

Mixed-Status Families and Immigrant Families with Children Continued Avoiding Safety Net Programs in 2023

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During the last two federal administrations, immigrants have experienced rapid shifts in policies affecting their access to public safety net programs. Looming especially large were changes to the public charge rule, by which the Trump administration sought to expand consideration of noncash public benefits receipt (such as Medicaid, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program [SNAP], and housing assistance programs) in applications for green cards (i.e., permanent residency) or temporary visas. An extended process of rulemaking and legal challenges unfolded between 2018 and 2021, with the new rule taking effect in February 2020. The final rule continued to be challenged via litigation efforts until March 2021, when the Biden administration reverted to longstanding public charge guidance, which was formalized in a new rule implemented in December 2022.¹

In this period of policy change and debate, many adults in immigrant families avoided safety net programs for fear of potential immigration consequences (often referred to as “chilling effects”). Since 2018, data collected from the Urban Institute’s Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey (WBNS) have documented a persistent chilling effect on safety net program participation among immigrant families, including during the COVID-19 pandemic, when many families suffered economic and health hardships and needed additional supports to meet their basic needs (Bernstein et al. 2019, 2021). In the aftermath of the most recent public charge rule changes, some federal, state, and local agencies and community organizations across the country made efforts to reassure immigrant families that participation in noncash benefit programs would not have immigration consequences under the current rule and encouraged them to apply for programs they may be eligible for.²

In this summary, we use WBNS data to provide updated estimates of chilling effects in 2023 among immigrant families (i.e., in which the respondent or a family member living with them was not born in the US). Our analysis examines differences in these effects by the presence of children under age 19 in the household and by family citizenship and immigration status. For family citizenship and immigration status, we focus on differences among three groups:

¹“Public Charge Timeline,” Immigrant Legal Resource Center, September 13, 2021, <https://www.ilrc.org/resources/public-charge-timeline>.

²“Words That Work on Public Charge: Opinion Research Insights for Outreach to Immigrant Families,” No Kid Hungry, accessed July 15, 2024, <https://bestpractices.nokidhungry.org/wtw>; “Worried about Immigration or Public Charge Issues? Don’t be Afraid to Apply for CalFresh,” California Department of Social Services and California Department of Public Health, accessed July 15, 2024, <https://www.cdss.ca.gov/calfreshoutreach/res/ImmigrationandPublicCharge.pdf>; “Public Charge Resource,” US Citizenship and Immigration Services, last updated November 20, 2023, <https://www.uscis.gov/green-card/green-card-processes-and-procedures/public-charge/public-charge-resources>.

- **All-citizen immigrant families:** households where all family members are naturalized or US-born citizens.
- **Green card and citizen families:** households where 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:** households where one or more members are undocumented and all other members are either naturalized or US-born citizens, permanent residents, or have another lawful immigration status.³

We find that adults in immigrant families continued to avoid safety net programs because of green card concerns, with rates that were consistent with patterns in prior years. Chilling effects were greater among mixed-status families and among adults in immigrant families with children. These types of families also reported high rates of material hardship.

FINDINGS

Nearly One in Four Adults in Mixed-Status Families Avoided Safety Net Programs because of Green Card Concerns in 2023

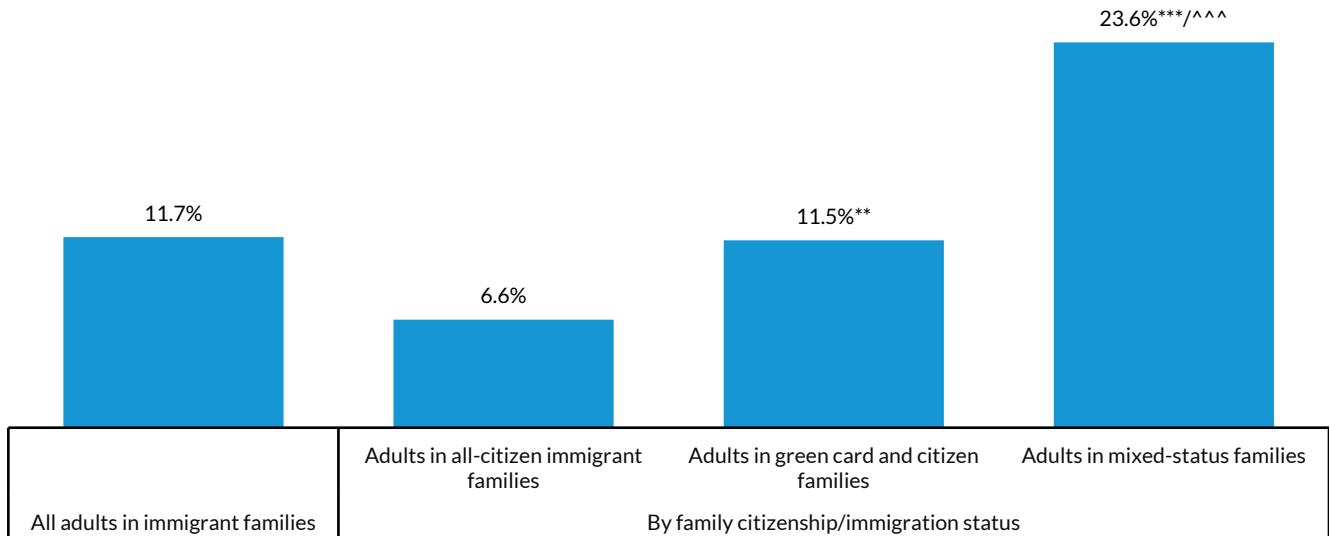
Overall, 11.7 percent of adults in immigrant families reported avoiding participation in noncash safety net programs because of green card concerns in 2023 (figure 1). These chilling effects were greatest among adults in mixed-status families compared with those in all-citizen immigrant families and those in green card and citizen families, groups not directly affected by the public charge rule (23.6 percent compared with 6.6 percent and 11.5 percent, respectively).

Mixed-status families may include some family members who are eligible for public benefits and others who are ineligible (e.g., citizen children living with undocumented parents). Some adults in immigrant families where every family member is a citizen or green card holder may have avoided safety net programs because of confusion about who the public charge rule applies to (Beier and Workie 2022; Bernstein et al. 2020; Kearney et al. 2024; No Kid Hungry 2021).

³ Noncitizen family members are considered to be living in the US lawfully if the respondent reported that those noncitizen members without a green card are in the US on a student visa, a work visa or permit, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, Temporary Protected Status, asylum or refugee status, or have another document permitting them to stay in the US for a limited time. This is consistent with other researchers' approaches to identifying undocumented immigrants in surveys. See De Trinidad Young and Madrigal (2017). We exclude (1) adults living in families with one or more noncitizens who do not have green cards but who are living in the US with other lawful immigration status and (2) adults in families where everyone is undocumented from our definition of "mixed-status families" but include them when providing estimates for all adults in immigrant families.

FIGURE 1

Share of Adults Ages 18 to 64 in Immigrant Families Who Reported Avoiding Noncash Government Benefits in the Last 12 Months because of Green Card Concerns, by Family Citizenship and Immigration Status, December 2023



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Source: Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey, December 2023.

Note: We exclude (1) adults living in families with one or more noncitizens who do not have green cards but who are living in the US with other lawful immigration status and (2) adults in families where everyone is undocumented from our definition of “mixed-status families” but include them when providing estimates for all adults in immigrant families.

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

^/^/^ Estimate differs significantly from adults in green card and citizen families at the 0.10/0.05/0.01 level, using two-tailed tests.

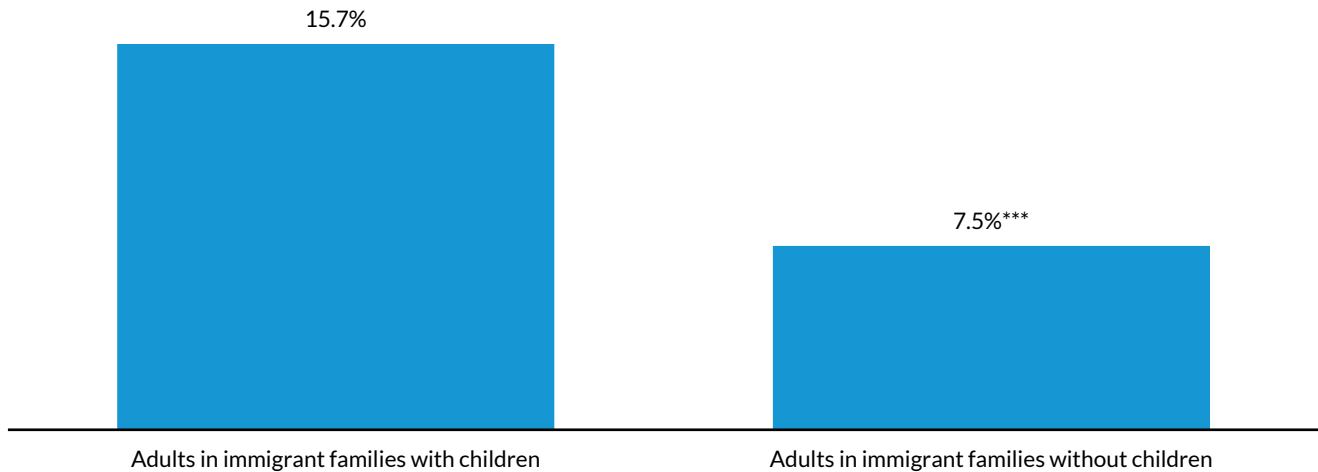
Over 1 in 7 Adults in Immigrant Families with Children Avoided Safety Net Programs because of Green Card Concerns

About 15.7 percent of adults in immigrant families with children avoided noncash safety net programs because of green card concerns in 2023, a rate twice as high as adults in immigrant families without children (7.5 percent; figure 2). Moreover, one in four adults in mixed-status families with children avoided safety net programs because of these concerns (data not shown).⁴ Lack of access to programs for which they may be eligible places children in immigrant families at risk of hardship and related adverse health and economic outcomes during the critical period of childhood development (Edmunds and Alcaraz 2021; Gundersen and Ziliak 2015; Sandstrom and Huerta 2013).

⁴ This estimate for adults in mixed-status families living with children is based on a small sample size and relatively imprecise.

FIGURE 2

Share of Adults Ages 18 to 64 in Immigrant Families Who Reported Avoiding Noncash Government Benefits in the Last 12 Months because of Green Card Concerns, by Presence of Children Under Age 19 in the Household, December 2023



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Source: Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey, December 2023.

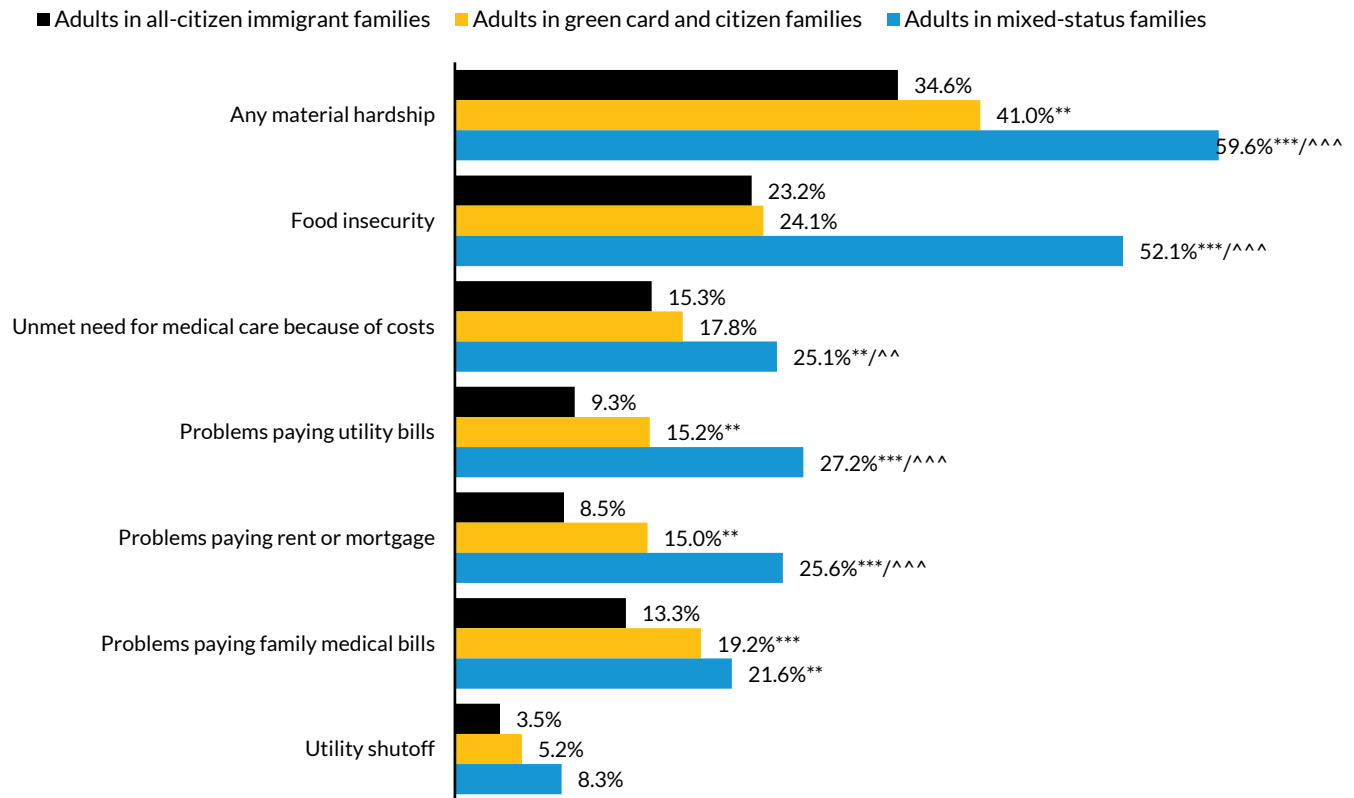
*/**/** Estimate differs significantly from adults in immigrant families with children at the 0.10/0.05/0.01 level, using two-tailed tests.

In Addition to Avoiding Safety Net Programs, Mixed-Status Families and Immigrant Families with Children Experienced High Rates of Material Hardship in 2023

Nearly 6 in 10 adults in mixed-status families (59.6 percent) reported experiencing one or more forms of material hardship in 2023, which included food insecurity, unmet need for medical care in the family because of costs, problems paying utility bills, problems paying rent or mortgage, problems paying family medical bills, and utility shutoff (figure 3). These adults were about twice as likely to report food insecurity as adults in all-citizen immigrant families and adults in families where all members were either green card holders or citizens (52.1 percent versus 23.2 percent and 24.1 percent, respectively). Adults in mixed-status families were also more likely than adults in all-citizen immigrant families to report that a family member had unmet needs for medical care because of costs and to report problems paying the rent, mortgage, or utility bills.

FIGURE 3

Share of Adults Ages 18 to 64 in Immigrant Families Reporting Material Hardships in the Last 12 Months, by Family Citizenship and Immigration Status, December 2023



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Source: Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey, December 2023.

Notes: Unmet need for medical care because of costs is reported for the family. We exclude (1) adults living in families with one or more noncitizens who do not have green cards but who are living in the US with other lawful immigration status and (2) adults in families where everyone is undocumented from our definition of “mixed-status families” but include them when providing estimates for all adults in immigrant families.

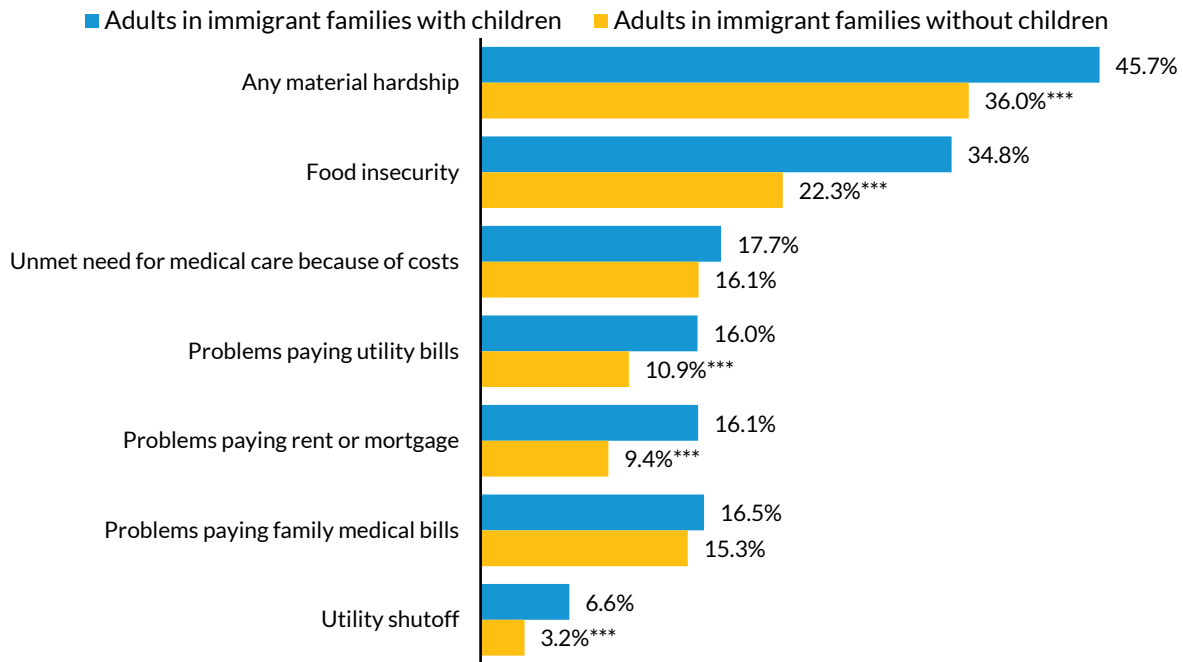
*/**/*** Estimate differs significantly from adults in all-citizen immigrant families at the 0.10/0.05/0.01 level, using two-tailed tests.

^/^ ^^/^ ^^ Estimate differs significantly from adults in green card and citizen families at the 0.10/0.05/0.01 level, using two-tailed tests.

Over 4 in 10 adults (45.7 percent) in immigrant families with children reported at least one form of material hardship, a share higher than that for adults in immigrant families without children (36 percent; figure 4). Adults in immigrant families with children most commonly reported food insecurity (34.8 percent), followed by unmet need for medical care in the family because of costs (17.7 percent). Compared with those in families without children, adults in immigrant families with children were more likely to report problems paying utility bills (16.0 percent versus 10.9 percent), problems paying the rent or mortgage (16.1 percent versus 9.4 percent), and a utility shutoff (6.6 versus 3.2 percent).

FIGURE 4

Share of Adults Ages 18 to 64 in Immigrant Families Reporting Material Hardships in the Last 12 Months, by Presence of Children Under Age 19 in the Household, December 2023



Source: Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey, December 2023.

Note: Unmet need for medical care because of costs is reported for the family.

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

CONCLUSION

The public charge rule has reverted to longstanding guidance, where the only public benefits that immigration authorities consider for green card and temporary visa applications are current or past use of public cash assistance and institutionalization for long-term care at the government’s expense. However, we found that chilling effects persisted in 2023 among immigrant families, which likely relates to confusion and misinformation about the rule and to whom it applies (Beier and Workie 2022; Bernstein et al. 2022, 2023; Gonzalez and Bernstein 2022; Gonzalez et al. 2023; Kearney et al. 2024; No Kid Hungry 2021; Vimo 2024).

As in our analyses from prior years, mixed-status families and immigrant families with children reported chilling effects at much higher rates than other immigrant families in 2023. This means that people in mixed-status families who are citizens or green card holders are missing out on needed safety net benefits, including many of the 3.5 million US citizen and lawfully present children in low-income families who live with at least one undocumented parent (Gelatt et al. 2022).

Furthermore, anti-immigrant rhetoric,⁵ paired with the potential for major shifts in immigration policy depending on the outcome of the 2024 national election, could lead even more immigrant families to avoid safety

⁵ “Thomas J. Rachko, Jr., “What’s Not Up for Debate? The Impact of Harsh Rhetoric and Policies on Im/migrant Well-Being,” Im/migrant Well-Being Scholar Collaborative, June 27, 2024, <https://www.iwbcollab.org/post/presidential-debate>.

net programs and to experience greater material hardship. Encouraging safety net program participation among eligible immigrant families would likely require the following:

- **Increased resources for community-based organizations (CBOs) that work with immigrant families.** CBOs are trusted community messengers who can convey accurate information about the current rule and address language access barriers and other immigration-related concerns (Bernstein et al. 2023).⁶ However, because CBO resources and staff can be stretched thinly, increasing resources for these entities to connect immigrant families with safety net programs and other community resources will be critical to expanding their capacity (Bernstein et al. 2020b; 2023; Gonzalez et al. 2022).
- **Simplified enrollment and renewal processes.** Applying for and staying enrolled in safety net programs is notoriously difficult, and immigrant families can face additional challenges navigating complex bureaucratic processes (Bernstein et al. 2022; 2023). For families that do overcome immigration concerns related to program participation, continuing to simplify enrollment processes and expand policies that promote continuous eligibility can help reduce interruptions in benefit receipt. This will be especially important as state Medicaid programs have returned to regular renewal processes, which were paused during the COVID-19 public health emergency.⁷
- **Expanded safety net program eligibility.** Several states have used state funds to expand Medicaid to immigrants who are ineligible because of their immigration status (Gonzalez et al. 2024). Continuing to build on state expansions and use state dollars to extend eligibility in other programs, such as SNAP, could reduce confusion about who can apply and promote access to key health and nutrition benefits for immigrant families. California, for example, recently expanded eligibility for state-funded SNAP benefits to all income-eligible noncitizen adults ages 55 and older regardless of status.⁸ Federal policymakers could also consider legislation to remove federal eligibility barriers (Acevedo-Garcia et al. 2021).

Immigrant families who lack access to safety net programs have fewer resources to draw on to meet their basic needs, which has adverse consequences for the health and well-being of all family members, including the children in the family. These effects occur in both the short and long run, particularly given how many children are affected.

Data

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. To assess chilling effects and related issues, we oversampled noncitizen respondents and constructed survey weights for analyzing nonelderly adults who are foreign-born or living with a foreign-born relative in their household (referred to as “adults in immigrant families”). The weights are based on the probability of selection from the Ipsos KnowledgePanel from which the WBNS sample is drawn and benchmarks from the American Community Survey for nonelderly adults in immigrant families who are proficient in English or primarily speak Spanish. The language criterion is used in the weighting to reflect the nature of the survey sample because the survey is only administered in English or Spanish. The survey weights mitigate but do not eliminate potential nonresponse bias. The sampling frame for the WBNS also excludes or underrepresents certain groups of adults, including those who are not proficient in English or Spanish. For further information on the survey design and content, see Karpman, Zuckerman, and Gonzalez (2018) and Bernstein et al. (2019).

⁶ Dulce Gonzalez and Michael Karpman, “As California Expands Safety Net Eligibility for Immigrants, Community Organizations Are Playing a Pivotal Role,” *Urban Wire* (blog), accessed July 17 2024, <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/california-expands-safety-net-eligibility-immigrants-community-organizations-are-playing>.

⁷ “Health Care at Risk for Immigrant Families,” Protecting Immigrant Families, November 2023, <https://pifcoalition.org/medicaid-unwinding>.

⁸ “California Food Assistance Program (CFAP),” California Department of Social Services, accessed July 15, 2024, <https://www.cdss.ca.gov/inforesources/calfresh/california-food-assistance-program>.

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