

The logo for Media Matters for America, featuring the words "MEDIAMATTERS" in a large, bold, white sans-serif font, with "FOR AMERICA" in a smaller, spaced-out, white sans-serif font below it, all set against a dark blue rectangular background.

# MEDIAMATTERS FOR AMERICA

## **Media Run With Discredited Nativist Group's Research To Claim More Than Half Of Immigrant Households Receive "Welfare"**

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Numerous conservative media outlets are parroting the misleading conclusions of a September 2015 report by an anti-immigrant nativist group, the Center for Immigration Studies (CIS), which claims that "immigrant households use welfare at significantly higher rates than native households." Like previous flawed CIS studies, these findings have been called into question by immigration experts for failing to account for the economic hardship of some immigrant families, lumping American-born beneficiaries into "immigrant household" categorizations, and conflating numerous anti-poverty programs with so-called "welfare." CIS Study Claims More Than Half Of Immigrant-Led Households Are On "Welfare." A September study by the Center For Immigration Studies' (CIS) Steven Camarota claims that "51 percent of households headed by an immigrant" reported using "at least one welfare program during the year." These programs include "Medicaid and cash, food, and housing programs." [Center for Immigration Studies, September 2015]

CIS Director Mark Krikorian: "The Only Answer Is To Stop Admitting So Many Poor Immigrants." In a Sep. 2 op-ed column pushed by National Review Online, Mark Krikorian, director of CIS, attempted to respond to expected criticism of his organization's findings, claiming that the only way to guarantee fewer families receive government benefits is to "stop admitting so many poor immigrants":

Practically and politically, it's nearly impossible to keep poor immigrant families off the welfare system once they are in the country. This isn't a moral failing; the fact that immigrant households are about 60 percent more likely to use welfare than natives doesn't mean they're 60 percent "worse." Rather, they're less educated, thus earn less money, thus qualify for a wide variety of taxpayer-funded services. There's simply no way to allow less-educated workers into the country to fill low-wage jobs without creating enormous welfare costs for taxpayers.

The only answer is to stop admitting so many poor immigrants. When you're in a hole, stop digging. [National Review Online,9/2/15]

American Thinker: CIS Study Will Put "Democrats And Immigration Reform Advocates On The Defensive." A Sep. 2 review of the CIS report by the conservative blog American Thinker highlighted how the data could be used to stir controversy in the debate over immigration reform and pressure immigration advocates:

The study should add fuel to the immigration debate, putting Democrats and immigration reform advocates on the defensive.

It's a shame that the study doesn't differentiate between legal and illegal immigrants. If it did, we could get a much better handle on the resource drain due to illegals accessing public benefits. But cities and towns across the country are already feeling the pinch in every way - from local budgets, to housing, health care, and education. [American Thinker, 9/2/15]

Breitbart.com: Immigration Is Supposed To Benefit The Economy, But Most Immigrants Are On Welfare. A series of write-ups of the CIS report by Breitbart.com focused on the central claim that more than half of so-called "immigrant-headed households" reported using "at least one welfare program" in 2012. One post featured an image of a suckling calf to reinforce claims made by CIS research director Steven Camarota that the government has not done enough to limit immigrants' access to and usage of government anti-poverty programs as well as his call to limit the admittance of "less-educated immigrants" who require more government assistance:

"If immigration is supposed to benefit the country, then immigrant welfare use should be much lower than native use," Steven Camarota the CIS's Director of Research and the report's author said. "However two decades after welfare reform tried to curtail immigrant welfare use, immigrant households are using most programs at higher rates than natives."

Camarota noted that the skill and education level of many current immigrants is contributing to their welfare use.

"The low-skill level of many immigrants means that although most work, many also access welfare programs. If we continue to allow large numbers of less-educated immigrants to settle in the country, then immigrant welfare use will remain high," he added. [Breitbart.com, 9/2/15; 9/2/15; 9/2/15]

Fox's Varney: CIS Report Reveals "Shocking" Statistic About Immigrant Households. On the Sep. 2 edition of Fox Business' Varney & Co., host Stuart Varney and guests Ashley Webster and Cheryl Casone discussed the CIS findings. Varney introduced the segment by claiming that the CIS data were "shocking" before concluding that the supposedly generous government benefits available to immigrants in the United States were "encouraging people to come across and get that support." [Fox Business, Varney & Co., 9/2/15]

Fox's O'Reilly: "It's Not Hard For Illegal Aliens" To Get "Entitlements." On the Sep. 2 edition of Fox News' The O'Reilly Factor, host Bill O'Reilly and Fox correspondent Shannon Bream discussed the CIS report, uncritically repeating its findings. O'Reilly concluded by focusing his attention on the supposed ease with which so-called "illegal aliens" can access means-tested "entitlement" programs:

O'REILLY: The illegal alien, who comes to the United States, can get -- and when we say means-tested, that's food stamps and direct payments, not Social Security and Medicare -- they can get those entitlements, right? It's not hard for illegal aliens to get them, correct?

BREAM: It's easier than people would think. And it used to be, under the Immigration and Nationality Act, that you had to attest if you were coming here -- and that's legally -- that you wouldn't be dependent on welfare programs. And so, many of them used to have some sort of gateway that would block people, especially if they weren't here legally. [Fox News, The O'Reilly Factor, 9/2/15]

Right-Wing Radio Host Jan Mickelson: "Would Ending Birthright Citizenship Make A Dent" In Welfare Participation? On the Sep. 2 edition of iHeartRadio's Mickelson in the Morning, CIS research director Steven Camarota and host Jan Mickelson discussed the key findings of the CIS report. Mickelson wondered if "ending birthright citizenship" could decrease participation in government benefit programs, while Camarota suggested that high welfare usage rates was the result of the government not being "careful" enough about admitting low-skilled and less-educated workers. [iHeartRadio, Mickelson in the Morning, 9/2/15]

NumbersUSA: Immigrants More Likely Use Welfare Than "Native Households." A Sep. 2 post by the anti-immigrant nativist group NumbersUSA briefly reiterated the key findings of CIS' study, highlighting the claim that 51 percent of immigrant-headed households access at least one "welfare" program each year, a significantly higher rate than so-called "native households." [NumbersUSA, 9/2/15]

Wash. Examiner: More Than Half Of "Legal And Illegal" Immigrants Are On Welfare. A Sep. 2 blog post by the Washington Examiner cited the CIS data to claim that more than half of the households led by "legal and illegal" immigrants use so-called "welfare programs." The Examiner claimed that the high usage rates "show that Washington has done little to curb access to Medicaid, cash, food, and housing programs." [Washington Examiner, 9/2/15]

Fox News Latino: "Some Observers Have Called The Findings Into Question." According to immigration experts interviewed by Fox News Latino, the CIS study "vastly over exaggerates immigrant welfare use compared to natives":

"[T]he immigrant-headed household variable CIS uses is ambiguous, poorly defined, and less used in a lot of modern research for those reasons," wrote Alex Nowrasteh, an immigration policy analyst at the Cato Institute's Center for Global Liberty and Prosperity. "Immigrant welfare usage could be higher but if the value of their benefits is lower, then the picture changes."

Nowrasteh cites a 2013 Cato report that found that the cash value of immigrant-received welfare benefits is far lower than it is for similarly poor natives, with native-born Americans on Medicaid consuming \$3,845 of benefits in 2010 compared to just \$2,904 for immigrants as one example.

Another critic of the CIS study was executive director of the National Immigration Forum Ali Noorani, who said that immigrant families make drastic gains in their economic well-being in the course of just one generation.

"Immigrants are willing to strive for the American dream despite the challenges they face," Noorani told Fox News Latino in an email. "That spirit benefits all of us in the long run. Our economy will benefit from effective policies that help immigrants gain skills and reach their full potential." [Fox News Latino, 9/2/13]

Cato Institute On CIS Methodology: "Counting The Cost Of The Children Of Immigrants Who Are Born Citizens Is A Bad Approach. "According to a March 21, 2013 post by the Cato Institute's Alex Nowrasteh, the CIS methodology for its study includes "everyone in a so-called immigrant-headed household regardless of citizenship status -- especially U.S.-born children and spouses" which leads to vastly overstating the data:

The first issue - which is rather wonky - is how to measure immigrant welfare use. Our approach is to count the benefits used by immigrants individually while Camarota's approach is to include everyone in a so-called immigrant-headed household regardless of citizenship status - especially U.S.-born children and spouses.

Our approach of counting immigrant welfare use individually is used by the conservative state of Texas to measure immigrant use of government education and other benefits. The Texas Comptroller's Office did not include the children of immigrants who were American citizens when calculating the cost to public services in Texas because, "the inclusion of these children dramatically increased the costs." The Texas report continued by stating:

"The Comptroller has chosen not to estimate these costs or revenues [of U.S.-born children] due to uncertainties concerning the estimated population and the question of whether to include the costs and revenues associated only with the first generation or so include subsequent generations, all of which could be seen as costs (emphasis added)."

In other words, counting the cost of the children of immigrants who are born citizens is a bad approach. If we were to follow Camarota's methodology, why not count the welfare costs of the great-grandchildren of immigrants who use welfare or public schools today? Our study, on the other hand, measures the welfare cost of non-naturalized immigrants and, where possible, naturalized Americans. [Cato Institute, 3/21/13]

NILC: Immigrant Welfare Data Are "An Old CIS Trick." In response to the 2011 version of CIS' "welfare" report, Jonathan Blazer of the National Immigration Law Center (NILC) pointed out that the CIS data were a "trick" intended to "make it look like immigrant households are welfare users and dependents and especially likely to be on welfare programs." Blazer concluded that the inflated welfare numbers serves the "express agenda" of CIS:

Some immigrant-advocacy groups criticized the report, saying it was engineered to inflame anti-immigrant sentiment by making an unequal comparison between immigrant households, which

tend to be low-income, and all native households, including low-income and high-income households.

Immigrant households use welfare programs at about the same rate when compared with the low-income native households, said Jonathan Blazer, an attorney at the National Immigration Law Center an immigrant-advocacy group in Washington, D.C.

"This is an old CIS trick," Blazer said. "They do it to make it look like immigrant households are welfare users and dependents and especially likely to be on welfare programs because it serves their express agenda" of controlling immigration and limiting access to public benefits by immigrants. [The Arizona Republic, 4/6/11]

PolitiFact: "Looking At Individuals Would Produce A Different, Lower Percentage." In a PolitiFact write up of comments made by Bill O'Reilly about the welfare use of immigrants from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, immigration experts explained that CIS' methodology allows its study to include American citizens in addition to immigrants thereby creating a higher percentage than if the measurement was just of individual immigrants' welfare use:

Giovanni Peri, a professor of economics at the University California-Davis, said, "the Center for Immigration Studies probably did it correctly from Current Population Statistics data."

Another economist, Marianne Bitler at the University of California-Irvine, agreed. "My guess is that their analysis is accurate for the family units they describe," Bitler said.

That said, there are a couple of caveats researchers said are worth mentioning.

Bitler noted how programs that help children could cause an entire household to be included in the tally. The Census, Bitler said, "measures whether anyone in the household is getting SNAP, but not whether all residents are getting it. Similarly, I imagine a lot of the Medicaid use they capture is by children."

Leighton Ku, a professor of health policy at George Washington University, gave an example of how this could play out. "Suppose there is a family where the father is a Central American legal immigrant, a small business owner," Ku said. "The wife is a U.S.-born citizen and their two children are U.S.-born citizens. One young child gets Medicaid or CHIP (health insurance for children), another gets school lunch and that is the only assistance they get. The whole household is now considered an 'immigrant welfare user.' "

The result: a higher percentage. [PolitiFact, 7/18/14]

Current CIS Findings Contradict Previous Ones By The Organization. Even CIS has acknowledged that the use of welfare programs is "very low" among undocumented immigrants. In 2004, CIS found that among undocumented immigrants the use of assistance programs "tends to be very low" and compared to other households, the use of Medicaid is also less:

Welfare use. Our findings show that many of the preconceived notions about the fiscal impact of illegal households turn out to be inaccurate. In terms of welfare use, receipt of cash assistance programs tends to be very low, while Medicaid use, though significant, is still less than for other households. Only use of food assistance programs is significantly higher than that of the rest of the population. Also, contrary to the perceptions that illegal aliens don't pay payroll taxes, we estimate that more than half of illegals work "on the books." On average, illegal households pay more than \$4,200 a year in all forms of federal taxes. Unfortunately, they impose costs of \$6,950 per household.

Social Security and Medicare. Although we find that the net effect of illegal households is negative at the federal level, the same is not true for Social Security and Medicare. We estimate that illegal households create a combined net benefit for these two programs in excess of \$7 billion a year, accounting for about 4 percent of the total annual surplus in these two programs. However, they create a net deficit of \$17.4 billion in the rest of the budget, for a total net loss of \$10.4 billion. Nonetheless, their impact on Social Security and Medicare is unambiguously positive. [Center for Immigration Studies, August 2004]

WSJ: "States Experiencing The Fastest Immigrant Population Growth" Are Those Spending Less On Public Benefits. According to a November 15, 2012 editorial in The Wall Street Journal, immigrants are increasingly locating to parts of the United States with the least-generous public benefits programs:

Over the past decade, the states experiencing the fastest immigrant population growth have not been traditional gateways like New York and California. Latino newcomers have been flocking to Arkansas, Tennessee, Utah, Alabama, Mississippi, Kansas, Iowa, Nebraska and the Carolinas--states that are among the stingiest for public benefits. Between 2000 and 2005, the Hispanic population in Arkansas grew by 48%, more than any other state. Social welfare spending in Arkansas is among the lowest in the country, making it an odd destination for someone in search of a hand-out. The early and mid-2000s were a period of strong economic growth in the state and much of the Southeast, and the immigrants were looking for jobs. [The Wall Street Journal, 11/15/12]

Southern Poverty Law Center: CIS Is Part Of The "Nativist Lobby," And Has "Frequently Manipulated Data" To Misrepresent Immigrants. According to a 2009 report by the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), CIS has been tied since its foundation to nativist organizations that have been listed as hate groups and the organization has "manipulated data" to push its anti-immigrant agenda:

CIS has never found any aspect of immigration that it liked, and it has frequently manipulated data to achieve the results it seeks. Its executive director last fall posted an item on the conservative National Review Online website about Washington Mutual, a bank that had earlier issued a press release about its inclusion on a list of "Business Diversity Elites" compiled by Hispanic Business magazine. Over a copy of the bank's press release, the CIS leader posted a headline -- "Cause and Effect?" -- that suggested a link between the bank's opening its ranks to Latinos and its subsequent collapse. [Southern Poverty Law Center, 1/31/09]

UFCW: CIS Reports Are A "Perfect Illustration" Of "Misinterpretation And Manipulation Of Data." In response to a 2009 CIS report that lauded a series of 2006 immigration raids at meat-packing plants around the country as best-practice models for immigration enforcement, the United Food & Commercial Workers (UFCW) union noted that CIS' research was "a perfect illustration of the misinterpretation and manipulation of data" that immigration advocates have come to expect from the anti-immigrant research group:

A new report by the Center for Immigration Studies is a perfect illustration of the misinterpretation and manipulation of data to reach a totally biased and flawed conclusion-and clearly demonstrates a complete lack of understanding about the history of the meatpacking industry.

The raids at Swift, and across the country, did nothing to protect workers or to address our broken immigration system. They were, in fact, a complete travesty of justice. And if the last eight years have shown us anything, it's that enforcement-only strategies don't work. Yes, we need enforcement. But comprehensive reform means addressing things like trade, family unification, legalization, workers' rights and living standards.

The CIS report just doesn't add up. It's more or less 16 pages of unproductive scapegoating, cherry-picked quotes, and historical misinterpretations. [American Immigration Council, Immigration Impact, 3/19/09]

ThinkProgress: CIS Report On Immigrants' Carbon Footprint Has "Deeply Flawed Methodology." An April 19, 2012 ThinkProgress article referred to the methodology used in a CIS report claiming that "immigrants have a carbon footprint four times larger in the U.S." as "deeply flawed." [ThinkProgress, 4/19/12]