

Executive Summary

Immigrant Families during the Pandemic: On the Frontlines but Left Behind

By Juan Carlos Gomez and Vanessa Meraz

February 2021

The Trump Administration's immigration and pandemic response policies exacerbated a range of hardships facing immigrant communities. This brief details how immigrants have been left behind in the pandemic and recommends policies for Congress and the Biden-Harris Administration to proactively meet their needs. Immigrants have been essential in this crisis and are essential to our nation's recovery.

Policymakers left immigrants behind with harsh immigration tactics and by denying them the health, nutrition, economic, and educational supports they need to survive. Here's how:

1. **Increased immigration enforcement put immigrant families at risk of family separation and illness.** The Trump Administration increasingly tore families apart in the pandemic, and disproportionately targeted Black immigrants. Their policies led to the death of at least eight immigrants in detention and risked the health of the five million+ children who have at least one undocumented parent.¹
2. **Uncertainty surrounding Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) and Temporary Protected Status (TPS) increased emotional and economic toll on families.** Over half a million U.S. citizen children have parents with DACA or TPS. The Trump Administration threatened the future of these programs, increasing immigrants' barriers to job security and ability to care for their families.
3. **Policy barriers blocked immigrants from getting critical health and nutrition needs met.** Denying immigrants pandemic aid, along with policies that block their access to health coverage and care, threatened their physical and mental health. Fear of immigration policies reduced immigrants' use of key health programs, including COVID testing, and have increased hunger in immigrant families.²
4. **Range of policies imposed disproportionate economic hardships on immigrants.** Overrepresented in all frontline industries, immigrants face increased risks to COVID-19. Many employers have denied them adequate protections, risking their livelihood if they get sick. Pandemic unemployment has also disproportionately hurt immigrants, while federal lawmakers largely barred them from pandemic aid.
5. **Students in immigrant families faced increased barriers to education.** In 2018, 3 in 10 immigrant households lacked home internet access.³ As schools shifted to online learning, this gap made it harder for students in immigrant families to succeed, more so for those in families with low incomes.

Immigrants play an essential role in communities nationwide. Meeting their needs is critical to supporting America’s recovery. Congress and the Biden-Harris Administration must:

1. **Divest in immigration enforcement and invest in policies that support immigrants.** Among other actions, federal policymakers can restore DACA and TPS and create pathways to citizenship for program recipients and for immigrants who are essential workers; strengthen the “sensitive locations” policy; end enforcement actions, such as family detention; and ensure people who have been deported can return to their family in the United States.
2. **Expand health coverage and other public benefits.** Federal leaders can expand immigrants’ access to health coverage, and ensure access to COVID-19 testing, treatment, and vaccines; shore up state and local government efforts supporting immigrants’ health and economic security; undo the public charge rule; and boost immigrant access to core programs that help families meet their basic needs.
3. **Provide economic support.** Policymakers can ensure all immigrants receive past and future pandemic assistance and that immigrant children are included in key refundable tax credits, regardless of a child or parents’ immigration status.
4. **Strengthen equity in education and student mental health.** Policymakers can close the internet access and technology gap for all students from pre-kindergarten through 12th grade; ensure postsecondary students, regardless of immigration status, are eligible for all forms of federal financial aid and COVID-19 assistance; and they can invest in school and community-based resources that support student mental health.
5. **Invest in learning more about what immigrant families need.** Congress must advance a study on how the pandemic is affecting immigrant families to understand what further actions can help them heal.

Immigrants are vital members of communities nationwide and are key to our country’s workforce. By adopting these recommendations, Congress and the Biden-Harris Administration can reduce the significant burdens confronting immigrant families today. Doing so can also put America, as a whole, on a path toward healing and recovery.

¹ Cary Lou, Gina Adams, and Hamutal Bernstein, “Part of Us: A Data-Driven Look at Children of Immigrants,” Urban Institute, March 14, 2019, <https://www.urban.org/features/part-us-data-driven-look-children-immigrants>.

² Food Over Fear: Overcoming Barriers to Connect Latinx Immigrant Families to Federal Nutrition and Food Programs, Food Resource & Action Center and National Immigration Law Center, 2020, <https://frac.org/research/resource-library/nilc-latinximmigrantfamilies>

³ “Back to School: A Look at the Internet Access Gap,” New American Economy, August 6, 2020, <https://research.newamericaneconomy.org/report/internet-access-covid-19/>