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CLASP
The Center for Law and Social Policy

Supporting Immigrant Families

More than six million children, the majority of whom are U.S. citizens, have an undocumented parent. Their lives are being upended through economic and social isolation and the detentions and deportations of their loved ones.

Introduction: The Problem and Solution

Immigrant families have long faced significant barriers to obtaining legal status and fully participating in civic and economic life in the United States. However, since the start of the second Trump Administration in January 2025, federal immigration policy has shifted dramatically. Through executive orders, administrative actions, legislation, and court decisions, the federal government has advanced a coordinated set of policies that have expanded harmful immigration enforcement practices that are terrorizing American communities, narrowed pathways to legal status, and restricted access to the supports families need to remain healthy and economically secure.

Moreover, far from being cost-effective, anti-immigrant policies are deeply harming our economy. Research has shown that mass deportations could decrease U.S. GDP by $4.7 trillion over a decade.[1] Immigration enforcement actions will decrease employment and wages of both U.S.-born and noncitizen workers, increase prices of goods in those industries with job losses, and decrease tax revenues for state and local governments.[2]

$4.7 trillion losses to U.S. GDP over a decade due to mass deportation

All Americans are going to suffer and pay the cost of immigration enforcement. Losing workers in direct care, child care, agriculture, and construction industries will lead to higher prices for health care, child care, food, and housing. The federal government's decisions to allocate $240 billion for immigration enforcement is driving the affordability crisis for all of us. We could, instead, allocate funding toward policies that actually make life more affordable for families.

More than six million children, the majority of whom are U.S. citizens, have an undocumented parent. Their lives are being upended through economic and social isolation and the detentions and deportations of their loved ones. Together, anti-immigrant actions threaten children's health, safety, and development while making stable family life increasingly out of reach for immigrant communities.

more than 6 million children, most of them U.S. citizens, have an undocumented parent

Policymakers must take action to ensure that all children have the opportunities to both survive and thrive. Ultimately, what immigrant children and their families deserve is a pathway to citizenship and an assurance that immigration enforcement actions prioritize their safety and well-being. Such an approach would reflect American values of prioritizing child safety and family unity while also benefiting our overall economy.

State of Play

Immigration Enforcement Has Expanded Dramatically

In less than a year, Congress enacted two major funding packages that, together, dramatically expanded the federal government's mass detention and deportation infrastructure. First, the **Budget Reconciliation Act of 2025 (H.R.1)** provided approximately $170 billion for immigration enforcement over four years, tripling Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE)'s budget while expanding detention capacity, deportation operations, and border enforcement;[3] this includes restarting the practice of family and child detention. Subsequently, in June 2026, Congress approved an additional $70 billion for ICE and Customs and Border Protection (CBP), further accelerating the administration's mass detention and deportation agenda.[4]

At the same time, the Trump Administration has ramped up enforcement and weakened critical protections aimed at mitigating the harm of immigration enforcement on children and families. It rescinded longstanding protected areas guidance that had discouraged immigration enforcement in schools, hospitals, child care centers, places of worship, shelters, and other essential community locations. ICE also rescinded guidance for its officers on protecting detained and deported parents' rights and replaced it with guidance that offers weaker protections; even this has not been consistently followed or enforced.[5] ICE has restarted the

practice of family and child detention and rapidly expanded 287(g) agreements that deputize state and local law enforcement officers to carry out federal immigration enforcement responsibilities, increasing immigration enforcement within communities across the country. These actions have led to children being detained and exposed to violent immigration enforcement in places once considered safe; family separation; and widespread fear among families seeking health care, education, child care, and other essential services.

Pathways to Legal Status and Humanitarian Protections Have Narrowed

The administration has also made it increasingly difficult for immigrants to obtain or maintain lawful immigration status, effectively expanding the number of people vulnerable to deportation. Temporary Protected Status (TPS) has been terminated for multiple countries; Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) recipients have faced significant delays; asylum protections have been significantly narrowed; and legal immigration processing has become increasingly restrictive.[6] The administration has sought to end birthright citizenship, challenged protections for lawful permanent residents, and advanced policies that increase barriers to obtaining lawful status.[7] Collectively, these actions create greater uncertainty for immigrant families and leave many long-term residents at risk of losing protections they have relied upon for years.

Access to Basic Supports Has Become More Restricted

Recent federal actions have also made it more difficult for immigrant families to access the services and supports that help children and families remain healthy and economically secure, at the same time the country is experiencing a worsening affordability crisis affecting all families. H.R.1 eliminated eligibility for Medicaid, SNAP, and other public benefits for many lawfully present immigrants while restricting the Child Tax Credit for millions of U.S. citizen children in mixed-status families.[8] Federal agencies have increasingly sought access to sensitive information held by the Internal Revenue Service and public benefits agencies, while proposing a new public charge regulation that creates uncertainty about the immigration consequences of using public benefits.[9] Reductions in federal funding to states is creating state-level pressure to cut optional services for their immigrant residents.[10] Additionally, several actions from the administration as well as provisions in H.R.1 have made obtaining and maintaining work authorization, essential for immigrant families to work in safe and secure jobs, even more difficult.[11] These actions reinforce the fear that interacting with government programs or seeking health care, nutrition assistance, or other supports could place families at risk. As a result, many eligible families have withdrawn from services or avoided seeking help altogether.[12]

Why Do We Need to Act?

Immigration enforcement, restrictions on legal status, and barriers to essential supports shape whether children grow up in stable families, whether parents are able to provide for their children, and whether communities remain places where families can safely meet their basic needs and thrive. Research, including the lived experiences of families, consistently demonstrates that anti-immigrant policies undermine

children's health, development, and long-term well-being. Moreover, the Trump Administration's actions have undermined the few protections children have in the course of immigration enforcement actions and while in custody, and are attempting to erode immigrant families' and children's well-being.

> *Policymakers must continue to emphasize that all children thrive when families are stable, caregivers are supported, and communities are safe.*

Immigration Policies and Practices are Harming Children

Over two decades of research shows that exposure to immigration enforcement activities–including the detention or deportation of a parent, witnessing enforcement actions, or living with the constant threat of family separation–can harm children's mental and physical health, disrupt healthy development, and create toxic stress with lifelong consequences.[13] The scale of potential harm is significant; over six million children, the majority of whom are U.S. citizens, live with at least one unauthorized immigrant parent. It is estimated that over 205,000 children experienced a parent in detention in the first nine months of 2025.[14]



8,755+

children have seen the inside of a detention center between early 2025 and Aug 2026 — at least 1,600 held longer than 20 days

Moreover, the immigration enforcement practices being employed since the start of the second Trump Administration are worsening children's safety and well-being, including that of children in non-immigrant families, and exposing them to novel harms. This includes children being teargassed or pepper-sprayed and left in dangerous situations due to immigration agents' actions, in violation of ICE's own policies.[15] As of August 6, 2026, over 8,755 children, including 562 babies and toddlers, have seen the inside of a detention center, where they experience delayed medical care, poor nutrition, and disruptions to their education.[16] At least 1,600 of these children have been in detention for longer than 20 days, in violation of the Flores Agreement, which established national minimum standards for the treatment, placement, and release of detained immigrant children.[17] Harms to children extend well beyond those in mixed-status families, affecting their classmates, educators, child care providers, and entire communities.

Families Cannot Thrive When They are Unable to Meet Their Basic Needs

Children's well-being depends on their families' ability to access health care, nutrition assistance, early education, housing, and other supports that promote healthy development. However, H.R.1 eliminated eligibility for many lawfully present immigrants to receive Medicaid, SNAP, and other supports. Children are more likely to have health coverage when their parents do, and children's long-term health and educational outcomes improve when families have reliable access to nutrition, health care, and economic supports.

Policies that increase fear or reduce access to these programs affect the millions of U.S. citizen children living in mixed-status families as well. A large body of research documents a well-established "chilling effect," in which families avoid programs for which they or their children are eligible because they fear immigration consequences, including concerns that personal information could be shared with immigration enforcement authorities.[18] Research consistently shows that this fear extends to programs and populations not directly affected by immigration policy changes, leaving even eligible families without the supports they need and worsening hunger, poor health, housing instability, and poverty across the board.

Immigration Policies Affect Entire Communities and The Economy

Similarly, the consequences of immigration enforcement extend beyond immigrant families.

> **CLASP RESEARCH**
>
> **CLASP's research found that child care and early education providers, health care workers, home visitors, and community organizations are increasingly spending time responding to their clients' fear and family crises rather than supporting children's development. Providers report higher levels of stress, declining attendance, staffing challenges, and less emotional capacity to provide the high-quality care and support that children and families need because immigration enforcement has become part of daily life in the communities they serve.[19]**

Immigration enforcement also carries broader economic and community costs. Parents are afraid to travel to work, bring their children to school or child care, seek medical care, or participate in everyday community life. Employers struggle to retain workers, local businesses lose customers, and trusted community institutions become less effective. Studies have found that immigration enforcement activities have led to a decrease in work among even U.S.-born workers and, overall, slowed economic growth.[20] Widespread immigration enforcement undermines workforce participation, economic stability and growth, and the relationships that allow children and families to thrive.

A Bold Vision Forward

Every child deserves to grow up in a safe, stable, and nurturing environment where they can reach their full potential. That vision is only possible when immigration policies protect family unity, promote children's healthy development, and recognize that children thrive when their caregivers have stability and security. Building an immigration system that centers children's best interests requires policies that keep families together, reduce unnecessary enforcement against parents and caregivers, and ensure children have access to the support they need to succeed. Policymakers should advance policies that prevent unnecessary family separation and ensure that children's best interests are central to immigration practices, including:

- Supporting the **Protecting Sensitive Locations Act**,[21] which would codify the longstanding sensitive locations policy which limits immigration enforcement in places critical to child well-being, like schools, child care facilities, and health care facilities.

- Supporting the **HELP Separated Children Act** and **Orlin's Law**, ensuring that immigration procedures center and prioritize the "best interests of the child,"[22] and codifying policies that allow parents to make decisions about their children and dependents.[23]
- Minimizing unaccompanied children's time in federal custody and reuniting them with family and/or sponsors in a safe, standardized fashion.
- Enabling access to free legal counsel in all immigration proceedings for all children and families involving children.
- Ensuring due process rights are respected for all people.
- Ending family and child detention. Family detention is inhumane and unnecessary, and while detention is harmful for everyone, it is particularly traumatizing for children. Ending family and child detention would also reduce federal spending on immigration detention and allow funding to be re-directed to programs that enhance well-being.

A Pathway to Citizenship Helps Ensure Children Can Grow and Thrive

A child's ability to thrive is closely connected to their family's ability to live with stability, security, and dignity. A pathway to citizenship would provide families with the stability they need to plan for their futures, access opportunities, and contribute to their communities. It would also improve children's economic security by increasing family income, strengthening access to essential services, and reducing the stress associated with the constant threat of family separation. Moreover, a pathway to citizenship would likely improve the U.S. economy by boosting the national GDP, creating new jobs, increasing federal and state revenues, and raising wages.[24]

Congress should allow those with temporary lawful status like TPS or Deferred Enforced Departure, undocumented immigrants, and all individuals brought to the United States as children, including DACA recipients, to apply for protection from deportation and opportunities to pursue permanent lawful status.

A path to citizenship has broad bipartisan support. Between 2024-2025, support for a pathway to citizenship has increased among both Republicans and Democrats from 36 to 40 percent and 77 to 82 percent, respectively.[25] Citizenship for all undocumented immigrants who call this country home is the solution and standard, and an important step toward ensuring families are free from the fear of separation or insecurity.

Redirect funding from immigration removal and enforcement operations to address the harms of immigration enforcement actions and programs that support well-being

Instead of investing resources into detaining and deporting people, the funds used for immigration enforcement could be used to right governmental wrongs. Individuals who have been wrongfully deported, including those sent to third countries or unsafe places and those whose deportations violated federal law or their constitutional rights, should also be provided safe and legal options for returning to the U.S. if they so choose, with expedient pathways for obtaining lawful immigration status.

Funding could also be redistributed to shore up U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services staffing and re-hire immigration judges to address visa, green card, and asylum backlogs and expedite DACA renewals and work authorization requests. This money could also be used to provide pro bono legal counsel, community-based alternatives to detention, expanded legal counsel for unaccompanied children, and wraparound services for people facing civil immigration proceedings such as housing and legal assistance, mental health services, assistance to access health care, and English classes.

Finally, funding for enforcement and removal operations could be allocated to other arms of the government so that more individuals and families could benefit from public education, affordable housing, child care programs, Medicaid, and SNAP. Children thrive when they and their families have access to the resources that support healthy development, including health care, nutritious food, stable housing, and high-quality education and child care. Immigrant households paid nearly $364 billion in federal, state, and local taxes, helping fund programs such as Social Security, Medicare, and unemployment insurance.[26] Yet they are excluded from the very benefits their tax dollars support. By removing unnecessary barriers to public benefits, Congress can help reduce hardship, improve child health and development, and strengthen the well-being of immigrant families and the communities in which they live.

For example, the $240 billion given to the Department of Homeland Security in total between 2025 and 2026 could have fully funded:

HEAD START

NEARLY

14 million

slots for children for one year

MEDICAID

NEARLY

69 million

children covered for one year

TEACHERS

OVER

2 million

elementary school teachers' salaries for one year[27]

Congress can take action to achieve this vision of a more humane immigration and public benefits system by supporting legislation such as the **LIFT the BAR Act** and reversing the H.R.1 eligibility carveouts from public benefits for lawfully present immigrants; restoring access to federal benefits for lawfully present immigrants previously carved out of public benefits from the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) and eliminate the five-year bar for green card holders from accessing Medicaid, the Children's Health Insurance Program, SNAP, TANF, and SSI; and guaranteeing state and local authorities the flexibility to use their own funds to provide benefits to their residents, regardless of their immigration status.

There is no reason for our government to spend billions of dollars to jail and deport children and individuals, the vast majority of whom have non-violent offenses or no criminal record at all. Congress should redirect funding from immigration enforcement to programs that support pathways to legal status, assist immigrants in meeting their basic needs, and enable their ability to thrive. Immigrants deserve an immigration system

that recognizes their dignity, ensures their safe employment, and allows for access to affordable housing, education, health care, and nutritious food. This approach will ultimately benefit all communities.

A REAL-LIFE STORY

over a month
IN FAMILY DETENTION



LUCIANA'S FAMILY



WASHINGTON STATE

Immigration enforcement has multiple, spillover implications for everyday Americans' economic security and well-being. Take for instance, the real-life case of Rayna,* a child care provider in Washington who rented out her home to Luciana,* a skilled child care provider who lived there with her family and ran an extension of Rayna's in-home child care company from the house. Among the several children with autism in the neighborhood she cared for was Deby,* a three-year-old with developmental disabilities. When Luciana attended a routine ICE check-in in 2025, she was told that she and her family were going to be deported to their home countries. She and her two children, ages five and seven, were jailed in Texas's Dilley Family Detention Center, housed separately from their father and her husband in the facility, and where her oldest son, who has high health needs, was denied critical medical treatment. The family ended up being deported to their home country after spending over a month in Dilley. On top of Luciana's family being separated and completely devastated, Rayna lost thousands of dollars in rent and income due to Luciana's unexpected deportation; and, because Deby's foster mother was unable to find another provider who she trusted to care for her nonverbal daughter, she had to quit her job as a physician's assistant to stay home with her child.

**Names changed to protect identities.*

ABOUT THIS BRIEF · ABOUT CLASP

This brief is part of A Stronger Foundation, CLASP's recommendations for the 120th Congress, and is designed to be read and shared as a standalone brief. CLASP is a national, nonpartisan anti-poverty organization advancing policy solutions that work for people with low incomes. · clasp.org

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