

FACT SHEET

Immigrants and the Food Stamp Program

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Immigrants pay taxes and make vital contributions to the United States. Despite their hard work, low wages and inadequate employment benefits, they are not eligible for food stamps or other basic assistance on the same basis as United States citizens.

■ **Eligibility for food stamps is available only to U.S. citizens and certain lawfully present immigrants.**

- Undocumented immigrants are not, and never have been, eligible for food stamps.
- In 1996, most immigrants were cut from the Food Stamp Program, including immigrants who had been living and working in the U.S. lawfully for many years. Recognizing the severe harm caused by this policy, Congress enacted two laws (in 1998 and 2002) making some immigrants eligible for food stamps on the same basis as citizens.
- However, special restrictions that apply only to immigrants remain: Lawfully present immigrants generally cannot receive food stamps on the same basis as citizens until they have been in the country in a “qualified” immigrant status for five years. There are a few narrow exceptions to this five-year waiting period, most notably for refugees and qualified immigrant children.

■ **Noncitizens work at the same rate as U.S. citizens but are twice as likely to be poor, primarily because they work in low-wage jobs.**

- Households headed by noncitizens are as likely to have a full-time worker as households headed by citizens.¹
- While foreign-born persons make up about 11 percent of the U.S. population, they comprise about one in four of all low-wage workers.²
- Nearly half (48 percent) of all immigrant workers earn less than two times the minimum wage.³
- Given the low wages earned by many newcomers to the U.S., noncitizens are almost twice as likely to be poor as citizens (22 percent compared to 12 percent).⁴

■ **As a result, children in immigrant households suffer more from economic hardship and food insecurity than other children.**

- One in four low-income children is the child of an immigrant.⁵
- Noncitizens are almost twice as likely to be poor as citizens (21.6 percent compared to 12.0 percent).⁶
- Among children in two-parent families in 1999, those in immigrant families were three times as likely to be poor as those in native-born families.⁷
- Over half (56 percent) of young, low-income children of immigrants live in families experiencing hunger or other food-related problems.



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- Most of these children are U.S. citizens: Over three quarters (77 percent) of children in immigrant families are native-born U.S. citizen children.⁸
- Immigrant children are twice as likely to live in families that spent more than half their income on rent or mortgage payments.⁹

■ **Yet immigrants are far less likely to receive food stamps than are citizens with similar incomes.**

- Even after the 2002 restorations, a disproportionately low number of immigrants receive food stamps. While noncitizens represent approximately 8 percent of the U.S. population,¹⁰ less than 3 percent of all food stamp recipients are noncitizens.¹¹
- Eligible immigrants are less likely to use food stamps than eligible citizens. In FY 2003, only 47 percent of noncitizens eligible for food stamps participated in the program. The overall food stamp participation rate among eligible individuals is 56 percent.¹²
- Participation is similarly low among U.S. citizen children of immigrants. While 74 percent of all eligible children participate in the Food Stamp Program, only 47 percent of eligible citizen children living with noncitizen adults participated in the program.¹³ Young low-income children of U.S.-born citizens are twice as likely to receive food stamps as are young low-income children of immigrants.¹⁴

■ **Immigrants pay taxes, work hard, and make vital contributions to the United States and should not be subject to special restrictions that prevent them from securing basic food assistance when they need it.**

- Seventy-eight percent of all agricultural workers are immigrants.¹⁵ Basic decency requires that these workers who feed the nation's families have enough food to ensure that their own families do not suffer from hunger.
- According to the February 2005 Economic Report of the President, "summing up the economic benefits and costs of immigration shows that over time, the benefits of immigration exceed the costs."

■ **There is broad, bipartisan consensus that the Food Stamp Program should serve both citizens and lawfully present immigrants.**

- The 2002 Farm Bill, which restored food stamp eligibility to many immigrants, passed with strong bipartisan support.
- The Bush administration has championed inclusion of lawfully present immigrants in the Food Stamp Program and was a key supporter of restoring immigrants' eligibility for food stamps in the 2002 Farm Bill. Under the president's administration, Food and Nutrition Services has engaged in targeted outreach aimed at welcoming immigrants back to the program.
- Newt Gingrich, an architect of the 1996 welfare law, has stated that the restrictions on legal immigrants' eligibility for food stamps were "one of the provisions [in the welfare law] that went too far."¹⁶
- An overwhelming majority of Americans polled believe that lawfully present immigrants should have the same access to public benefits as U.S. citizens, with very little difference in viewpoint between people who identified as Republican, Democrat, or independent.¹⁷

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¹ *Immigrants' Health Care Coverage and Access*, Kaiser Commission on Medicaid and the Uninsured (Aug. 2003).

² Randy Capps, Michael Fix, and Jeffrey Passel, *The Dispersal of Immigrants in the 1990s*, Urban Institute (Nov. 2002) (In this study, "low wage" is defined as under 200 percent of the federal poverty level).

³ Randy Capps, Michael Fix, Jeffrey Passel, Jason Ost, and Dan Perez-Lopez, *Profile of the Low-Wage Immigrant Workforce*, Urban Institute Immigration Studies Program (Nov. 2003).

⁴ 2005 Census Bureau—published tables based on the Annual Social and Economic Supplement to the Current Population Survey.

⁵ Randy Capps, Robin Koralek, Katherine Lotspeich, Michael Fix, Pamela Holcomb, Jane Reardon Anderson, *Assessing Implementation of the 2002 Farm Bill's Legal Immigrant Food Stamp Restorations: Final Report to the United States Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service*, Urban Institute (Nov. 2004).

⁶ 2005 Census Bureau tables, *supra* note 4.

⁷ Ron Haskins, Mark Greenberg, and Shawn Fremstad, "Federal Policy for Immigrant Children: Room for Common Ground?" *The Future of Children*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (Summer 2004).

⁸ Census Bureau, *Profile of the Foreign-Born Population in the United States: 2000* (Dec. 2001).

⁹ Randy Capps, Michael Fix, Jason Ost, Jane Reardon-Anderson, and Jeffrey Passel, *The Health and Well-Being of Young Children of Immigrants*, Urban Institute (2004).

¹⁰ Estimate of total U.S. population reported by U.S. Census Bureau (July 2004) divided by estimate of noncitizen population reported by Pew Hispanic Center (March 2004).

¹¹ Karen Cunyningham and Beth Brown, *Characteristics of Food Stamp Households: Fiscal Year 2003*, a report prepared for the U.S. Dept. of Agriculture by Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. (Nov. 2004). Even before the restrictions on eligibility were implemented, rates of participation in the Food Stamp Program among eligible noncitizens were lower than those of citizens; only 5.2 percent of food stamp benefits went to immigrants. See Mike Stavrianos, Scott Cody, and Kimball Lewis, *Characteristics of Childless Unemployed Adult and Legal Immigrant Food Stamp Participants: Fiscal Year 1995*, a report prepared for the U.S. Dept. of Agriculture by Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. (Feb. 13, 1997); and Michael Fix and Jeffrey Passel, *Trends in Noncitizens' and Citizens' Use of Public Benefits Following Welfare Reform: 1994–97*, Urban Institute (March 1999), available at www.urban.org/url.cfm?ID=408086.

¹² Karen Cunyningham, *Food Stamp Program Participation Rates: 2003*, Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. (July 2005).

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ *The Health and Well-Being of Young Children of Immigrants*, *supra* note 9 (using 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).

¹⁵ Andrew Sum, Ishwar Khatiwada, Paul Harrington, and Sheila Palma, *New Immigrants in the Labor Force and the Number of Employed New Immigrants in the U.S. from 2000 through 2003: Continued Growth Amidst Declining Employment Among the Native Born Population*, Center for Labor Market Studies (Dec. 2003); U.S. Dept. of Labor, *Findings from the National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS) 2001–2002: A Demographic and Employment Profile of United States Farm Workers* (May 2, 2005).

¹⁶ Robert Pear, "White House Seeking to Restore Food Stamp Aid for Noncitizens," *New York Times* (Jan. 9, 2002).

¹⁷ Lake, Snell, Perry, and Associates, reporting on a survey of 1000 persons, survey commissioned by the National Immigration Law Center (May 2002).