



# Including Children in Immigrant Families in Policy Approaches to Reduce Child Poverty

Dolores Acevedo-Garcia, PhD; Pamela K Joshi, PhD; Emily Ruskin, MPA; Abigail N Walters, MPP; Nomi Sofer, PhD; Carlos A Guevara, JD

From the Brandeis University, The Heller School for Social Policy and Management, Institute for Child, Youth and Family Policy (D Acevedo-Garcia, PK Joshi, AN Walters, and N Sofer), Waltham, Mass; and UnidosUS (E Ruskin and CA Guevara), Washington, DC  
The authors have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

Address correspondence to Dolores Acevedo-Garcia, PhD, Institute for Child, Youth and Family Policy, Heller School for Social Policy and Management, 415 South St, Waltham, MA 02453 (e-mail: [dacevedo@brandeis.edu](mailto:dacevedo@brandeis.edu)).

Received for publication December 30, 2020; accepted June 26, 2021.

## ABSTRACT

Although they are an increasing share of the US child population (26% in 2020) and have much higher poverty rates than children in nonimmigrant families (20.9% vs 9.9%), children in immigrant families have much more restricted access to the social safety net, which can lead to increased economic hardship and health and developmental risks. More than 90% of children in immigrant families are US citizens, but they are excluded from the safety net due to restrictions that affect their parents and other family members. Exclusions that affect children in immigrant families include restricted categorical eligibility based on immigrant status, stricter income eligibility, reduced benefit levels, high administrative burden, and interactions with immigration policy such as public charge. These exclusions limit the ability of both existing and enhanced social programs to reduce child poverty among this population. Results derived from the Transfer Income Model simulations for the National Academy of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine's 2019 report

*A Roadmap to Reducing Child Poverty* show that the poverty-reducing effects of potential enhancements to three main anti-poverty programs result in unequal poverty reduction effects by family citizenship/immigration status with disproportionate negative effects on Hispanic children, 54% of whom live in immigrant families. Policy principles to improve equitable access and poverty-reduction effects of social programs for children in immigrant families include basing eligibility and benefit levels on the developmental, health and nutrition needs of the child instead of the immigration status of other family members, reducing administrative burden, and eliminating the link between immigration policy and access to the safety net.

**KEYWORDS:** child poverty; children in immigrant families; health equity; immigration; safety net; social programs

**ACADEMIC PEDIATRICS** 2021;21:S117–S125

## WHAT'S NEW

This paper shows that due to immigrant exclusions from the social safety net, US citizen children in immigrant families benefit less from anti-poverty programs, despite having higher poverty rates than other children. This suggests the need to eliminate immigrant exclusions to ensure that all children benefit equitably from current and proposed enhanced anti-poverty programs.

THE CORONAVIRUS DISEASE 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic and resulting economic crisis have deepened racial and ethnic inequities among children. Immigrant families (defined as families with at least one foreign-born parent) have been one of the hardest hit groups because many immigrants perform essential, front-line jobs, and have limited access to health care and family and medical leave.<sup>1,2</sup> Hispanic children are disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic because 54% live in immigrant families.<sup>3</sup>

Although the pandemic has exacerbated economic hardship among children in immigrant families, higher

rates of child poverty and limited access to antipoverty programs among this population predate the pandemic.<sup>4</sup> Despite advocacy efforts, 3.7 million US citizen children and 1.4 million spouses were excluded from the first stimulus payments under the 2020 CARES Act because they live in immigrant families where at least one parent does not have a Social Security Number (SSN).<sup>5</sup> While these exclusions are particularly harmful during a national crisis, they reflect the treatment of immigrant families in US social policy during ordinary times that compromises families' economic resources and child health.

Applying a policy equity analysis framework,<sup>6</sup> this article defines limited access to the safety net as restricted categorical eligibility based on immigrant status, stricter income eligibility, reduced benefit levels, higher administrative burden to apply for and receive public benefits and programs because of citizenship verification and language barriers, and reluctance to use safety net programs because of interactions between the safety net and immigration policy. The Biden administration's focus on reducing child poverty by half and infusing racial equity across federal policies presents an opportunity to

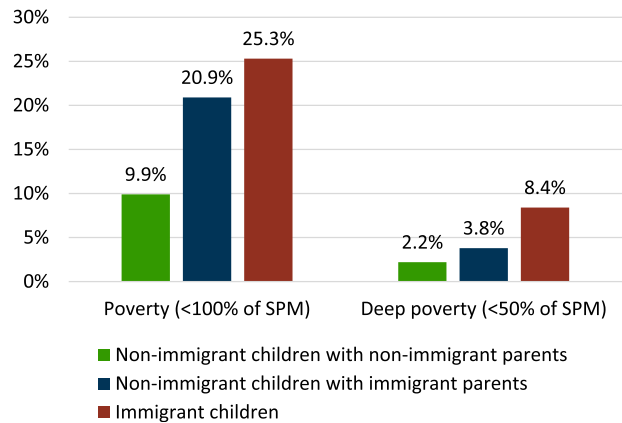
reexamine the implications of high poverty rates among children in immigrant families and identify changes to antipoverty programs to reduce poverty among these children.

This article describes the population of children in immigrant families and their poverty rates. It then presents a short review of the evidence on the health of children in immigrant families and the developmental risks they face, including factors associated with their families' immigrant status and the high poverty rates they experience. Next, the article illustrates the limitations of current antipoverty programs for reducing poverty among children in immigrant families, using as examples existing exclusions in three major anti-poverty programs: the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), the Child Tax Credit (CTC), and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). To illustrate the unequal effects of these programs, the article presents poverty-reduction effects by citizenship and immigration status from three significant hypothetical expansions of antipoverty programs simulated in the 2019 National Academy of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine's (NASEM) report, *A Roadmap to Reducing Child Poverty*. Although these expansions would significantly reduce child poverty overall and for certain groups of children, the reductions would be smaller for children in immigrant families and Hispanic children because the policy changes simulated in the NASEM report did not address underlying eligibility restrictions. The article concludes with policy recommendations to enhance the reach and effectiveness of antipoverty programs for children in immigrant families by expanding eligibility and access.

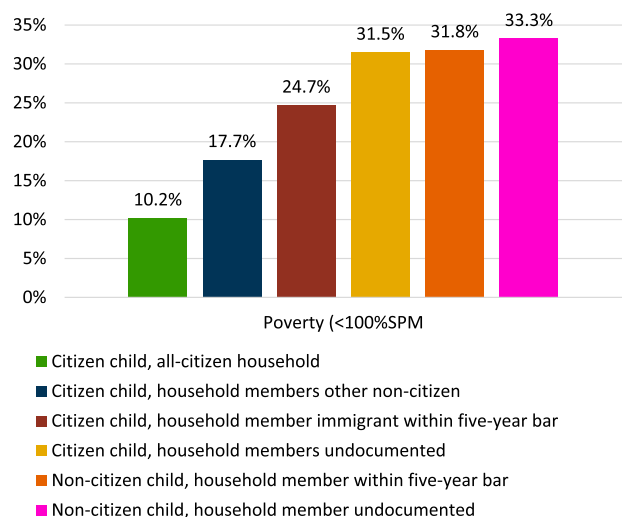
### REDUCING POVERTY AMONG CHILDREN IN IMMIGRANT FAMILIES IS A CORE ISSUE IN SOCIAL POLICY

Children in immigrant families are becoming a larger share of all US children and they are disproportionately poor. They represent 26% of US children, up from only 6% in 1970, but 43% of all children in poverty.<sup>7,8</sup> The vast majority of children in immigrant families (91%) are US citizens.<sup>3</sup> However, these children and their families have reduced access to social programs because restrictions placed on immigrants affect their noncitizen parents and siblings. Overall, about 19% of US children live in mixed-status families, defined as families where at least one household member is not a US citizen.<sup>8</sup> Because 36% of children in poverty live in mixed-status families,<sup>8</sup> immigrants' eligibility for anti-poverty programs can potentially affect the wellbeing of more than one-third of children in poverty—approximately 3.5 million children.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, the treatment of children in immigrant families is a core issue in US social policy.

As shown in Figure 1, children in immigrant families have much higher poverty rates than other children. Poverty is defined as a family's income being below 100% of the income threshold for the Supplemental Poverty Measure, which extends the Official Poverty Measure by



**Figure 1.** Supplemental Poverty Measures Rates by Nativity. Notes: National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine. *A Roadmap to Reducing Child Poverty*. Appendix E: Trim3 Summary Tables [Internet]. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press; 2019. Available at: <https://www.nap.edu/catalog/25246/a-roadmap-to-reducing-child-poverty>.



**Figure 2.** Supplemental Poverty Measure Rates by Citizenship/Immigration Status (<100% Supplemental Poverty Measure). Notes: National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine. *A Roadmap to Reducing Child Poverty*. Appendix E: Trim3 Summary Tables [Internet]. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press; 2019. Available at: <https://www.nap.edu/catalog/25246/a-roadmap-to-reducing-child-poverty>.

including many of the government programs that assist low-income families that are not included in the Official Poverty Measure.

The poverty rate among children in immigrant families is more than twice as high as that of children in nonimmigrant families (20.9% vs 9.9%). This inequity is a concern because the weight of the research evidence indicates that child poverty has strong negative causal effects on children's health and education, as well as on their wellbeing and economic prospects as adults.<sup>7</sup> As shown in Figure 2, US citizen children in various types of mixed-status families have much higher poverty rates—about two to three times higher—than citizen children in families where all members are US citizens. Children in mixed-status families with undocumented family

members have the highest poverty rates (more than 30%), even when they themselves are US citizens.

### DEVELOPMENTAL AND HEALTH RISKS FACING CHILDREN IN IMMIGRANT FAMILIES

Children in immigrant families are at a much higher risk of poverty, which negatively contributes to the developmental risks they face. Immigration enforcement creates other risk factors that uniquely compromise the health of children in immigrant families. Unique stressors associated with their families' legal status and related immigration policies include psychosocial stressors such as the threat and fear of detention, direct physical threats such as deportation and family separation, diminished access to health promoting resources such as health care, and heightened vigilance when confronting anti-immigrant climates.<sup>9</sup>

Immigration legality or social stratification by legal status is increasingly recognized as a manifestation of structural racism, one of the social determinants of child health.<sup>4</sup> While legal status is race neutral on its face, it has been applied in a racially discriminatory manner with disproportionately negative effects on Hispanic families.<sup>10</sup> Empirical evidence suggests multiple links between stressors associated with legality and child health outcomes. During periods of heightened anti-immigrant climates, babies born to immigrant mothers exhibit worse birth outcomes.<sup>11</sup> Stressors associated with detention and separation also have adverse effects on children and youth's health behaviors and physical health outcomes, as well as on cognitive, developmental and mental health outcomes.<sup>12–14</sup> Children with undocumented status face the greatest health vulnerabilities associated with immigration enforcement, but these threats also extend to US citizen children in mixed-status families with undocumented parents or siblings.<sup>15</sup> In both immigration enforcement and social policy, immigrant exclusions have negative spillover effects on US citizen children in immigrant families.

Recognizing the unique health vulnerabilities that children in immigrant families experience, between 1997 and 2019 the American Academy of Pediatrics issued four statements urging pediatricians to educate themselves about how children are negatively affected by US immigration laws and enforcement practices, exclusions from social safety net programs, especially health insurance coverage, family separation, and limited access to legal representation in immigration hearings.<sup>16,17</sup> The statements show an evolution toward an explicit discussion of immigration status as a key social determinant of health and increasingly urge pediatricians to proactively work to ensure access to health care for children in immigrant families.

### RESTRICTED ELIGIBILITY FOR THE SOCIAL SAFETY NET FOR CHILDREN IN IMMIGRANT FAMILIES

A central aspect of the heightened developmental risks that children in immigrant families experience is the

combination of high poverty and eligibility restrictions that prevent them from fully benefitting from the social safety net.<sup>4,18</sup> Limited access to social programs such as the EITC and SNAP may constitute hardship for US citizen children in immigrant families, because they do not experience the poverty alleviation benefits nor the long-term health and educational benefits associated with these programs.<sup>19–21</sup>

The vast majority of children in immigrant families are US citizens. However, their families may have lower access to the safety net because of immigrant eligibility restrictions and harsher income eligibility and benefit calculation rules, which penalize immigrant families and result in lower benefit levels. Immigrant families also face higher administrative burden arising from a highly fragmented and complex system of program rules than children in nonimmigrant families, and reluctance to use safety net programs because of the interaction between immigration policy and the safety net (eg, public charge). These policy features are meant to have exclusionary effects and may discourage families from applying for public assistance.<sup>4,22,23</sup>

An important and often overlooked aspect of immigrant restrictions is that they apply not only to undocumented immigrants, but also to lawfully present immigrants and US citizens living in immigrant families. Undocumented immigrants are not eligible for refundable tax credits and most safety net programs with few exceptions such as emergency medical care.<sup>24</sup> This exclusion has serious implications for citizen children in these families and has a disproportionate impact on Hispanic children, 25% of whom live in households with undocumented members.<sup>25</sup>

Immigrant eligibility restrictions also apply to lawfully present immigrants. Since the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, known as welfare reform, only immigrants with qualified status (eg, lawful permanent residents) are eligible for safety net programs. However, most immigrants must wait for 5 years after obtaining qualified immigration status (eg, a green card) before they can be eligible for federal public programs (ie, the "5-year bar").<sup>26</sup> Finally, immigrant restrictions also affect US citizen children in immigrant families because for some programs eligibility is determined for the household not the child.<sup>4</sup>

### RESTRICTED ACCESS TO THE SAFETY NET INCREASES POVERTY AMONG CHILDREN IN IMMIGRANT FAMILIES

This section describes immigrant exclusions in three major antipoverty programs and the effects of these exclusions on children in immigrant families. Note, though, that immigrant exclusions apply to participation in most supports for low-income families, such as housing subsidies and Supplemental Security Income.

The data come from the 2019 National Academy of Sciences' report, *A Roadmap to Reducing Child Poverty*,<sup>7</sup> which included ten policy and program approaches with two simulated policy changes for each approach: a more

generous and a less generous policy expansion. The goal was to identify policy changes that could reduce the US child poverty rate by half in 10 years. This paper focuses on the poverty-reducing effects of changes to three anti-poverty programs: the EITC, a policy proposal to create a nearly universal child allowance as an expansion of the current CTC, and SNAP.

Currently, the EITC, the CTC, and SNAP are the most important antipoverty programs. Without the EITC and CTC, the child poverty rate would be 18.9% instead of 13%. Without SNAP, the child poverty rate would be 18.2% instead of 13%.<sup>7</sup> An overall finding of the NASEM report is that, although all 20 programs and policy changes considered would reduce poverty across most subgroups, Hispanic children and children in immigrant families would benefit relatively less.<sup>7</sup> Due to small sample sizes, simulation results are not available by race/ethnicity and citizenship/immigration status together. However, the smaller poverty alleviation effects for Hispanic children are due to the large proportion of children in immigrant families in this racial/ethnic group.

The NASEM simulations are based on the Transfer Income Model, Version 3 (TRIM3), a comprehensive static microsimulation model developed by the Urban Institute. TRIM3 simulates the major US governmental tax, benefit, and health insurance programs. It incorporates detailed modeling of program rules and interactions across programs. The model allows users to simulate the effects on family economic wellbeing of hypothetical or proposed policy changes.<sup>27</sup> TRIM3 developed custom simulations for the policy changes considered in the NASEM report using data from the US Census Bureau's Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplement. Methodological details of the simulations are included in the report's technical documentation.<sup>27</sup> This article uses data from the NASEM technical appendix to calculate the magnitude of poverty reduction effects for different policy options by citizenship/immigration status and race/ethnicity (Table 3).

Table 1 summarizes immigrant provisions for the three programs. Eligibility for the EITC is determined at the household level. The credit is not available to children in immigrant families, even if they are US citizens, if one or both parents or heads of household do not have a SSN. Restriction of eligibility for the EITC to only SSN holders was introduced in 1996 as part of the sweeping changes to welfare and immigration legislation.

On the other hand, eligibility for SNAP is determined at the child level, which means that, provided they meet income eligibility, US citizen children are eligible regardless of the immigration status of other household members.

The proposed child allowance simulated in the NASEM report is essentially an expansion of the CTC, including a significant increase in the size of the benefit and inclusion of families without earnings. The NASEM child allowance is similar to the temporary expansion of the CTC under the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021.<sup>28</sup> It is an example of a new program that could be intentionally designed to be more inclusive of immigrant families.

## EITC

The EITC is a tax credit available to lower-income families that have earned income (ie, perform paid work). The EITC is meant to primarily help families with children, but as Table 1 shows, it is not available to immigrants who file taxes without an SSN, excluding about 17% of US citizen children in poverty from this benefit.<sup>29</sup>

As shown in Table 2, under current immigrant eligibility rules, a household with two citizen children or qualified immigrant children, 2 working parents with SSNs, and an annual earned income of \$25,000 would receive nearly \$6000 from the EITC. In contrast, a similar household with the same income in which one or both working parents do not have SSNs would not receive the EITC at all.

The NASEM report included 2 proposals to strengthen the EITC to reduce child poverty. Table 3 presents the second proposal, which is more expansive: increase EITC payments by 40%. The NASEM proposal does not include changes in immigrant eligibility for the EITC. Therefore, immigrant eligibility in the simulations reflects the status quo.

Poverty rates at baseline are three times higher for citizen children in households with undocumented members (31.5%) than for children in households where all members are citizens (10.2%). Despite having much higher poverty rates, citizen children living with undocumented immigrants would not benefit from this substantial increase in the EITC benefit, because the proposal does not address immigrant eligibility. The NASEM simulation results by citizenship and immigration status show wide variation in the effects of the EITC proposals. In households where all members are citizens, child poverty would decrease by 20%, while in households where children are citizens but at least one member is undocumented, child poverty would decrease by less than 3%.

## EXPANSION OF THE CTC OR CHILD ALLOWANCE

The proposed child allowance—or expanded CTC—further illustrates the unequal poverty reduction effects associated with differences in immigrant eligibility. Table 2 shows benefits under the temporary expansion of the CTC under the American Rescue Plan Act. A family of four where all members have SSNs, or a family where the children have SSNs but the parents do not, can receive up to \$6600 from the CTC. In contrast, a family with 2 children without SSNs cannot receive the CTC at all.

Unlike the EITC, the CTC, after which the NASEM allowance was modelled, is available to citizen children who have an SSN regardless of the immigrant status of their families, provided that other eligibility criteria (eg, income) are met. Therefore, unlike the proposed EITC expansion, the proposed child allowance has a large effect (41% reduction) on poverty among citizen children in families with undocumented members (Table 3).

On the other hand, the child allowance for noncitizen children was modelled after the changes to the CTC in 2018, which excluded children without SSNs from

**Table 1.** Children in Immigrant Families' Access to Federal Safety Net Policies

Federal Program	Program Benefits	Eligibility Restriction for Noncitizen* Parents	Restricted Eligibility		Stricter Income Eligibility Resulting From Sponsor Deeming <sup>¶</sup>	Benefit Restrictions Based on the Proportion of Ineligible Noncitizens	Administrative Burden	Public Charge Rule <sup>#</sup>
			US Citizen Children's Eligibility Restricted by Parents' Immigration Status	Eligibility Restriction for Noncitizen Child				
EITC	Cash: refundable tax credit	SSN required for all family members <sup>†</sup>	Yes	Ineligible if child does not have SSN	No	No	Yes	No
Temporary expansion of the CTC	Cash: refundable tax credit	None, immigration-status eligibility based on child <sup>‡</sup>	No	Ineligible if child does not have a SSN	No	No	Yes	No
SNAP	Noncash: assistance to purchase food	Most qualified immigrants must meet the 5-year bar <sup>§,  </sup>	No	Eligible if qualified immigrant (not subject to 5-year bar)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes (February 2020–March 2021)

EITC indicates Earned Income Tax Credit; SSN, Social Security Number; CTC, Child Tax Credit; and SNAP, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.

\*Noncitizens are legal and undocumented immigrants (ie, foreign born) who are not naturalized US citizens. They may have an SSN. Generally, noncitizens who are authorized to work in the United States have an SSN. Noncitizens without an SSN may have an ITIN, an identification to allow an individual to pay taxes. In rare instances, noncitizens without work authorization can obtain an SSN if they prove they have a valid nonwork reason to obtain one, for example, if a state or federal law requires an SSN to receive benefits.

†To be eligible for the EITC, families must have earned income and adjusted gross income within certain limits; meet certain basic rules; and have a child that meets all the qualifying child rules. The income limits depend on the filing status of the family and the number of qualifying children claimed. In 2021, the thresholds ranged from \$42,158 for single, head of household or qualifying widow(er) with 1 child to \$57,414 for a married filing jointly couple with 3 or more qualifying children. For the family to receive the credit, each member must have an SSN, ITINs are not accepted.

‡The amount of the CTC begins to phase out at \$75,000 for single tax filers, \$112,500 for head of household filers, and \$150,000 for married filing jointly filers. Individuals that earn more than \$200,000 and married couples that earn more than \$400,000 are not eligible for the CTC.

§To be eligible for SNAP, families must have a gross monthly income at or below 130% of the federal poverty level; have a net income at or below 100% of the federal poverty level, after deductions; and assets below certain limits. Noncitizens must also meet one of the following conditions to be eligible for SNAP: live in the United States for 5 years as a qualified immigrant; earn 40 qualifying work quarters; receive benefits or assistance for blindness or disability, born before August 22, 1931 and lawfully reside in the United States on August 22, 1996; or serve active duty in the military or be an honorably discharged veteran (spouses and surviving spouses of military members are also eligible).

||Qualified immigrants are noncitizens who meet the specific definition of “qualified alien” under 7CFR 273.4(a)(5)(i), which includes lawful permanent residents, asylees, refugees, parolees, individuals granted withholding of deportation or removal, conditional entrants, Cuban or Haitian entrants, survivors of domestic violence, and noncitizen victims of a severe form of trafficking. Qualified immigrant is a term used for federal public benefit purposes and is not an immigration status, but a collection of immigration statuses.

¶Noncitizens with sponsors who signed an affidavit of support are subject to deeming rules if they apply for certain means-tested programs (eg, SNAP, Supplemental Security Income, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, nonemergency Medicaid, and Children's Health Insurance Program). Deeming rules require benefit-administering agencies to count a portion of the income and assets of the applicant's sponsor as available to the noncitizen applicant. This “deeming” usually makes the noncitizen applicant ineligible for benefits by pushing the applicants' income and assets over the limits set by means tests. If a sponsored noncitizen receives benefits, their sponsors could be required to repay the government for those benefits. But, due to unclear federal guidelines, few state agencies ask sponsors to repay the benefits. Some noncitizens are exempt from deeming rules like survivors of domestic violence, or in the case of SNAP, children.

#A noncitizen could be barred from seeking admission to the United States or seeking to adjust their immigration status to that of a lawful permanent resident if a US Citizenship and Immigration Services Officer determines the noncitizen is a public charge or “likely to at any time to become a public charge.” A noncitizen can be determined a public charge if they become primarily dependent on the government for subsistence through cash assistance for income maintenance or institutionalization at the government's expense (eg, relying on Medicaid to pay for a nursing home). A noncitizen applicant's age, health, family status, assets, resources, financial status, education and skills, and their affidavit of support are considered when the officer makes a public charge determination. Receipt of certain public programs can be considered when making a public charge determination (eg, Supplemental Security Income, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families cash assistance, state and local cash assistance programs that provide benefits for income maintenance, and programs to support noncitizens institutionalized for long-term care, including Medicaid). Some noncitizens are exempt from the public charge rule (eg, refugees, asylees, certain self-petitioners under the Violence Against Women Act, and certain nonimmigrant visa applicants like human trafficking and crime victims).

**Table 2.** Earned Income Tax Credit, Child Tax Credit Under American Rescue Plan Act, and SNAP Benefit, for 2-Parent, 2-Child Families (Ages 4 and 8), with Incomes at \$25,000, 2021

Family Type	Benefit
	EITC
Citizen/qualified immigrant children*, both parents have SSN	\$5980
Citizen/qualified immigrant, 1 parent has an SSN	\$0
Citizen/qualified immigrant, neither parent has an SSN	\$0
Children do not have SSN <sup>†</sup>	\$0
	CTC <sup>‡</sup>
Citizen/qualified immigrant, both parents have SSN	\$6600
Citizen/qualified immigrant, one parent has an SSN	\$6600
Citizen/qualified immigrant, neither parent has an SSN	\$6600
Children do not have SSN	\$0
	SNAP <sup>§</sup>
All citizen family	\$512
Citizen/qualified immigrant children, one eligible and 1 ineligible LPR parents <sup>  </sup>	\$512
Citizen/qualified immigrant children, 2 ineligible LPR parents	\$430
Citizen children, 2 undocumented parents	\$160
Unqualified immigrant children, 2 undocumented parents	\$0

EITC indicates Earned Income Tax Credit; SSN, Social Security Number; CTC, Child Tax Credit; LPR, Lawful Permanent Resident; and SNAP, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.

Please contact the author for calculations and assumptions.

\*Qualified immigrant children are assumed to have an SSN. They are not subject to the five-year bar for the SNAP program.

†Children that do not have an SSN could be unqualified immigrants or in rare cases, US citizens.

‡These CTC calculations are based on the temporary expansion of the program under the American Rescue Plan Act.

§Reflects 15% increase in maximum SNAP allotments under pandemic relief legislation effective until September 30, 2021.

||Lawful Permanent Resident.

receiving the CTC.<sup>30</sup> Since the baseline for the NASEM policy simulations used the 2015 tax law, which allowed children without SSNs to receive the tax credit, the proposed child allowance makes non-citizen children worse off. As shown in [Table 3](#), while citizen children in all-citizen households would experience a poverty reduction of nearly 46%, all subgroups of non-citizen children would have higher poverty rates—about 3% higher—after the introduction of a child allowance. This reflects the changes in the 2018 tax law which made one million non-citizen children ineligible for the CTC.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, the temporary expansion of the CTC in the American Rescue Plan Act adopted the eligibility criteria of the 2018 tax law. Therefore, it does not reduce poverty among noncitizen children.

The expanded CTC or child allowance exemplifies that even the design of a generous and nearly universal program needs to be intentional about addressing eligibility for children in immigrant families.

## SNAP

Unlike the EITC, SNAP is available to citizen and qualified immigrant children regardless of the immigration status of their household ([Table 1](#)). However, citizen children in immigrant families may still experience reduced SNAP benefits. Benefits for immigrant families may be hundreds of dollars lower because benefits are prorated—calculated based on the number of eligible members of the family, which excludes ineligible adults such as qualified immigrants within the five-year bar and undocumented immigrants. As shown in [Table 2](#), an all citizen family of 4 would receive \$512 as their monthly SNAP benefit. In contrast, a family with 2 lawful permanent resident parents that have not met the 5-year bar would receive a reduced benefit of \$430 due to proration. If the parents are undocumented the benefit is even lower at \$160.

Additionally, immigrants may be reluctant to apply for SNAP even if their children qualify. Avoidance of SNAP and other public programs was exacerbated in 2018 because of a leaked rule from the Department of Homeland Security that expanded the programs considered in the determination of public charge to include in-kind programs such as SNAP and Medicaid. While public charge has long been understood to apply to noncitizens who are mostly reliant on government assistance by subsisting on cash assistance benefits, the Trump-era version of the rule widened its scope to include in-kind safety net programs.<sup>32,33</sup> Data from the National Survey of Family Needs suggest that low-income immigrant families—even those where all members are naturalized citizens or permanent residents—have opted to forego use of public programs such as SNAP, presumably due to fear of immigration-related consequences.<sup>33</sup> The case of SNAP illustrates that immigrant exclusions other than eligibility can affect access to the safety net. Both complex eligibility rules and interactions between program use and immigration policy create confusion among immigrant families and have a deterrent effect.

Another NASEM policy proposal to reduce child poverty would increase SNAP benefits by 30%. Like the EITC proposal, the SNAP proposal has larger poverty reduction effects on citizen children in households where all members are citizens ([Table 3](#)). However, the difference between the effect on these children and the effect on citizen children living with an undocumented immigrant is much smaller (18.9% vs 16.8% reduction) than the respective difference in the EITC proposal. This contrast is due to differences in immigrant eligibility between the 2 programs.

As shown in the NASEM simulation results, under existing immigrant restrictions, benefit expansion of the EITC, the CTC, and SNAP would result in unequal poverty reduction effects by family citizenship/immigration status. Reducing poverty for children in immigrant families would require not only expanding program benefits but eliminating immigrant eligibility restrictions.

Policy approaches to reduce poverty also have differential effects by race/ethnicity. Specifically, the way

**Table 3.** Baseline Poverty Rate and Percent Change in Child Poverty Rate From Baseline by Citizenship and Immigration Status After Simulated Policy Changes

Parameter	Total	US Citizen Child			Noncitizen Child			Race/Ethnicity of Child		
		All-Citizen Household	Household With Qualified Immigrant Within 5-Year Bar	Household With Undocumented Immigrant	Household With Qualified Immigrant Within 5-Year Bar	Household With Undocumented Immigrant	Non-Hispanic White	Non-Hispanic Black	Hispanic	
Baseline poverty rate*	13.0%	10.2%	24.7%	31.5%	31.8%	33.3%	7.9%	17.8%	21.7%	
EITC expansion†	-16.0%	-20.0%	-23.8%	-2.8%	-14.8%	-0.6%	-17.0%	-20.5%	-13.8%	
New child allowance‡ (expanded CTC)	-40.4%	-45.7%	-37.8%	-41.0%	+3.9%	+2.7%	-42.3%	-45.5%	-38.4%	
SNAP expansion§	-17.5%	-18.9%	-15.8%	-16.8%	-13.6%	-4.4%	-19.2%	-17.9%	-16.3%	

EITC indicates Earned Income Tax Credit; CTC, Child Tax Credit; and SNAP, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. Authors' calculations of percent change in poverty between 2015 baseline and simulated policy change using data on poverty rates from National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine. (2019) A Roadmap to Reducing Child Poverty, Appendix E: TRIM3 Summary Tables.

\*The baseline poverty rate is the 2015 Supplemental Poverty Rate (<100%SPM). The goal of these policy simulations is to reduce poverty by 50%.  
 †The simulated EITC policy change increases payments by 40% across the entire schedule, keeping the current range of the phase-out region.  
 ‡The simulated Child Allowance (expanded CTC) pays a monthly benefit of \$250 per month per child to the families of all children under age eighteen who were born in the United States or are naturalized citizens. (In implementing this new child allowance, eliminate the CTC and the dependent exemption for children.) Phase out child allowance benefits between 300% and 400% of the poverty line.  
 §The simulated SNAP policy change increases SNAP benefits by 30%, adjust for the number of children age 12 and above in the home, and increases the Summer Electronic Benefit Transfer for Children.

immigrant eligibility is addressed has a substantial impact on the poverty rate of Hispanic children. For example, because of the exclusion of noncitizen children from the child allowance, Hispanic children would benefit less from this significant policy expansion compared to White and Black children (-38.4% vs -42.3% and -45.5%, respectively) (Table 3). Below we outline policy principles to address these differential effects and reduce poverty equitably.

### POLICY PRINCIPLES TO REDUCE POVERTY AMONG CHILDREN IN IMMIGRANT FAMILIES

The Biden administration has a focus on reducing child poverty by half and infusing equity across federal policies and programs.<sup>34</sup> The unequal poverty-reducing effects illustrated by the policy simulations in the NASEM report call for a national discussion about the harmful effects of immigrant restrictions on children in immigrant families. The administration is already implementing some program changes aimed at reducing child poverty by half, but steps that could significantly reduce poverty among children in immigrant families like restoring immigrant eligibility for children without SSNs, have not been proposed.

Immigrant restrictions both result in higher poverty rates among children in immigrant families and prevent further lowering of the overall child poverty rate. The sheer complexity of immigrant restrictions constitutes a high level of intentional administrative burden that is costly not only for immigrant families but for agencies and programs at all levels of government.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, immigrant restrictions contradict professed societal values such as equal treatment, protection of child wellbeing, and rewarding parental work effort.

Immigrant restrictions are not inherent to US social policy. Paradoxically, or perhaps intentionally, immigrant restrictions have been implemented during a period of rapid growth in the population of children in immigrant families. Immigrant restrictions were enacted as recently as 1996 with welfare reform or even 2018, in the case of the CTC. While the exclusionary intent and adverse consequences of these restrictions were in place well before the current health and economic crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated their negative consequences. Principles to guide immigrant eligibility for safety net programs should include:

- 1. Base program eligibility on children’s status instead of their families or households.** At a minimum, eliminate restrictions that affect US citizen children in immigrant families, for example, grant eligibility for the EITC to families whose children have SSNs, even if their parents file taxes with an Individual Tax Identification Number (ITIN).
- 2. Extend eligibility for tax credits to children who have ITINs or SSNs.** For example, restore the CTC to pre-2018 eligibility rules, which included qualified children with ITINs. This change is especially important in the context of the temporary expansion of the

CTC under recent pandemic legislation which, if made permanent, would serve as a main tool to reduce child poverty.

3. **Eliminate punitive rules for the calculation of program benefits when the household includes immigrant members who are not eligible.** For example, eliminate proration of benefits under SNAP.
4. **Conduct a thorough review of the public charge rule, including its discriminatory implementation and its effect on reducing children's access to the social safety net.** Although the most damaging version of the rule has been repealed, public and private stakeholders must commit to robust public education of the repeal to reduce its lasting chilling effects.

As summarized in the 2019 NASEM report *A Roadmap to Reducing Child Poverty*, the weight of the evidence suggests that poverty has severe negative effects on children and significant costs to the nation.<sup>7</sup> Yet, US immigration enforcement and social policy restrict access for children in immigrant families and create inequities in their health and development. Recent efforts like the NASEM report and this paper in the special issue of *Academic Pediatrics* on child poverty constructively advance the national discourse on US social policies that restrict access for children in immigrant families. The current national focus on reducing child poverty presents an opportunity to reduce inequities by expanding access to the safety net for children in immigrant families and making sure that they become a priority in national conversations.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We gratefully acknowledge funding for "Including Children of Immigrants in the Post-Pandemic Economic Recovery Efforts and Safety Net" from the W.T. Grant Foundation (Grant ID: 201535, Acevedo-Garcia, PI) and the Spencer Foundation (Grant ID: 20210009, Acevedo-Garcia, PI).

*Financial disclosure:* This article is published as part of a supplement sponsored by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

## REFERENCES

1. Orrenius PM, Zavondny M. Do immigrants work in riskier jobs? *Demography*. 2009;46:535–551.
2. Earle A, Joshi P, Geronimo K, et al. Job characteristics among working parents: differences by race, ethnicity, and nativity. *MLR*. 2014;5(1B):1–26.
3. Institute Urban. *Children of Immigrants Data Tool*. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute; 2021. Available at: <http://webapp.urban.org/charts/datatool/pages.cfm###>. Accessed September 1, 2021.
4. Acevedo-Garcia D, Joshi PK, Ruskin E, et al. Restoring an inclusionary safety net for children in immigrant families: a review of three critical social policies. *Health Aff (Millwood)*. 2021;40:1099–1107.
5. Chishti M, Bolter J. *Vulnerable to COVID-19 and in Frontline Jobs, Immigrants Are Mostly Shut Out of U.S. Relief*. Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute; 2020. Available at: <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/covid19-immigrants-shut-out-federal-relief>. Accessed September 1, 2021.
6. Joshi P, Geronimo K, Romano B, et al. Integrating racial/ethnic equity into policy assessments to improve child health. *Health Aff (Millwood)*. 2014;33:2222–2229.
7. National Academies of Sciences Engineering and Medicine. *A Roadmap to Reducing Child Poverty*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press; 2019. Available at: <https://www.nap.edu/catalog/25246/a-roadmap-to-reducing-child-poverty>. Accessed September 1, 2021.
8. National Academies of Sciences Engineering and Medicine. *A Roadmap to Reducing Child Poverty*. Baseline. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press; 2019. Unpublished Appendix: TRIM3 Summary Tables. Available at: <https://www.nap.edu/catalog/25246/a-roadmap-to-reducing-child-poverty>. Accessed September 1, 2021.
9. Young M-EDT, Beltrán-Sánchez H, Wallace SP. States with fewer criminalizing immigrant policies have smaller health care inequities between citizens and noncitizens. *BMC Public Health*. 2020;20:1460.
10. Asad AL, Clair M. Racialized legal status as a social determinant of health. *Soc Sci Med*. 2018;199:19–28.
11. Gemmill A, Catalano R, Casey JA, et al. Association of preterm births among US Latina women with the 2016 presidential election. *JAMA Netw Open*. 2019;2. e197084-e.
12. Eskenazi B, Fahey CA, Kogut K, et al. Association of perceived immigration policy vulnerability with mental and physical health among US-born Latino adolescents in California. *JAMA Pediatr*. 2019;173:744–753.
13. Yoshikawa H, Kalil A. The effects of parental undocumented status on the developmental contexts of young children in immigrant families. *Child Dev Perspect*. 2011;5:291–297.
14. MacLean SA, Agyeman PO, Walther J, et al. Characterization of the mental health of immigrant children separated from their mothers at the U.S.–Mexico border. *Psychiatry Res*. 2020;286:112555.
15. Zayas LH, Gulbas LE. Processes of belonging for citizen-children of undocumented Mexican immigrants. *J Child Fam Stud*. 2017;26:2463–2474.
16. Linton JM, Green A; American Academy of Pediatrics, Council on Community Pediatrics. Providing care for children in immigrant families (American Academy of Pediatrics Policy Statement). *Pediatrics*. 2019;144:e20192077.
17. American Academy of Pediatrics, Council on Community Pediatrics. Providing care for immigrant, migrant, and border children (American Academy of Pediatrics Policy Statement). *Pediatrics*. 2013;131:e2028–e2034.
18. Perreira KM, Pedroza JM. Policies of exclusion: implications for the health of immigrants and their children. *Annu Rev Public Health*. 2019;40:147–166.
19. Braga B, Blavin F, Gangopadhyaya A. The long-term effects of childhood exposure to the earned income tax credit on health outcomes. *J Public Econ*. 2020;190:104249.
20. East CN. The effect of food stamps on children's health: evidence from immigrants' changing eligibility. *J Hum Resour*. 2018;55:387–427.
21. Hoynes H, Schanzenbach DW, Almond D. Long run impacts of childhood access to the safety net. *Am Econ Rev*. 2016;106:903–934.
22. Herd P, Moynihan DP. *Administrative Burden. Policymaking by Other Means*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation; 2018.
23. Ray VE, Herd P, Moynihan D. Racialized burdens: applying racialized organization theory to the administrative state. *SocArXiv Papers*. 2020.
24. Singer AL. *Unauthorized Aliens' Access to Federal Benefits: Policy and Issues*. Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service; 2016 RL34500. Available at: [https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20161028\\_RL34500\\_e09cd8faef6c1dd9e69b799713b1968e369a56db.pdf](https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20161028_RL34500_e09cd8faef6c1dd9e69b799713b1968e369a56db.pdf). Accessed September 1, 2021.
25. Clarke W, Turner K, Guzman L. *One Quarter of Hispanic Children in the United States Have an Unauthorized Immigrant Parent*. National Research Center on Hispanic Children & Families; 2017. Available at: <https://www.hispanicresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Hispanic-Center-Undocumented-Brief-FINAL-V21.pdf>. Accessed September 1, 2021.
26. Kolker AF. *Noncitizen Eligibility for Federal Public Assistance: Policy Overview*. Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service; 2016 RL33809. Available at: <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/RL/RL33809>. Accessed September 1, 2021.
27. National Academies of Sciences Engineering and Medicine. *A Roadmap to Reducing Child Poverty*. Washington, DC: The



- National Academies Press; 2019. Appendix F: Urban Institute TRIM3 Technical Specification.
28. Crandall-Hollick ML. The Child Tax Credit: temporary expansion for 2021 under the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 (ARPA; P.L. 117-2). Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service; 2021 IN11613. 2021. Available at: <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IN/IN11613>. Accessed September 1, 2021.
  29. *A Roadmap to Reducing Child Poverty*. Authors' calculations based on: National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (National Academies of Sciences Engineering and Medicine, Washington, DC). 2021. Unpublished data.
  30. Crandall-Hollick ML. *The Child Tax Credit: How It Works and Who Receives It*. 2020. Available at: <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R41873.pdf>. Accessed September 1, 2021.
  31. Leibenluft J. *Tax Bill Ends Child Tax Credit for About 1 Million Children*. Washington, DC: Center for Budget and Policy Priorities; 2017. Available at: <https://www.cbpp.org/blog/tax-bill-ends-child-tax-credit-for-about-1-million-children>. Accessed September 1, 2021.
  32. Batalova J, Fix M, Greenberg M. *Chilling Effects: The Expected Public Charge Rule and Its Impact on Legal Immigrant Families' Public Benefits Use*. Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute; 2018. Available at: <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/ProposedPublicChargeRule-Final-Web.pdf>. Accessed September 1, 2021.
  33. Haley JM, Kenney GM, Bernstein H, et al. *One in Five Adults in Immigrant Families with Children Reported Chilling Effects on Public Benefit Receipt in 2019*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute; 2020. Available at: [https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/100754/safety\\_net\\_access\\_in\\_the\\_context\\_of\\_the\\_public\\_charge\\_rule\\_2.pdf](https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/100754/safety_net_access_in_the_context_of_the_public_charge_rule_2.pdf). Accessed September 1, 2021.
  34. Biden JR. *Executive Order on Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government*. Washington, DC: The White House; 2021. Available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/01/20/executive-order-advancing-racial-equity-and-support-for-underserved-communities-through-the-federal-government/>. Accessed September 1, 2021.
  35. Heinrich CJ. Presidential address: "A Thousand Petty Fortresses": Administrative Burden in U.S. Immigration Policies and Its Consequences. *J Policy Anal Manage*. 2018;37:211–239.