

Immigrant Families Continued Avoiding the Safety Net during the COVID-19 Crisis

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In its first days in office, the Biden administration has already moved to reverse many of the Trump administration's immigration policies that created a climate of fear and insecurity for many immigrant families. The prior administration's changes to the "public charge" rule intensified immigrant families' reluctance to participate in public benefit programs and supports that address basic health, nutrition, and housing needs.¹ According to new data from the Urban Institute's December 2020 Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey (WBNS), immigrant families continued avoiding noncash public programs and other supports in 2020 because of concerns about immigration status.

Findings

In 2020, almost one in seven adults in immigrant families (13.6 percent) reported that they or a family member avoided a noncash government benefit program, such as Medicaid, the Children's Health Insurance Program, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or housing assistance, because of concerns about future green card applications (figure 1).² This "chilling effect" was most significant in families more likely to be directly affected by the rule, those in which one or more members do not have a green card (27.7 percent).

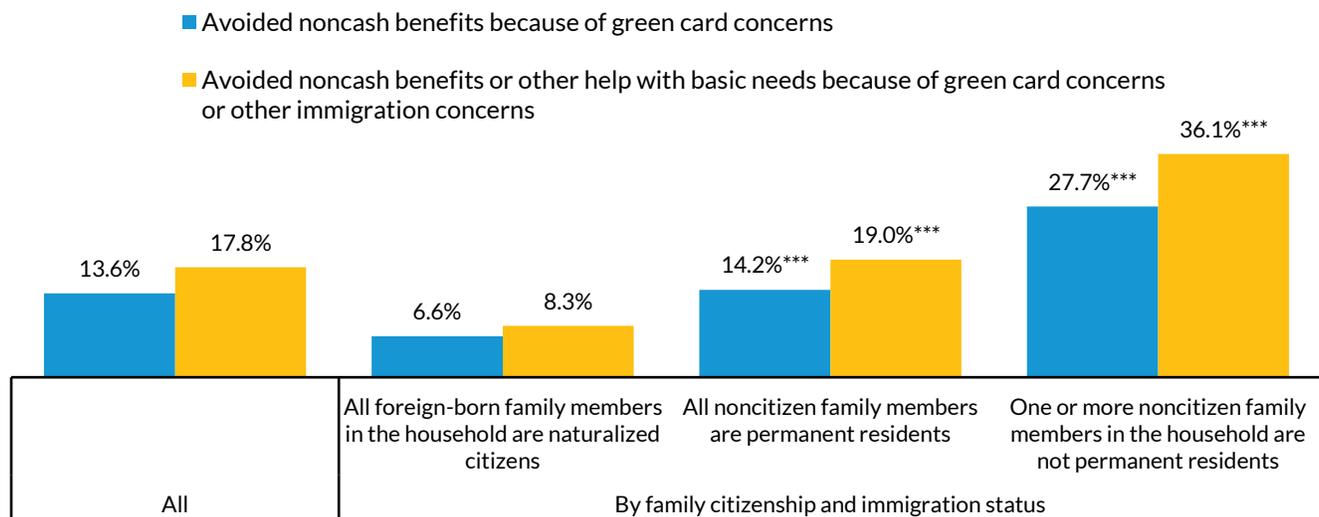
Immigrant families avoided public benefits and supports not only because of perceived risks of how the public charge rule might affect their ability to secure a green card but because of broader immigration concerns, such as the risk of information being shared with immigration enforcement authorities or the deportation of family members.³ In 2020, more than one in six adults in immigrant families (17.8 percent) reported avoiding a noncash government benefit program or other help with basic needs because of green card concerns or other worries about immigration status or enforcement. More than one in three adults in families in which one or more members do not have a green card (36.1 percent) reported these broader chilling effects.

Policy Implications

Analyses have found that the new public charge rule, first proposed in 2018, had a chilling effect on immigrant families' participation in safety net programs even before it took effect in February 2020.⁴ The continued chilling effects experienced by immigrant families in 2020 are alarming in the context of the pandemic, during which people of color, many of whom are part of immigrant families, have disproportionately experienced economic and health hardships.⁵ Avoiding medical care and emergency supports necessitated by the pandemic presents risks to adults' and children's well-being and bears consequences for public health and essential industries. The new administration has an opportunity to change course. Beyond reversing the changes to the public charge rule, government agencies can reassure families that accessing critical basic supports or seeking medical care will not put immigration status at risk. An effective, large-scale communication effort is needed to repair trust and inform immigrant families about their rights and changes to immigration policies expected under the Biden administration.

FIGURE 1

Share of Adults in Immigrant Families Who Avoided Noncash Government Benefits in the Past Year Because of Immigration Concerns, Overall and by Household Citizenship and Immigration Status, December 2020



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Source: Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey, December 2020.

Notes: Adults are ages 18 to 64. Categories are constructed around the citizenship and immigration status of the foreign-born family members in the household, but each group may contain US-born family members (including the respondent). ***/*** Estimate differs significantly from adults in households where all foreign-born family members are naturalized citizens at the 0.10/0.05/0.01 level, using two-tailed tests.

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. Surveys are subject to various sources of error, including coverage and nonresponse error, sampling error, and measurement error. The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on survey research, including the findings in this report, are not yet fully understood. Comparing 2020 results with those from earlier years should be approached with caution, particularly for subgroup estimates, which are subject to greater sampling error than estimates for the overall sample of adults in immigrant families.

Notes

- 1 Hamutal Bernstein, Dulce Gonzalez, Michael Karpman, and Stephen Zuckerman, “Amid Confusion over the Public Charge Rule, Immigrant Families Continued Avoiding Public Benefits in 2019” (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2020).
- 2 The difference between the share of adults in immigrant families avoiding public benefits in 2020 over green card concerns and the shares doing so in 2018 (13.7 percent) and 2019 (15.7 percent) is not statistically significant. These estimates differ slightly from our previously published 2018 and 2019 estimates, which were estimated using regression adjustment.
- 3 Food Research and Action Center and National Immigration Law Center, “Food over Fear: Overcoming Barriers to Connect Latinx Immigrant Families to Federal Nutrition and Food Programs,” (Washington, DC: Food and Research Action Center, 2020).
- 4 Holly Straut-Eppsteiner, “Documenting through Service Provider Accounts Harm Caused by the Department of Homeland Security’s Public Charge Rule,” (Washington, DC: National Immigration Law Center, 2020); and Jennifer Tolbert, Olivia Pham, and Samantha Artiga, “Impact of Shifting Immigration Policy on Medicaid Enrollment and Utilization of Care among Health Center Patients,” (San Francisco: Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, 2020).
- 5 Dulce Gonzalez, Michael Karpman, Genevieve M. Kenney, and Stephen Zuckerman, “Hispanic Adults in Families with Noncitizens Disproportionately Feel the Economic Fallout from COVID-19,” (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2020).