



COMMUNITY VOICES: Headlines can be deceiving

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A recent letter (“Letter to the Editor: Fix the immigration problem,” Jan. 1) illustrates the danger of reading too quickly, or accepting in good faith as true what turns out to be misleading.

The letter’s main point is the claim, “... as many as 70 percent of illegal immigrants are receiving some type of government assistance ... according to the Center for Immigration Studies ...” I don’t know if the letter writer read the report or an article about it. You must be careful reading reports from CIS, because it is opposed to all immigration, not just the illegal type. CIS doesn’t present neutral information; it presents arguments against the immigration it already opposes.

If you google “Center for Immigration Studies Welfare,” you’ll get to its report, issued Dec. 2, 2018, titled, “63% of Non-Citizen Households Access Welfare Programs.” You will probably notice it says 63 percent, not “... as many as 70 percent,” and it refers to non-citizen households, not illegal immigrants. The report claims at one point that roughly half of non-citizens in the data are illegal. It does not explain where it got that figure, or why to assume illegal immigrants access benefits at the same rate as legal immigrants.

The “households” versus individuals getting benefits may be important. I don’t really understand it, but further down on your google results you will get to “CIS Study Overstates Immigrant, Non-Citizen and Native Welfare” from the Cato Institute, a conservative think tank. It notes that Department of Human Services uses the individual basis of analysis instead of the household analysis and that CIS’s numbers are, for non-citizens, 250 percent higher than DHS’. Big difference! See Cato’s Table 2. As I say, I don’t understand it, but read it for yourself and see what you think.

Something I do understand is that the CIS report uses a very wide definition of “welfare programs” in its analysis, making the announced results very misleading. It includes many benefits we wouldn’t think of as “welfare.”

When we refer to welfare programs, I think most people think of programs like Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (formerly Aid to Families with Dependent Children) or Supplemental Social Security that give cash to people. Maybe food stamps (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) and Medicaid too. But there are lots of federal programs out there, including free school lunches that CIS wants to consider as welfare programs. These programs are subject to “means testing,” so that applicants will not be eligible if they have earned a high income or have many assets.

Means testing applies to more than welfare benefits. If you earn over a certain amount you can’t take a deduction for your IRA contribution, for example. Does that make it a welfare benefit to shield your income from taxes in an IRA?

CSI counts Earned Income Tax Credit, EITC, as a welfare program. The program gives working taxpayers with children a tax credit that reduces what they owe in income tax and can even result in cash to the taxpayer if the credit is more than the tax owed. Amount depends on the taxpayer's income and number of children, and at a certain level of income it cuts out. So, in a sense it is a cash welfare program. A very distorted sense, I think

When my children were younger, I claimed them as exemptions, and then I owed less in taxes. I never thought that was "benefits from a welfare program." I don't think an immigrant who gets the benefit of EITC is getting benefits from a welfare program either. By the very nature of EITC, the beneficiary is working.

Interestingly enough, one of the report's bullet points (the fourth paragraph after the heading "Among the Findings") has this buried halfway down the paragraph: "If the EITC is not included, then cash receipts by non-citizens is slightly lower than native born (6% to 8%)." CIS also notes, at footnote 1, that non-citizen households are more likely to include someone who is working than citizen-led households, 92 percent to 76 percent.

Thus, immigrants are more likely than citizens to work, possibly for lower pay, so their families are eligible for more benefits like EITC, but they are less likely to get cash assistance than citizens. Not the message CIS wants us to see. I guess that's why it's not in the headline.