

MICRO-REPORT

Public Charge was Reversed— But Not Enough Immigrant Families Know

Immigrant Families Continue to Avoid Critical Nutrition and Other Safety Net Programs

In March of 2021 the Biden Administration repealed the harsh changes to the public charge rule enacted by the previous administration to restrict immigration based on use or potential use of public benefits by lawfully-present immigrants. However, new research shows that more than 3 in 4 immigrant families are unaware the policy has been reversed and are wary of using critical safety net programs for which they qualify, like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

The findings validate that confusion and fear about potential adverse impacts on immigration status continue to keep eligible immigrant families from accessing programs that help feed, house and keep their children healthy, a phenomenon known as the public charge “chilling effect.”

This means more kids in America are unnecessarily at a far greater risk of hunger.

The research was conducted by BSP Research for the Protecting Immigrant Families (PIF) coalition and funded by Share Our Strength’s No Kid Hungry campaign.



About the Public Charge Rule

“Public charge” is a determination used by U.S. immigration officials to refer to someone who is, or is likely to become, primarily dependent on the government by using cash welfare assistance such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) or federal assistance to pay for long-term institutional care under Medicaid. Being designated a “public charge” can negatively affect a prospective immigrant’s application to enter the country and lawfully-present immigrants living in the U.S. applying for legal permanent residency.

In 2018, the Trump administration moved to drastically expand the definition of “public charge” by including *both* cash and non-cash public benefits such as health care, food assistance and housing programs. The regulatory proposal was finalized in 2019, and it took effect enacting these changes one month before the COVID-19 pandemic hit the United States in 2020.

While the additional restrictions to this rule were reversed in March of 2021, the changes had a far-reaching impact, creating fear and confusion, and a chilling effect which began in 2018 when the changes were proposed. This chilling effect has kept many U.S. citizen kids, eligible immigrants and mixed-status families from applying for or participating in safety net programs, exacerbating the risk of hunger and poverty during and after the pandemic.

It’s important to note that eligibility of federal safety net programs like SNAP and Medicaid is limited to U.S. citizens and green card holders with at least five years of permanent residency and who meet certain criteria.

Mixed-Status Families

A mixed-status family is a family whose members include people with different citizenship or immigration statuses, and can include a family member who was born in the United States.

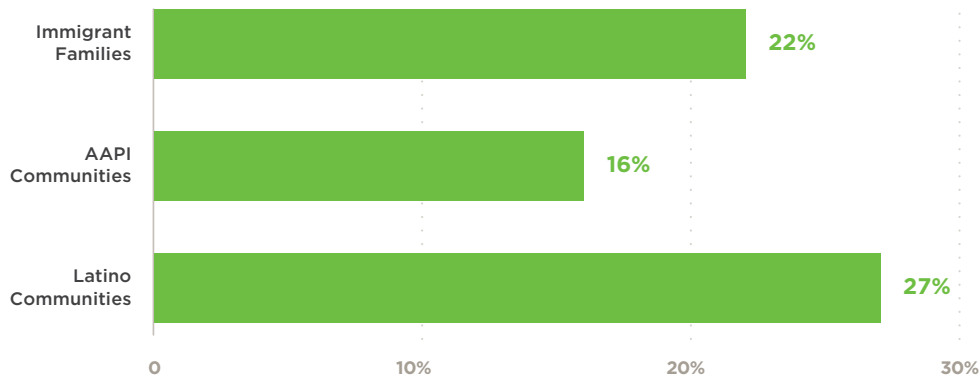
- More than 1 in 4 U.S. children have at least one immigrant parent.
- 7.6 million children who are citizens of the United States could experience the chilling effects of confusion about the public charge rule, according to Migration Policy Institute.
- Latinos and Asian American/Pacific Islanders (AAPI) are the two largest racial/ethnic immigrant groups and likely to be mostly impacted by the chilling effect of the public charge rule.
- Over 16 million people live in families that rely on benefits and include at least one Latino family member who is not a citizen. Another 3 million live in such families with at least one AAPI family member.

Source: MPI: [*U.S. Children Living with Immigrant Parents, MPI analysis*](#)

[*Millions Will Feel Chilling Effects of U.S. Public-Charge Rule That Is Also Likely to Reshape Legal Immigration*](#)

Findings

Awareness about the reversal of the public charge policy among Latino and AAPI mixed-status families is low



Only 22% of immigrant families “have heard a lot” about the most recent changes to the policy. Awareness was especially low among AAPI communities (16% heard a lot) compared to Latino communities (27% heard a lot).

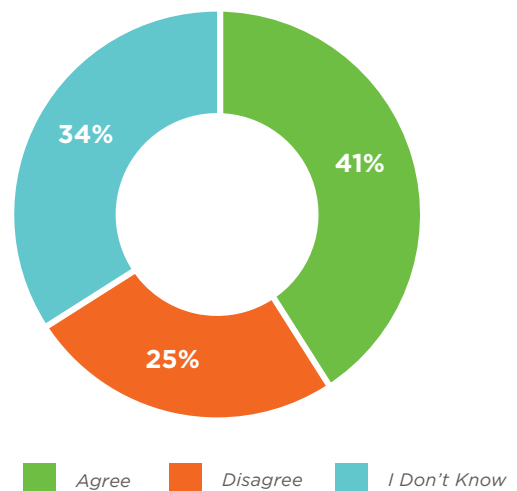
Confusion and Fear Kept Families from Getting Help.

- When asked about trying to get assistance during the COVID-19 pandemic, **nearly half (46%) of families who needed assistance did not apply for it due to concerns over immigration status.**

Belief that applying for assistance could cause immigration problems

More than two-in-five respondents currently believe “applying for assistance programs could cause immigration problems,”: **41% of respondents agreed that this statement was correct compared to only 25% who said it was incorrect and 34% said they don’t know. Non-citizens were less likely to believe this statement was correct at 34%.**

This misbelief was even higher among U.S.-born respondents who have at least one family member who is not a U.S. citizen, with **47% believing applying for assistance could cause immigration problems.**



- *U.S.-born family members in mixed-status families often help their families navigate benefits programs. As such, U.S.-born and naturalized immigrants may be good messaging targets to let others in their mixed-status families know that safe access to nutrition and other safety net programs has been restored.*

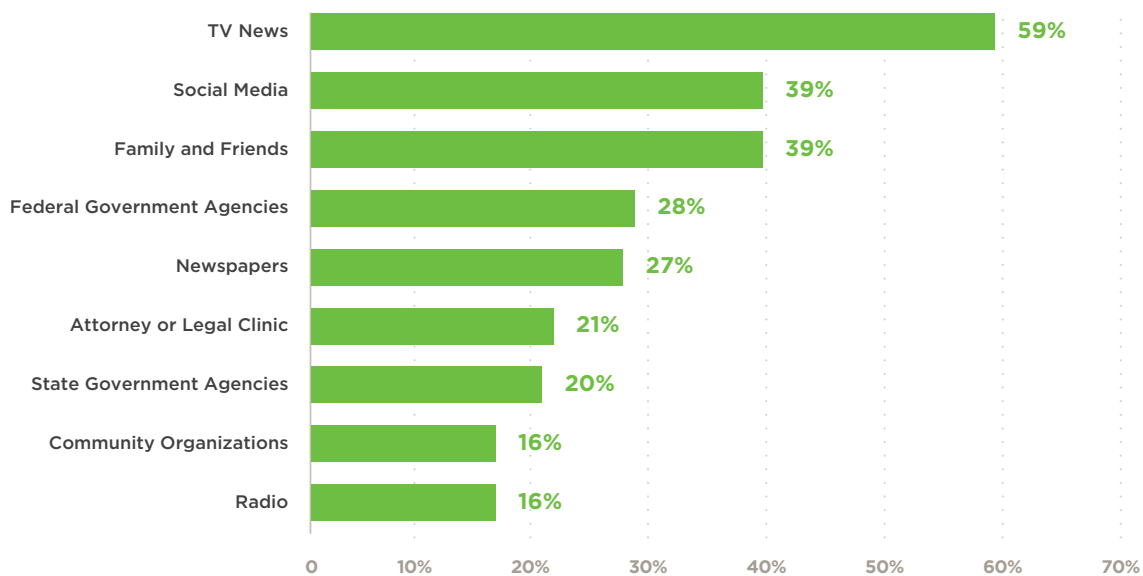
Awareness can make a difference

50% of the respondents said that knowledge about the reversal of the public charge rule made them more likely to use safety net programs when necessary.

This is a powerful indicator of the need for more outreach to the immigrant community. The findings strongly suggest that not enough people have heard about this change in policy and their lack of knowledge is having a negative impact on their ability to get food, care and help.

Trusted Sources of Information

Over half of respondents (59%) noted “TV news” as a reliable source of information about immigration policy. The second most popular source was “Facebook, social media, or online” (39%) and “Friends and family” (39%).



This suggests that TV news continues to be a source immigrant families turn to for information about immigration policies but that digital media must be a large part of the tactical mix when it comes to outreach. The poll also finds that agencies themselves (federal and state) and community organizations and legal clinics are also trusted sources, so effective outreach must also reach families through these partnerships.

The Bottom Line

The pandemic, together with the previous administration’s changes to the public charge rule became a double whammy for immigrant families and their children, widening pre-pandemic hunger disparities. As suspected, the consequences of this policy continue to harm the health and well-being of millions of kids—contributing to the spike of hunger in communities of color. According to USDA data, more than 1 in 5 Latino families with children faced hunger in 2020, a 28% rise from 2019.

While food insecurity levels across AAPI groups vary, vulnerable families of Asian descent experienced record unemployment during the pandemic, putting these groups at greater risk of food insecurity. In New York City, where a sizable Asian immigrant population resides, a report by the Asian American Federation showed that unemployment among Asians rose from 3.4% in February to 25.6% by May of 2020.

Reversing the public charge rule was an important first step, but it's not enough. There is an urgent need to double down on culturally responsive outreach to make sure all immigrant families have the facts about the programs they are eligible for to help feed their children during times of need.

The No Kid Hungry Perspective

Thawing the chilling effect of public charge: A matter of equity

No Kid Hungry believes that addressing the chilling effect of this now-reversed policy is critical to ensuring an equitable pandemic recovery.

Federal nutrition programs like SNAP, WIC and school meals are among the most effective ways for families in need to feed their children. Yet these findings show that misinformation and fear stood in the way of these programs reaching eligible immigrant and U.S. citizen children alike at a time when they needed them most.

No Kid Hungry is partnering with policy makers and trusted community leaders to deliver culturally and linguistically relevant solutions for immigrant families to access the resources and federal programs for which they qualify.

When we make sure all of our nation's children are nourished, housed and cared for, it creates a stronger and equitable society where children thrive and communities prosper.

Research Methodology

Research was conducted by BSP Research for the Protecting Immigrant Families (PIF) coalition and funded by No Kid Hungry.

The survey included 1,000 total completed interviews with adults who either live in mixed-status families or who have family members or close friends who are non-citizens. The majority of interviews (70%) are with mixed-status households, however there are also a large number of U.S. born Latinos and Asian Americans with non-citizen parents. Even though some of these younger Americans who grew up in mixed-status households now live on their own, they are still very important conduits and providers for their non-citizen parents and therefore included in the survey. Among the U.S. born, 76% report having non-citizen parents and 17% report having a non-citizen sibling.

The survey was fielded from September 1-30, 2021 nationwide and included interviews with 500 Latino, 425 interviews with Asian American, and 75 interviews with respondents from other races, and contains an overall margin of error of +/- 3.1%.

The survey was fielded through a mix of both online and live phone interviews (both landline and cellphone). To ensure representativeness of the sample, the survey was available in English, Spanish, Chinese (Mandarin and Cantonese), Korean, Vietnamese and Tagalog. The data was weighted to ensure demographic balance of the sample based on the demographic parameters defined by the American Community Survey's adult population who live in mixed-status families to the best extent possible. In many cases, respondents were able to identify more than one response option which resulted in totals not always equaling 100%.



No Kid Hungry

No child should go hungry in America. But millions don't know where their next meal is coming from. No Kid Hungry is ending childhood hunger by helping launch and improve programs that give all kids the healthy food they need to thrive. This is a problem we know how to solve. No Kid Hungry is a campaign by Share Our Strength, an organization working to end hunger and poverty.