

A conversation with Audrey Singer on June 25, 2013 about immigration reform

Participants

- Audrey Singer — Senior Fellow, Metropolitan Policy Program, Brookings Institution
- Holden Karnofsky — Co-Founder and Co-Executive Director, GiveWell
- Cari Tuna — Co-Founder, Good Ventures
- Alexander Berger — Senior Research Analyst, GiveWell
- Hudson Cavanagh — Research Analyst, GiveWell

Note: This set of notes was compiled by GiveWell and gives an overview of the major points made by Audrey Singer.

Summary

GiveWell spoke with Audrey Singer as part of its investigation of immigration advocacy. Conversation topics included: the likely effects of the current U.S. immigration reform bill, the influential organizations in this round of immigration reform, and the opportunities for effective immigration advocacy outside of the U.S.

Background on immigration reform in the U.S.

Since the mid-1980s, there have been significant changes in the U.S. to the number of people who immigrate, where immigrants come from, why people immigrate, and the geographic settlement of new immigrants. The U.S. now has more high-skilled immigrants than low-skilled immigrants.

The battleground for immigration reform has changed since the mid-1990s because immigrant flows have shifted from areas with a high concentration of immigrants to areas without a history of immigration. Local communities have had trouble adapting to this shift in places where the immigrant population has grown quickly. What used to be an issue for a handful of states and cities is now a “50-state” issue. Suburbs are being transformed by immigration in the latest shift of settlement patterns.

If the current immigration reform bill were to become law, it would be the first significant change to U.S. immigration law in almost 25 years.

The likely effects of the current immigration reform bill

If the immigration reform bill were passed in its current form, the biggest positive impact would be the local effects on newly legalized immigrants—on their families, communities, workplaces, and schools.

The bill would make U.S. immigration policy more suitable to its economic needs by increasing visas for both high-skilled and low-skilled immigrants, by creating a more flexible system for people trying to immigrate in certain occupations and industries, and by moving away from the lottery system for visas (which was implemented in 1990 to move away from a family-based immigration system).

The bill would create greater flexibility to change immigration policy in the future.

The bill would reduce diversity visas and family preference visas, which might have problematic local effects.

Although the bill would likely result in fewer illegal immigrants, it would not totally eliminate illegal immigration.

Political landscape for immigration advocacy

There are a variety of organizations having a major impact on the current immigration reform debate in the U.S. They can be separated into rough categories.

Traditional rights-based advocacy groups

- Center for Community Change
- American Civil Liberties Union
- American Immigration Lawyers Association
- National Immigration Law Center

New coalitions

Bibles, Badges, and Business, a reform coalition convened by the National Immigration Forum, has been highly effective at organizing faith, business, and law enforcement groups at the community and national level.

Groups whose work on immigration is driven by particularly influential individuals

- America's Voice — led by Frank Sharry
- Immigration Works USA — led by Tamar Jacoby
- Partnership for a New American Economy — led by Michael Bloomberg
- Center for American Progress — led by Angela Kelley and Marshall Fitz
- Heritage Foundation — led by Robert Rector

Faith-based organizations

- Catholic Legal Immigration Network
- Catholic bishops

- Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society
- Lutheran groups

The Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society and Lutheran groups are particularly focused on refugee policy and direct aid.

Policy/research groups

- Migration Policy Institute
- Center for Global Development
- Institute for the Study of International Migration at Georgetown

Conservative advocacy groups

- Federation for Immigration Reform
- NumbersUSA
- Center for Immigration Studies

The Center for Immigration Studies was one of the most influential conservative advocacy groups in the past, but has been divided in recent months because of disagreement about immigration policy within the Republican Party.

The Brookings Institution's Metropolitan Policy Program's work on immigration reform

Role in the current immigration reform discussion

The Brookings Institution provides empirical analysis, ideas, and data to policymakers in order to inform the discussion around immigration reform. It has produced reports on many immigration-related issues, such as temporary workers, international student visas, and Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA).

Role in the future of immigration policy

Regardless of the outcome of immigration reform, the Brookings Institution plans to help their core audience—service providers, businesses, and federal, municipal, and local officials—understand the impact of immigration laws going forward. It has been building a large interactive data platform that will help policymakers understand the key developments in their districts as a result of changes in immigration policy. Brookings will use its empirical capabilities to highlight the best programs on the ground so that other regional governments can implement them.

Audrey Singer's work on immigration policy

Ms. Singer's research focuses on federal, state, and local policy responses to immigration, the new geography of immigration, and the economic, social, political, and civic integration of immigrants.

The effect of immigration on immigrants and on the communities where they settle is an immediate issue but also a long term issue. Children of immigrants are going to be a large and important group in the U.S. over the next decade. Along with their parents, they are the largest and fastest-growing part of the U.S. labor force.

Opportunities for U.S. immigration reform outside of the current bill

Regardless of the outcome of the current immigration debate, there will be opportunities for funders and policymakers to make a difference in immigration policy and in immigrants' lives in the coming years. For example, there will be significant changes in immigration policy at the state and local level as legal battles are fought in places that try to limit immigrants' rights, as seen in the last six years in Arizona, Alabama, Georgia, and various municipalities.

Opportunities for effective immigration advocacy outside of the U.S.

Background

The United States receives the most immigrants and refugees by far, making its immigration policy situation unique. However, some other countries have a foreign-born population that is larger as a share of the total population. Immigrants usually have varying legal statuses, and some countries are highly selective about who is allowed to immigrate.

Policies vary by country and region. For example, the European Union allows free movement within its borders, but generally has stricter controls on temporary workers, though temporary worker programs vary country-by-country. Most immigrants to the EU are from Eastern Europe or developing countries.

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