



Trump's Top Immigration Official Thinks the Statue of Liberty Has it Wrong

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August 13, 2019

On Monday, Ken Cuccinelli, the acting director of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) and the highest-ranking immigration official in the Trump administration, announced a new "public charge" restriction for documented immigrants. The new regulation empowers federal officials to deny green cards to people who have used public benefits in the past, including Medicaid, SNAP (food stamps), and housing assistance. It also gives immigration officials broad latitude to deny green cards based on whether they believe applicants are likely to use public benefits at some point in the future: applicants who aren't fluent in English, don't already have private health insurance, and who don't make at least 250 times the poverty level (which would be \$160,000 a year for a family of four) are all more likely to be rejected, according to the *New York Times*.

When a reporter for NPR's *Morning Edition* asked Cuccinelli on Tuesday morning if "The New Colossus," the Emma Lazarus poem inscribed on the Statue of Liberty, is still part of the "American ethos," he responded with his own version, "They certainly are, 'Give me your tired and your poor who can stand on their own two feet, and who will not become a public charge.'"

The original lines read, "Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, The wretched refuse of your teeming shore." Stephen Miller, one of Trump's longest-lasting and most staunchly anti-immigrant advisers, has dismissed the poem before, telling *CNN's Jim Acosta*, "The Statue of Liberty is a symbol of American liberty lighting the world. The poem that you're referring to was added later (and) is not actually part of the original Statue of Liberty." Miller's half-right: Lazarus wrote the poem as part of a fund-raising campaign to build the statue's pedestal, and it was inscribed on the base in 1903, almost 20 years after it was dedicated in 1886. Since then, an estimated 12 million immigrants passed through nearby Ellis Island—almost none of them with visas or passports, which is a relatively recent immigration requirement—and the Statue of Liberty gained a nickname: the Mother of Exiles.

The "public charge" directive for officials is vague, which some critics say is the point: it grants them broad discretion to reject applicants. When the administration first proposed the rule in September, Dara Lind at *Vox* wrote that just the announcement was having a chilling effect, driving immigrants away from services they're legally entitled to out of fear they may be penalized for it. When reporters asked USCIS for an estimate of how many people this rule will likely effect, the agency said it hasn't conducted any such analysis. A study by the libertarian Cato Institute, however, found that poor, uneducated immigrants are the group least likely to use public assistance, despite the fact that all immigrants, documented or otherwise,

contribute billions of dollars in taxes every year to these programs. Undocumented immigrants contribute as much as an estimated \$23 billion a year in just income taxes alone.

Research by the Migration Policy Institute, however, found that the "public charge" rule it will likely have a disproportionate effect on women, children, and the elderly, and that it will likely shift legal migration away from Latin America and toward Europe. After a similar rule was implemented for visa applications in January of 2018, the number of rejections skyrocketed: 13,500 visas were denied in 2018, nearly four times as many as the year before and the highest number since 2004. One man who spoke to Reuters couldn't get back in to the U.S. even with an \$18-an-hour job already arranged.

Cuccinelli, a vocal Trump loyalist and former attorney general for Virginia, has long had a reputation as an immigration hawk. He told Real Clear Politics, a month after taking his current role, that his agency offers immigrants "privileges, not rights." In an interview with Breitbart in 2018, he claimed authorities were wasting time and energy detaining and housing people caught crossing the border, saying, "You don't have to keep 'em. No catch and release, no nothing. You just point 'em back across the river, and let 'em swim for it." In response to a viral photograph of a migrant and his young daughter drowned in a river, he said, "Let's be very clear, adults are responsible for their decisions, and that father is responsible for his decision."