

# One in Four Adults in Mixed-Status Families Did Not Participate in Safety Net Programs in 2022 Because of Green Card Concerns

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Many immigrant families do not enroll eligible members in safety net programs for fear that doing so will expose them to immigration consequences (Fortuny and Chaudry 2011). These fears were especially salient during discussions about the Trump administration's expanded public charge rule, which considered use of noncash public benefits, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Medicaid, or housing assistance, in applications for green cards or temporary visas.<sup>1</sup> Leading up to and after the publication of the new rule, immigrants avoided public benefits for fear of jeopardizing future immigration status (Barofsky et al. 2020; Bernstein et al. 2019; Straut-Eppsteiner 2020). Despite a reversal of the Trump-era regulation and continued need for support, immigrant families express reluctance to participate in public programs during and after the COVID-19 pandemic (Bernstein, Gonzalez, and Karpman 2021; Bernstein et al. 2022).<sup>2</sup>

In this fact sheet, we draw on data from the Urban Institute's December 2022 Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey (WBNS) to provide an update on the share of adults in immigrant families who avoided noncash government benefits in the past year because of concerns that receiving benefits would affect their or a family member's ability to obtain a green card in the future (henceforth referred to as chilling effects). We provide estimates for adults in immigrant families overall and by family citizenship and immigration status, including new estimates of chilling effects among adults in mixed-status families. We find that adults in immigrant families continued to avoid safety net programs because of immigration concerns in 2022, and adults in mixed-status families were more likely than other adults to report this program avoidance.

## DEFINITIONS OF FAMILY CITIZENSHIP AND IMMIGRATION STATUSES

We define adults in immigrant families as adults born outside the US (foreign-born) or living with one or more foreign-born family members. Adults in all-citizen families live in households where all family members are naturalized or US-born citizens. Adults in green card and citizen families live in households where at least one family member is a permanent resident and all other members are either naturalized or US-born citizens or permanent residents. Adults in mixed-status families live in households where one or more members are undocumented and all other members are either naturalized or US-born citizens, permanent residents, or have another lawful immigration status.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Beier and Essey Workie, "The Public-Charge Final Rule Is Far from the Last Word," Migration Policy Institute, September 2022, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/news/public-charge-final-rule-far-last-word>.

<sup>2</sup> "USCIS Updates Public Charge Resources Webpage to Provide Information on the Public Charge Ground of Inadmissibility and Public Benefits Available to Noncitizens," US Citizenship and Immigration Services, updated June 3, 2022, accessed July 17, 2023, <https://www.uscis.gov/newsroom/alerts/uscis-updates-public-charge-resources-webpage-to-provide-information-on-the-public-charge-ground-of>.

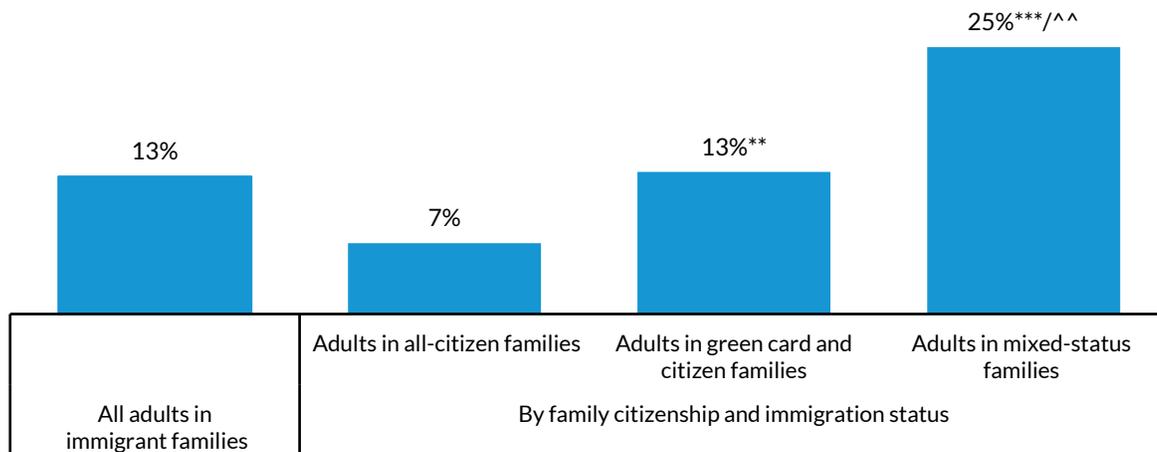
<sup>3</sup> Noncitizen family members are considered to be living in the US lawfully if the respondent reported that those noncitizen members are in the US on a student visa, a work visa or permit, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, Temporary Protected Status, asylum or refugee status, or another document which permits them to stay in the US for a limited time. For this analysis, because of insufficient sample size, we exclude 1) adults living in families with one or more noncitizens who do not have green cards but who are living in the US with other lawful immigration status and 2) adults in families where everyone in the family is undocumented.

## FINDINGS

About 13 percent of adults in immigrant families reported they or a family member avoided applying for or participating in noncash government benefit programs such as Medicaid, SNAP, or housing subsidies because of green card concerns in 2022 (figure 1). This share was statistically unchanged from previous years (data not shown).<sup>4</sup> A quarter (25 percent) of adults in mixed-status families reported avoiding public benefits because of green card concerns, making them more likely than adults in green card and citizen families (13 percent) and adults in all-citizen families (7 percent) to report chilling effects.

FIGURE 1

### Share of Adults in Immigrant Families Who Avoided Noncash Government Benefits in the past Year Because of Green Card Concerns, Overall and by Family Citizenship and Immigration Status, December 2022



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Source: Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey, December 2022.

Note: Adults are ages 18 to 64.

\*/\*\*/\*\* Estimate differs significantly from adults in all-citizen families at the 0.10/0.05/0.01 level, using two-tailed tests.

^/^/^ Estimate differs significantly from adults in green card and citizen families at the 0.10/0.05/0.01 level, using two-tailed tests.

## DISCUSSION

Immigrant families experience higher levels of hardship than other families, and barriers to safety net access such as fears of immigration consequences can further exacerbate these (Bernstein et al. 2022).<sup>5</sup> Ensuring equitable health and economic well-being for immigrant families will require efforts to reduce program avoidance because of these immigration-related fears. The Biden administration removed a key barrier to safety net participation in March 2021 by reversing the Trump administration's public charge regulation and clarified that many noncash benefits, such as Medicaid and benefits received

<sup>4</sup> We compared estimates for 2022 with those from previous years dating back to 2018, the first year when we collected data on chilling effects in the WBNS.

<sup>5</sup> Jason DeParle, "Safety Net Barriers Add to Child Poverty in Immigrant Families," *The New York Times*, April 13, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/06/us/politics/child-poverty-immigrants.html>.

by family members, will not be considered under public charge determinations.<sup>6</sup> Another step that policymakers and other stakeholders can take to help reduce chilling effects on program participation is engagement with immigrant families to build trust and communicate current policy in linguistically and culturally relevant ways.

Community-based organizations with the needed linguistic and cultural competence can play an important role in bridging the gap and connecting families to safety net programs (Gonzalez, Karpman, and Alvarez Caraveo 2022). Federal agencies' partnership with such trusted organizations and financial support for their engagement work, in addition to frequent communication about the importance of seeking needed services, could help mitigate lingering chilling effects on program participation among eligible immigrant families (Vision Strategy and Insights 2020).

## DATA AND LIMITATIONS

The WBNS is a nationally representative survey of adults ages 18 to 64 that monitors individual and family well-being as policymakers consider changes to the safety net.<sup>7</sup> Surveys are subject to various sources of error, including coverage and nonresponse, sampling, and measurement errors. Subgroup estimates are subject to greater sampling error than estimates for the overall sample of adults in immigrant families.

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<sup>6</sup> Department of Homeland Security, "DHS Publishes Fair and Humane Public Charge Rule," September 8, 2022, accessed July 17, 2023, <https://www.dhs.gov/news/2022/09/08/dhs-publishes-fair-and-humane-public-charge-rule>.

<sup>7</sup> For more information about the WBNS, see "The Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey," at <https://www.urban.org/policy-centers/health-policy-center/projects/well-being-and-basic-needs-survey>.