

Immigration Concerns Disrupted Families' Essential Activities and Caused Children Emotional Distress in 2025

Findings for Immigrant Families with Children from the Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey

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In 2025, the federal administration, with expanded funding from Congress, enacted sweeping changes affecting immigrant communities. These included dramatically expanding immigration enforcement actions, removing prior protections for sensitive locations like schools and hospitals where enforcement activities had previously been prohibited, and requiring the sharing of data between public benefit programs and immigration enforcement agencies (Altman, Broder, and D'Avanzo 2025; Chishti, Bush-Joseph, and Putzel-Kavanaugh 2026; Ruiz Soto 2025). Emerging evidence suggests that immigrant families, including children, are being negatively affected by these policies (Kocher 2025; Rogers et al. 2025; Schumacher et al. 2025).¹ In addition, Congress enacted legislation restricting access to safety net benefits for many lawfully present immigrants, and the administration proposed changes to the "public charge" rule to penalize green card applicants for participation in public programs (Altman, Broder, and D'Avanzo 2025; Gelatt 2025).

New research based on December 2025 data from the Urban Institute's Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey (WBNS) finds that adults in both immigrant and nonimmigrant families reported feeling effects of immigration enforcement efforts (Bernstein, Gonzalez, and Guelespe 2026). Adults in immigrant families also reported that they experienced worries and that they and their families did not take part in essential activities and safety net programs in 2025 because of immigration-related concerns (Gonzalez et al. 2026).

In this brief, we use data from the WBNS, a nationally representative survey of adults, to examine how immigration concerns affected immigrant families with children, who constitute a large share of all immigrant families (Gonzalez et al. 2026; box 1). We focus on disruptions to families' activities and immigration-related concerns reported by adults in immigrant families (families in which one or more people living in the household were born outside the US) that include children ages 18 and younger, hereafter referred to as "adults in immigrant families with children", overall and by citizenship/immigration status of family members living in the household (box 2)² and awareness of local activity by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) or other immigration enforcement.³ We also assess reported emotional distress among children, as well as avoidance of safety net programs, because of immigration-related worries and measures of material hardship. These data were collected in December 2025, almost a year into the current administration and before the high-profile campaign and fatal shootings in Minneapolis.⁴ The survey findings document the impacts of immigration policies on the daily lives of immigrant families with children and on children's well-being, particularly for mixed-status families who include both undocumented immigrants as well as lawfully present immigrants and/or US citizens. With 1 in 4 children in the US living in an immigrant family, responses to immigration enforcement could have far-reaching adverse consequences for millions of children and for their communities (Haley et al. 2025).

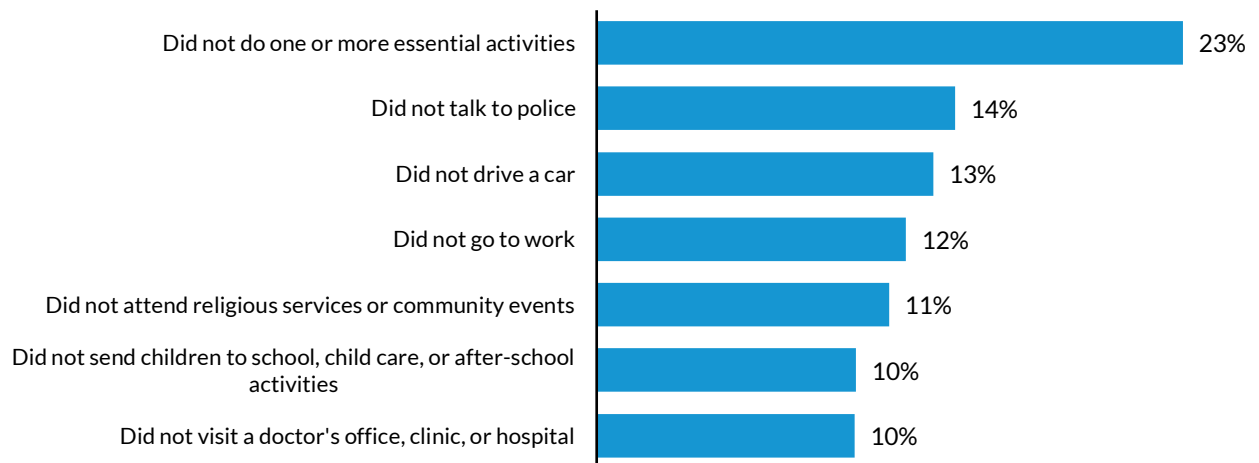
Immigrant Families with Children Did Not Engage in Essential Activities Because of Immigration Concerns

In December 2025, 23 percent of adults in immigrant families with children reported that they or their family members had chosen not to do one or more of six activities in the prior year because of not wanting to draw attention to a family member’s immigration status (figure 1). Specific activities respondents reported they or their families had not done, hereafter referred to as essential activities, included talking to police (14 percent); driving a car (13 percent); going to work (12 percent); attending religious services or community events (11 percent); sending children to school, child care or after-school activities (10 percent); and visiting a doctor’s office, health clinic, or hospital (10 percent).⁵

FIGURE 1

More than 1 in 5 Adults in Immigrant Families with Children Reported Their Families Did Not Engage in Essential Activities Because of Immigration Concerns in 2025

In the past 12 months, was there a time when you or anyone in your family chose not to do any of the following activities because you did not want to draw attention to your immigration status or the immigration status of a family member?



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Source: Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey, December 2025.

Notes: The sample for this figure is adults ages 18 and older in immigrant families that include any children 18 and younger.

BOX 1

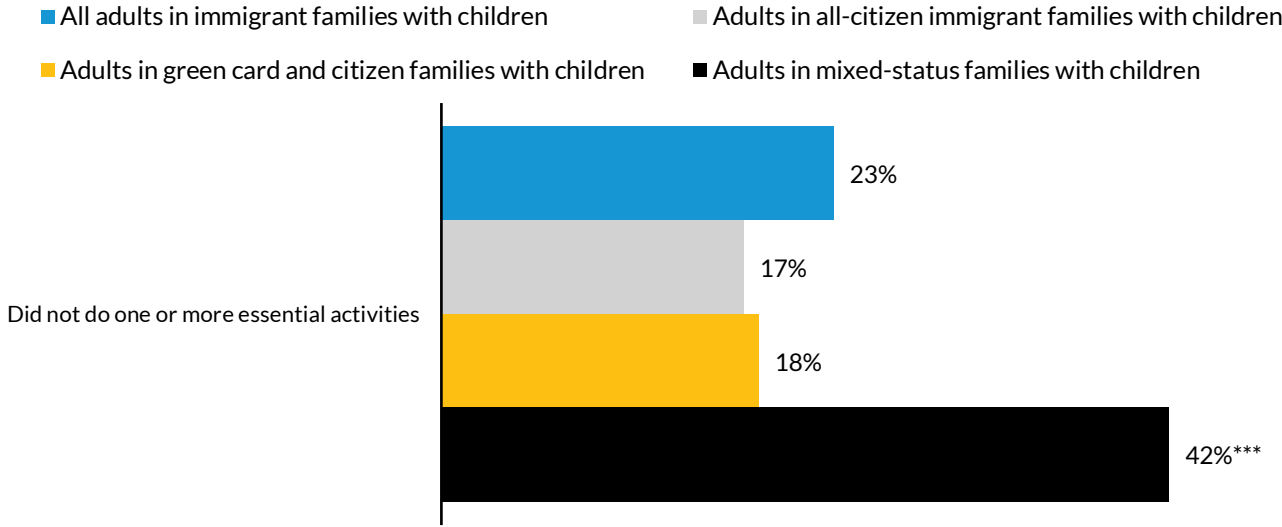
2025 WELL-BEING AND BASIC NEEDS SURVEY

The WBNS is a nationally representative, annual survey of adults that monitors individual and family well-being in the context of a changing safety net. Launched by the Urban Institute in December 2017, the WBNS provides timely information on the challenges that households face in meeting basic needs such as food, housing, and health care.

More than 10,000 adults ages 18 and older participated in the December 2025 round of the survey, which they could complete online in English or Spanish. Participants were sampled from the KnowledgePanel, a probability-based internet panel maintained by Ipsos that includes households with and without internet access. To assess experiences of adults in immigrant families, we oversampled noncitizens and constructed survey weights to produce nationally representative estimates for adults who were born outside the US or lived with a relative who was born outside the US. For this analysis, we examined the experiences of the 1,036 adults in immigrant families with children 18 and younger living in the household at the time of the survey.

Figure 2 shows that approximately 4 in 10 adults in mixed-status families with children (42 percent) reported not doing one or more essential activities, higher than in families including only naturalized or US-born citizens (17 percent) or a mix of green card holders and citizens (18 percent). Mixed-status families were also more likely to report choosing not to do each of the specified activities than other immigrant families with children (data not shown). In addition, just over one-third of adults in immigrant families with children who reported that their area experienced ICE activity in the past year indicated they did not engage in one or more of these activities (34 percent; data not shown). Although less common among adults who reported no local ICE activity, 21 percent of adults in immigrant families with children who reported no local ICE activity said they or their families experienced such disruptions in activities (data not shown).⁶

FIGURE 2
Mixed-Status Families with Children Were More Likely than Other Immigrant Families with Children to Not Engage in Essential Activities Because of Immigration Concerns in 2025
In the past 12 months, was there a time when you or anyone in your family chose not to do [one or more of six] activities because you did not want to draw attention to your immigration status or the immigration status of a family member?



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Source: Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey, December 2025.

Notes: The sample for this figure is adults ages 18 and older in immigrant families that include any children 18 and younger. Mixed-status families are families that include undocumented as well as lawfully present immigrants and/or US citizens. The six activities include talking to police; driving a car; going to work; attending religious services or community events; sending children to school, child care, or after-school activities; and visiting a doctor’s office, health clinic, or hospital.

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

BOX 2

FAMILY CITIZENSHIP AND IMMIGRATION STATUS

Survey respondents reported immigration and citizenship status for themselves, spouses/partners, children under 19, and other relatives living with them. We classify survey respondents into the following household categories:

- **All-citizen immigrant families.** Households in which all family members are naturalized or US-born citizens
- **Green card and citizen families.** Households in which at least one family member is a permanent resident (i.e., a green card holder) and all other members are either naturalized or US-born citizens or permanent residents
- **Mixed-status families.^a** Households in which one or more family members are undocumented and all other family members either are naturalized or US-born citizens, are permanent residents, or have another lawful immigration status

^aOur definition of adults in mixed-status families excludes (1) adults living in households in which all family members who are noncitizens without a green card are living in the US with other lawful temporary immigration status and (2) adults in households in which everyone is undocumented. We include these two groups when providing estimates for all adults in immigrant families. We do not disaggregate data for these two groups because of small sample sizes.

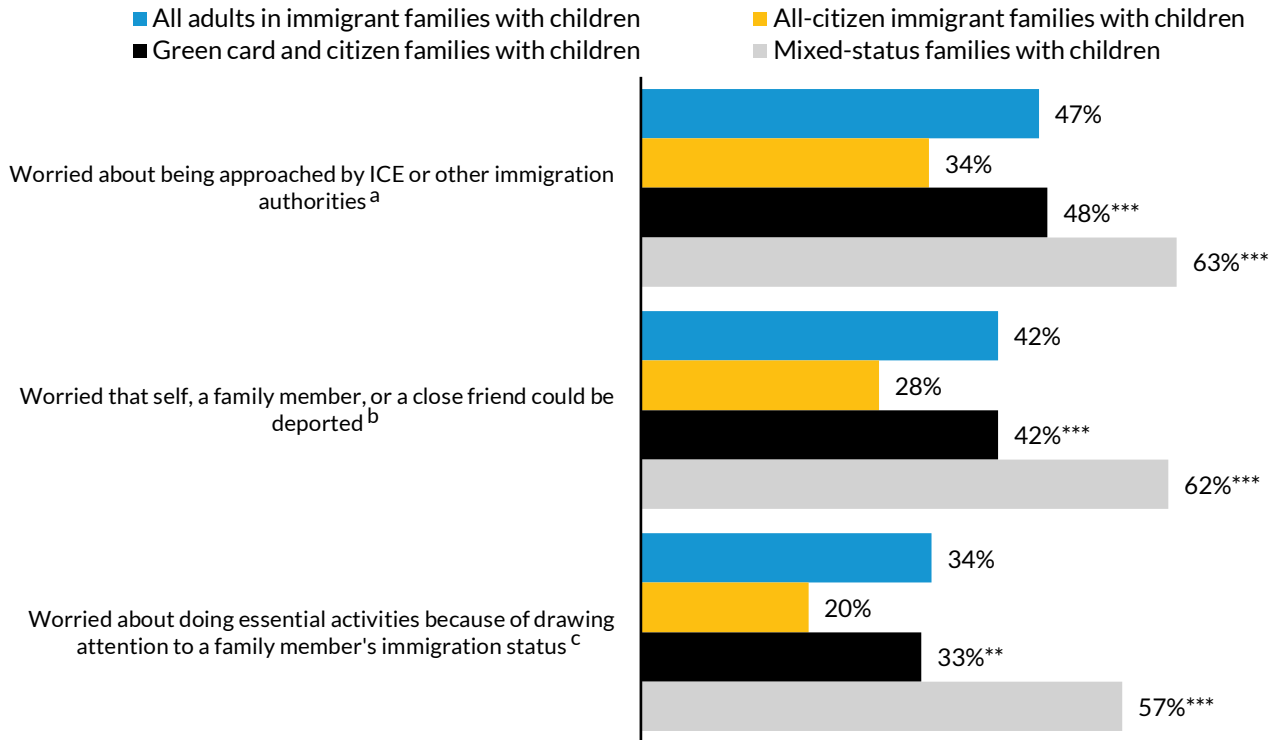
Immigrant Families with Children Worried About Immigration Enforcement

More than 4 in 10 adults in immigrant families with children reported worrying “a lot” or “some” about being approached by ICE or other immigration authorities (47 percent) or that they, a family member, or close friend could be deported (42 percent; figure 3). In addition, 34 percent reported worrying “a lot” or “some” about performing one or more essential activities because of immigration concerns. The activities included driving a car (22 percent); talking to police (21 percent); going to work (20 percent); attending religious services or community events (18 percent); visiting a doctor’s office, health clinic, or hospital (18 percent); and sending children to school, child care or after-school activities (18 percent; data not shown).

Worries were higher in mixed-status families with children. More than 6 in 10 adults in mixed-status immigrant families with children reported worries about being approached by ICE or themselves or someone close to them being deported, and over half worried about doing at least one essential activity (figure 3). Worries were also higher for those reporting local ICE activity than those reporting no local ICE activity, which was consistent with patterns found among all adults in immigrant families regardless of the presence of children (Gonzalez et al. 2026). Among all adults in immigrant families with children who reported local ICE activity, more than 7 in 10 reported they were worried about being approached by immigration authorities, more than 6 in 10 worried about deportation, and almost half worried about doing essential activities (data not shown).⁷

FIGURE 3

Nearly Half of Adults in Immigrant Families with Children Worried About ICE Enforcement, and over a Third Worried About Doing Essential Activities Because of Immigration Concerns in 2025



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Source: Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey, December 2025.

Notes: ICE = Immigration and Customs Enforcement. The sample for this figure is adults ages 18 and older in immigrant families that include any children 18 and younger. Mixed-status families are families that include undocumented as well as lawfully present immigrants and/or US citizens. Figure shows the share who reported worrying “a lot” or “some” in response to (a) “Regardless of your own immigration or citizenship status, how much, if at all, do you worry that you or a family member will be approached by ICE or other immigration authorities?”; (b) “Regardless of your own immigration or citizenship status, how much, if at all, do you worry that you, a family member, or a close friend could be deported?”; or (c) “How much, if at all, do you worry about doing the following activities because you do not want to draw attention to your immigration status or the immigration status of a family member? talking to police; driving a car; going to work; attending religious services or community events; sending children to school, child care, or after-school activities; visiting a doctor’s office, health clinic, or hospital.” Respondents reported their level of worry for each of these activities separately.

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

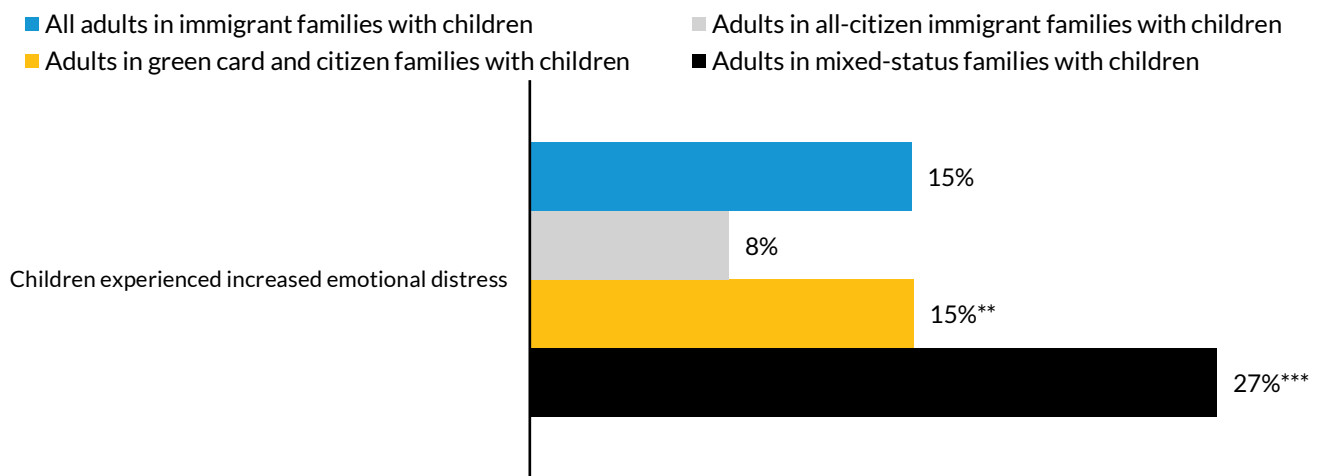
Adults in Immigrant Families Reported Their Children Experienced Increased Emotional Distress Because of Immigration-Related Worries

Among adults in immigrant families with children, 15 percent reported their children experienced increased stress, anxiety, or sadness because of worries about immigration status in the previous year (figure 4).⁸ Such effects were higher for those in mixed-status families (27 percent) but were also felt in families with all citizens (8 percent) and a mix of green card holders and citizens (15 percent).

FIGURE 4

More than 1 in 7 Adults in Immigrant Families with Children Reported Immigration Concerns Increased Emotional Distress for Their Children in 2025

In the past 12 months, have any of the children living with you experienced increased stress, anxiety, or sadness because of worries about their own or a family member's immigration status?



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Source: Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey, December 2025.

Notes: The sample for this figure is adults ages 18 and older in immigrant families that include any children 18 and younger. Mixed-status families are families that include undocumented as well as lawfully present immigrants and/or US citizens.

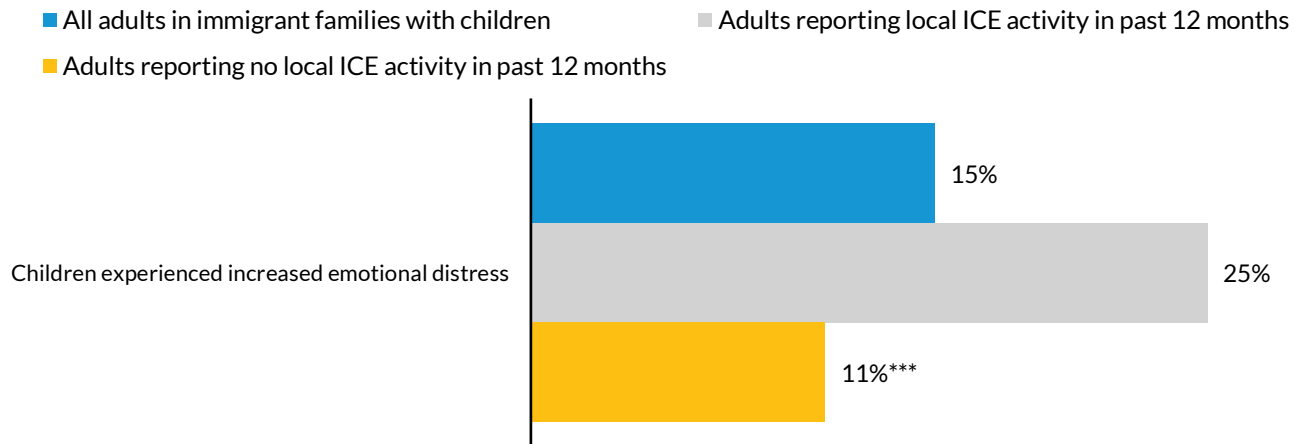
*/**/** Estimate differs significantly from adults in all-citizen immigrant families with children at the 0.10/0.05/0.01 level, using two-tailed tests.

Figure 5 shows that reports of increased stress, anxiety, and sadness among children were also more than twice as high among adults who reported being aware of local ICE activity in the previous year (25 percent) compared with those who reported no local enforcement activity (11 percent).²

FIGURE 5

Adults in Immigrant Families Reporting Local ICE Activity Were More Likely to Report Immigration Concerns Increased Emotional Distress for Their Children in 2025

In the past 12 months, have any of the children living with you experienced increased stress, anxiety, or sadness because of worries about their own or a family member's immigration status?



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Source: Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey, December 2025.

Notes: ICE=Immigration and Customs Enforcement. The sample for this figure is adults ages 18 and older in immigrant families that include any children 18 and younger. The measure of local ICE activity is self-reported and reflects respondents' awareness of any type of local immigration enforcement activities.

*/**/** Estimate differs significantly from adults in immigrant families with children reporting no local ICE activity at the 0.10/0.05/0.01 level, using two-tailed tests.

Despite High Levels of Material Hardship, Immigrant Families with Children Reported Forgoing Noncash Benefit Programs Because of Immigration Concerns

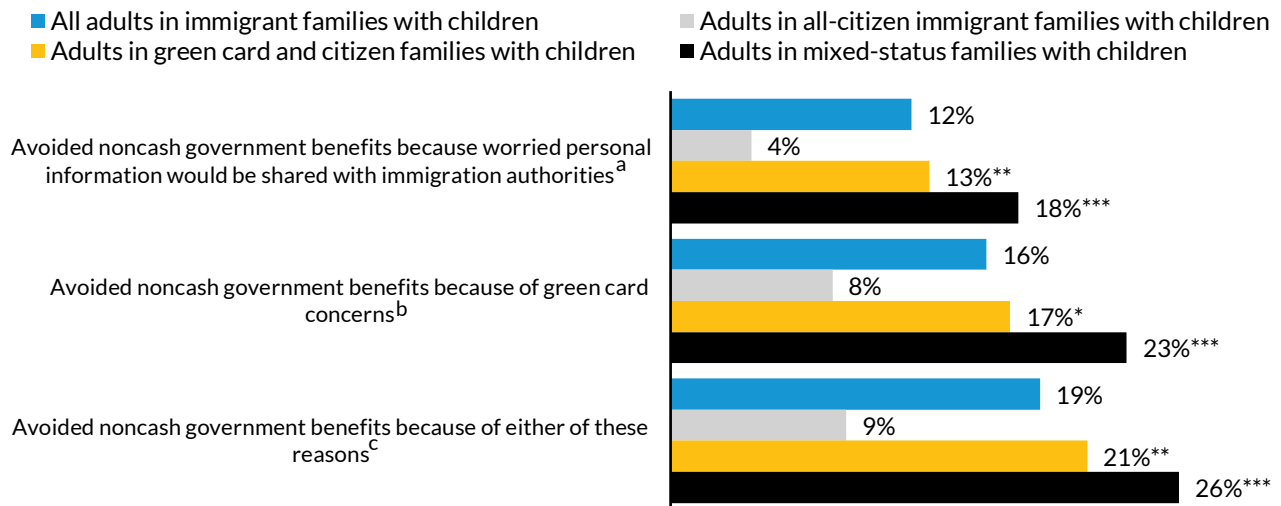
Although many immigrants are ineligible for federal safety net programs, most children of immigrants are US citizens and eligible for safety net programs on the same basis as other citizen children (Haley et al. 2025). Along with reporting withdrawal from essential activities and immigration-related worries, some immigrant families with children reported avoiding safety net programs, consistent with patterns observed in prior years of the WBNS (Gonzalez et al. 2023, 2024, 2025).¹⁰ As shown in figure 6, 12 percent of adults in immigrant families with children reported their family avoided safety net programs because they worried their personal information would be shared with immigration authorities, and 16 percent reported their family decided not to apply for or stopped participating in noncash government programs like Medicaid and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program in the past year because of concerns that program participation would prohibit themselves or a family member from obtaining a green card. In total, 19 percent avoided safety net programs for one or both reasons.

Not applying for or stopping participation in noncash benefit programs for green card reasons was higher among adults in mixed-status families (23 percent) but was also reported in all-citizen immigrant families (8 percent) and families with a mix of green card holders and citizens (17 percent). Forgoing safety net benefits was also more common among those who were aware of local ICE activity (26 percent) than those reporting no local ICE activity (15 percent; data not shown).¹¹ This could mean families who were most attuned to local ICE enforcement activity were also most concerned about program enrollment placing their families' future immigration status at risk.

FIGURE 6

Nearly 1 in 5 Adults in Immigrant Families with Children Reported Forgoing Safety Net Programs Because of Immigration Concerns in 2025

Share of adults in immigrant families with children whose families decided not to apply for and/or stopped participating in one or more noncash government benefits because of immigration concerns



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Source: Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey, December 2025.

Notes: The sample for this figure is adults ages 18 and older in immigrant families that include any children 18 and younger. Mixed-status families are families that include undocumented as well as lawfully present immigrants and/or US citizens. Figure shows the share who reported saying “yes” when asked (a) “Was there a time in the past 12 months when you or someone in your family did not apply for or participate in noncash government benefits because you were worried that your or your family member’s personal information would be shared with immigration authorities?”; (b) “Was there a time in the past 12 months when you or someone in your family decided not to apply for one or more noncash government benefits, such as Medicaid or CHIP, SNAP (or food stamps), or housing subsidies, because you were worried it would disqualify you or a family member or relative from obtaining a green card?” or “Was there a time in the past 12 months when you or someone in your family stopped participating in any noncash government benefits, such as Medicaid or CHIP, SNAP (or food stamps), or housing subsidies, because you were worried it would disqualify you or a family member or relative from obtaining a green card?”; or (c) any of these questions.

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

Immigrant families with children decided not to apply for or stopped participating in safety net programs despite high levels of material hardship. As shown in figure 7, overall, more than half of adults in immigrant families with children (60 percent) reported experiencing one or more material hardships in the past year: 44 percent reported someone in the family had an unmet need for health care because of costs; 36 percent reported experiencing household food insecurity; 19 percent reported problems paying family medical bills; 19 percent reported problems paying gas, oil, or electricity bills; 16 percent reported problems paying rent or mortgage; 12 percent reported problems paying water bills; and 7 percent reported heating or electric utilities being shut off.

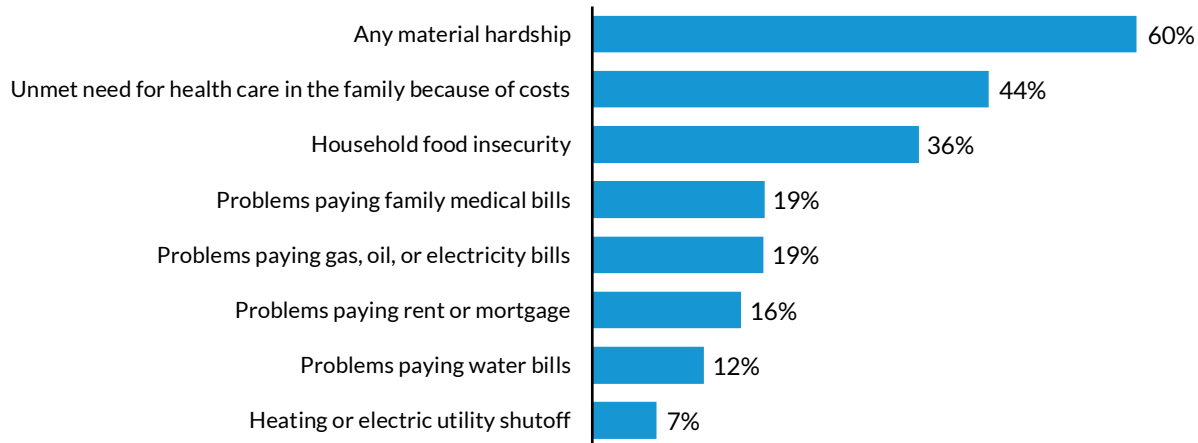
Material hardships were higher in mixed-status families but were reported across all types of immigrant families with children, including 50 percent of adults in all-citizen families, 64 percent in green card and citizen families, and 69 percent in mixed-status families with children (data not shown). Among adults in mixed-status immigrant families with children, 51 percent reported someone in the family had an unmet need for health care because of costs; 41 percent reported food insecurity; 26 percent reported problems paying family medical bills; 22 percent reported problems paying rent or mortgage; 21 percent reported problems paying gas, oil, or electricity bills; 19 percent

reported problems paying water bills; and 13 percent reported experiencing heating or electric utilities being shut off (data not shown).

FIGURE 7

Most Adults in Immigrant Families with Children Reported Experiencing Material Hardship in 2025

Share of adults in immigrant families with children reporting material hardships in the past 12 months



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Source: Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey, December 2025.

Notes: The sample for this figure is adults ages 18 and older in immigrant families that include any children 18 and younger. Unmet health care needs refer to someone in the family needing prescription drugs; a doctor visit; medical tests, treatment, or follow-up care; dental care; mental health care or counseling; or treatment or counseling for alcohol or drug use, but did not get it because they couldn't afford it. Household food insecurity is based on the six-item short form of the USDA's Household Food Security Survey Module and uses a 12-month reference period. Respondents with two to four affirmative responses are defined as having *low household food security*, and respondents with five to six affirmative responses are defined as having *very low household food security*. These groups are jointly defined as *food insecure*.

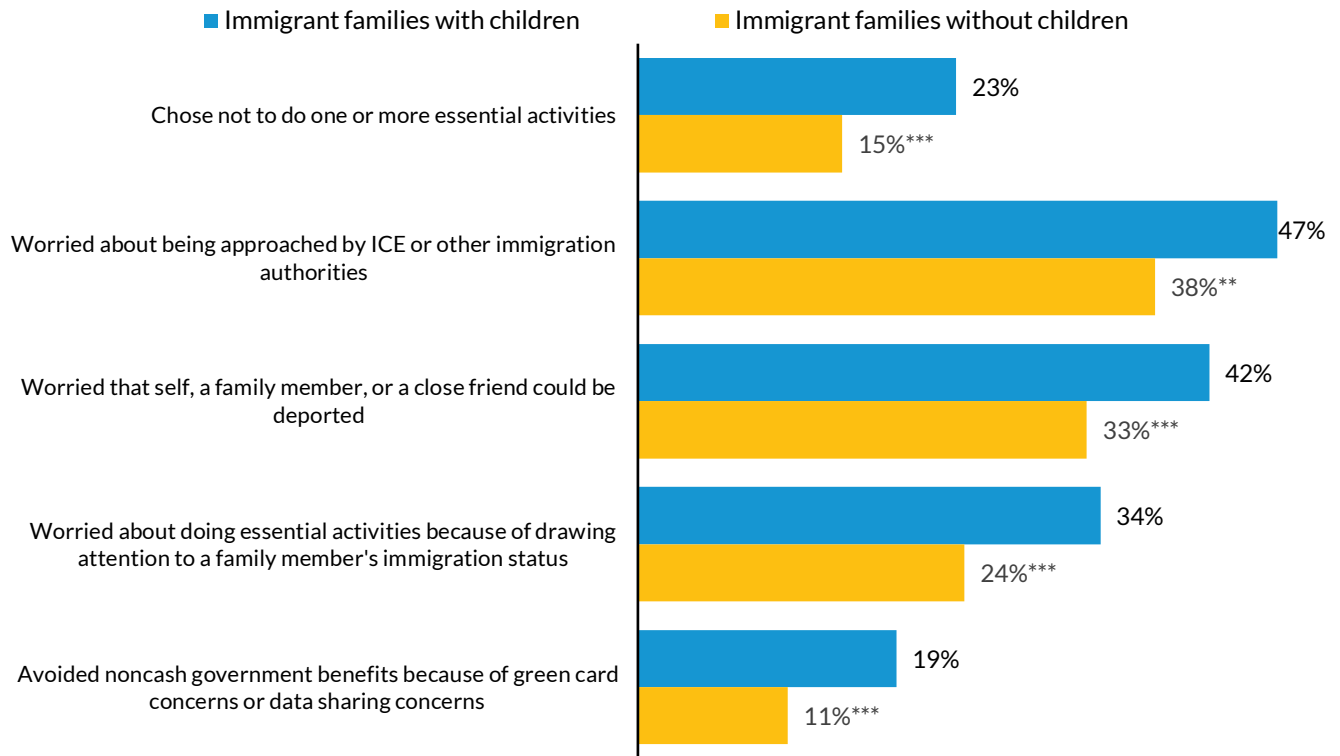
Immigrant Families with Children Were More Likely to Report Immigration-Related Disruptions and Worries than Those Without Children

Adults in immigrant families with children were more likely to report that they or their families had chosen not to do essential activities, forgone safety net programs, and worried about doing essential activities compared with those without children. Over one in five adults in immigrant families with children (23 percent) did not do one or more essential activities because of worry about drawing attention to family immigration status, compared with 15 percent of those without children (figure 8).¹² Adults in immigrant families with children were also more likely to worry about being approached by immigration authorities (47 versus 38 percent); potential deportation of themselves, a family member, or close friend (42 versus 33 percent); and conducting essential activities (34 versus 24 percent). They also reported higher rates of forgoing safety net programs because of immigration concerns (19 versus 11 percent).

FIGURE 8

Disruptions to Essential Activities and Worries Were Higher Among Immigrant Families with Children Than Those Without Children

Share of adults in immigrant families reporting selected activities and worries, by presence of children 18 and younger in the household



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Source: Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey, December 2025.

Notes: The sample for this figure is adults ages 18 and older in immigrant families. Selected essential activities include talking to police; driving a car; going to work; attending religious services or community events; sending children to school, child care, or after-school activities; and visiting a doctor's office, health clinic, or hospital.

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

Conclusion

In 2025, worries about drawing attention to their families' immigration status caused immigrant families with children to not take part in essential activities like driving, attending community events and religious services, and visiting health care settings, and for their children to miss out on school, child care, or after-school activities. Immigrant families with children also expressed worries about ICE enforcement and about doing essential activities because of immigration concerns, with 1 in 6 adults in immigrant families with children reporting that their children experienced increased emotional distress in 2025 because of immigration concerns. Despite high levels of material hardship, immigrant families with children continued to forgo safety net programs that could help them meet their basic needs, which may have exacerbated the stresses these families experienced. Together, cutting back on essential activities, worrying about ICE enforcement, and forgoing programs important for meeting people's basic needs could place significant strain and hardship on both adults and children in these families.

These disruptions to daily life and worries about immigration concerns were higher in immigrant families with children than in those without children. Moreover, they were widespread, occurring in every region across the country (data not shown). Effects were found among different types of immigrant families with children, including among those with no undocumented members and those who reported not being aware of local ICE enforcement activities. But across the board, disruptions and worry were highest among mixed-status families: more than 4 in 10 had avoided activities because of worries about immigration, more than 6 in 10 worried about encountering ICE enforcement or potential deportations of themselves or loved ones, and 1 in 4 reported their children’s emotional distress increased because of immigration concerns. People who reported their local communities experienced ICE activity were also more likely to report disruptions to their daily lives and more than twice as likely to report that their children experienced increased distress than those who were unaware of such activities in their communities. Such disruptions and worries may also have risen since these data were collected in December 2025, given the high-profile enforcement efforts that have occurred in early 2026.

Such effects could compromise children’s health, education, and well-being both immediately and in the long term. For instance, if family avoidance of medical settings and health care and nutrition programs extends to children in the family, this would be expected to harm children’s health and health care in the near term; negatively affect their development, income, and educational attainment into adulthood; and increase their reliance on government support (Boudreaux Golberstein, and McAlpine 2016; Brown, Kowalski, and Lurie 2020; Cohodes et al. 2016; Howell and Kenney 2012; NoghaniBehambari 2021; Ratcliffe, McKernan, and Zhang 2011; Sommers et al. 2017; Wherry, Kenney, and Sommers 2016; Wherry et al. 2018). Likewise, consequences of children’s increased stress and missed learning could be lifelong (Allison et al. 2019; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child 2007). Moreover, the withdrawal of these families from daily activities could reduce the richness of public life for their entire communities, immigrant and nonimmigrant alike. And with one in every four children in the US living in an immigrant family, most of whom are US citizens, elevated worries and hardships experienced by immigrant families with children could have lasting, damaging effects that are felt by the nation as a whole (Haley et al. 2025; Novak et al. 2025).

Notes

¹ Physicians for Human Rights, “ICE Tactics and Deportation Fears Limit Access to Health Care for Children of Immigrants: Survey,” November 19, 2025, <https://phr.org/news/ice-tactics-and-deportation-fears-limit-access-to-health-care-for-children-of-immigrants-survey/>.

² Survey respondents reported immigration and citizenship status for themselves, spouses/partners, children younger than age 19, and other relatives living with them.

³ We asked respondents, “As far as you know, have there been any ICE raids or other immigration enforcement activity where you live, work, go shopping, or regularly go in the past 12 months?” Response options included yes, no, and don’t know. The measure of local ICE activity in communities is self-reported and reflects a respondent’s awareness of local enforcement activities, which may or may not be visible to or perceived by respondents (Bernstein, Gonzalez, and Guelespe 2026). Awareness of enforcement activity does not necessarily mean that their locality had been targeted for a high-profile operation and could include a variety of activities such as traffic stops, arrests at homes, or raids at worksites or other community spaces.

⁴ Dan Berry, “A Shocked Nation Watches Minneapolis Killings: ‘Something Needs to Change,’” *New York Times*, January 27, 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/01/27/us/alex-pretti-shooting-minneapolis-reaction.html>.

⁵ Avoidance of talking to police and attending religious services or community events was also statistically significantly higher for immigrant families with children than immigrant families without children (data not shown).

⁶ See note 3.

⁷ See note 3.

- ⁸ Of the remainder, 66 percent reported their child or children did not experience increased distress, and 17 percent did not know if their children experienced increased distress (data not shown).
- ⁹ See note 3. Sample size limitations preclude precise estimates for each family type by reported awareness of ICE activity, but the underlying pattern shows higher rates of increased emotional distress among children in mixed-status families regardless of reported awareness of local ICE activity (data not shown).
- ¹⁰ Avoidance of public programs due to green card concerns among working-age adults (ages 18 to 64) was consistent with patterns over recent years (Gonzalez et al. 2023, 2024, 2025).
- ¹¹ See note 3. Sample size limitations preclude precise estimates for family type by reported awareness of ICE activity, but the underlying pattern shows higher rates of avoidance of safety net programs in mixed-status families regardless of reported awareness of local ICE activity (data not shown).
- ¹² Estimate excludes sending children to school, child care, or after-school activities, which was not asked of families without children. Estimates for the summary measure with and without this exclusion do not change meaningfully.

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