

## *A National Registry for Work*

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### **Body**

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A Federal commission on immigration reform has urged President Clinton to establish a computerized *national registry* of all citizens and immigrants authorized to work in the United States. The goal, a worthy one, is to help employers check the eligibility of job applicants in order to screen out illegal aliens.

The proposal has been vigorously attacked as an invasion of privacy and a threat that will lead to government surveillance, a *national* identification card and new forms of discrimination. But such fears appear exaggerated. The *registry* can be protected so that it does not grow into an instrument of government oppression. The commission's chairwoman, Barbara Jordan, a former Democratic Congresswoman from Texas, a longtime civil rights advocate and leading black politician, said she would never support a proposal that increased discrimination or invaded privacy.

The *registry* is designed to tighten access to employment, the lure that brings most illegal immigrants across U.S. borders. The 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act sought to shut off this economic magnet by penalizing employers who hired illegal aliens. Employers are required to ask all job applicants for documents to verify that they are either citizens or aliens authorized to work in the U.S. But phony documents can be readily obtained in many cities. Thus many illegal immigrants use false papers to obtain jobs, and many employers, seeking to avoid sanctions for illegal hiring, discriminate against any applicants who look foreign, whether they are entitled to work or not.

How to resolve this dilemma was one of many issues that the Commission on Immigration Reform was set up to examine. The commission will issue a final report next month, but Ms. Jordan previewed its recommendations before the Senate Judiciary Committee last week.

The most controversial proposal is the computerized *registry* of all eligible workers in the country, using data from the Social Security Administration and the Immigration and Naturalization Service. Employers would use the *registry* to check that the Social Security number provided by an applicant was valid and had been issued to someone authorized to work in the U.S.

The commission recommends a large pilot program in those states with the most illegal immigrants -- California, Texas, Florida, New York and Illinois -- to test the best way of determining the job applicant's identity and eligibility. That might be done through more secure documents, like counterfeit-resistant Social Security cards and driver's licenses, or other methods like a telephone verification system.

By making the same initial check of all potential employees, the new system would actually reduce the chances of discrimination. Employers would no longer have any reason to ask if an applicant was an immigrant or to reject all foreign-looking applicants out of hand. And American workers at the bottom of the economic ladder would benefit from more effective ways of discouraging the hiring of illegal immigrants.

## A National Registry for Work

Opponents of the proposal, like the American Civil Liberties Union, insist that it comes dangerously close to a **national** identity card. But the Social Security number is already a form of **national** identification system, used widely by government agencies and private companies. The computerized **registry** would enhance its reliability.

The commission recognizes the need for accuracy of the new **registry** and supports efforts by the Social Security Administration and the Immigration and Naturalization Service to improve and update their records. It also supports safeguards against use of the **registry** data for improper purposes. The task for Washington is to protect the integrity of any new data system as vigilantly as it would protect the workplace from illegal immigrants.

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