

THE HEALTH AND WELL-BEING OF YOUNG CHILDREN OF IMMIGRANTS

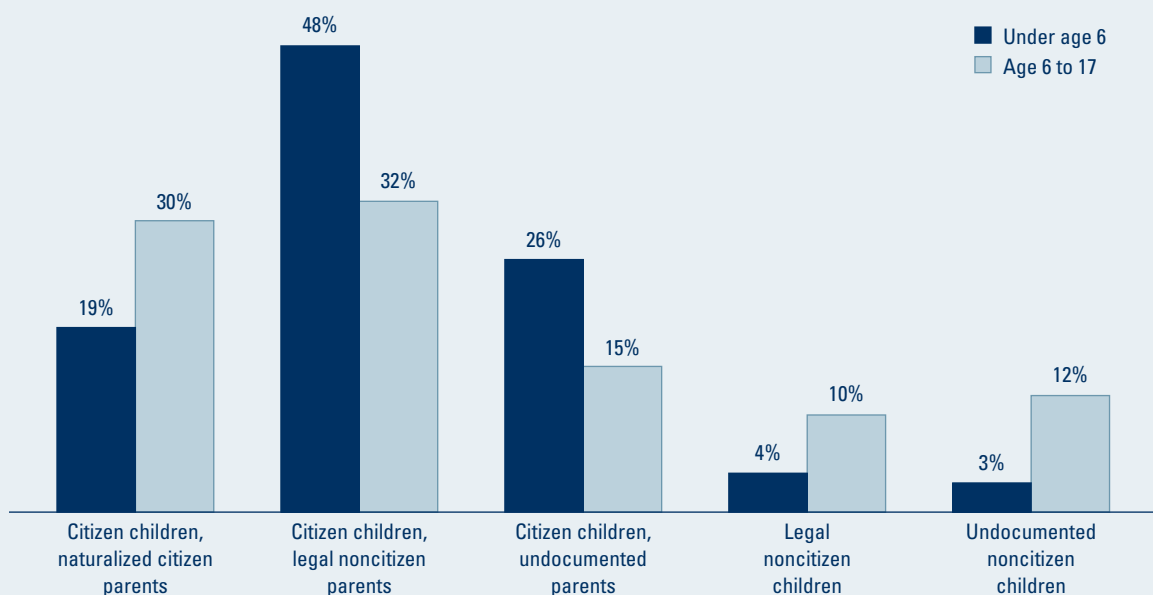
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This brief summarizes the results of recent Urban Institute research on the health and well-being of young children under 6 in immigrant families, that is, those with at least one parent born outside the United States. The research responds to several imperatives. First, despite the fact that young children of immigrants compose a large and rising share of the nation's young child population, comparatively little is known about them. Second, young children of immigrants differ from young children of natives and from older children of immigrants in some ways that are pertinent to policy. Finally, it is now widely accepted that the early years of life are crucial for development, underscoring the importance of policies that affect young children.

Key Findings

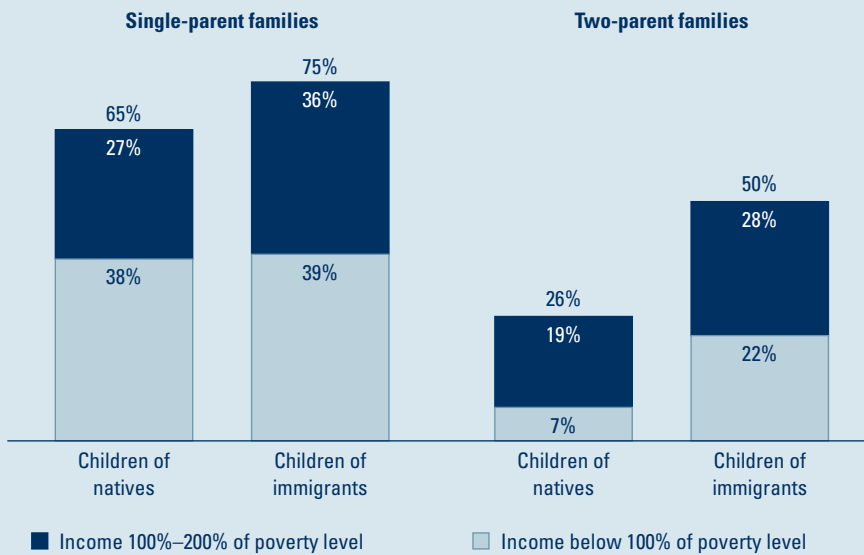
Children of immigrants are a large share of the young child population. Children of immigrants are the fastest growing component of the child population (Hernandez 1999). While immigrants are 11 percent of the total U.S. population, children of immigrants make up 22 percent of the 23.4 million children under 6 in the United States. They make up a larger share of children under 6 than of those age 6 to 17. Policies, then, that advantage or disadvantage younger children—such as child care and early education—will have far-reaching impacts on children of immigrants. Correlatively, policies affecting young children and their families will increasingly be judged by their effects on the health, well-being, and school readiness of children of immigrants.

FIGURE 1. Distribution by Legal Status of Young Children of Immigrants and Their Parents, 2002



Source: March 2002 U.S. Current Population Survey, with Urban Institute assignments of legal status to noncitizen adults and children.
Note: Percentages may not add to 100 because of rounding.

FIGURE 2. Low-Income and Poverty Rates for Children under 6 by Family Structure, 2002



Source: 2002 National Survey of America's Families.

Most young children of immigrants are citizens living in mixed-status families. Almost all (93 percent) children of immigrants under 6 are citizens. Most live in mixed-status families with one or more noncitizen parents. These legal and illegal noncitizen parents may be reluctant to approach public or publicly funded institutions for services despite their children's citizenship and eligibility. One result is that children of immigrants use public benefits less often than children of natives, despite higher rates of economic hardship.

Over one-quarter of young children of immigrants have undocumented parents. Twenty-nine percent of children of immigrants under 6 live in families with one or more undocumented parents. Twenty-six percent of these children are U.S.-born citizens with undocumented parents, and 3 percent are themselves undocumented (figure 1). No matter how Congress resolves the current debate over providing legal status for undocumented immigrants, the results will have a major impact on large

numbers of immigrant families with young children.

More young children of immigrants than natives live in two-parent families. Children of immigrants under 6 are more likely to live in two-parent families than natives (86 versus 75 percent), but they are *less* likely to live in families with two working parents (43 versus 50 percent). The presence of two parents appears to have a less pronounced effect on reducing poverty in immigrant than native households owing to lower wages and lower employment levels among immigrant women. Children of immigrants with two parents are three times as likely to have incomes below the poverty level (22 versus 7 percent) and about twice as likely to be low income—i.e., to have incomes less than twice the federal poverty level (50 versus 26 percent, as shown in figure 2).

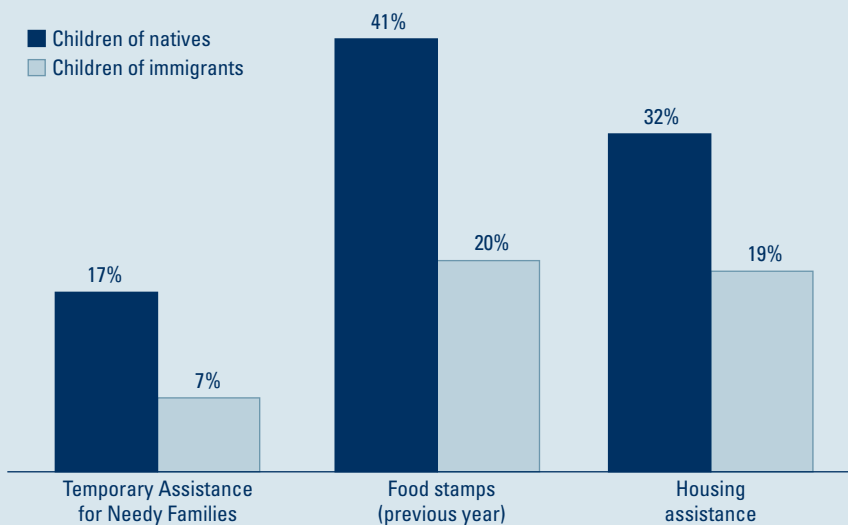
Many young children of immigrants live in families with low incomes and have parents with low education levels and limited English proficiency. They also interact less often with their parents. All these factors are associated with lower performance in school.

- Fifty-six percent of young children of immigrants live in low-income families; 64 percent of *foreign-born* children of immigrants live in low-income families.
- Twenty-nine percent of all low-income children under 6 in the United States are children of immigrants.
- Even in families where both parents work, almost a quarter (24 percent) of children of immigrants are low income, a rate more than twice that for children of natives (11 percent).
- Twenty-nine percent of young children of immigrants have parents with less than a high school education (versus 8 percent for children of natives).
- Fifty-eight percent have one or more limited English proficient parents.
- Seventy-four percent of young children of immigrants are read to by their parents at least three times a week, compared with 89 percent of children of natives.

Young children of immigrants experience high levels of economic hardship but fewer use benefits than children of natives. Children of immigrants are substantially more likely to be poor and to experience food- and housing-related hardship. Fifty-six percent of young children of immigrants are low-income versus 40 percent of young children of natives. Young children of immigrants are more likely to live in families with one or more food-related problems (40 versus 27 percent). Young children of immigrants are also four times more likely than young children of natives to live in crowded housing¹ (32 versus 8 percent), and they are twice as likely to live in families spending over half their monthly income on rent or mortgage costs (14 versus 7 percent).

At the same time, low-income children of natives under 6 are twice as likely to receive food stamps and more than twice as likely to receive Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) as young low-income children of immigrants (figure 3). And low-income chil-

FIGURE 3. Share of Low-Income Children under 6 Receiving Public Benefits, 2002



Source: 2002 National Survey of America's Families.

Note: Low-income is income below 200 percent of the federal poverty level.

dren of natives are more likely than their peers in immigrant families to receive housing assistance.²

One partial explanation for lower levels of public benefit use is that many young *noncitizen* children are ineligible for federal means-tested public benefit programs like TANF, food stamps, housing assistance, and Medicaid. Almost half of young noncitizen children are undocumented and are, as a result, ineligible for virtually all benefits except emergency Medicaid. At the same time, welfare reform's exclusion of immigrants from federal means-tested public benefits for five years after entry effectively excludes almost all legal noncitizen children under 6 from services during this critical time in their development. Moreover, many eligible *citizen* children with noncitizen parents do not participate in these programs because the parents are unaware that their children are eligible. They may also be afraid of receiving benefits because of the consequences for retaining legal status or becoming a citizen. Further, because TANF is often the

gateway to other benefits, children of immigrants may be excluded from such work supports as child care subsidies.

Children of immigrants are more likely to be in fair or poor health and to lack health insurance or a usual source of health care. Young low-income children of immigrants are twice as likely to be uninsured as those of natives (22 versus 11 percent), despite a rise in coverage

between 1999 and 2002 (from 45 to 57 percent). Seven percent of young children of immigrants are reported in "fair or poor health" by their parents, over twice the rate for children of natives (3 percent). More than twice as many young children of immigrants as natives lack a "usual source of health care" (8 versus 3 percent).

Children of immigrants are more often in parental care and less often in center-based child care. Children of immigrants under 6 are more likely to receive child care from parents (53 versus 34 percent for children of natives) and less likely to be in center-based care (17 versus 26 percent, as shown in table 1). Use of center-based care is lowest among children of immigrants whose parents have little education. These differences in use patterns can be partially explained by family structure, low incomes, patterns of work participation, and, perhaps, by differing propensity for care. Access issues such as cost, lack of subsidies, language barriers, and availability of nearby care may also be associated with lower use of center-based care among children of immigrants. While our data show lower participation in center-based care among children of immigrants, little is known about the reasons for these patterns (Takanishi 2004). When only families with two working parents are considered, however, the gap in use of center-based

TABLE 1. Child Care Arrangements for Children under 6, 2002

Child care arrangement	Children of natives (percent)	Children of immigrants (percent)
Parental care/no regular arrangement	34.4	52.8
Nonparental	65.6	47.2
Center-based	26.0	17.0
Relative-provided	25.5	20.4
Home of a nonrelative	9.2	6.9
Nanny or babysitter	4.9	2.9
All arrangements	100.0	100.0

Sources: 1999 and 2002 National Survey of America's Families.

Note: Excludes children enrolled in school.

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care between children of immigrants and natives narrows somewhat.

Child care, especially in center-based settings, may benefit a child's early development and socialization and ease the transition from home to school. Child care may also help children of immigrants adapt to a new culture and language, and overcome linguistic isolation and other barriers (Brandon 2004). At the same time, child care centers can be institutions that provide adult education, improve parenting skills, increase family access to health care and other benefits, and link parents to the communities in which they live.

Data Sources

Data for the analyses presented here are principally drawn from three sources: the 2000 U.S. Census of Population and Housing 1 Percent Sample, the 2002 U.S. Current Population Survey, and the Urban Institute's 2002 National Survey of America's Families.

Notes

1. We define crowded housing as more than two persons per bedroom.
2. The NSAF asked respondents whether the government pays their rent, they live in public housing, or an agency gave them a voucher to help pay rent. We defined families receiving housing assistance to be those answering "yes" to any of these three questions.

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For further information, see the full report by these authors, *The Health and Well-Being of Young Children of Immigrants* (Washington, DC: The Urban Institute, 2005).

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