

Excluding Non-Citizens from SNAP Harms Children's Health

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Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic led to unprecedented economic hardship. This hardship impacted groups differentially—Hispanic and Black individuals were hit harder economically compared to white individuals. This is especially worrisome because many Hispanic individuals are non-citizens who are excluded from key safety net programs in the U.S. Indeed, non-citizens' receipt of safety net programs in the early days of the pandemic was lower than similarly disadvantaged citizens, and the recovery packages aimed to close some of these gaps in eligibility and participation.¹ However, many of these changes have now expired and non-citizens again have less access to safety net programs than citizens.

This study looks at an earlier time—the years following welfare reform in 1996, which revoked eligibility from immigrants previously authorized to participate in federal safety net programs. A subsequent series of state and federal laws granted eligibility back to some subgroups of immigrants. The study focuses particularly on the SNAP program (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, formerly “Food Stamps”). SNAP is one of the largest safety net programs today; it reached 38 million people in 2019 and has provided crucial support for families during the pandemic.

The researcher examines how U.S.-born children with immigrant parents were affected by changes in access to SNAP. Importantly, all these children are eligible, but children whose *parents were ineligible* were 50% less likely to receive SNAP. Parental ineligibility also increased the likelihood children were born low birthweight, a key indicator of health. Moreover, an additional year of parental ineligibility for children under 6 worsened children's developmental health at school-age and increased the likelihood children were chronically absent from school. This suggests the limitations on immigrants' access to SNAP during the pandemic worsened the impact on children in immigrant families, and this effect would be even worse if not for the changes made in recovery packages.

Key Findings

- >> Economic impacts of COVID were worse for Hispanic and Black individuals than white individuals
- >> Many Hispanic individuals are non-citizens who are not eligible for many federal safety net programs
- >> Studying an earlier period, U.S.-born children who are eligible still experienced large declines in SNAP receipt if their parents were ineligible
- >> Parental ineligibility worsened children's health at birth and children's developmental health outcomes at school ages
- >> Without recovery packages, the effect of the pandemic on children in immigrant families would have been worse

The SNAP Program and Eligibility

SNAP benefits are given out in the form of a debit card and can be used to purchase food that is to be consumed at home. They are available to households with total income below 130% of the poverty line, regardless of the household size or structure, and are intended to allow households to maintain a minimum level of adequate nutrition. Eligible households' benefit amount is a function of their resources and a maximum benefit amount, the latter of which is determined by the number of eligible members in the household. In 1998, the maximum Food Stamp benefit amount for a household of three was \$321 per month and the average benefits received were roughly \$100 below this maximum. These eligibility rules and benefit amounts are set nationally and have varied little since the program began.

In 1996, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act ("welfare reform") passed. In addition to overhauling traditional cash welfare, the act drew a sharp line between non-citizens and U.S.-citizens in terms of their eligibility for SNAP and other safety net programs. Many authorized non-citizens, who previously had been eligible under the same rules as citizens, became ineligible for SNAP. (Note, unauthorized immigrants have never been eligible for SNAP at the federal level.). Following the reform, states were given the option to use their own funds to restore eligibility to some groups of non-citizens and 9 states did so between 1998-2002. In 2003, as part of the Farm Bill, eligibility was restored federally for authorized non-citizens who had lived in the U.S. for at least 5 years.

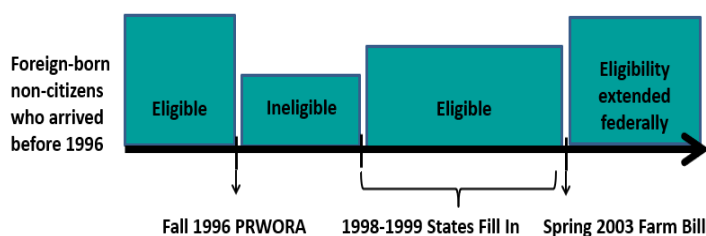


Figure 1: Non-citizens' eligibility for SNAP

Findings

1) Parental ineligibility worsens children's access to SNAP, regardless of the child's own eligibility

This study finds that among U.S.-born children, who are all birthright U.S. citizens, their own citizenship does not guarantee their family will participate in SNAP. In fact, if a U.S.-born child's parents are not eligible for SNAP, the family is 50% less likely to receive SNAP benefits. This may be due to confusion about eligibility rules or to fear of safety net benefits affecting immigration status.

Also, importantly, when only children are eligible, the maximum benefit amount for which the household can qualify for is lower, because it is a function of the number of eligible household members. So, households may no longer find it worth the cost of applying for benefits when the benefit amount falls.

2) Lack of Access to SNAP Worsens Children's Health at Birth

The researcher examines the impact of SNAP eligibility on the birth outcomes of U.S.-born children of pregnant immigrants using the National Vital Statistics Birth Certificate records. To do so, the study compares the outcomes of children who were born to an eligible parent, to outcomes of children who are born to an ineligible parent, due to the parent's state of residence and the child's year of birth.

Maternal ineligibility during the in utero period increases the incidence of low birthweight by 1%. Low birthweight is a marker of poor infant health and is highly correlated with poor outcomes in adulthood.²

3) Parental ineligibility for SNAP among children in early-life harms their health later in childhood

The early-life period is an especially sensitive time for human development. Poor nutrition in early life is predicted to be detrimental to cognitive outcomes and immune system functionality in later childhood.^{3,4} Additionally, more household

resources may reduce parental stress and increase parents' time spent with their children, both of which may improve children's outcomes.

Theory predicts the first 5 years of life, including the in utero period, is particularly significant, so the author studies the impact of parental ineligibility for SNAP in this period on outcomes when children are ages 6-16. Using the National Health Interview Survey in 1998-2015, the author finds that children with one additional year of parental ineligibility in early life have a significantly higher likelihood of being diagnosed with autism, a learning disability, mental retardation, a developmental delay, or ADD/ADHD. Additionally, children are significantly more likely to be chronically absent from school (missing at least 15 days).

Implications for Policy

The findings in this study provide strong evidence that limiting immigrants access to safety net programs harms children's health. This is true not only for children who are immigrants themselves, but also for children born in the U.S. to foreign-born parents.

In a recent poll, three quarters of Americans support eliminating the exclusionary policies that keep authorized immigrants from participating in safety net programs.⁵

Of the original 18 states that expanded SNAP coverage to non-citizens following welfare reform, only 6 states still cover non-citizens, and many have complicated eligibility rules that make the program hard to access.⁶ At the same time, states are removing exclusionary rules of other key safety net programs such as Medicaid. California was the first of now six states to expand access to public health insurance regardless of immigration status.⁷ These policy changes will benefit children's health and educational outcomes in both the short and long-run.

If you would like to learn more about this study, please find the full paper [here](#).

About the Lab

The Equitable Policy Research Lab's mission is to build a more equitable society by supporting policymakers in creating effective and inclusive policies and by diversifying the Economics profession. We conduct policy-relevant research in collaboration with other scholars and community partners in service of reducing current and historical inequities. We evaluate existing policies and propose evidence-based changes that will allow more equitable opportunities and representation. As part of this research, we make data sets on U.S.-based policies publicly available. We also create non-technical summaries of our findings to be shared with advocates and policymakers. In addition to researching inequities, we work to counteract inequalities within the Economics profession itself. The Lab was founded by Dr. East in Spring 2022 as part of her ongoing objective to provide evidence-based recommendations to advocates and policymakers on how to best structure equitable policies.

Endnotes

¹ Watson, Tara, Hoynes, Hilary, and East, Chloe. June 2020. “Coronavirus’ Disproportionate Economic Impacts on Immigrants.” ECONOFACT. <https://econofact.org/coronavirus-disproportionate-economic-impacts-on-immigrants>.

² Sandra E. Black, Paul J. Devereux, Kjell G. Salvanes, From the Cradle to the Labor Market? The Effect of Birth Weight on Adult Outcomes, The Quarterly Journal of Economics, Volume 122, Issue 1, February 2007, Pages 409–439, <https://doi.org/10.1162/qjec.122.1.409>

³ Prado, Elizabeth, and Kathryn Dewey. 2012. “Nutrition and brain development in early life.” Alive and Thrive. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nure.12102>

⁴ Save the Children. 2012. “Nutrition in the First 1,000 Days.” <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/pdf/6006.pdf/>

⁵ Protecting Immigrant Families. January 2022. “3/4 of Americans Support Expanding Immigrant Families’ Safety Net Access.” <https://pifcoalition.org/resource/3-4-of-americans-support-expanding-immigrant-families-safety-net-access>

⁶ Food Research and Action Center. April 2021. “State Food Assistance Programs: Addressing Gaps in SNAP Eligibility for Immigrants.” <https://frac.org/research/resource-library/statefoodassistanceimmigrants>.