



Three in 10 Adults in California Immigrant Families with Low Incomes Avoided Safety Net Programs in 2020

Executive Summary

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Many immigrant families have avoided safety net and pandemic relief programs in recent years over concerns that their participation would have adverse immigration consequences. These chilling effects on program participation occurred in the context of a restrictive immigration policy environment under the Trump administration, including the expansion of the “public charge” rule. Though the Biden administration has reverted to prior guidance on the public charge rule and reversed many other immigration policy changes, chilling effects may continue to deter adults in immigrant families from seeking safety net supports for which they or their children are eligible.

This study draws on Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey data collected in December 2020 and interviews conducted with adults in immigrant families and people who work at organizations that connect immigrant families to health, nutrition, and other support programs in California. We conducted the interviews between March and May 2021, in the early months of the Biden administration, offering unique insights as policy priorities were shifting.

Experiences during the Pandemic

Our findings from the December 2020 survey show the following:

- About half of adults in California immigrant families with low incomes reported their families lost work or income during the pandemic. One in three of such adults reported food insecurity

in 2020. One in five reported unmet needs for medical care due to costs, and similar shares reported problems paying family medical bills or utility bills.

- Three in 10 adults in California immigrant families with low incomes reported avoiding public benefit programs or other assistance in 2020 because of green card or other immigration concerns. This affected both basic safety net programs, like CalFresh (California's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) and Medi-Cal (California's Medicaid program), and pandemic emergency programs, like the Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT); unemployment assistance; and emergency cash, rental, or food assistance; as well as health care services for uninsured patients.

Accessing Safety Net Programs and Community Resources to Mitigate Hardship

Our interviews with service providers and adults in immigrant families with low incomes in California revealed the following:

- During the pandemic, California immigrant families navigated the complexities of job losses due to businesses shutting down, reduced work hours, and challenges returning to work, where some faced risks of exposure to the coronavirus. This created significant economic insecurity that fluctuated during the pandemic and affected not only the people we spoke with but all relatives living in their households.
- California service providers reported increased enrollment in Medi-Cal and CalFresh among many new and existing clients, many in immigrant families, and some people became newly eligible for the programs because of a change in employment or loss of income.
- Nevertheless, these families faced ongoing barriers to enrollment and program participation, including limited eligibility for federally funded programs, concerns about the immigration consequences of their participation, burdensome application processes, and language and technology barriers.
- California immigrant families also turned to private and philanthropic supports in their communities, most commonly food assistance.

Reflections on the Change in the Federal Administration

The change in the federal administration offers a unique opportunity to explore how shifts in immigration policy could affect immigrants' trust in accessing public programs, especially given the reversal of the expanded public charge rule. We learned the following from our interviews:

- Views on the prospects of immigration policy changes were mixed; some interviewees were cautiously optimistic or unsure about what the policy changes initiated under the new

administration meant for them, and others felt positively about the administration's early policy actions.

- Many interviewees were aware of the reversal of the expanded public charge rule, and a large share of those were less hesitant about participating in public programs given recent changes in federal immigration policies.

Opportunities for Reaching Immigrant Families and Building Trust

Counteracting chilling effects and other challenges to accessing assistance among immigrant families requires making such families aware of the programs for which they are eligible, helping them navigate enrollment processes, and building trust between immigrant families and the stakeholders interested in expanding their access to the safety net. Our interviews with service providers and adults in immigrant families with low incomes in California pointed to several potential ways to achieve this:

- Expand partnerships with culturally specific organizations to help shape and implement strategies for outreach and enrollment, by tapping into existing networks to gather input on language access and engagement strategies and by contracting directly with such organizations for translations, outreach, education, and enrollment.
- Tailor outreach strategies to the sources of information and places that immigrant families rely on. Multiple approaches can be leveraged, such as engagement with trusted government and community leaders, in-language media, and distribution of information in commonly frequented spaces in communities.
- Develop enrollment strategies that resonate with immigrant families by maximizing referrals to reach those who are unaware of programs, matching families to services based on need, limiting the collection of sensitive information, and, when needed, connecting families to legal aid resources that can advise on how program participation could affect immigration status.
- Increase funding and capacity for enrollment navigators who provide culturally and linguistically sensitive services that can effectively support families through program enrollment and beyond.

The findings of this study highlight the economic hardships experienced by California immigrant families with low incomes during the pandemic, the lifeline that safety net and community supports can offer, and the barriers these families face to greater access to these programs. Efforts to expand this access will be more successful if they reflect the real experiences of families and are developed and delivered by trusted service providers in their communities. As illustrated, our interview findings suggest several concrete opportunities for creatively and effectively using resources to reach families and build trust. Improving safety net access for immigrant families can help support a stronger and more equitable recovery from the pandemic.

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