



Study: Public charge rule having a chilling effect on immigrant families' use of public programs

by Melissa Jenco, News Content Editor

Nearly one-third of low-income immigrant families with children avoided using public benefits because of green card concerns, according to a new study.

"Such chilling effects are very concerning given that access to nutritious food, affordable health insurance coverage and stable housing are essential to children's healthy development and to families' material well-being and psychological health, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic when the need for public assistance is high," researchers from the [Urban Institute](#) wrote in their report.

In 2018, the Trump administration proposed changing the public charge rule, expanding authorities' ability to consider immigrants' use or likely use of public programs when deciding whether they can enter the U.S. or advance through the immigration process. The rule went into effect earlier this year despite [opposition from the Academy](#) and other advocates who feared immigrant families would forgo essential health services.

Urban Institute researchers measured this chilling effect through a nationally representative survey in December 2019 that included 949 adults from immigrant families living with children.

They found 20% avoided a public health benefit such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, Medicaid or housing assistance that year. Among low-income families, 31.5% avoided these programs.

Drilling down further, the data showed 11% of the families, including 17% of those who are low-income, avoided a nutrition program. Roughly 11% of the immigrant families and 16% of those who were low-income avoided a medical program. Authors said these figures may be even higher now that the rule has gone into effect.

Some families avoided programs they may not have realized were not part of the public charge rule such as the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children and free or reduced-price school lunches. Many parents did not know the rule excludes benefits used by children.

"Although the public charge rule excludes benefits used by children as a factor in their parents' public charge determination, reluctance to participate in public programs out of fear or confusion about immigration consequences could make it even harder for immigrant families with children to address their basic needs," authors wrote.

The findings come just weeks after another Urban Institute report found the [COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated hardships](#) for low-income and minority families. Authors said Congress should include immigrant families in pandemic relief efforts and that community organizations should be prepared to provide additional assistance. Advocates also should ensure families know they can seek testing and treatment for COVID-19 without it being counted against their green card or visa application.

Resources

- [AAP policy "Providing Care for Children in Immigrant Families"](#)
- [Immigrant Child Health Toolkit](#)
- [AAP Council on Immigrant Child and Family Health](#)



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