



CHILDREN OF IMMIGRANTS: FACTS AND FIGURES

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Congress is debating whether or not to legalize more than 11 million unauthorized immigrants, as well as stricter border and workplace enforcement. Mostly left out of this debate are the more than 5 million children living in unauthorized families, who, like their parents, would be greatly affected by the outcome of this debate.

Because of recent immigration trends, children with immigrant parents—whether legal or illegal—are the fastest growing segment of the nation’s child population. The well-being of these children is influenced not only by the legal status of parents, but also by family income and structure; parental work patterns, educational attainment, and English proficiency; health insurance coverage; and access to work supports, such as tax credits, food assistance, and child care.

This fact sheet describes the population of U.S. children of immigrants—especially those with unauthorized parents—by drawing on facts and figures from the following reports, among others:

“The Health and Well-Being of Young Children of Immigrants,” by Randy Capps, Michael Fix, Jason Ost, Jane Reardon-Anderson, and Jeffrey S. Passel (February 2005).

“The New Demography of America’s Schools: Immigration and the No Child Left Behind Act,” by Randy Capps, Michael Fix, Julie Murray, Jason Ost, Jeffrey S. Passel, and Shinta Herwantoro (September 2005).

Immigration trends

- The number of children with immigrant parents is rising due to rapid immigration. More than 15 million immigrants entered the United States during the 1990s, and we are on pace for the same number to enter during the current decade. The number of immigrants now exceeds 35 million, and their children number over 15 million.
- Immigrants comprise over 12 percent of the U.S. population, and their children over 20 percent. If current trends continue, children of immigrants will represent at least a quarter of all U.S. children by 2010.
- Four-fifths of children of immigrants were born in the United States and are, therefore, citizens. Most children of immigrants—61 percent in 2003—live in families where one or more children are citizens but one or more parents are noncitizens. In these “mixed-status” families, the well-being of children can be greatly affected by their parents’ lack of citizenship or legal status.

- There are over 5 million children living with unauthorized parents. Even in families where parents are undocumented, two-thirds of the children are U.S.-born citizens. Children who are citizens are entitled to public benefits, but their unauthorized parents may be reluctant to approach public institutions for services because they fear deportation. Unauthorized parents also often work at low-paying, unstable jobs and lack access to bank accounts and other financial services.
- The share of U.S. children with immigrant parents is highest among the youngest children, and these children are also the most likely to be U.S.-born. Twenty-two percent of children under age 6 are children of immigrants, but 93 percent of these children were born in the United States. The share of older children (ages 6–17) with immigrant parents is 18 percent, 77 percent of whom are U.S. born. Because a higher share of younger children were born here, there are many mixed-status families in which the younger children are citizens but the older children—like their parents—are noncitizens.
- Like immigrants, their children are highly concentrated in the nation’s largest cities and states. In 2000, 68 percent of the total population of young children of immigrants lived in six “major destination” states, down from 74 percent in 1990: California, Texas, New York, Florida, Illinois, and New Jersey.
- The number of immigrant families is growing most rapidly, however, in other parts of the country. Ten states had especially rapid growth in their populations of young children of immigrants between 1990 and 2000: North Carolina (270 percent increase), Nebraska (269 percent), Arkansas (244 percent), Nevada (236 percent), Georgia (210 percent), Iowa (182 percent), Tennessee (165 percent), Oregon (159 percent), Colorado (155 percent), and Idaho (152 percent). These states have little experience with immigrant integration, but the presence of these new arrivals may be felt by new demands on health care, social services, and schools—demands that are driven in large part by increasing numbers of children of immigrants.

Poverty, Family Structure, and Economic Hardship

- Children of immigrants live in lower income families than children of natives. In 2003, 54 percent of children of immigrants versus 36 percent of children of natives were low income (i.e., had family incomes below twice the federal poverty level).
- Lower incomes are associated with increased food insecurity, a greater likelihood of living in crowded housing, poorer health, and lower rates of health insurance coverage in immigrant families. Yet, young low-income children of immigrants are substantially less likely to receive cash welfare, food stamps, or housing assistance, as many immigrant parents are noncitizens ineligible for federal assistance.
- The most important factor explaining higher poverty among children of immigrants is the lower wages their parents earn. The median hourly wage for native parents of young

children was about \$17.00 in 2002. For immigrant parents of young children, the median hourly wage was about \$13.00 for the higher-earning parent.

- Since unauthorized immigrants earn especially low wages, their children are particularly likely to be low income. In 2003, the low-income share was 33 percent for children with naturalized parents, 56 percent for children with legal noncitizen parents, and 72 percent for children with unauthorized parents. While this means that children in unauthorized immigrant families have the greatest need for income and social assistance, they are also least likely to receive such aid because their parents are generally ineligible and afraid to apply for assistance.
- Children of immigrants are more likely than natives to live with both parents; however, their poverty rates are higher than natives in two-parent families. In 1999, 80 percent of children of immigrants lived with two parents, compared with 70 percent of natives. But the two-parent poverty rate was three times as high for children of immigrants as natives: 18 versus 6 percent. The presence of a second parent in the home of young children of immigrants does not necessarily translate into lower poverty rates for these children because the second parent—usually the mother—is less likely to work.

School Performance and Early Education

- As a result of rising poverty rates, by 2000, over half of all children of immigrants in the elementary grades (pre-kindergarten through grade 5) were low income. The share of children of immigrants who were low-income rose substantially between 1980 and 2000, from 41 to 51 percent. Lower incomes are a significant risk factor for poor performance in school.
- Children of immigrants may also be at a disadvantage in school because their parents are less well educated on average than native-born parents. In 2000, 32 percent of children of immigrants in the elementary grades had parents without high school degrees, compared with 9 percent of children of natives. Fifteen percent of children of immigrants in the elementary grades had parents with less than 9th grade educations, compared with only 1 percent of children of natives. The gaps in parental education were similar among children in the higher grades.
- More than half of immigrant parents have difficulty speaking English, which may also affect their children's performance in school. In 2000, 58 percent of all young children of immigrants (i.e., those who have not yet entered school) had at least one limited English proficient (LEP) parent. Twenty-nine percent of young children of immigrants had parents who are bilingual. Lack of English proficiency is strongly associated with poverty, food insecurity, and other forms of economic hardship in immigrant families. Limited English skills may lead to difficulty navigating schools, health providers, and other public and private institutions. Moreover, children of immigrants with LEP parents have relatively little exposure to the English language before they enter school.

- Children of immigrants are less likely than children of natives to be in center-based child care, and they are substantially more likely to be in parental care. Evaluations of pre-kindergarten and Head Start programs show that quality early education can benefit children's early development and socialization, ease the transition from home to school, help children adapt to a new culture and language, provide parents with educational opportunities, increase family access to health care and other benefits, and link parents to the communities in which they live.
- Immigrants' lower use of formal child care arrangements may be partially explained by the lower share of second parents—usually mothers—who work. Immigrant parents may also face barriers to child care access, such as cost, eligibility for subsidies, language barriers, legal status, and the availability of nearby care.

DATA SOURCES:

The 2000 U.S. Census of Population and Housing

The 2002, 2003, and 2005 U.S. Current Population Survey, Annual Demographic and Economic Supplement, March

The Urban Institute's 1999 and 2002 National Survey of America's Families