

CENTER FOR IMMIGRATION STUDIES (CIS)

IMPACT: The Center for Immigration Studies (CIS) is an anti-immigration research organization founded in 1985 that advocates a reduction in immigration numbers. CIS was founded by environmentalist, nativist, and anti-immigration activist John Tanton, who was also instrumental in founding the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR), and NumbersUSA. CIS policy stances include a revision of policy on birthright citizenship, support for public charge rules, and opposition to the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program (DACA), sanctuary city jurisdictions, and family-based immigration, which it refers to as chain migration. CIS has promoted anti-Muslim rhetoric and shares endorsements from anti-Muslim figures, including former U.S. Attorney General and Senator Jeff Sessions and Frank Gaffney. The Trump administration has close ties to CIS and has referred to its research in speeches, television advertisements, and advocacy of the Muslim Ban.

- The Center for Immigration Studies (CIS) purports to be an “independent, non-partisan, non-profit, research organization” based in Washington, D.C. According to its website, “current, high levels of immigration are making it harder to achieve such important national objectives as better public schools, a cleaner environment, homeland security, and a living wage for every native-born and immigrant worker.” **Members of the organization have argued for a revision of policy on birthright citizenship, expressed support for public charge rules, and rejected the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program (DACA), sanctuary city jurisdictions, and family-based immigration—referred to as “chain migration.”** Western States Center describes CIS as “**the anti-immigrant movement’s key think tank**” that “traffics in misinformation and blatant anti-immigrant animus.” The organization’s founding chairman was historian Otis Graham Jr., and its current executive director, Mark Krikorian, has been head of CIS since 1995.
- CIS was originally founded in 1985 as the research component of the Federation of American Immigration Reform (FAIR) by environmentalist, nativist, and anti-immigration activist John Tanton and formally split off in 1986. Along with FAIR and NumbersUSA, CIS forms a part of Tanton’s network of anti-immigration organizations. **Tanton has advocated a “European-American majority” as essential for the progression of American civilization, is a proponent of eugenics, has corresponded with white nationalist figures, and is an admirer of the overtly racist and anti-immigrant novel The Camp of the Saints.** According to reporting in the New Republic, the novel “**has long been influential in organized white supremacy**” and “the cartoonish violence and garish racism of [it] have prevented it from becoming a truly mainstream work.”
- CIS has since attempted to separate itself institutionally from FAIR—its website and Twitter both claim that Otis Graham Jr. founded the organization, and in an email to the Southern Law Poverty Center’s (SLPC) Intelligence Report, Krikorian wrote that Tanton has “never been on our board or served as an employee, he’s never even been in our offices.” However, the SPLC explains that Tanton was instrumental in founding both organizations, raising money and convincing Graham to leave his position on the board at FAIR in order to run CIS. In memos donated to the University of Michigan, Tanton extensively wrote to Graham over the first decade of CIS on the development of an advisory board, the introduction of new board members, and the importance of analyzing “the emotional factors and ethical systems” that influence immigration policy.¹ A January 2019 article published by CIS, claims that Tanton “worked with Graham to get CIS off the ground.”
- Many people currently involved with CIS have connections to FAIR. Peter Nunez, Dr. Frank Morris, and Scott McConnell have served on the board of directors at CIS and the board of advisors or board of directors at FAIR. In 1988, Krikorian accepted a job at FAIR and worked on the publication of FAIR’s newsletter, which “served him seven years later to be hired as CIS’s executive director.” Graham remained on the FAIR board of advisors until his death in 2017.
- In 2017, CIS received over \$2.9 million in gifted contributions. These gifted donations made up approximately 99 percent of the Center’s total revenue. One of the organization’s top donors is the Colcom Foundation—founded by heiress Cordelia Scaife May with a stated mission to “foster a sustainable environment to ensure quality of life for all Americans by addressing major causes and consequences of overpopulation and its adverse effects on natural resources.” **Colcom Foundation, like Tanton, links overpopulation with environmental collapse—an**

¹ John Tanton Archive, University of Michigan Bentley Historical Library, Boxes 1 - 14, as reproduced by IREHR

ideology described by reporting in the Guardian as “eco-minded white supremacy.” A few of Colcom Foundation’s other beneficiaries include FAIR, NumbersUSA, and the Social Contract Press, all of which were founded or influenced by Tanton.

- The CIS website states that the Center has been called to testify over 130 times in front of the U.S. Congress and state legislatures since its founding. The organization’s research has a history of promoting anti-Muslim and anti-immigration policy recommendations and animus. **These include the ways that “militant Islamic [sic] terrorists” could use the immigration system to enter the United States, the degree to which immigrants use welfare, the perceived problems with the refugee system, and what they claim is the cost of immigration to citizens.** In order to convey their research to the public they produce press releases, reports, and fact sheets. They also publish op-eds (largely in conservative leaning venues like the National Review and The Federalist) and participate in various public panel discussions.
- On the CIS website, the “About” page lists endorsements from several prominent anti-Muslim figures. The include Jeff Sessions, former US Attorney General, who said, “I just want to thank CIS for providing invaluable research. You can be sure the other side has plenty of money and plenty of numbers, a lot of it not very accurate,” and Frank Gaffney, the head of the Center for Security Policy, who calls CIS’s work “truly first rate.” Other politicians who have associated with CIS in the past include U.S. Representatives Steve King, Lamar Smith, Mo Brooks, and Lou Barletta, all four of whom supported President Donald Trump’s Muslim Ban.
- **Trump, as presidential candidate and president of the United States., has drawn on CIS studies to support his policies.** As a presidential candidate, Trump referenced CIS at a campaign rally in Arizona in August 2016, stating, “[CIS] estimates that 62 percent of households headed by illegal immigrants use some form of cash or non-cash welfare programs like food stamps or housing assistance.” In August 2016, Trump also released a campaign ad that cited CIS and warned “illegal immigrants convicted of committing crimes get to stay, collecting Social Security benefits, skipping the line.”
- Several members of the Trump administration also have close ties to CIS. In May 2018, Trump nominated CIS fellow Ronald Mortensen to be Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration. Speakers for Immigration Newsmakers, an event hosted by CIS, have included former Director of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) Francis Cissna in August 2018; Director of the Executive Office for Immigration Review (EOIR) James McHenry in May 2018; Deputy Director of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Thomas D. Homan in June 2018; and acting Director of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services Ken Cuccinelli in September 2019.
- **According to reporting in the New York Times, White House advisor Stephen Miller has “long relied on data produced by the Center for Immigration Studies”** and “shortly after Mr. Trump was elected, Mr. Miller became well-known in the West Wing for putting printouts of studies published by the group on the president’s desk.” **While advocating for the Muslim Ban in 2017, Miller cited CIS, stating, “First of all, 72 individuals, according to the Center for Immigration Studies, have been implicated in terroristic activities who hail from those seven nations.”** The Washington Post fact checker found this statement was inaccurate. In May 2015, while working as director of communications for the office of Senator Jeff Sessions, Miller served as a keynote speaker for a CIS event.
- **Although CIS generally argues in favor of lowering immigration numbers, the Center has also worked to vilify Muslim immigrants to the United States.** In August 2002, CIS published a “Backgrounder” report coauthored by Daniel Pipes and Khalid Durán on Muslim immigration to the United States, and designated “Islamist ambitions” as one of the three main motivations. In the same report, Muslim immigrants’ supposed views on family life are described: “Muslim immigrants widely see a range of American customs touching on family relations and the position of women as morally corrupt and endangering their way of life.” The report also claimed, “In its long history of immigration, the United States has never encountered so violent-prone and radicalized a community as the Muslims who have arrived since 1965.”
- In March 2011, CIS published a report condemning birthright citizenship. **In the report, an anonymous author claimed, “A U.S. passport is the gold standard for would-be international terrorists, giving them ready**

access to virtually any country on earth where they may elect to set up operations.” The report describes a hypothetical U.S-born citizen who is “reared in Waziristan, educated in Islamist madrasas, and trained in the fundamentals of terror at one of the many camps in Southwestern Asia.” Finally, it asks, “Is it reasonable that those individuals [birthright citizens] will share our societal values or our worldview, or appreciate the accident of birth that accords them the right to come and go through American borders ... as they choose, as ‘one of us’?”

- In March 2014, CIS Fellow Steven Steinlight gave a speech to the Pearland, Texas, Tea Party in which he said that he supports banning Muslims from the United States because **“Muslims believe in things that are subversive to the Constitution.”** He goes on to say that “Muslim [sic] infiltration [sic]” is a great danger, and that he thinks that “Islam is not so much a religion as a hideous totalitarian political creed looking for world supremacy.”
- In an August 2019 article, CIS Senior National Security Fellow Todd Bensman used examples of attacks committed by migrants in Europe to warn of undocumented immigration along the U.S.-Mexico border: “Europe’s tragic experience with refugee resettlement from Muslim-majority nations holds lessons for American homeland security strategists and policy-makers, especially the extent to which security vetting is incorporated as a central component in any national strategy to manage border-crossing migrants arriving as strangers without identification at the U.S.-Mexico border.”
- **In an immigration topic on its website labeled “Black Americans,” CIS has attempted to blame job competition and high unemployment rates among Black Americans on immigration levels.** In May 1992, Graham wrote an op-ed with Roy Beck, director of NumbersUSA, titled To Help Inner City, Cut Flow of Immigrants in which they argued, “We should not have to rediscover that massive immigration widens the divide between wealth and poverty, storing up social dynamite, especially diminishing life for African-Americans.” In reference to the 1992 Los Angeles riots, which occurred after four policemen were acquitted for “the savage beating of Rodney King, an African American man,” Beck and Graham wrote, “Several aspects of the riots point to the taboo truth that there has been too much immigration and too much diversity, all of it happening at much too fast a pace.” **The idea that immigrant workers take jobs from American citizens has been challenged and referred to as “the Lump of Labor Fallacy: the erroneous notion that there is only so much work to be done and that no one can get a job without taking one from someone else.”**
- A study completed by the nonprofit Define American and the MIT Center for Civic Media revealed that **“ninety percent of news articles in the New York Times, Washington Post, Los Angeles Times, and USA Today that cited the Center for Immigration Studies from 2014 to 2017 did not mention ‘the extremist nature of the group or its ties with the Trump administration.’”** CIS was additionally “often cited as a neutral authority in providing expert opinion or data.”
- CIS research has received a range of critiques. In 2013, CIS published an announcement detailing ICE’s decision to release over 36,000 undocumented immigrants with criminal backgrounds. The announcement prompted a slew of headlines from right-wing media outlets such as Breitbart and the Washington Times, but it was soon revealed that the CIS had misrepresented the information in its statement. Although CIS intended to “[raise] questions about the Obama administration’s management of enforcement resources, as well as its enforcement plans and priorities,” ICE’s deputy press secretary, Gillian Christensen, revealed that **the majority of the releases were required by law, and had nothing to do with President Obama’s policy decisions.** The American Immigration Council, a D.C.-based immigrant advocacy group, condemned the report, arguing, “This latest report from CIS is anti-immigrant fear-mongering at its lowest. Immigrants are demonized as dangerous criminals, despite the fact that they are less likely to commit serious crimes or be behind bars than the native-born. ... This is a cynical and small-minded view of the world that bears no relationship to reality.”
- The American Immigration Council has criticized CIS’s research on several other occasions for **misrepresenting data or misapplying statistical methods.** Additionally, in 2016, the libertarian think tank the Cato Institute wrote that **a CIS study about immigrant use of federal welfare programs was exaggerated and that the actual results in the paper undermine the claims that the headline makes.** Democratic Congressman Luis Guterierrez has questioned CIS’s research more generally: “Their 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 has attempted to challenge the SPLC's designation of the organization as a hate group. In March 2017, Krikorian published an opinion piece in the Washington Post titled "[How labeling my organization a hate group shuts down public debate](#)" in which he labeled the hate group designation "an attempt to delegitimize and suppress views regarding immigration held by a large share of the American public" and argued "SPLC's true purpose can only be to deprive the American people of points of view they need to hear to make informed and intelligent collective decisions." He also claimed the SPLC "is an integral part of the immigration-expansion coalition" and attempted to distance CIS from Tanton: "But whatever his vices and virtues, they are irrelevant to CIS; as he himself has written, 'I also helped raise a grant in 1985 for the Center for Immigration Studies, but I have played no role in the Center's growth or development.'"
- In March 2017, Heidi Beirich, director of the SPLC's Intelligence Project, [responded](#) to Krikorian's article in a letter to the editor. **Beirich wrote, "Mr. Krikorian argued that our hate-group list is intended to shut down debate about issues such as immigration. Not true. Our purpose is to help the public understand who is doing the talking."** She argued that SPLC had earned the designation: "In recent years, the CIS has promoted the writings of prominent white nationalist figures, such as [Jared Taylor](#) of American Renaissance and [Kevin MacDonald](#), the anti-Semitic editor of [Occidental Quarterly](#). Mr. Taylor wrote, 'When blacks are left entirely to their own devices, Western civilization — any kind of civilization — disappears.' Mr. MacDonald produced a series of books positing that Jews destabilize host societies and engage in a 'group evolutionary strategy' to enhance their ability to outcompete non-Jews for resources."
- In January 2019, CIS [announced](#) that it was filing "a civil lawsuit under the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act (RICO) against Richard Cohen, President of the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC)" which sought damages and "an injunction prohibiting Cohen and his colleague, Heidi Beirich, who heads the group's 'hate group' project, from repeating the false claim that the Center is a hate group." In a statement, Krikorian claimed, "Our purpose is to make the case for a pro-immigrant policy of lower immigration – fewer immigrants but a warmer welcome for those admitted ... SPLC attacks us simply because it disagrees with these policy views." **In September 2019, U.S. District Judge Amy Berman Jackson threw out the lawsuit and said in her ruling, "The Center for Immigration Studies' lawsuit is devoid of any allegation that the law center made a false statement about the Washington-based nonprofit."**
- **During the novel coronavirus pandemic, CIS published "approximately 44 blogs where COVID-19 is either the main subject or mentioned" and pushed claims that undocumented immigrants were spreading COVID-19 along the U.S.-Mexico border.** In a June 2020 [article](#), CIS Senior National Security Fellow Todd Bensman wrote, "evidence continues to mount that spikes in Covid cases in U.S. border states are due to successive waves of infected people fleeing Mexico's dysfunctional and overwhelmed hospitals to get American medical care." He further claimed, "Although the states and hospitals do not release nationality or immigration status information, several Border Patrol agents [told the Center for Immigration Studies](#) that, per policy, they have been transporting to U.S. care facilities increasing numbers of illegal Central American border-crossers they apprehend who report Covid-like symptoms, as well as Cubans, Venezuelans, Ecuadorans, and other nationalities." The article further claimed, "The U.S. Customs and Border Protection's media relations office was not able confirm the extent to which that was happening."
- A second [article](#) by Bensman in July 2020 urged the public release of data "showing patient place of birth, nationality, immigration status, and city of residence; inter-hospital transfers within Texas; and Customs and Border Protection hospital transports (Border Patrol and Office of Field Operations at the ports of entry) from June 1 to present" to help inform policy decisions, including whether the Trump's border closure "was sufficient and should be quickly revised and toughened to better protect American hospital systems." **Reporting by the Washington Post, CNN, and the New York Times revealed that the majority of travel conducted across the border was from American citizens and Mexican permanent residents who had traveled to or lived in Mexico and were seeking American medical care.**