Helping Our Youngest First-Generation Americans To Thrive

Immigrant families are an integral part of our communities—they are our neighbors, coworkers, friends, and fellow parents. Today, one in four children in the United States (US) has at least one immigrant parent; of those children, 94 percent were born in the United States, and comprise our youngest first-generation Americans. Children with immigrant parents will grow up to play a critical role in our nation’s future. Meeting the basic needs of young children and their families is fundamental to building strong communities today and in the future. All children should have opportunities to thrive no matter where their parents were born.

Like all parents, those who immigrated to the United States strive to provide the best for their children. In fact, immigrant families have many health habits and characteristics that set their children on the road to success. Previous Children’s HealthWatch research shows the majority of infants whose mothers were born outside the U.S. had healthy birth weights, were breastfed, and lived in a two-parent family.

Despite taking steps for a positive start for their children, immigrant families disproportionately have difficulty accessing enough food for all family members, struggle to afford housing costs, and lack consistent access to health care. These economic hardships are exacerbated by federal and state policies that create barriers to stable employment with living wages and also to assistance programs, whose benefits are available for other families and necessary to meet family expenses like food, shelter and health care.

Our research highlights the disparities immigrant families with young citizen children experience in their ability to afford enough food, and describes the severity of that deprivation. As severity of food insecurity increases, risks of poor health outcomes also increase. This research also explores how the length of time mothers have lived in the US is related to their family’s ability to afford enough food.

Many Journeys, Many Stories: Families Interviewed by Children’s HealthWatch

Figure 1
Family Origins

Immigrants in the United States are diverse, moving from every region of the world for reasons that include: fleeing harm, seeking freedom and better opportunities, and reuniting with their families.

This map shows the countries of origin for families of young children interviewed in English and Spanish by Children’s HealthWatch.
Figure 2
Young children of mothers born outside the US experience higher rates of food insecurity.

Household Food Insecurity — Inadequate access to sufficient food for all adults household members to lead active, healthy lives.

Child Food Insecurity — The most severe form of food insecurity for families with children. This occurs when the quality or quantity of food for children is diminished due to a family’s lack of resources.

SNAP helps young, first generation Americans thrive.
These children are more likely to:

- Be in good/excellent health
- Be child food secure
- Live in a stable home
- Live in families who are able to afford prescriptions and medical care

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DOCTOR-APPROVED POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Harmful rhetoric and policies including immigration bans on majority Muslim nations, heightened immigration enforcement, and proposals to block participation in assistance programs create a culture of fear. This fear causes many immigrant parents to feel deep anxiety, which has tangible negative impacts on the health of children. Children, even at very young ages, are able to sense stress and anxiety among their caregivers. This stress, if sustained over a long period of time becomes “toxic stress” and can have measurable negative effects on the health and development of children. Additionally, this culture of fear prevents immigrant families from accessing basic necessities, including seeking medical care and/or help from social service agencies to apply for programs like SNAP, for which they or their children are eligible. A collective tone of respect for all our neighbors must confront the xenophobic and anti-immigrant rhetoric that perpetuates fear among all of us.

Policy changes can help fill the gaps in family budgets and promote positive health and development for all families with young children, particularly for immigrant families who are disproportionately impacted by low-wage employment. Although SNAP is an important support for many children of immigrants, families headed by an immigrant adult participate in SNAP and several other public assistance programs at lower rates than US-born parents. Research shows that lower participation rates are due both to misconceptions and fear regarding program participation among immigrants as well as to regulatory barriers. The following policies would keep children healthy and help ensure families are able to put food on the table for their children.

1. **Support the health of children by maintaining current eligibility for all immigrants with qualifying status to participate in SNAP without placing future immigration status changes at risk.** Heightened concern among immigrant communities about potential changes to immigration policy affects participation in assistance programs. In today’s political environment, fear among immigrant families about the future impact of receiving assistance, even if only for their eligible US citizen children, keeps entire families from accessing SNAP and other programs. Further, when eligible families do not participate in SNAP out of fear, there can be community-wide impacts. For example, the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) streamlines access to free, healthful meals for school-aged children. CEP does this by utilizing SNAP enrollment for calculating the number of children in a given school or district that qualify for free school meals to determine eligibility for CEP. If fewer children are enrolled in SNAP, even if they or their families are eligible, then schools and districts are at-risk of losing CEP eligibility. When families fear participating in SNAP and schools are unable to offer free meals to all students, children community-wide miss out on the important health benefits of nutrition assistance, with long-term negative consequences for child health and educational outcomes.

2. **For optimal family and child health, reduce barriers to nutrition assistance.** Immigrant families often face greater barriers to accessing assistance programs. Partnering with and providing support for local community organizations with deep relationships and a positive reputation among immigrant families to conduct SNAP outreach may mitigate many of the obstacles families experience, especially language barriers and misconceptions of program requirements and rules.

3. **As a strategy for improving the health of all family members, eliminate the five-year waiting period for SNAP.** Documented immigrant adults who have been in the U.S. for less than five years, even if they meet all other eligibility criteria, are ineligible for SNAP. While their U.S. citizen children may still qualify for SNAP, policies that penalize any family member impact the health of all members of the family, including U.S. citizens. Research demonstrates that when parents are ineligible for assistance, their eligible children are less likely to participate in assistance programs. Our findings in this study demonstrate that children whose mothers have been in the U.S. for the least amount of time are at highest risk for the most severe food insecurity. Eliminating waiting periods for immigrants with authorized status, who would otherwise be eligible for benefits, increases the likelihood that their eligible children will also participate in SNAP. Removing barriers for eligible households provides families with resources to afford food for all family members, supporting a healthier and more productive workforce for all of us today and in the future.
Conclusion

Our nation’s prosperity depends on the well-being of all our young citizens and their families. With one in four children in the U.S. today living with at least one immigrant parent, it is crucial to provide the opportunity for our youngest first generation neighbors and their families to thrive. Doing so enables us all to continue enriching the fabric of our nation by fully engaging our best selves in creating a shared future.

Sources

5. Fortuny K and Pedrotta J. Barriers to Immigrants’ Access to Health and Human Services. The Urban Institute. 16 October 2014. Available at: https://www.urban.org/research/publication/barriers-immigrants-access-health-human-services