threat, even when immigrants commit crimes at lower rates than native-born populations.

What Research Shows:

- Negative media framing increases anti-immigrant prejudice even among people with no personal negative experiences with immigrants
- Political rhetoric using dehumanizing language ("invasion," "infestation," "illegal aliens") primes prejudiced responses
- Positive counter-narratives can shift attitudes, but they must be sustained and authentic, not tokenizing

The Pedagogical Challenge: Students encounter immigration discourse daily—in news, social media, family conversations, political ads. Without critical media literacy tools, they absorb frames uncritically.

What You Can Do: Teach students to analyze immigration coverage: Whose voices are centered? What language is used? What's included or omitted? Compare coverage across sources. Examine historical patterns in how different immigrant groups have been portrayed. Help students recognize when language dehumanizes or when framing serves political purposes rather than informing.

Social Learning: How Context Shapes Attitudes

The Pattern: People develop attitudes toward immigration through their environments—families, communities, media, and schools. Research identifies patterns in how prejudice develops, rooted in understandable human psychological processes.

What Research Shows:

Studies show that individuals raised in contexts emphasizing strict conformity, limited exposure to diversity, or rigid social hierarchies are more likely to view immigration negatively.

Understanding why helps educators work effectively:

- **Conformity and threat response:** When children learn that safety comes from sameness and obedience, difference registers as potential danger. Immigration—representing change and unfamiliarity—triggers anxiety not because immigrants themselves are threatening, but because any disruption to established order feels threatening in these contexts.
- **Limited exposure and stereotype formation:** Human brains are pattern-seekers. Without direct experience, we fill gaps with available narratives—often stereotypes from media, political rhetoric, or community discourse. The less contact someone has with immigrants, the more their attitudes rely on secondhand information rather than real relationships.
- **Hierarchy and status threat:** In contexts where social order is understood as a fixed hierarchy, immigration can feel like a zero-sum game. If you've learned your security comes from your position in a hierarchy, anyone perceived as moving into that hierarchy threatens your place. This explains why anti-immigrant attitudes often intensify among people who feel their own status is precarious.

The Pedagogical Challenge: These patterns emerge from rational psychological responses to specific conditions. They're not fixed personality traits or moral failings—they're learned ways of navigating the world that made sense in particular contexts.

Schools create different conditions. When classrooms provide safe spaces for questioning, structured cross-group contact, and critical examination of how social structures work, different dispositions develop. Education expands students' capacity to engage with complexity and think critically about the world.

What You Can Do: Focus on building skills and expanding experience:

- Teach media literacy so students can evaluate claims about immigration
- Use collaborative structures that create genuine relationships across difference
- Examine primary sources showing how previous generations made similar claims about different immigrant groups
- Ground discussions in evidence: What does research show? What stories do the data tell?

The goal isn't to change students' beliefs, but to ensure they have the tools, experience, and information to think critically about immigration discourse.

Policy Context and Institutional Signals

The Pattern: When institutions—schools, employers, governments—create inclusive policies and practices, public attitudes shift toward acceptance. When institutions signal exclusion, prejudice intensifies.

What Research Shows:

- Integration policies that support newcomers while building cross-community connection reduce prejudice
- Punitive immigration enforcement (raids, family separations, deportations) increases fear and hardens negative attitudes
- How institutions treat immigrants sends powerful signals about whose belonging matters

The Pedagogical Challenge: Schools are civic infrastructure. Your policies about language, family engagement, curriculum, and discipline communicate whether immigrant-origin students belong or are merely tolerated.

What You Can Do: Audit your school's practices: Do immigrant-origin families navigate additional barriers? Is migration history included in curriculum as American history, or treated as "other"? Are immigrant students positioned as knowledge-holders or knowledge-deficient? Consider what messages your institutional practices send about who belongs.

Historical Patterns: "This Time Is Different"

The Pattern: Every generation of Americans has believed that current immigrants are fundamentally different from previous waves—less assimilable, more threatening, culturally incompatible. This rhetoric has been applied to Irish, Italian, Jewish, Asian, and Latino immigrants in turn.

What Research Shows:

- The same arguments recycled across generations reveal that anti-immigrant prejudice follows predictable patterns, not actual characteristics of immigrant groups
- Past groups once deemed unassimilable are now considered quintessentially American
- This historical amnesia allows each generation to believe their prejudice is uniquely justified

The Pedagogical Challenge: Students (and adults) rarely know this history. Without it, current anti-immigrant rhetoric seems novel and potentially valid rather than recognizable as recycled prejudice.

What You Can Do: Use primary sources showing historical anti-immigrant rhetoric. Have students compare 19th-century cartoons about Irish or Italian immigrants with current rhetoric. Help them recognize patterns. When students encounter claims that today's immigrants are "different," ask: How would we test that claim? What similar claims were made about previous immigrant groups? What happened?

Distinguishing Prejudice from Policy Debate

Not all immigration discussions involve prejudice. Legitimate policy questions exist:

- How should countries determine immigration numbers and criteria?
- What resources support successful integration?
- How do we balance humanitarian obligations with practical capacity?

Prejudice enters when:

- Discussion dehumanizes immigrants or denies their dignity
- Claims rely on stereotypes rather than evidence
- Certain groups are characterized as inherently threatening or unable to integrate

What You Can Do: Help students distinguish between these. Practice analyzing: Is this argument making a policy claim supported by evidence, or is it using policy language to express prejudice? This is a crucial skill for democratic citizenship.

Conclusion: Your Power to Build Belonging Infrastructure

Anti-immigrant prejudice is learned, not innate. It emerges from specific conditions: economic scapegoating, social isolation, identity threat narratives, limited cross-group contact, negative media frames, and institutional exclusion. Every one of these conditions is changeable.

As educators, you directly control many of the conditions that either reproduce or interrupt prejudice. You decide:

- Whether migration stories are centered or marginalized in curriculum
- How classroom structures position students in relation to each other
- What critical thinking tools students develop
- Whether your policies communicate that every student belongs
- How students learn to analyze rather than absorb media narratives

This work is essential not just for immigrant-origin students' success, but for all students' preparation for democratic life in diverse communities. Every young person deserves to develop the capacity to recognize prejudice, think critically about scapegoating, build relationships across difference, and participate in building the inclusive society we need.

You have the power to transform schools into belonging infrastructure. This guide provides the research foundation to do that work strategically and effectively.

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