

The U.S. Commission on Immigration Reform (1990-1997) “Jordan Commission”

As the Congress begins a serious discussion on immigration reform, it would be a mistake to ignore the lessons of the past. In that vein, many members of Congress are invoking the **The U.S. Commission on Immigration Reform**, informally known as the Jordan Commission, for its chair, Barbara Jordan, a former Democratic Congresswoman from Texas. Issued in 1990's, the Commission's recommendations reflect the thinking of the time, but do not necessarily provide guidance for resolving today's immigration crisis. This fact sheet provides a brief overview on the Commission and the necessity of tempering its recommendations with the knowledge we have gained in the past quarter of a century since its recommendations were released.

- The bipartisan [U.S. Commission on Immigration Reform](#) was created by the Immigration Act of 1990 with a mandate to evaluate the impact of the Act's provisions and to recommend reforms to the entire U.S. immigration system.
 - The Commission is sometimes referred to as the “Jordan Commission” after its Chair, [Barbara Jordan](#), who was a former Congresswoman from Texas (1973-1979).
- The Commission examined and made recommendations on virtually every aspect of the immigration system: family reunification, employment-based immigration, enforcement measures to stem unauthorized immigration, and numerical limits on all classes of immigrants, non-immigrants, and asylees.
- The Commission issued four reports to Congress:
 1. [U.S. Immigration Policy: Restoring Credibility](#) (1994): This report focused on controlling unauthorized immigration through enforcement measures at both the border and the work-site.
 - The report supported the “prevention through deterrence” strategy of border enforcement, as well as upgrading infrastructure at ports of entry and creating a more effective system for verifying work authorization.
 - ✓ Experience and research have since demonstrated that the prevention-through-deterrence strategy of [border enforcement](#), and the [enforcement-only](#) approach to unauthorized immigration more generally, are ineffective.
 - According to the report: “Serious problems undermine present immigration policies, their implementation, and their credibility: people who should get in find a cumbersome process that often impedes their entry; people who should not get in find it all too easy to enter; and people who are here without permission remain with impunity.”

- In addition, the report declared that: “The Commission decries hostility and discrimination against immigrants as antithetical to the traditions and interests of the country. At the same time, we disagree with those who would label efforts to control immigration as being inherently anti-immigrant. Rather, it is both a right and a responsibility of a democratic society to manage immigration so that it serves the national interest.”
2. [*Legal Immigration: Setting Priorities*](#) (1995): The Commission recommended revising the numerical limits on family- and employment-based immigration and refugee admissions, as well as policies to facilitate the “Americanization” of new immigrants.
- The report recommended a [reduction](#) in the level of legal immigration of approximately 30 percent (from 675,000 per year to 550,000). The reduction would come about through the elimination of the following family-based admission categories: siblings of U.S. citizens; adult, unmarried sons and daughters of U.S. citizens; adult, married sons and daughters of U.S. citizens; and adult, unmarried sons and daughters of legal permanent residents.
 - ✓ President Bill Clinton initially supported the Commission’s proposal to eliminate siblings of U.S. citizens as an admissions category, but reportedly reversed his position due to opposition from the Asian community.
 - ✓ The Commission’s stance on family-based immigration failed to fully recognize the economic contributions of family-based immigrants, particularly their role in running family-owned small businesses.
 - The Commission called for favoring immigrants with more education and skills on the grounds that “immigrants with relatively low education and skills may compete for jobs and public services with the most vulnerable of Americans, particularly those who are unemployed or underemployed.”
 - ✓ [Research](#) has since demonstrated that, even at the lower-skilled end of the occupational spectrum, immigrant and native-born workers tend to “complement” rather than substitute for one another. Moreover, there is no correlation between immigration and unemployment among the native-born.
 - According to the report, the “Commission’s recommendations support effective Americanization of new immigrants, that is the cultivation of a shared commitment to the American values of liberty, democracy, and equal opportunity.”
3. [*U.S. Refugee Policy: Taking Leadership*](#) (1997): The report concluded that “the U.S. government must have the capacity...to assist in caring for and protecting the

refugees overseas who are forced to leave their countries; to resettle effectively the few for whom U.S. resettlement is the only or best option; to adopt a viable plan to respond to mass migration emergencies that immediately affect our own nation; and to operate an effective asylum system that protects the bona fide refugee while deterring those who are not.”

4. [*Becoming An American: Immigration and Immigrant Policy*](#) (1997): The Commission recommended that “federal, state, and local governments take an active role in helping newcomers become self-reliant: orienting immigrants and receiving communities as to their mutual rights and responsibilities, providing information they need for successful integration, and encouraging the development of local capacities to mediate when divisions occur between groups. ”
 - The report concluded with the following statement of principles: “Properly-regulated immigration and immigrant policy serves the national interest by ensuring the entry of those who will contribute most to our society and helping lawful newcomers adjust to life in the United States. It must give due consideration to shifting economic realities. A well-regulated system sets priorities for admission; facilitates nuclear family reunification; gives employers access to a global labor market while protecting U.S. workers; helps to generate jobs and economic growth; and fulfills our commitment to resettle refugees as one of several elements of humanitarian protection of the persecuted.”