



Immigrant Families Faced Multiple Barriers to Safety Net Programs in 2021

Hamutal Bernstein, Dulce Gonzalez, Paola Echave, and Diana Guelespe

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Despite making up a disproportionate share of essential workers and playing a critical role in the pandemic response (Gelatt and Chishti 2022), immigrants and their families face major challenges meeting their basic needs. Immigrant families face high levels of food insecurity and other material hardships and confront barriers to safety net programs beyond eligibility rules that exclude many from assistance. The Urban Institute’s Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey (WBNS), a nationally representative survey fielded most recently in December 2021, offers an opportunity to monitor how immigrants and their families are faring and provides insights on barriers to program access. In this brief, we present new evidence on immigrant families’ experiences when accessing safety net programs, including issues around application processes and interactions with program staff.

Our analyses focus on adults in immigrant families with family incomes below 400 percent of the federal poverty level (FPL) or about \$51,500 for a single adult and \$106,000 for a family of four in 2021.¹ We describe experiences for adults in immigrant families, who we define as adults who were born outside the US or who live with one or more foreign-born family members. We compare adults in immigrant families’ experiences with those of adults in all-US-born families, in which all family members were born in the US. Because the WBNS is conducted in English and Spanish, it does not fully capture the experiences of adults who speak other languages. Our survey results are as follows:

- Many adults in immigrant families reported material hardships in 2021. They were more likely than adults in all-US-born families to report food insecurity (36.4 versus 31.4 percent),

problems paying utility bills (21.2 versus 16.2 percent), and problems paying the rent or mortgage (20.3 versus 13.8 percent).

- Many adults in immigrant families reported not applying to safety net programs because of immigration-related concerns. Over one in five (20.6 percent) reported avoiding one or more noncash safety net programs in 2021 because of worries about being disqualified from obtaining a green card; 16.3 percent because of other worries about immigration status or enforcement; 13.8 percent because they were unsure about eligibility because of their or a family member's immigration status; and 11.3 percent because they were asked to provide their Social Security number or other proof of citizenship or immigration status when they applied for a family member.
- About half of adults in immigrant families who did apply for or participate in one or more cash or noncash safety net programs such as Medicaid, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), or Supplemental Security Income in 2021, reported difficulties with enrollment in one or more programs, a higher share than in all-US-born families (50.8 versus 43.4 percent). Specifically, 34.9 percent had trouble figuring out if they or their family members were eligible, 26.1 percent had trouble providing required documentation or completing required paperwork, and 34.9 percent did not get benefits as soon as they needed them.
- Adults in immigrant families who applied for safety net programs were more likely than adults in all-US-born families to report that staff for one or more programs never or only sometimes treated them with courtesy and respect (37.9 versus 29.2 percent) and to report feeling they received unfair judgment or treatment because of their racial or ethnic background (16.9 versus 10.5 percent). In addition, 37.8 percent of adults in immigrant families reported that staff never or only sometimes gave them the information or help they needed, and 24.0 percent reported they never or only sometimes could find program information in their preferred language.
- Just over one in five adults in immigrant families who applied for or participated in safety net programs (21.0 percent) reported that someone from a community organization helped them apply, compared with 11.0 percent of adults in all-US-born families.

Policymakers are taking steps to ameliorate some of the structural challenges all families, including eligible immigrant families, face to safety net access. These include the Biden Administration's recent efforts to establish a new public charge rule² and require federal agencies to review their programs to improve customer service experiences and enhance equity.³ Proposed legislation to lift the five-year bar exclusion from public programs for new green card holders, state-led expansions in access to state-funded public programs, and state-specific pandemic relief efforts are additional strategies that policymakers are considering or implementing to fill in gaps for immigrant families (Bernstein, Gonzalez, and Karpman 2021). Understanding immigrants' experiences when accessing and navigating the safety net can help inform such immigrant inclusive policies and practices.

Background

Immigrant Eligibility Exclusions from the Federal Safety Net

Immigrant families face significant eligibility barriers to federal safety net programs. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA) established that many lawfully present noncitizens would not qualify for key federally funded programs, limiting eligibility based on immigration status, year of arrival, and number of years of green card status. With some exceptions, such as for refugees and asylees, immigrants must hold a green card for five years to be eligible for federal programs (Perreira and Pedroza 2019).⁴ Similar to the chilling effects around changes to the public charge rule under the Trump administration (Barofsky et al. 2020; Bernstein et al. 2019, 2020a; Bernstein, Gonzalez, and Karpman 2021; Capps et al. 2020), the implementation of PRWORA led to confusion on eligibility for benefits and a decline in the use of benefits among immigrant households. PRWORA spillover effects on US citizen children in households with parents deemed ineligible have been widely documented (Fix and Zimmerman 1999).

Undocumented immigrants and temporary visa holders are not eligible for the major federal safety net programs like SNAP, Medicaid, or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF).⁵ Eligibility restrictions mean the household benefit level is lower for households with a mix of immigration statuses (i.e., in which there are eligible US-citizen children and ineligible adults). The restrictions in place can block services to citizen children and other lawfully present immigrants in mixed-status families.

Exclusionary immigrant eligibility rules have been identified as major impediments to reducing child poverty. Some have described this exclusion as a form of structural discrimination, with eligibility implemented “in a racialized way...and [having] disparate impacts on Hispanics” (Acevedo-Garcia et al. 2021). Others have also highlighted how these eligibility rules maintain racial and economic inequities, specifically keeping Latinx children in immigrant families with higher poverty rates (Minoff et al. 2021; Thomson et al. 2022).

General Systemic Barriers to Safety Net Programs

Enrolling and staying in safety net programs can be difficult, especially for people of color (Moynihan, Herd, and Harvey 2015; OMB 2021). People applying for public programs often encounter barriers to enrollment, including difficulty understanding eligibility requirements and confusing application forms (Moynihan, Herd, and Harvey 2015). Although there has been greater flexibility allowing for telephone interviews during the pandemic, some programs, such as SNAP and TANF, also require in-person or telephone interviews as part of the application or reenrollment process, and attending these interviews can be difficult for families with limited ability to take time off work and restricted access to child care or transportation (CBPP 2018; Shrivastava and Azito Thompson 2022).⁶

Even for families who can enroll in safety net programs, maintaining their benefits requires program participants to keep up with frequent and cumbersome requests for information to recertify eligibility,

such as updating their income, family size, and other information; program participants who do not provide this information lose benefits (Gray 2019; Unrath 2021). Because these requests for information primarily come through mailed communications, it can be easy for busy families or families who move frequently to miss these letters (MACPAC 2022). At any point when applying, recertifying eligibility, or troubleshooting issues, people can face unfair treatment from program staff (Pratt and Hahn 2021). Complying with other program requirements, such as conditions that participants look for employment or participate in job training while receiving benefits, further adds to the burden of staying enrolled in programs (Hahn et al. 2017).

Immigration-Related Barriers to Safety Net Programs

In addition to the challenges that all applicants face when seeking safety net assistance, immigrant families also face unique barriers. Language access is one significant issue; information about programs, including on applications and on program websites, can be limited in languages other than English and Spanish (Haldar et al. 2022; Musumeci et al. 2022). Given the language diversity across communities, it is a significant challenge to provide information and sufficient bilingual service representatives in needed non-English languages (Food Research & Action Center and National Immigration Law Center 2020; Perreira et al. 2012).⁷

Even if families have members eligible for assistance programs, such as US-citizen children, many do not participate because they fear interaction with government agencies or exposure to immigration enforcement authorities (Artiga and Ubri 2017; Perreira and Pedroza 2019). Requirements to provide information on immigration status or a Social Security number for family members who are not applying for assistance, for example for a parent who is applying on behalf of an eligible child, can deter immigrant family participation (Gennetian, Hill, and Ross-Cabrera 2020).⁸ Families may also avoid program participation because of fears about public charge determinations or their sponsorship of family members for permanent residence.⁹ Despite the reversal of Trump-era expanded public charge regulations, evidence exists that many families are unaware of the changed policies and are avoiding support programs (Godinez-Puig, Boddupalli, and Mucciolo 2022).¹⁰

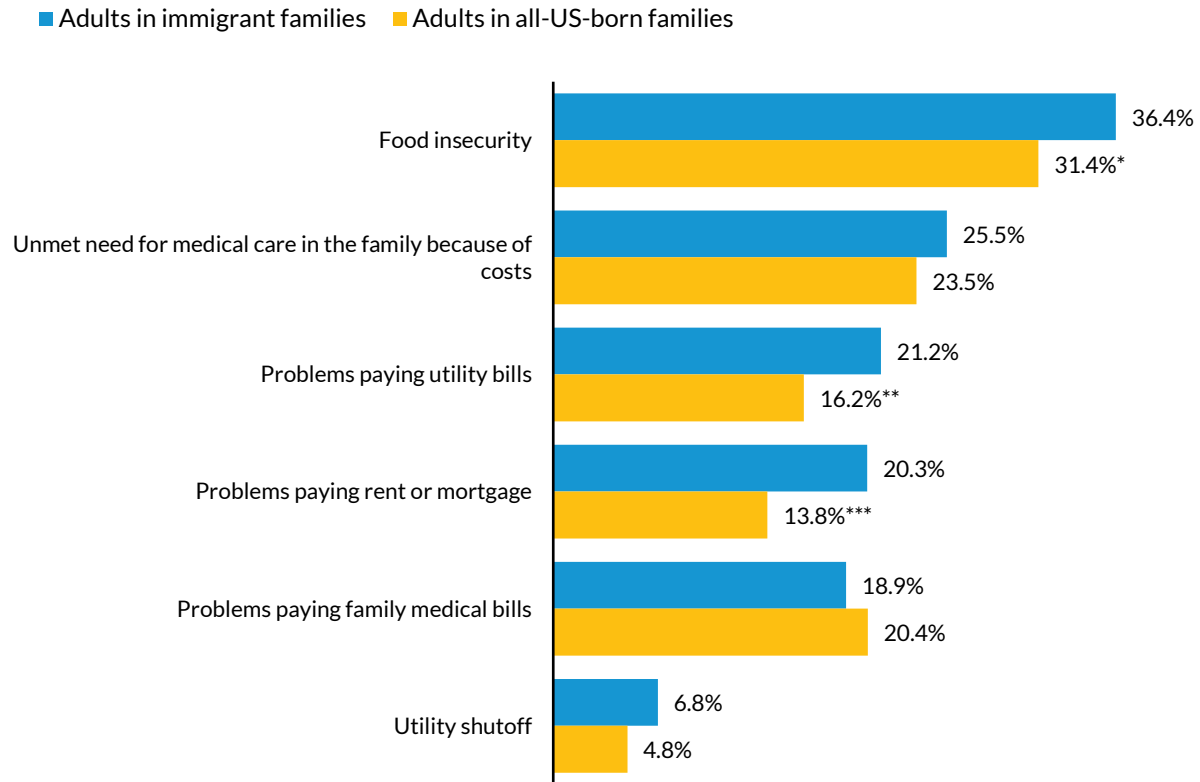
Results

Material Hardship

Many adults in immigrant families experienced material hardship in 2021, with higher rates of food insecurity, problems paying utility bills, and problems paying rent or mortgage than adults in all-US-born families. At a share of 36.4 percent, food insecurity was the most frequent form of material hardship reported for the 12 months before the survey among adults in immigrant families with incomes below 400 percent of the FPL (figure 1). Adults in immigrant families were more likely than adults in all-US-born families to report food insecurity (36.4 versus 31.4 percent), problems paying utility bills (21.2 versus 16.2 percent), and problems paying rent or mortgage (20.3 percent versus 13.8 percent).

Adults in immigrant families also reported unmet needs for medical care in the family because of costs (25.5 percent), problems paying family medical bills (18.9 percent), and utility shutoffs (6.8 percent). Adults in immigrant families reported these hardships at levels similar to those for adults in all-US-born families.

FIGURE 1
Share of Adults with Family Incomes Below 400 Percent of the FPL Who Reported Material Hardships in the Past 12 Months, by Family Nativity Status, December 2021



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Source: Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey, December 2021.

Notes: FPL = federal poverty level. Adults are ages 18 to 64. See the data and methods section for details on question wording.

*/**/*** Estimate differs significantly from that for adults in immigrant families at the 0.10/0.05/0.01 level, using two-tailed tests.

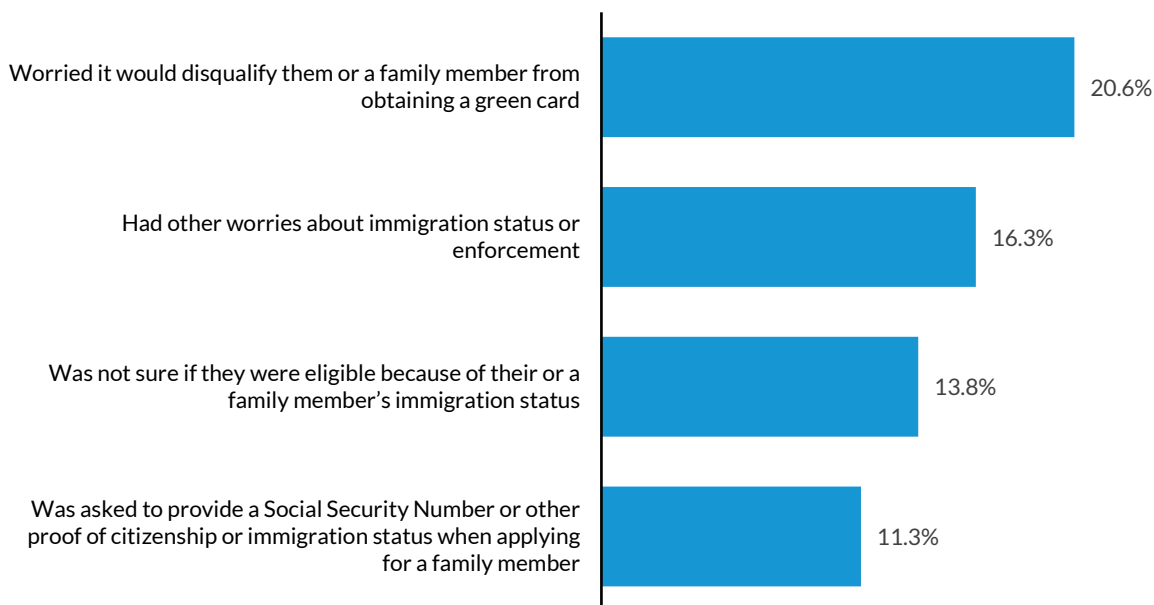
Barriers to Applying for Safety Net Programs

Many adults in immigrant families reported not applying to safety net programs because of immigration-related reasons. About one in five adults in immigrant families with incomes below 400 percent of the FPL (20.6 percent) reported they or a family member avoided one or more noncash government programs, such as Medicaid, SNAP, and housing subsidies, in 2021 because they worried doing so would disqualify them or a family member from obtaining a green card (figure 2). Close to one

in six adults in immigrant families (16.3 percent) reported their family avoided noncash government programs because of worries about immigration status or enforcement.

Just under one in seven adults in immigrant families (13.8 percent) reported they or a family member did not apply for one or more noncash government programs because they were unsure if they were eligible because of their or a family member's immigration status. Over one in ten (11.3 percent) reported not applying because they were asked to provide their Social Security number or other proof of citizenship or immigration status when they applied for a family member.

FIGURE 2
Share of Adults in Immigrant Families with Family Incomes Below 400 Percent of the FPL Who Avoided One or More Noncash Safety Net Programs because of Select Immigration-Related Reasons, December 2021



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Source: Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey, December 2021.

Notes: FPL = federal poverty level. Adults are ages 18 to 64. See the data and methods section for details on question wording.

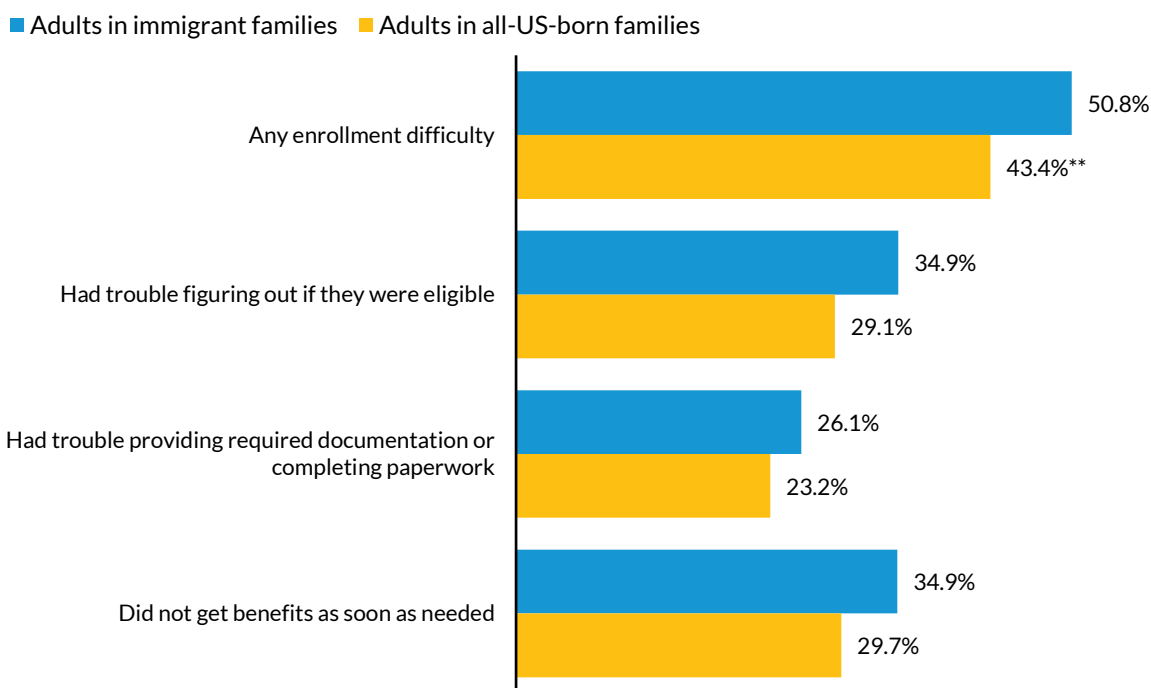
Experiences Navigating the Safety Net

About half of adults in immigrant families who did apply for or participate in cash or noncash safety net programs reported general barriers to program access unrelated to immigration concerns—a higher rate than for adults in all-US-born families.

Overall, 61.3 percent of adults in immigrant families with incomes below 400 percent of the FPL reported that their families applied for or participated in one or more of the following programs in the past year: SNAP, Medicaid or the Children’s Health Insurance Program, rental assistance, Supplemental Security Income, Social Security Disability Insurance, TANF, or other cash assistance, and unemployment benefits (data not shown).

Among adults in immigrant families that applied for or participated in one or more of these programs, about half (50.8 percent) reported difficulty with enrollment for at least one program (figure 3). In comparison, 43.4 percent of adults in all-US-born families who participated in one or more programs reported an enrollment difficulty for at least one program.

FIGURE 3
Share of Adults with Family Incomes Below 400 Percent of the FPL Reporting Challenges Enrolling in One or More Safety Net Programs in the Past 12 Months, by Family Nativity Status, December 2021



URBAN INSTITUTE

Source: Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey, December 2021.

Notes: FPL = federal poverty level. Adults are ages 18 to 64. Estimates are based on adults reporting their families applied for or participated in one or more of the following programs in the past 12 months: Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, Medicaid, Children’s Health Insurance Program, unemployment insurance benefits, rental assistance, Supplemental Security Income, Social Security Disability Insurance, and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families or other cash assistance. Respondents could have reported challenges for one or more of these programs. See the data and methods section for details on question wording.

*/**/*** Estimate differs significantly from that for adults in immigrant families at the 0.10/0.05/0.01 level, using two-tailed tests.

Though the differences were not statistically significant, slightly more adults in immigrant families reported trouble figuring out eligibility (34.9 versus 29.1 percent), providing or completing required paperwork (26.1 versus 23.2 percent), and delays in benefit receipt (34.9 versus 29.7 percent) compared with adults in all-US-born families.

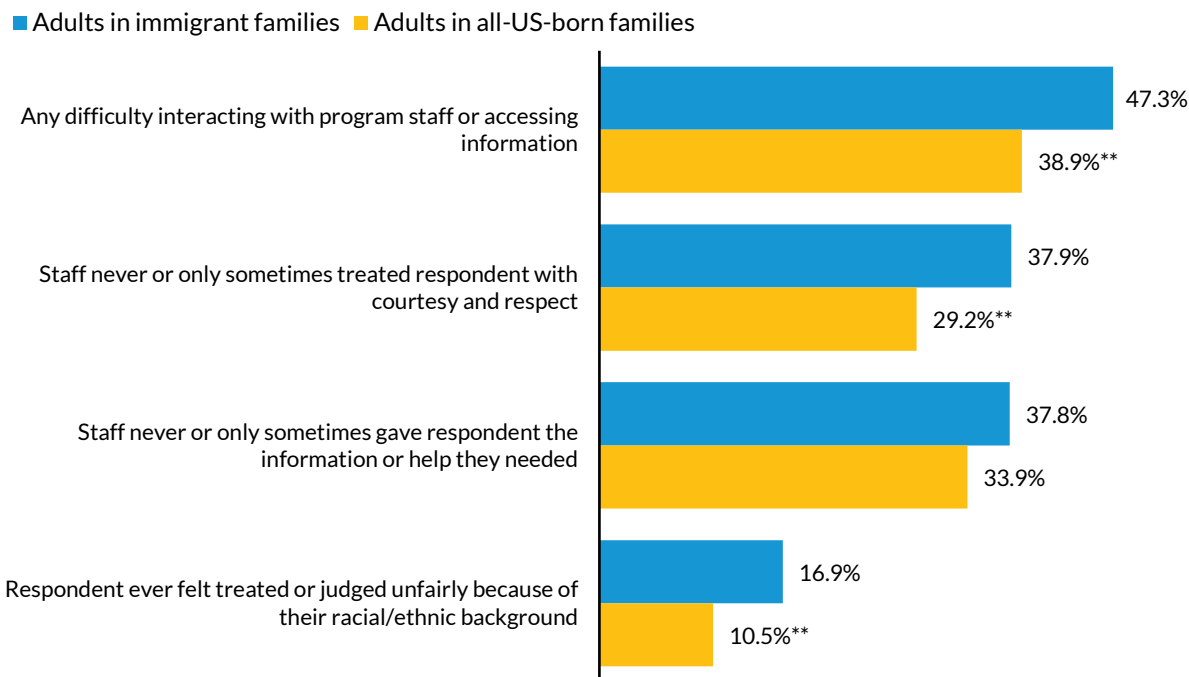
Adults in immigrant families who applied for or participated in cash or noncash safety net programs were more likely than adults in all-US-born families to report lack of courtesy and respect from program staff, and feeling treated or judged unfairly because of their racial or ethnic background.

Among adults who participated in or applied for one or more safety net programs, adults in immigrant families were more likely than those in all-US-born families to report difficulties interacting with program staff for one or more programs (47.3 versus 38.9 percent; figure 4). Adults in immigrant families were also more likely than adults in all-US-born families to report that staff for at least one program never or only sometimes treated them with courtesy and respect (37.9 versus 29.2 percent). More adults in immigrant families than adults in all-US-born families reported that they felt treated or judged unfairly when interacting with staff for one or more programs because of their racial or ethnic background (16.9 percent versus 10.5 percent). Similar shares of adults in immigrant families and adults in all-US-born families reported that staff never or only sometimes gave them the information or help they needed (37.8 versus 33.9 percent).

In addition, just under a quarter (24.0 percent) of adults in immigrant families who had participated in or applied for one or more programs were never or only sometimes able to find information in their preferred language for at least one program (data not shown). Importantly, only people who are Spanish or bilingual Spanish-English speakers received the question about language access; their experiences do not represent the experiences of speakers of other non-Spanish languages, who generally face even higher barriers to language access (Bernstein et al. 2021).

FIGURE 4

Share of Adults with Family Incomes Below 400 Percent of the FPL Reporting Challenges When Interacting with the Staff One or More Safety Net Programs in the Past 12 Months, by Family Nativity Status, December 2021



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Source: Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey, December 2021.

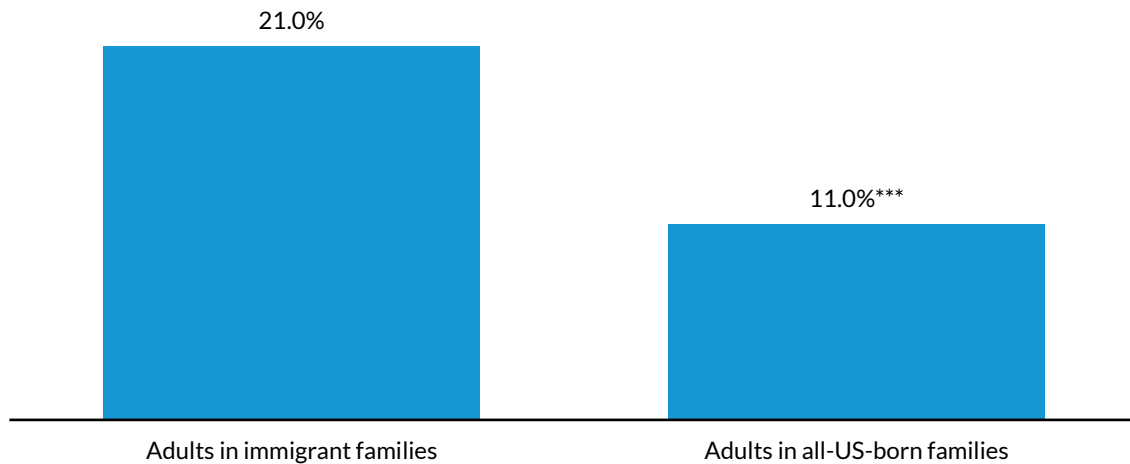
Notes: FPL = federal poverty level. Adults are ages 18 to 64. Estimates are based on adults reporting their families applied for or participated in one or more of the following programs in the past 12 months: Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, Medicaid, Children’s Health Insurance Program, unemployment insurance benefits, rental assistance, Supplemental Security Income, Social Security Disability Insurance, and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families or other cash assistance. Respondents could have reported challenges for one or more of these programs. See the data and methods section for details on question wording.

*/**/*** Estimate differs significantly from that for adults in immigrant families at the 0.10/0.05/0.01 level, using two-tailed tests.

Over one in five adults in immigrant families who participated in or applied for one or more programs (21.0 percent) reported that someone from a community organization helped them apply (figure 5). Adults in immigrant families were more likely than adults in all-US-born families to report they received assistance from a community organization (21.0 versus 11.0 percent).

FIGURE 5

Share of Adults with Family Incomes below 400 Percent of the FPL Reporting Receiving Application Assistance for One or More Safety Net Programs in the Past 12 Months, by Family Nativity Status, December 2021



URBAN INSTITUTE

Source: Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey, December 2021.

Notes: FPL = federal poverty level. Adults are ages 18 to 64. Estimates are based on adults reporting their families applied for or participated in one or more of the following programs in the past 12 months: Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, Medicaid, Children’s Health Insurance Program, unemployment insurance benefits, rental assistance, Supplemental Security Income, Social Security Disability Insurance, and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families or other cash assistance. See the data and methods section for details on question wording.

*/**/*** Estimate differs significantly from that for adults in immigrant families at the 0.10/0.05/0.01 level using two-tailed tests.

Discussion

Immigrant families face barriers to safety net programs above and beyond eligibility restrictions, which is particularly concerning because of persistently high material hardship. In 2021, despite often experiencing hardships such as food insecurity, many adults in immigrant families chose not to apply for safety net programs like SNAP or Medicaid for their families because of immigration-specific concerns. This included concerns about public charge–related consequences for future green card applications or other immigration status or enforcement consequences, as well as being asked to provide a Social Security number when applying on behalf of family members or being unsure about eligibility because of their or a family member’s immigration status. And among adults in immigrant families who did apply for or participate in safety net programs, many faced significant barriers to access, including general barriers faced by all program participants but especially for immigrant families, and additional barriers stemming from their experience as immigrants. Adults in immigrant families were more likely than those in all-US-born families to report difficulties interacting with program staff, including feeling they were treated or judged unfairly because of their racial or ethnic background.

These findings highlight the unmet needs of immigrant families and their ongoing exclusion from basic safety net supports. They face barriers encountered by all program applicants, but these are further complicated by policy and practice impacting immigrant communities specifically, such as the threat of immigration enforcement and language access gaps (Food Research & Action Center and National Immigration Law Center 2020; Watson 2014). While reversal of Trump-era changes to public charge regulations is a step forward, the continuation of chilling effects is a major concern. A number of strategies have been emphasized to improve outreach to immigrant populations, increase language access, and enhance partnerships with community-based organizations as a way to reduce chilling effects and address disparities in safety net access (Bernstein et al. 2021).¹¹ The strategies below focus on addressing structural barriers to safety net access and initiatives at the federal level to promote equal access for immigrants and support racial and ethnic equity goals.

Expanding Eligibility for Safety Net Programs to Immigrants and Their Families

Immigrants' continued avoidance of safety net programs and confusion about their eligibility are related to the implementation of exclusionary policy and practice measures, including restrictive immigrant eligibility rules for federal assistance instituted by PRWORA. Changing and simplifying eligibility rules that exclude many directly and indirectly from supports is one step forward to expanding access to the safety net to immigrant families.

Federal legislation has been proposed to move in this direction. Lifting Immigrant Families through Benefits Access Restoration Act of 2021 (LIFT the BAR Act) would restore eligibility to lawfully present immigrants by repealing provisions in PRWORA, which initially led to the five-year bar, so that lawfully present immigrants can access health and social services.¹²

States have also taken measures to fill in gaps in the federal safety net, including such efforts as New York State's Excluded Workers Fund, which provided cash payments to workers who had been excluded from federal pandemic relief, in particular undocumented immigrants (Waxman et al. 2022). California has used state funds to continue expanding eligibility for health and nutrition benefits to additional segments of the undocumented immigrant population, and will soon become the first state to make full-scope Medicaid available to all Californians with low incomes, regardless of immigration status (Gonzalez, Karpman, and Alvarez Caraveo 2022).

Addressing Immigration Concerns in Equity Initiatives

The vast majority of immigrants in the US are people of color, and their experiences of racism and discrimination as people of color are intertwined with their experiences as immigrants (Bernstein, McTarnaghan, and Islam 2021; Aranda and Vaquera 2015). Immigrant-inclusive policy and practice can potentially promote racial and ethnic equity and reduce disparities for immigrant families, who have been historically underserved, marginalized, and adversely affected by poverty (Acevedo-Garcia et al. 2021). Recent federal equity initiatives to enhance equity offer a potential lever for advancing immigrant families' safety net access.

In December 2021, the Biden Administration issued an executive order directing federal agencies to improve customer experience for people who interact with federal programs, offering an opportunity to ameliorate longstanding administrative burdens associated with government programs (Moynihan, Herd, and Harvey 2015).¹³ The executive order on transforming customer service experiences followed another Biden Administration executive order calling on federal agencies to advance racial equity and support underserved communities.¹⁴

The development of equity action plans stemming from these executive orders is an opportunity to advance equity and improve the program access experience for immigrant families. A component of the Department of Health and Human Services' first equity action plan¹⁵ specifically outlines steps to address some of the barriers that immigrants face to safety net access by restoring and strengthening the cross-department Language Access Plan, as well as those faced by people with limited English proficiency. However, language access is only one of the barriers faced by immigrant families, and such measures do not address other key issues such as immigration concerns and fears of data being shared with enforcement agencies, which also pose a barrier to participation. Equity plans could center the impacts of immigration policy on immigrant communities by avoiding unnecessary requests for social security numbers or other forms of identification proving lawful immigration status, mitigating fears about sharing of data, and reassuring concerns about potential public charge impacts of service participation.

Experiences of discrimination, limited language access, immigration concerns, and confusion about eligibility exist and are likely to compound general barriers to safety net programs for immigrant families. Those engaging in efforts to expand eligibility and access to underserved immigrant families should consider how such barriers affect those suffering hardship and unable to obtain assistance. Steps such as the Department of Health and Human Services' efforts to promote language access are important to reduce barriers for immigrant families, but they are insufficient to address the range of obstacles faced by immigrant applicants, such as experiences of discrimination and immigration-related fears. Future federal efforts to promote safety net access for immigrant families can go beyond language issues for immigrants and emphasize equity considerations inherent in immigration status eligibility exclusions, immigration enforcement, and related concerns that deter access to needed supports.

Data and Methods

Data and Sample

This brief draws on data from the December 2021 WBNS, a nationally representative, internet-based survey of more than 8,000 adults ages 18 to 64; the survey is designed to monitor changes in individual and family well-being as policymakers consider changes to federal safety net programs. For each round of the WBNS, we draw a stratified random sample (including a large oversample of adults in low-income

households) from the KnowledgePanel, a probability-based internet panel maintained by Ipsos that includes households with and without internet access.¹⁶

We define adults in immigrant families as those who were born outside the US or live with a relative who was born outside the US. Adults in all-US-born families are those living in families where everyone was born in the US, Puerto Rico, or abroad to US citizen parents. Our analysis focuses on 1,267 adults in immigrant families and 4,161 adults in all-US-born families with annual family incomes below 400 percent of the FPL. We use this income range for this analysis because of the inclusion of a broader set of safety net programs that have more variation in income-based eligibility. For measures of both family income and family program participation, the family includes the respondent, their spouse or partner, and any of their children or stepchildren under age 19 living with them.

To assess material hardships, barriers to accessing safety net programs, and experiences navigating safety net programs, we constructed weights for analyzing adults in immigrant families and those in all-US-born families. The weights are based on the probability of selection from the KnowledgePanel and benchmarks from the American Community Survey for nonelderly adults who are proficient in English or primarily speak Spanish.¹⁷ The language criterion is used in the weighting to reflect the nature of the survey sample because the survey is only administered in English or Spanish. For further information on the survey design and content, see Karpman, Zuckerman, and Gonzalez (2018).

Measures

We construct measures of material hardship in the past 12 months based on questions about food insecurity, problems paying utility bills, problems paying rent or mortgage, problems paying family medical bills, and utility shutoffs.

We asked adults with annual family incomes below 400 percent of the FPL whether they or a family member had participated in or applied for one or more of the following safety net programs in the last 12 months:

- Medicaid, CHIP, or any kind of state or government-sponsored health plan based on income or a disability
- SNAP
- a federal, state, or local government housing program that lowers the rent, such as a housing voucher or public housing
- unemployment insurance benefits
- Supplemental Security Income
- Social Security Disability Insurance
- cash assistance from a state or county welfare program, including TANF

Adults who reported that they or someone in the family had participated in or applied for one or more of these programs were asked to report their past-year experiences with each program. Respondents were asked how often (never, sometimes, usually, always) they were treated with courtesy and respect, given the information or help they needed, and could find information in their preferred language if they spoke Spanish or were bilingual in English and Spanish. Respondents could indicate that they did not communicate with program staff for one or more programs.

Respondents were also asked whether there was ever a time in the last 12 months when they

- had trouble figuring out if they or a family member were eligible for the program;
- had trouble providing required documentation or completing other paperwork;
- had someone from a community organization (e.g., a navigator or benefit assister) help them or their family apply for the program;
- did not get benefits as soon as needed; or
- felt treated or judged unfairly because of their racial or ethnic background.

We also asked adults in immigrant families whether there was ever a time in the last 12 months when they or someone in their family decided not to apply for one or more non-cash government benefits because

- they were worried it would disqualify them or a family member or relative from obtaining a green card;
- they had other worries about immigration status or enforcement;
- they were not sure if they were eligible because of their or a family member's immigration status; or
- they were asked to provide their Social Security Number or proof of their citizenship or immigration status when they tried to apply for a family member.

Analysis

We estimate the share of adults in immigrant families who reported avoiding noncash government programs because of immigration concerns. Among adults whose families participated in one or more programs, we assess the share reporting challenges when interacting with one or more programs by family nativity status. We limit the following estimates to adults who reported communicating with program staff: the share reporting they were never or only sometimes treated with courtesy and respect, given the information or help they needed, and could find information in their preferred language, and the share treated or judged unfairly because of their racial or ethnic background. Finally, we estimate the share of adults who received assistance from a community-based organization applying for one or more programs by family nativity status.

For each measure in which we compare estimates by family nativity status, we tested differences between adults in immigrant and all-US-born families using two-tailed independent sample t-tests.

Limitations

This analysis has several limitations. First, the WBNS does not capture the experiences of immigrants who speak other languages besides English or Spanish. We estimate these excluded adults represent between 5 and 15 percent of all nonelderly adults in immigrant families as defined for this brief.

In addition, the survey weights reduce but do not eliminate the potential for error associated with sample coverage and nonresponse, which are likely larger for the subgroup of adults in immigrant families. Though the weights are designed to produce representative estimates for nonelderly adults in the US, the survey's design effect increases the sampling error around our estimates.

Measurement error is likely for questions related to the immigration and citizenship status of respondents and relatives in their households, particularly among adults who are undocumented or have been in the US for a short time (Van Hook and Bachmeier 2013). Further, though previous studies have found that federal survey respondents generally underreport receipt of public benefits, self-reported participation in the WBNS is slightly higher than in federal surveys such as the American Community Survey and the Current Population Survey (Karpman, Zuckerman, and Gonzalez 2018; Meyer, Mok, and Sullivan 2009; Wheaton 2008).

Finally, because we aggregate experiences across programs, we cannot determine whether or how experiences differ for individual programs.

Notes

¹ Urban Institute's prior studies on immigrant families drawing on prior waves of the WBNS (Bernstein et al. 2019, 2020b, 2021) examined all immigrant families and immigrant families with incomes below 200 percent of the FPL.

² For more information on the most recent changes to the public charge rule, see Drishti Pillai and Samantha Artiga "2022 Changes to the Public Charge Inadmissibility Rule and the Implications for Health Care," May 5, 2022, <https://www.kff.org/racial-equity-and-health-policy/issue-brief/2022-changes-to-the-public-charge-inadmissibility-rule-and-the-implications-for-health-care/>.

See the new published rule, which was released on September 9, 2022, and will become effective on December 23, 2022, "Public Charge Ground of Inadmissibility," US Citizenship and Immigration Services, Department of Homeland Security, September 9, 2022, <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2022/09/09/2022-18867/public-charge-ground-of-inadmissibility>.

³ "Executive Order on Transforming Federal Customer Experience and Service Delivery to Rebuild Trust in Government," The White House, December 13, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/12/13/executive-order-on-transforming-federal-customer-experience-and-service-delivery-to-rebuild-trust-in-government/>.

"Executive Order on Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities through the Federal Government," The White House, January 20, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential>

[actions/2021/01/20/executive-order-advancing-racial-equity-and-support-for-underserved-communities-through-the-federal-government/](https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/01/20/executive-order-advancing-racial-equity-and-support-for-underserved-communities-through-the-federal-government/).

- ⁴ Federal means-tested programs subject to the five-year bar include Medicaid (except for emergency Medicaid), the Children's Health Insurance Program, TANF, SNAP, and Supplemental Security Income. For more information, see Broder, Moussavian, and Blazer (2015).
- ⁵ While undocumented immigrants are not eligible for major federal programs, they can receive assistance from emergency Medicaid, public health programs that offer immunizations and treatment of communicable diseases, noncash disaster relief, school breakfast and lunch programs, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), charitable food assistance, and assistance through homeless shelters.
- ⁶ "SNAP Extension of Waiver of QC Face-to-Face Interview Requirement: January 2022 – June 2022," US Department of Agriculture, updated December 13, 2021, <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/extension-QC-face-to-face-interview-waiver-january-2022-june-2022>.
- ⁷ Kathy Ko Chin, "HHS Must Improve Language Access to Make Meaningful Access a Reality," Health Affairs Forefront, July 22, 2016, <https://www.healthaffairs.org/doi/10.1377/forefront.20160722.055907/>.
- ⁸ For more information, see "Triagency Letter," Office for Civil Rights, last updated July 26, 2013, <https://www.hhs.gov/civil-rights/for-individuals/special-topics/needy-families/triagency-letter/index.html>.
- ⁹ For more information, see "Sponsored Immigrants and Benefits," National Immigration Law Center, last updated February 8, 2021, <https://www.nilc.org/issues/economic-support/sponsored-immigrants-and-benefits/>.
- ¹⁰ See "Immigrant Families Poll Finds Persistent Chilling Effect," Protecting Immigrant Families, December 15, 2021, <https://pifcoalition.org/resource/immigrant-families-poll-finds-persistent-chilling-effect>, which shows low levels of awareness of the new public charge policies and continued chilling effects.
- ¹¹ See Dulce Gonzalez and Michael Karpman, "As California expands safety net eligibility for immigrants, community organizations are playing a pivotal role," *Urban Wire* (blog), Urban Institute, August 4, 2022, <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/california-expands-safety-net-eligibility-immigrants-community-organizations-are-playing>.
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- ¹⁵ "Equity Action Plan Summary: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services," White House, April 2022, <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/hhs-equity-action-plan.pdf>.
- ¹⁶ Adults without internet access are provided free web-enabled devices and internet access to facilitate participation in the KnowledgePanel.
- ¹⁷ We define adults with English proficiency as those who speak English at least well, as classified in the American Community Survey. Adults with limited English proficiency are those who speak English less than well. This is a common measure used to define English proficiency (Wilson 2014). We use the following measures for weighting: gender, age, race and ethnicity, educational attainment, presence of children under age 18 in the household, census region, homeownership status, family income as a percentage of the federal poverty level, access to the internet, and family composition. We benchmark non-Hispanic respondents who are not white or Black by two categories: (1) other race born in Asia and (2) either multiple races or other race not born in Asia.

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About the Authors

Hamutal Bernstein is a principal research associate in the Income and Benefits Policy Center at the Urban Institute, where she leads Urban's program on immigrants and immigration. Her research focuses on the well-being of immigrant and refugee families and workers. Her areas of expertise include immigration and integration, workforce development and training, and human services. She is a mixed-methods researcher, with experience in policy analysis, program monitoring and evaluation, technical assistance, design of qualitative and survey data collection, and qualitative and quantitative data analysis. She is a principal investigator on the Annual Survey of Refugees for the US Department of Health and Human Services. Before joining Urban, Bernstein was a program officer at the German Marshall Fund of the United States and a research associate at the Institute for the Study of International Migration at Georgetown University. Bernstein received her BA in international relations from Brown University and her PhD in government from Georgetown University.

Dulce Gonzalez is a research associate in the Health Policy Center at Urban. She forms part of a team working on the Urban Institute's Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey. Gonzalez conducts quantitative and qualitative research focused primarily on the social safety net, immigration, and barriers to health care access. Her work has also focused on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on nonelderly adults and their families. Before joining Urban, Gonzalez worked at the Georgetown University Center for Children and Families and at the nonprofit organization Maternal and Child Health Access. Gonzalez holds a BA in economics from California State University, Long Beach, and a master's degree in public policy from Georgetown University.

Paola Echave is a research associate in the Income and Benefits Policy Center at Urban. Her areas of expertise include immigration and health. Her research focuses on the role of immigration enforcement on the health, economic, and social well-being of Latinx and immigrant communities. She has extensive training in quantitative and qualitative methods and experience with large-scale social science, demographic, and international surveys. She is currently the project manager of the Annual Survey of Refugees for the US Department of Health and Human Services. Before joining Urban, Echave worked

in various international and US-based projects as a research assistant at the Ohio State University. She conducted research and published work on the role of obesity on the risk of mortality and trends in specific health outcomes in the US. Echave holds a BA in criminology from the University of New Mexico and master's and doctoral degrees in sociology from the Ohio State University.

Diana Guelespe is a senior research associate in the Income and Benefits Policy Center and a member of Urban's inaugural 2022–24 Equity Scholars Program. She is a sociologist with over 20 years of experience working with immigrant and refugee communities at the local, state, and national levels. Her qualitative research on mixed-status immigrant families and their daily challenge of driving without a license led to subsequent changes in state and local policies to improve access to driver's licenses for undocumented immigrants in Illinois and Washington, DC. It has also served as a resource to community groups in other states seeking similar policy changes. Prior to joining Urban, she conducted policy analysis for Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service. Guelespe's previous academic work includes serving as the assistant director of the Consortium on Race, Gender and Ethnicity at the University of Maryland. She also served as director of research and evaluation at the Center for Social Justice Research, Teaching and Service at Georgetown University. Guelespe received her BA in anthropology and MA in political science from Northeastern Illinois University, and a PhD in sociology from Loyola University Chicago.

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500 L'Enfant Plaza SW
Washington, DC 20024

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