

# Immigrant Families and Workers

FACTS AND PERSPECTIVES

## IMMIGRANT WELL-BEING IN NEW YORK AND LOS ANGELES

### Central Issues

Despite their strong attachment to the labor force, large numbers of immigrants and their families in New York and Los Angeles have low incomes, lack health insurance, and are food insecure.<sup>1</sup> The most powerful predictor of poverty and hardship is their limited English skills. Legal immigrants arriving *after* welfare reform's enactment in 1996—who have the most restricted access to public benefits—are poorer than immigrants arriving before the law's enactment.

### Demographic Context

One in nine U.S. residents and one in four low-wage workers is an immigrant. Most of the children in poor immigrant families are citizens. These families are more likely than their native counterparts to include two parents and at least one full-time worker, counter to the image of a single-parent family led by an unemployed adult that has traditionally been associated with poverty.

### Policy Context

The 1996 welfare reform act was designed to reduce welfare dependency by promoting work. The law restricted legal immigrants' access to Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and related employment services; it also reduced their access to food stamps, Medicaid, and the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP)—the primary public programs providing food assistance and health insurance to low-income working families. Legal immigrants arriving after welfare reform's enactment are eligible for fewer benefits than are those who arrived before enactment.

In May 2002 Congress partially restored federal food stamp eligibility by expanding coverage for legal immigrant children. As of July 2002 there were proposals before the Congress to further restore Medicaid, TANF, and other benefits to post-enactment immigrants (i.e., those entering after August 1996).

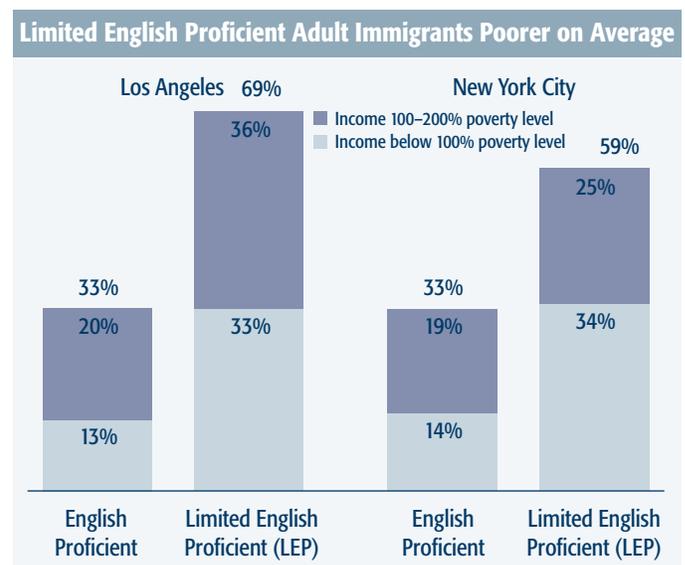
### Income and Language Skills

As 20 percent of all U.S. immigrants live in New York City and Los Angeles County, their status is key to understanding immi-

grant well-being nationwide. In 1999–2000, 30 percent of immigrant families with children in these two cities were poor; more than half had incomes below 200 percent of the poverty level. In both cities nearly three quarters of low-income immigrant families included at least one working adult, compared to 58 percent of native families in California and 64 percent in New York State.

Legal immigrants in New York and Los Angeles who entered the country after 1996 were poorer than those who arrived earlier, despite new policies requiring their sponsors to demonstrate incomes over 125 percent of the federal poverty level. The share of legal permanent residents entering since August 1996 with incomes below the poverty line was 30 percent in Los Angeles and 40 percent in New York City, compared to 27 and 29 percent for immigrants entering before 1996.

In New York, two-thirds of foreign-born adults could be classified as limited English proficient (LEP).<sup>2</sup> One-quarter lacked a high school diploma. In Los Angeles three-quarters of immigrant adults had limited English skills and one-third lacked a diploma. In both cities low educational attainment and limited English proficiency were closely associated with low earnings, poverty, and hardship.



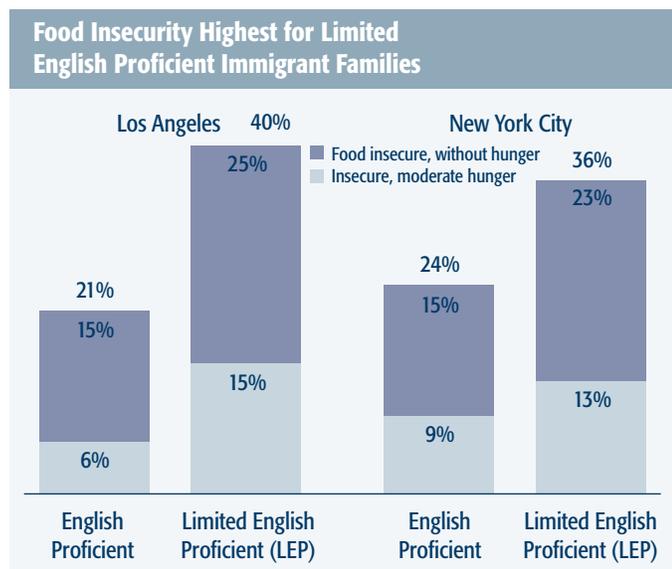
Source: Urban Institute, 2002.

## Food Insecurity and Food Assistance

One-third of all immigrant families in Los Angeles and 31 percent in New York were food insecure in 1999–2000, according to a standard U.S. Department of Agriculture definition. Just over 10 percent experienced food insecurity with moderate hunger. Food insecurity and hunger rates were almost three times as high for immigrant families as for native-born citizen families.

Hardship was more closely associated with limited English proficiency than either legal status or period of arrival to the United States. In Los Angeles the rate of food insecurity was twice as high among families where one or more adults were LEP when compared to more proficient families. In both cities, about half of families with adults who spoke no English at all were food insecure.

Only 20 percent of food insecure immigrant families received food stamps during the year before the survey. Half of families receiving food stamps in 1996–97 were no longer receiving benefits in 1999–2000, while another quarter had their benefits reduced. Food stamp participation was highest among families with adults who did not speak English very well.



Source: Urban Institute, 2002.

## Health Insurance Coverage

In Los Angeles, 40 percent of noncitizen children and 22 percent of citizen children in immigrant families were uninsured, compared to 6 percent of children in California's native citizen families. In New York City, 28 percent of noncitizen children and 8 percent of citizen children in immigrant families were uninsured, versus 6 percent of children in native citizen families in New York State. These findings suggest that health insurance rates for children depend on the citizenship and legal status of both children and their parents. The findings also suggest that the New York State Children's Health Insurance Program had succeeded in enrolling large numbers of children in immigrant families.

Forty-two percent of immigrant adults in Los Angeles and 38 percent in New York City lacked health insurance coverage—rates roughly triple those for native citizens in New York State and California. The primary reason for this gap was that immigrants were less likely to have job-based health insurance coverage. They were, however, as likely as natives to be enrolled in Medicaid.

## Language and Poverty Link

In New York and Los Angeles hardship and the need for benefits are more closely associated with limited English proficiency than with citizenship or legal status. Thus more effective English language instruction is an essential anti-poverty tool for working immigrant families. One strategy that might increase English language acquisition would be to give credit for English instruction under revised TANF work requirements.

## The Data

These findings are based on a survey of 3,447 immigrant families (i.e., those with at least one foreign-born adult) conducted during late 1999 and early 2000 by the Urban Institute and the Survey Research Center of the University of California, Los Angeles. The Los Angeles New York City Immigrant Survey (LANYCIS) describes the living conditions of about 4.8 million people in Los Angeles County and 3.5 million people in New York City. Unlike other household surveys with large samples, LANYCIS includes information on immigration status. It was conducted in five languages, included respondents from over 100 countries, and had a strong response rate of 69 percent.

## Further Details

- Capps, Randy, Leighton Ku, and Michael Fix. 2002. "How Are Immigrants Faring After Welfare Reform? Preliminary Evidence from Los Angeles and New York City," final report to U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Urban Institute, <http://www.urban.org/ViewPub.cfm?PublicationID=7538>.
- Fix, Michael, and Jeffrey S. Passel. 2002. "The Scope and Impact of Welfare Reform's Immigration Provisions," *Assessing the New Federalism* Discussion Paper 02–03. Urban Institute, <http://www.urban.org/ViewPub.cfm?PublicationID=7522>.

## Endnotes

1. According to the USDA, a household is food insecure if, at some time during the previous year, it was uncertain of having, or unable to acquire, adequate food sufficient to meet basic needs because of inadequate resources.
2. English proficient respondents either speak English at home or report speaking it "very well." Limited English proficient respondents report speaking English "well," "not well," or "not at all."

## Acknowledgements

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