

## Trump Administration Immigration Policies Are Harming Children and Families in the Greater Boston Area

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All children in Massachusetts—no matter their background or circumstances—deserve the opportunity to *just be kids*: To know the love of their families. To have a safe, stable place to live with plenty of healthy food to eat. To play with their friends. To go to school and learn without fear. To grow up to become thriving, productive adults.

As we document in this brief, harm is evident in the Greater Boston area, where immigrant families' daily lives are being upended by harsh immigration policies and children are losing out on vital health, nutrition, and educational services as a result. Whether it's systematically separating migrant children and families at the border, arresting hundreds of immigrant parents in massive worksite raids on the first day of school in Mississippi, or factoring the "cost savings" of eligible U.S. citizen-children losing public benefits in its public charge regulation, the Trump Administration has demonstrated time and again that it is indifferent to—and in some cases emboldened by—the harm its policy decisions inflict on children across the country.

Building on research conducted in 2017,<sup>1</sup> the Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP) conducted a series of site visits in 2019 and 2020 to deepen our understanding of how immigrant families are affected by immigration policy changes at state and federal levels. This brief draws on in-person and phone interviews with more than 30 individuals representing child care providers, home visitors,<sup>2</sup> health and mental health care providers, and legal service providers in the Greater Boston area (see page 8 for more information).

*Disclaimer: This brief is based on interviews conducted before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.*

### Key findings include:

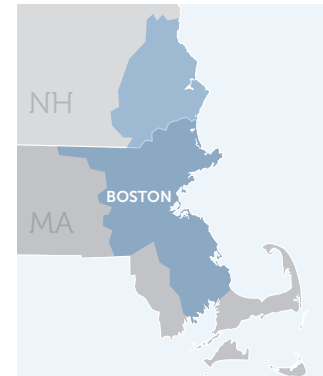
- Fears are pervasive, evolving, and disrupting families' day-to-day lives
- Families are avoiding publicly funded health, nutrition, and education services for which they are eligible, even for their U.S. citizen-children
- The threat of family separation is taking a toll on the health and wellbeing of children and their families
- Trusted service providers are under immense pressure and facing new, complex challenges



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**Immigrant families in the Greater Boston area**

The Greater Boston area (which includes Norfolk, Plymouth, Suffolk, Essex, and Middlesex counties in Massachusetts, and Rockingham and Strafford counties in New Hampshire) is culturally, linguistically, and ethnically diverse. Nearly 1 million immigrants—about 20 percent of the metro area population<sup>3</sup>—call Greater Boston home, and roughly one-third of all area children have at least one parent who was born outside the United States.<sup>4</sup> The vast majority of immigrants in Greater Boston are from Latin America (40 percent) or Asia (32 percent).<sup>5</sup>



**Boston-Cambridge-Newton, MA-NH Metro Area Visited**

|   | Boston Metro Area | Massachusetts    | USA                 |
|---|-------------------|------------------|---------------------|
| <b>Share of children with at least one immigrant parent</b> | <b>33%</b>        | <b>30%</b>       | <b>25%</b>          |
| <b>Total population of children</b>                         | <b>960,000</b>    | <b>1,367,000</b> | <b>73.4 million</b> |

Source: The Urban Institute, Data from the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series datasets drawn from the 2016 and 2017 American Community Survey.

Greater Boston has a long history as an immigrant-friendly area, but the particular communities in which immigrants live have shifted dramatically over time. For example, communities south of Boston have historically had larger concentrations of foreign-born residents, while communities just north of the city—including Chelsea, Lynn, and Malden—have seen dramatic increases over the course of the last 30 years.<sup>6</sup> The demographic shifts in areas surrounding the city are due in part to the rising cost of living in Boston proper, particularly rent and housing costs that have led families with lower household incomes to move further out into the region.

Despite this history—and the state’s progressive reputation—Massachusetts has struggled to enact immigrant-friendly legislation, such as in-state tuition or drivers’ licenses for undocumented residents. Massachusetts is also the only state in New England to have active 287(g) agreements,<sup>7</sup> which deputize local law enforcement agencies to carry out immigration enforcement activities at the expense of local taxpayers. Research shows that 287(g) agreements make immigrant residents fearful to contact police if they are victims of or witnesses to a crime in their area, putting the safety of the entire community at risk.<sup>8</sup>



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### Key findings

#### Fears are pervasive, evolving, and disrupting families' day-to-day lives

In our interviews with providers, we consistently heard that they are seeing wide-spread and evolving fears of immigration-related consequences among the families they serve. Providers told us that anxieties regarding immigration enforcement and confusion about different immigration policies have always been present in the communities they serve. However, they were clear that those concerns seem more acute in the current context and are having marked impacts on how families go about their daily lives.

For example, a family services provider with an early childhood program noticed changes after the 2016 election. "And it was immediate," she said. "There was no lag time there." Initially, she said parents were primarily concerned about immigration enforcement and being deported without their children. And while those concerns are still present, they are now compounded by questions about the immigration consequences of participating in publicly funded programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

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*"Now it's like a day-to-day [question] of what is going to happen."*

— IMMIGRATION LEGAL SERVICES PROVIDER

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Other providers described how clients saw certain policies being implemented—like the refugee ban and the Muslim ban early in 2017 and family separation at the border in 2018—and feared that they could be impacted by similar policies. A home visitor, whose program serves a large number of South and Central American immigrants recounted how her clients worried that the bans on immigration would extend to their home countries, preventing them from traveling from the U.S. to visit their loved ones, which she said "... has kind of happened—or at least it feels like that for a lot of our families."

A pediatric mental health specialist similarly expressed how scary it is for immigrant parents to witness the worksite raids in Mississippi and other targeted enforcement actions play out in communities across the country. "One of the worst possible experiences these families could live [through], after many of them went at great lengths to protect their children from harm in their countries of origin, is to be separated from their young children as a result of immigration enforcement," she explained. "The threat of an increasing number of families being broken apart due to immigration policy was a fantasy or a fear we all had at some point, but now it's a reality."

This fear is leading families to make dramatic changes to their daily lives and routines. A home visitor who works with young, first-time mothers shared that one family was afraid to leave their home—even just to get groceries—because they were worried that they may be stopped and asked for documentation. Another described a few participants who are part of the same extended family that "stopped seeing each other because they were afraid that [U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, or ICE] would then find them."

Many health and social service professionals we interviewed mentioned that families are more fearful of going to "official" places, like health clinics or social service offices. The presence—whether real or rumored—of



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*“The implication for kids is that they don’t go out, they don’t go to child care, they don’t go to see the doctor, they don’t go to the park, they are not part of the social fabric, and are forced to remain marginal and in fear.”*

— PEDIATRIC MENTAL HEALTH SPECIALIST

immigration agents in communities and at public transit stations exacerbates those fears and further inhibits immigrants’ mobility, even affecting children’s school attendance. A family services provider with an early childhood program described how attendance rates drastically decline when immigrant agents are rumored to be nearby. She recalled how word of a small, targeted raid in one of the communities they serve significantly hit the attendance in their program: “One day only 10 percent of children were there.”

### Families are avoiding publicly funded services, even for their citizen-children

Nearly every service provider we interviewed described how immigrants were withdrawing from or refusing publicly funded services for themselves or their children because of concerns related to the public charge regulation and enforcement. Public charge was a particularly salient issue during our site visit to the Greater Boston area in September 2019, in part because changes to policy were scheduled to go into effect just a couple weeks later.<sup>9</sup>

“The public charge changes have probably been most confusing for our membership,” shared the executive director of a multi-service organization that offers early care and education. She described parents wanting to get off benefits because they believed that participating would hurt them in the long run. Health care, legal service, and home visiting providers echoed similar misconceptions among the families they serve, most of whom were not directly impacted by public charge. Several immigration lawyers said clients have even asked about giving back or paying back the cost of subsidies for housing and health insurance to avoid being labeled a public charge.

“Everyone is asking about public charge,” one lawyer said. “Doesn’t matter if they are citizens, noncitizens. Everyone is afraid.”

While the new public charge policy was top of mind during our site visit, several providers were clear that fears related to public charge have always been a challenge in the community; now, rapidly changing policies and heightened enforcement just exacerbate those longstanding fears. Notably, it was difficult to separate public charge-related concerns from concerns about immigration enforcement. When asked why immigrants were refusing certain services, many interviewees talked both about the changes to public charge policy and concern about how private information—like other services they use or their home address—provided on a program application or renewal form might be accessible to immigration agents.

As a result of widespread fear and confusion, service providers reported that immigrant families are increasingly losing out on a wide range of services they are eligible for, including for their U.S. citizen-children. SNAP, Medicaid, and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) were commonly named as programs that parents are declining. One provider mentioned that parents were even refusing services from a local privately funded food pantry. Notably, neither WIC nor food pantries are included in a public charge determination.



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Some providers shared that immigrant families are not necessarily coming to them with questions. Families come with perceived notions about how they are impacted and what they need to do. One legal service provider described how clients don't want WIC or SNAP anymore, even if the clients are U.S. citizens or green card holders already.

Providers who work with families with young children also reported that parents are increasingly reluctant to enroll in other critical programs that aren't considered in a public charge determination, including child care assistance, Head Start, and early intervention for infants and toddlers with disabilities or developmental delays. Multiple preschool program directors similarly reported enrollment declines in their programs, particularly in communities with large immigrant populations. One said enrollment was so low in a specific community that they had to close a classroom ahead of the 2019-2020 school year. Another said program staff are increasingly getting anonymous calls from parents asking what kind of information they have to report to enroll in the program.

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*"In a culture of fear like this, people tend to withdraw."*

— LEGAL PARTNER

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Several providers discussed how families may be weighing the importance of different services for their children and the perceived risk of obtaining those services. A legal partner described how parents may choose to forgo specialty services they don't perceive as essential, like dental care. "I think every family is doing a cost-benefit analysis," she said.

### **Looming threat of family separation is taking a toll on the health and wellbeing of children and their families**

Providers were mixed in their perceptions of whether immigration enforcement had increased in Boston and the surrounding areas. Some sensed that more immigration agents were present in the community or they knew that the Trump administration was conducting more non-criminal deportations. Others were more aware of rumors than anything else, which still have adverse effects on immigrant families' mobility and feelings of safety. Across the board, providers were clear that the uncertainty of the current immigration policy climate is harming their clients' health and wellbeing.

A primary care doctor characterized this volatility as a "violence" being inflicted on her adult patients, whose distress is showing up in increased depression rates, a resurgence of symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, or difficulty managing chronic diseases.

"Even children who are very young can and do understand the threat of their parents being taken away," a legal partner said. "That's very traumatic for children and parents," especially for adults who can't assure their children that nothing will happen.

In these circumstances, it's difficult for parents to be emotionally present for their children and go about their lives with a sense of normalcy and safety, a pediatric mental health specialist told us. She offered an example of a mother suffering from depression who couldn't get out of bed because she was overwhelmed by thoughts of being separated from her child.





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She went on to say that “for children who are so dependent on their caregivers for their survival—what is happening, the constant threat of losing a parent or actually losing a parent to detention and deportation, can be devastating.”

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*“The worst thing that can happen to me is if I lost you.”*

— PEDIATRIC MENTAL HEALTH SPECIALIST

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Providers described changes in children’s behavior indicative of heightened stress, such as difficulty sleeping, frequent nightmares, or not meeting developmental milestones. A family services provider with an early childhood program reported significant increases in the behavior supports necessary in their classrooms over the last three years.

“Our social-emotional interventions have skyrocketed. [The number of] children receiving one-on-one mental health has skyrocketed,” she said. “It certainly can’t all be attributed to immigration-related concerns, but there’s no way it’s not involved.”

For too many children, the threat of being separated from their loved ones due to immigration detention or deportation had become a reality. About half of the providers who work directly with young children were aware of at least one family in their programs or clinics who had a close family member detained or deported. When we asked a group of early childhood professionals if any of the children they served had a family member deported in the last three years, the family services provider said she could think of 15 off the top of her head.

“Our immigrant communities are so interwoven and often are intergenerationally housed,” she explained. “So even if it’s not the mom or dad, somebody else being deported or having a legal issue related to their status—it’s just terrible for the children.”

Providers who work closely with families described the remaining family members’ economic hardship and emotional distress in the aftermath of a loved one’s deportation. An enrollment specialist at an early childhood program said one pregnant mother was so afraid and upset after her husband was arrested that she refused to leave the house and relied on her relatives to help care for her child.

A family services provider described a child who was riding with his parents when his father was pulled over for running a red light. The child witnessed the police searching the family’s vehicle and his father being arrested. “There’s no child that’s unaffected by something like that happening,” she said. “[He] was scared of—and refused to ride in— cars for about a year after the incident. Mom would walk [him] everywhere, including to and from school each day.”

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*“He knows that his mom is undocumented and that he has status, [because] he was born in the U.S. He started asking all these questions like, ‘Do we have to go...? How will we go back? Who will be waiting at the airport? Can I take my toys and the Nintendo?’”*

— FAMILY SERVICE NAVIGATOR

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### Trusted service providers are under immense pressure and facing new, complex challenges

Supporting immigrant families in a meaningful way given the current policy climate requires service providers across all sectors to be thoughtful, proactive, and intentional. The providers we interviewed acknowledged the trust their clients placed in them and they took that responsibility seriously. But many felt frustrated and exhausted by the rapid changes in policy. Providers shared feelings of uncertainty, due to these fast-paced policy changes.

In particular, many providers said they felt like they can't speak confidently about how policies might affect families and assure them of their safety, which they felt undermines their credibility with their clients.

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*"There's just a lot of internalized trauma going on."*

— EARLY EDUCATION PROVIDER

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Others described the weight that they and their colleagues felt as they worked to support families through increasingly difficult situations and decisions.

"To know you work with people that are afraid to leave their homes, that are afraid to go to the store..." a home visiting program coordinator said. "To think about the impact this is having on the daily lives of other human beings is a lot to hold for people."

The toll that the current climate has on staff is particularly concerning among organizations that employ members of the communities they serve, meaning many staff members are immigrants themselves. Even if they aren't directly impacted, many staff have family members or friends who are affected by policy changes.

In the face of these heightened demands, providers described a number of strategies they used to inform, empower, and protect themselves and the families they serve. Home visitors, child care and early education providers, and health care providers all mentioned disseminating handouts and "Know Your Rights" cards to families, hosting informational workshops, and making changes to their policies and procedures to respect families' safety and privacy. Several providers who work closely with families with young children also support parents in creating family emergency plans in case one or both parents are detained or deported.

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*"This is a really traumatic time for everyone it touches...  
This giant set of problems created by a culture of fear and uncertainty  
touches a lot of people, way more people than we think it does."*

— LEGAL PARTNER

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This brief would not be possible without the dozens of service providers and advocates who took the time to speak with us. We are grateful for their willingness to share their experiences and for the work they do to support immigrant families every day.

We also want to extend our thanks to Madison Allen, Wendy Cervantes, Kate Gallagher Robbins, Elizabeth Lower-Basch, Hannah Matthews, and the CLASP communications team for their helpful review and insights.

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# Children and families in the Greater Boston area deserve better

Conversations with immigrant-serving organizations in the Greater Boston area reveal that parents are altering their daily lives and avoiding public health, nutrition, and education programs—including for their U.S. citizen-children—in response to the Trump administration’s relentless attacks. We need to reverse course and help ensure that children and their families are on a path to success by advocating for policies that truly support economic security and a stronger future for Massachusetts and the rest of the United States—rather than undermining our collective wellbeing and long-term success. After all, every child deserves the chance to just be a kid.

Ensuring all children have the opportunity to thrive requires local, state, and national leaders to prioritize children’s and families’ best interests in our laws and policies. Yet the Trump Administration’s immigration policies could not stray further from this approach.

### Summary of our methods

Between September and October of 2019, CLASP conducted semi-structured interviews with organizations in the Greater Boston area. Participants included more than 30 staff across 15 organizations that provide the following services:

- Primary health care
- Patient support and care coordination
- Mental and behavioral health care
- Center-based child care and early education
- Home visiting and early intervention
- Nutrition assistance
- Immigration advocacy and legal services

We are withholding specific information about participants and their organizations to protect their privacy.

<sup>1</sup> Wendy Cervantes, Rebecca Ullrich, Hannah Matthews, “Our Children’s Fear: Immigration Policy Effects on Young Children” (Center for Law and Social Policy, March 2018) [www.clasp.org/ourchildrensfear](http://www.clasp.org/ourchildrensfear).

<sup>2</sup> Home visitors provide parents with support, coaching, and resources to support their understanding of children’s health and development, promote strong parent-child relationships, and connect them to resources in the community.

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Census Bureau (2018). American Community Survey 1-year estimates. Retrieved from Census Reporter Profile page for Boston-Cambridge-Newton, MA-NH Metro Area <http://censusreporter.org/profiles/31000US14460-boston-cambridge-newton-ma-nh-metro-area/>.

<sup>4</sup> The Urban Institute. Data from the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series datasets drawn from the 2017 and 2018 American Community Survey.

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Census Bureau (2018). American Community Survey 1-year estimates. Retrieved from Census Reporter Profile page for Boston-Cambridge-Newton, MA-NH Metro Area <http://censusreporter.org/profiles/31000US14460-boston-cambridge-newton-ma-nh-metro-area/>.

<sup>6</sup> Rita Kiki Edozie, Barbara Lewis, Shauna Lo, et al., *Changing Faces of Greater Boston*, Boston Indicators, The Boston Foundation, UMASS Boston, and the UMASS Donahue Institute, 2019, <https://www.bostonindicators.org/-/media/indicators/boston-indicators-reports/report-files/changing-faces-2019/changing-faces-of-greater-boston.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> Immigrant Legal Resource Center, “National Map of 287(g) Agreements,” 2019, <https://www.ilrc.org/national-map-287g-agreements>.

<sup>8</sup> Laura Muñoz Lopez, *How 287(g) Agreements Harm Public Safety*, Center for American Progress, 2018, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/immigration/news/2018/05/08/450439/287g-agreements-harm-public-safety/>.

<sup>9</sup> Some people who apply for a green card or a visa to enter the U.S. must pass a public charge test, which looks at whether the person is likely to use certain government services in the future. In making this determination, immigration officials review all of a person’s circumstances, including their age, income, health, education and skills, and their sponsor’s affidavit of support. Immigration officials can also consider whether a person has used the following public programs: SNAP, Federal Public Housing and Section 8 assistance, Medicaid (except for emergency services, children under 21 years, and pregnant women, and new mothers), and cash assistance programs. Since our interviews, the public charge regulation was implemented on February 24, 2020. For more information about public charge, please visit <https://protectingimmigrantfamilies.org/>.