



STATE POLICIES MATTER FOR THE WELL-BEING OF IMMIGRANT PARENTS & THE ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT OF THEIR YOUNG CHILDREN

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This brief is part of a series on child and parent well-being in immigrant families.

Background

Over one in four children in the United States live with at least one immigrant parent as of 2022.¹ Immigrants include anyone residing in the U.S. who was born in a foreign country. This includes naturalized citizens, green card holders, asylum applicants, Temporary Protected Status holders, and those with unauthorized status. Children in immigrant families are overrepresented in families with low incomes.¹ In other words, an estimated 7.6 million children in immigrant families live with a household income of \$59,400 or less for a family of four.

Social programs are shown to benefit adults' well-being and children's development.² Social programs include government programs that provide nutrition (e.g., SNAP, also known as food stamps; WIC), health insurance (e.g., Medicaid and CHIP) and cash assistance (e.g., TANF) programs for individuals with low-income, and also can include other eligibility requirements. The federal government excludes many immigrants from social programs.³ States have flexibility to expand or reduce coverage to social programs for immigrants. States differ widely in their social program eligibility policies for immigrants. More work is needed on how state policy exclusions impair the well-being of immigrant families. This brief reports on research that examines the role of state policy exclusions on immigrant family well-being.

Who are the children of immigrants?⁴

1 in 4 children in the U.S. live with an immigrant parent.



88% of these children were born in the U.S.



49% of these children live in families with low-incomes.



Who are immigrants in the U.S.?⁴

Immigrants are those born abroad and live in the U.S.; they make up 14% of the U.S. population in 2022. This includes naturalized citizens (49%); green card holders (19%), and those with temporary protected status, DACA recipients and humanitarian parolees (8%).

66% of all immigrants arrived prior to 2010.



54% reported speaking English "very well."

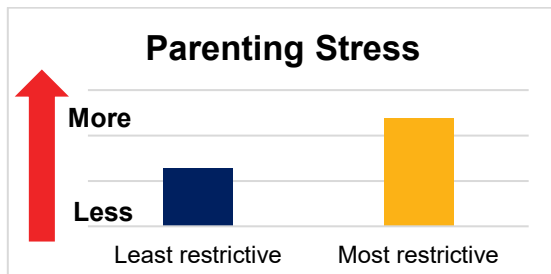


What did we find?

State policies matter for the well-being of immigrant parents and the academic achievement of their young children. Below are the main findings from our study.

Parent Well-being: Immigrant parents experience higher parenting-related stress in states with restrictive policies. These are immigrant parents with young children and low incomes.

- Parental stress was *higher* in restrictive states when children were 2 and 4 years old.



SOURCE: U.S. Dept. of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Birth Cohort (ECLS-B).

Note. Significant differences in parental stress were found when children were 2 and 4 years old. This graph shows findings at age 4, but similar significant findings were found at age 2.

- Immigrant parents described experiencing less stress when they had access to social programs.

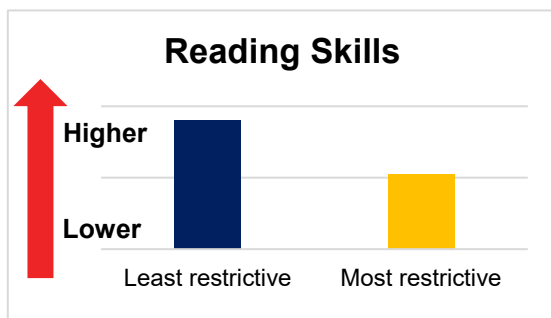


It is also that if you are not doing well yourself, very stressed, you don't have what you need that day to buy food, and you stress, you stress, and you are in a bad mood... if you receive that support... it is like economic relief... These programs, I repeat, are not only about here it [the resource] is, but it is look, here you can do this with it [what you receive].

Parents who we spoke to were aware of state policy differences towards immigrants. Parents described greater stress and alienation in more restrictive states.

Child Academic Achievement: Access to social programs was linked to positive developmental outcomes for children. These are children of immigrant parents with low incomes.

- Children in restrictive states had lower reading skills at age 4 and kindergarten entry.



SOURCE: U.S. Dept. of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Birth Cohort (ECLS-B).

Note. Significant differences in readings skills were found when children were 4 years old and in. This graph shows findings at kindergarten, but similar significant findings were found at age 4.

- Parents described feeling less stressed and having more time and resources to dedicate to their children when they had access to social programs.



And with food stamps, you grab [all your] kids, grab your list, and let's go. You only search if you're looking for lower prices, but you don't have to look to cut anything off the list and sometimes you can even have the luxury of 'oh, grab some cookies, grab a juice,' so, grocery shopping becomes family time.

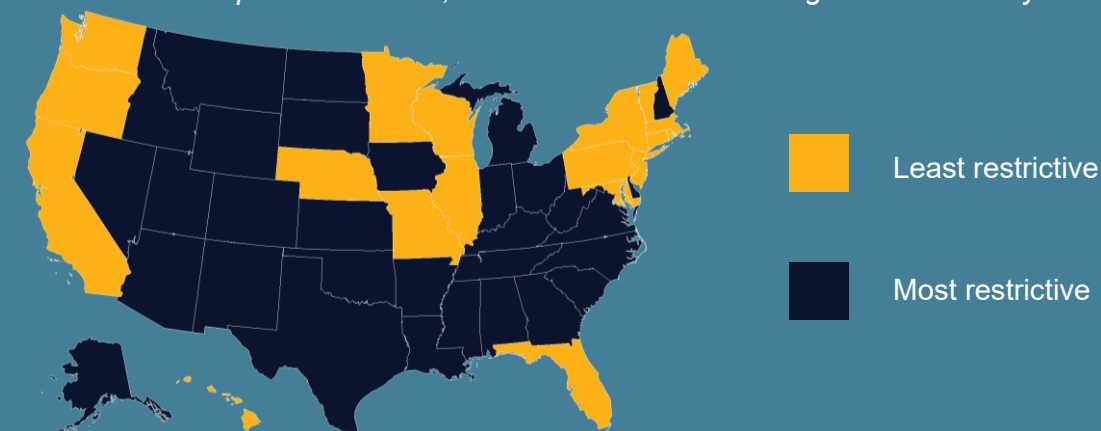
What are State Policies Exclusions?

The 1996 Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) excluded many immigrants from social programs.³ For example, immigrants with green cards are barred from receiving federally funded social programs during their first five years with a green card. At the same time, it gave individual states the flexibility to expand or reduce coverage for different immigrant groups. As a result, there is a lot of variation in how states have expanded or excluded immigrants from social programs.

Social Programs include:

- Nutritional Programs
 - Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)
 - Women, Infants & Children (WIC) program
 - Or state replacement program
- Income Support
 - Supplemental Security Income
 - General Assistance
 - Temporary Assistance to Needy Families
- Health Insurance
 - Medicaid
 - Children's Health Insurance Program
 - Or similar state replacement program (e.g., HUSKY Health for Connecticut Children and Adults)

We categorized states as (1) most restrictive or (2) least restrictive⁵, see the map below. *This map of states with exclusionary policies reflects state policies in 2001, which aligns with the years of data collection for the quantitative data; some states would be categorized differently today.*



Implications

- States with less restrictive policies benefit children and parents in immigrant families. State policymakers should consider how proposed policy changes impose added stress to immigrant parents and are harmful for children's academic preparation. More restrictive states can take actions to create more inclusive social policies to benefit families in their state.
- In addition to state policymakers, federal policy makers should consider changes to policies at the federal level to ensure that eligible children across all states are benefiting.
- Access to social programs was linked to positive developmental outcomes for children in immigrant families. Those who work with families to access social programs should ensure that eligible families sign up and receive the benefits.

How did we conduct this research?

This study utilized a mixed methods approach. First, we used data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study – Birth Cohort (ECLS-B). The ECLS-B is a nationally representative survey of children born in the U.S. in 2001. Second, we conducted focus groups with 35 immigrant parents in two states with different social policies. Focus groups were analyzed for patterns in responses in relation to the research questions.

For more information on the study, including research methods and references, read the [full study](#), which is publicly available.

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¹ Lou, C., Adams, G., & Bernstein, H. (2019). *Part of us: A data-driven look at children of immigrants*. Urban Institute. <https://www.urban.org/features/part-us-data-driven-look-children-immigrants>

² National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2019). *A roadmap to reducing child poverty*. National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/25246>

³ Lacarte, V., Gelatt, J., & Podplesky, A. (2024). *Immigrants' eligibility for U.S. public benefits: A primer*. Migration Policy Institute. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/immigrants-publicbenefits-primer>

⁴ Batalova. (2025, March 25). Frequently requested statistics on immigrants and immigration in the United States. Migration Policy Institute. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/frequently-requested-statistics-immigrants-and-immigration-united-states>

⁵ Zimmerman, W., & Tumlin, K. C. (1999). Patchwork policies: State assistance for immigrants under welfare reform. The Urban Institute.