



SPLC Southern Poverty Law Center

Center for Immigration Studies Debunked

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Since 1985, the Center for Immigration Studies (CIS) has served as the anti-immigrant movement's go-to think tank. The organization publishes dozens of reports and hundreds of blog pieces each year that are cited by elected officials and the media. But its reports have been widely criticized and debunked by groups such as the Immigration Policy Center, the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, and the CATO Institute.

Speaking about CIS head Mark Krikorian on NPR, Alex Nowasteh, an Immigration Policy Analyst at CATO said in early 2017, "Oh, I'm convinced that he's wrong about all the facts and issues. They're wrong about the impact of immigrants on the U.S. economy and on U.S. society." In August, Illinois Rep. Luis Gutierrez said, "[CIS'] research is always questionable because they torture the data to make it arrive at the conclusion they desire, which is that immigrants are criminals and a burden on the U.S. and our economy. It is the worst kind of deception, but politicians, the conservative media and some Americans eat it up because it always looks somewhat legitimate at first glance."

CIS's veneer of legitimacy starts with its motto on the top of its website claiming the group is "low-immigration, pro-immigrant." But the truth is that CIS was founded by white nationalist John Tanton and throughout its 30-plus years of existence, the group has promoted an immigration platform that has never strayed far from its origins. In between reports about the cost of undocumented immigration are others promoting age-old racist tropes about immigrants bringing disease into the country and blaming them for increases in crime, as well as fear-mongering around terrorism. In 2011, for instance, CIS attempted to add a "scholarly veneer" to the "terror babies" concept, arguing that birthright citizenship left the nation at risk of raising future terrorists.

The CIS reports follow a similar pattern: after posing the problem of immigration, they then shift focus to claims there are only two solutions to immigration reform – amnesty or mass deportation, and argue that neither of these options would be successful. In offering a third solution, attrition through enforcement, CIS reports focus on five main themes: 1) the relationship between ICE and undocumented immigrants, 2) immigrants are criminals and

terrorists, 3) immigrants use a disproportionate amount of welfare, 4) immigrants negatively affect the U.S. economy, 5) the general public wants to reduce immigration.

The Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) rounded up four debunked studies back in 2009. What follows is a look at more recent CIS studies, challenged by an array of immigration policy experts. When the economic analyses and arguments advanced by CIS come apart, the foundation for the “low immigration, pro-immigrant” vision of the organization shifts to what Tanton, CIS founder, said in a letter in 1993: "I've come to the point of view that for European-American society and culture to persist requires a European-American majority, and a clear one at that."

Immigration and Customs Enforcement and Undocumented Immigrants

In February 2015, Jessica Vaughan claimed the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has issued 5.5 million new work permits since 2009 to undocumented immigrants. However, her data includes individuals who are also documented, from temporary and permanent workers to students, refugees and asylum seekers. She mentions the culpability of the Obama administration, however, it is in fact a responsibility of the DHS in accordance with Immigration and Reform Control Act of 1986. Moreover, she both says undocumented immigrants are an issue and DHS can stop the “next 5 million” undocumented immigrants by stopping the DACA program. However, DACA only accounts for 10% of the 5.5 million work permits issued, or less than 600,000 permits.

In June 2017, Vaughan alleged very few Central Americans were being deported. She says that deportations to Northern Triangle countries (Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras) declined by 40 percent but only compared 7 months of this year to 12 months of last year. The decline she found makes sense considering this incomplete analysis – she counted 5 fewer months. In fact, deportations have increased.

Criminals and Terrorism

CIS has further built on the idea that undocumented immigrants are criminals through their briefs on sanctuary jurisdictions.

For example, an ICE detainer is a voluntary request, not a warrant. There is no penalty if local agencies do not comply. A detainer is most often issued by an ICE officer if an investigation has been initiated. However, an ICE detainer doesn't mean that a person is subject to deportation or ICE has a reason to believe so.

As the ACLU points out, the Supreme Court has explained that “detaining individuals solely to verify their immigration status would raise constitutional concerns.” This is what ICE asks of local agencies in issuing ICE detainers. ICE detainers violate the Fourth and Fifth amendment since there is no probable cause in issuing them. Sanctuary jurisdictions are directly addressing this issue and do not comply with detainers.

In an effort to promote ICE and immigration restriction, CIS often conflates a detainer with a judicial warrant. CIS notes, “A detainer is the primary tool used by ICE to gain custody of criminal aliens for deportation.” This is not true. An ICE detainer is also not a criminal detainer, which can only be issued if there are charges pending in another jurisdiction against a person serving a criminal sentence.

Moreover, CIS has created a map labeled with sanctuary jurisdictions which they claim “have laws, ordinances, regulations, resolutions, policies, or other practices that obstruct immigration enforcement and shield criminals from ICE — either by refusing to or prohibiting agencies from complying with ICE detainers, imposing unreasonable conditions on detainer acceptance, denying ICE access to interview incarcerated aliens, or otherwise impeding communication or information exchanges between their personnel and federal immigration officers.” This map has been used to propagate the false notion that (a) ICE detainers are legally binding, (b) ICE detainers are primarily used to detain criminals, and (c) sanctuary cities that do not comply with ICE detainers obstruct immigration enforcement and shield criminals from ICE.

In October of 2013, former CIS analyst Jon Feere wrote *The Myth of the Otherwise “Law Abiding” Illegal Alien*. Feere attempted to prove that undocumented immigrants are criminals by providing a list of statutes that an undocumented person has the potential to violate. However, Feere leaves out an analysis of how undocumented immigrants are charged differently than citizens for the same crimes.

For over 20 years, since the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996, undocumented immigrants have been charged more severely than their native-born counterparts. For example, an aggravated felony for an undocumented immigrant could include shoplifting or falsifying tax data for which their native-born counterpart would likely be charged with a misdemeanor. Subsequently, legal permanent residents and unauthorized immigrants convicted of an aggravated felony face mandatory deportation.

Feere offers a list of “criminal illegal aliens” but leaves out the qualifications of their title. The fact remains that most of the undocumented immigrants deported each year are nonviolent.

In May 2014, Jessica Vaughan wrote an article detailing Obama's release of thousands of immigrants who are criminals in *ICE Document Details 36,000 Criminal Alien Releases in 2013*. The headline is a bit misleading. First, the 36,000 criminal aliens she discusses includes legal permanent residents. Second, 33,000 of the convictions of the 36,000 were for traffic offenses. Third, all of these individuals have served their jail time and paid their offenses. And finally, the judge in this case has the final say and the ability to keep undocumented immigrants in jail if they pose a threat to public safety.

In February 2017, Vaughan wrote another report insinuating immigrants from the countries included in Trump's Travel Ban are terrorists. She claims that 72 terrorists came from countries covered by this ban. Thanks to analysis from FactCheck.org, we know this is not at all true.

In fact, 44/72 of the individuals listed here were not convicted on terrorism charges, 25/72 were convicted of helping to finance terrorism outside the U.S., and 4/72 were arrested in foreign countries and extradited to the U.S. for prosecution. Not one of these individuals was responsible for any terrorist related deaths in the U.S during the same time almost one million refugees from those countries came to the United States. In total, there were 28 convictions – a third of what Vaughan claimed and not one of them were affiliated with Libya or Sudan as she asserts.

Welfare

The articles below, which focus on the welfare usage of immigrants, lack control variables, do not make side-by-side comparisons, and leave out the two largest issues in the welfare state – Medicaid and Social Security.

In September of 2015, CIS research director Steven Camarota attempted to make the case that immigrant families, relative to native-born populations, disproportionately use welfare programs. In his attempts to demonstrate the high welfare use among immigrants, he includes a welfare use of households – many of which are mixed status families. Here, he doesn't account for American spouses and children, which heavily skew the data.

Camarota also left out the cash value of welfare; the data he uses only analyzes the rate of each welfare program, which is determined by amount of people in the household. This is worrisome for multiple reasons. First, the amount of welfare a household is entitled to radically differs depending on the number of dependents. Second, without an analysis of the cash value of the program, and therefore the amount of welfare being used, it is impossible to make a comparison. Camarota also chooses to compare wealthy, high socioeconomic status (SES) native households to poor, low SES immigrant households. This sort of comparison cannot yield an accurate result.

In fact, a comparison of the cash value and usage of welfare between low SES native-born and low SES immigrant households, demonstrates that poor immigrants use public benefits at a lower rate than poor native-born citizens.

In May 2016, CIS writer Jason Richwine, building upon the work of his colleague, insisted that welfare use by immigrant households is disproportionate to native-born led households. His report faces the same methodological issues as Camarota's. Richwine compared immigrant households including those that have U.S. born children and spouses to households headed by native-born Americans.

There are a plethora of issues in using immigrant households as a point for comparison. First, U.S.-born citizens constitute the bulk of children in immigrant households, which make the majority of immigrant households mixed status homes. Second, while many immigrants are ineligible for programs like Medicaid and Social Security, their American born children, and at times spouses, participate in these programs. This means during data collection, despite the actual immigrant not using these programs, a mixed status household would be counted as a participant in Medicaid and Social Security, misrepresenting the welfare use of immigrants.

Third, the definition of immigrant that CIS holds includes naturalized citizens. However, naturalized citizens and native-born citizens have virtually the same rights and there is no reason they should be included in the count of immigrant households. Fourth, welfare usage depends on the amount of people per household – something this study does not factor in. And this is a big deal – immigrant families are on average larger than native-born led families (3.4 to 2.5). Finally, households can also include non-family members living in the same house such as native-born renters, further altering data.

Cost Analyses and Impact on U.S. Economy

In May of 2010, Camarota claimed that low skilled immigrants force native-born teenagers out of the labor market. However, this is only true based off of the 1994 Labor Force Participation Rate (LFPR) he cited, which was the recorded all time high for teenagers. The LFPR largely fluctuates regardless of immigration trends. For example, the LFPR in the 1960s was the same as the 2000s.

Moreover, the effects of minimum wage need to be taken into account. If teenagers truly have lower skill sets and are consequently less desirable for employers, the market in theory should adjust itself via wages. However, due to minimum wage this doesn't happen, and employers shift to older, more skilled candidates. This is true with or without immigrants.

Low-skilled immigrants don't force teenagers out of the labor market. Economists at the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago agree:

We find no compelling evidence that associates the recent decline in teen participation with greater labor market competition due, for example, to larger cohorts of teens or an increase in the number of unskilled workers entering the market because of the 1996 welfare reform or change in immigration.

CIS also claims that teenagers without summer employment experience suffer from lower wages in the future. This is contradicted by evidence that shows a minimum 33 percent decline in youth summer employment was due to higher summer school or college enrollment.

In 2012, with the help of CIS demographer Karen Ziegler, Camarota argued that immigrants take jobs from all sectors of the labor market. To do so, Ziegler and Camarota attempted to analyze the growth of the labor market. Bureau of Labor Statistics suggests using seasonally adjusted data to determine employment growth. Seasonally adjusted data, for example, would factor for annual fluctuations in employment such as the summer when students are out of school and able to work. CIS did not do this and also used unadjusted data to claim that 67 percent of jobs created under the Obama administration went to immigrants from 2009 to 2012.

Similar to previous reports, this study includes naturalized citizens in their definition of immigrants. This is likely a major reason for their miscalculations -- census data shows that almost 50 percent of all employed immigrants in 2012 are naturalized.

Ziegler and Camarota are also working off of the "lump of labor fallacy," which says there is a fixed amount of work regardless of other factors. This isn't true, however. A variety of economic factors work to determine the number and type of jobs. More important, forcing immigrants out of a job will not automatically make them available to native-born workers. Often, these jobs disappear all together. For example, in the first four years following Legal Arizona Workers Act, employment in the farming industry declined by 15.6 percent -- and American workers did not fill these jobs.

In May of 2014, Camarota and Ziegler, asserting that wage growth is one of the best measures of labor demand, declared there was no shortage of STEM workers, since wages barely increased. However, this report doesn't offer a comparison of STEM wages and employment with other occupations in the industry. STEM wages actually did increase by 2 – 5 percent during this period while overall employment *fell* by almost 1 percent. There is, in fact, a deficit of STEM

workers, and this is a consequence of declining student enrollment in computer science fields in conjunction with reduced government and industry support for research.

This report also doesn't acknowledge the impact STEM immigration has had on the American economy and what altering this form of immigration would mean. In 2012, a quarter of engineering and technology companies founded in the United States between 2006 and 2012 had at least one founder who was foreign-born. In 2012, these companies employed almost 600,000 people and made \$63 billion in sales. If STEM immigrants were no longer welcome, the economy would shrink, and wages, employment, and productivity would all be negatively impacted.

In February 2017, Camarota explained how the Border Wall would pay for itself. He rationalized that if a border wall prevented a "small fraction" of undocumented immigrants, the savings would be enough to cover the costs of a border wall. The savings would not be enough. Camarota mistakenly relied on a statement by Senator Mitch McConnell instead of the DHS' estimate – which is \$6.6 billion less than the DHS's to make his calculations. The report additionally uses 2010 data instead of available 2015 data to predict the level of undocumented immigration. CATO points out that changing just these two factors would mean that 5 – 6 times as many immigrants would have to be stopped in the next 10 years for the wall to pay for itself.

Beyond the costs of building an actual wall, Camarota fails to recognize the many expenses associated with it such as border agents and deportations. DHS estimates the removal of each undocumented immigrant is almost \$10,000. CATO estimates it would cost \$6.2 billion to hire the 5,000 border agents mandated by the executive order. However, perhaps most importantly, CIS doesn't offer any evidence that the wall will actually deter undocumented immigration. In fact, it sounds like a very costly experiment.

Public Opinion

Finally, in July of 2017, CIS contributor James Gimpel said that immigration has become a partisan issue and is gaining importance in the GOP. He believes Trump's popularity is a direct result of his stance on immigration. He says that Americans have favored decreasing or keeping immigration at present levels since 1999.

However, Gimpel only offers polls on those in favor of maintaining and decreasing immigration, not the rise of those in favor of increasing immigration. He also only shows the data from 1999 to present – not the full term of the study dating back to the 1965 – likely because there was a

huge reduction in those in favor of decreasing immigration between 1990 and 1999 (65% to 40%). Both of these issues contradict Gimpel's claim that Americans are in favor of decreasing immigration. In fact, pushes for less immigration are as unpopular now as they were in 1965 and pro-immigration sentiments are at a record-high.