Rewire

Anti-Immigrant Groups Launch Misinformation Campaign in Congressional Hearing

Anti-immigrant leaders, some with ties to white nationalist groups, pushed myriad myths and debunked data about undocumented people before a congressional subcommittee.

Tina Vasquez

April 28, 2017

The House Oversight Subcommittee on National Security held a hearing on Thursday purporting to examine the benefits of President Donald Trump's proposed border wall. It was little more than a meeting of anti-immigrant leaders pushing anti-immigrant propaganda.

The framing of the hearing—that undocumented people are "straining" U.S. resources—was fraught with inaccuracies. Research cited included a report by the Center for Immigration Studies (CIS) that has been largely debunked.

Dr. Steven Camarota, director of research at the anti-immigrant hate group CIS, presented findings from his report "The Cost of a Border Wall vs. the Cost of Illegal Immigration," the premise of which is that the border wall will pay for itself.

Camarota claims that if the border wall stopped between nine and 12 percent of the migrants expected to cross the border in the next decade, the fiscal savings from having fewer undocumented immigrants in the United States would cover the costs of the wall. The researcher claims that because immigrants come to the US "with modest levels of education," they create significantly more in government costs than they pay in taxes. This, Camarota said, results in an "average fiscal burden of approximately $74,722 during their lifetimes, excluding any costs for their U.S.-born children."

If a border wall stopped between 160,000 and 200,000 people, the fiscal savings would equal the $12 to $15 billion it would cost to build the president's wall, Camarota said. (A recent estimate placed the actual cost of Trump's wall at nearly $67 billion.)

The Cato Institute found that the CIS report not only based much of its findings on inaccurate portrayals of undocumented communities—including the assertion that they are mostly uneducated—but relied on outdated data. Using recent data to update the CIS analysis while keeping the hate group's methodology, the Cato Institute found that a conservative, ten-year cost estimate for the border wall would be $43.8 billion, and that the wall would have to deter about 59 percent of those successfully attempting to cross the border.

While Camarota relied on warmed over, cherry-picked data to form his analysis, he made two glaring omissions. Undocumented immigrants do not put a strain on the economy; rather, they contribute to it. And Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) recipients, often college students or college graduates who met specific educational requirements to receive the benefit, exist. Sixty-five percent of those who responded to a recent national DACA survey reported they are in school. Of these, 70 percent are working as well, which means they are paying taxes.

The Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy in March released new findings that verify undocumented immigrants are taxpayers, contributing an estimated $11.74 billion to state and local coffers each year. On average, the 11 million undocumented people residing in the US pay 8 percent of their incomes in state and local taxes every year.

Those DACA recipients for whom Camarota conveniently forgot to account pay more in state and local taxes than the average rate paid by the top 1 percent of taxpayers. The Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy recently reported that the 1.3 million young undocumented immigrants enrolled or immediately eligible for DACA contribute an estimated $2 billion a year in state and local taxes. On average, DACA-eligible individuals pay 8.9 percent of their income in state and local taxes.

In 2013, Camarota promoted a widely denounced report by Heritage Foundation researchers. One of that report's authors, Jason Richwine, had argued in his PhD dissertation that genetic differences in intelligence and aptitude existed between whites, Asians, and other races. Camarota referred to the reportas the "most detailed and exhaustive ever done on this topic."

Camarota also had bylines at John Tanton's *Social Contract Press*, a white nationalist journal that published the English translation of the "stunningly racist" novel *The Camp of Saints*—the book White House chief strategist Stephen Bannon cites in interviews explaining his feelings on immigrants.

While Trump failed to secure a down payment for his border wall, backing off his demand that Congress approve funding for the project alongside a short-term spending measure needed to avoid a government shutdown, he has been successful in continuing to normalize anti-immigrant rhetoric, placing anti-immigrant leaders with white nationalist ties in high-ranking federal immigration positions.

For example, CIS, the organization whose findings were featured in Thursday's hearing, evolved from the Federation of American Immigration Reform (FAIR). FAIR's leaders have ties to eugenics and white supremacist organizations. The organization's founder, John Tanton, is credited with creating the modern anti-immigrant movement.

Trump cited FAIR and CIS prominently on his campaign website for his formal immigration policies. In January, Julie Kirchner, former executive director of FAIR, was reportedly named chief of staff of U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP). Earlier this month, Jon Feere, a former analyst for CIS, was hired as an adviser to Thomas Homan, the acting director of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

For years, the racist, anti-immigrant propaganda put out by CIS has been treated as a credible source by mainstream media organizations. These anti-immigrant hate groups are finding increasingly clever ways to position themselves in public discourse.

Pushing a narrative similar to CIS and FAIR, Negative Population Growth, a quasi-environmental group purportedly concerned with the destruction of the planet, released a report this week proposing the United States pay undocumented immigrants to self deport because "current practices attract immigrants—both legal and illegal—with much lower levels of skill and education than natives, placing a huge burden on American taxpayers." The group's president, Don Mann, is on the FAIR board of directors.

The same speakers Trump has trotted out while in the White House and on the campaign trail were also present at Thursday's hearing.

Brandon Judd, president of the National Border Patrol Council (NBPC), was there to testify and encourage politicians to "stop politicizing" border security, though he and his colleagues do just that.

NBPC is Border Patrol's union, representing 18,000 agents and support personnel in the U.S. Border Patrol. When NBPC endorsed Trump last year, it was the first time in the union's history it had officially backed a presidential candidate. Unions for ICE and NBPC reported that morale among agents and officers "has increased exponentially" after Trump signed his anti-immigrant executive orders.

Shawn Moran, vice president of media relations for NBPC, recently suggested on an episode of the Green Line, a union podcast, that the union should be credited with the president's anti-immigrant executive orders. The Green Line is NBPC's weekly podcast, recorded at Breitbart News Studios, which is owned by the white nationalist site Breitbart. Bannon, who used to lead Breitbart, was the reported author of Trump's anti-immigrant executive orders.

Trump has invited family members of people allegedly killed by undocumented immigrants to campaign rallies and his first congressional address, and he has credited his interactions with them as the reason for his new Victims Of Immigration Crime Engagement (VOICE) office, launched this week.

Agnes Gibboney, who was present in Phoenix when Trump delivered his anti-immigration policy speech and who has offered to "help dig the trenches" of the border wall, testified at Thursday's congressional hearing. Gibboney is a self-identified "Angel Mom," a term used by The Remembrance Project for mothers of those allegedly killed by undocumented people.

The Remembrance Project is a non-profit that purports to educate and raise awareness about "the epidemic of killings of Americans by individuals who should not have been in the country in the first place." According to the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), the group has been "an active figure in anti-immigrant circles for half a decade" and attempts to "drum up support for anti-immigrant stances and policies."

Remembrance Project Director Maria Espinoza has appeared in white nationalist publications and at white nationalist gatherings. Her organization has received $25,000 in funding from a Tanton group. Espinoza also testified during the congressional hearing on Trump's border wall.