

FACTS ABOUT Immigrants and the Food Stamp Program

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Immigrants pay more than their fair share of taxes and make vital contributions to the United States. Despite their hard work and the fact that their wages are often low, immigrants are not eligible for food stamps or other basic safety-net services on the same basis as U.S. citizens.

■ **Food stamps are available only to U.S. citizens and limited categories of lawfully residing immigrants.**

- Undocumented immigrants are not, and never have been, eligible for food stamps.
- In 1996, most lawfully residing immigrants were cut from the Food Stamp Program, including many immigrants who had been living and working in the U.S. for several years. Recognizing the severe inequity and harm caused by this policy, Congress enacted two bills (in 1998 and 2002) restoring eligibility for some categories of immigrants.
- However, most lawfully residing adults cannot receive food stamps on the same basis as citizens until they have been in the U.S. in a specified “qualified” immigrant status for five years.

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

- Households headed by noncitizens are just as likely to have a full-time worker as households headed by citizens.¹
- Immigrants make up 11 percent of U.S. residents but represent 20 percent of low-wage workers.²
- Nearly half (48 percent) of all immigrant workers earn less than two times the minimum wage.³
- Because many newcomers earn low wages, noncitizens are twice as likely to be poor as foreign-born naturalized citizens (10.4 compared to 20.4 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 a child of an immigrant.⁵
- Over half (56 percent) of young⁶ low-income children of immigrants live in families experiencing hunger or other food-related problems.⁷
- Most of these children are U.S. citizens: 80 percent of children in immigrant families are U.S.-born citizen children.⁸

Facts updated by Anyu Fang, Emerson Hunger Fellow 2007.



LOS ANGELES (Headquarters)

3435 Wilshire Boulevard
Suite 2850
Los Angeles, CA 90010
213 639-3900
213 639-3911 fax

WASHINGTON, DC

1101 14th Street, NW
Suite 410
Washington, DC 20005
202 216-0261
202 216-0266 fax

OAKLAND, CA

405 14th Street
Suite 1400
Oakland, CA 94612
510 663-8282
510 663-2028 fax

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

- Even after the 2002 restorations, a disproportionately low number of immigrants receive food stamps. While noncitizens represent 8.8 percent of the U.S. population,⁹ only 4 percent of all food stamp recipients are noncitizens.¹⁰
- Eligible immigrants are less likely than eligible citizens to use food stamps. In FY 2004, only 42 percent of noncitizens eligible for food stamps participated in the program. The overall food stamp participation rate among eligible individuals is 60 percent.¹¹
- Participation is similarly low among U.S. citizen children of immigrants. While 82 percent of all eligible children participate in the Food Stamp Program, only 52 percent of eligible citizen children living with noncitizen adults participated in the program.¹² Young low-income children of U.S.-born citizens are twice as likely to receive food stamps as their counterparts in immigrant families.¹³

■ Immigrants pay taxes, work hard, and make vital contributions to the U. S.; they should not be subject to special restrictions on basic food assistance.

- Seventy-eight percent of all agricultural workers are immigrants.¹⁴ Basic decency requires that these workers who feed the nation's families have enough food for their own families.
- According to the February 2005 Economic Report of the President, "a comprehensive accounting of the benefits and costs of immigration shows that the benefits of immigration exceed the costs."¹⁵
- Recent immigration has benefited U.S.-born workers and consumers; research has shown that "the complementary nature of the skills, occupations, and abilities of foreign-born workers increases the productivity of natives, stimulates investment, and enhances the choices available to consumers."¹⁶

■ There is broad, bipartisan consensus that the Food Stamp Program should serve both citizens and lawfully residing 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 immigrants in the Food Stamp Program and was a key supporter of restoring immigrants' eligibility for food stamps in the 2002 Farm Bill.
- Newt Gingrich, an architect of the 1996 welfare law, has stated that the restrictions on immigrants' eligibility for food stamps were "one of the provisions [in the welfare law] that went too far."¹⁷
- An overwhelming majority of Americans believe that immigrants who are in the U.S. lawfully should have the same access to public benefits as U.S. citizens, and on this issue there is very little difference in viewpoint among Republicans, Democrats, and independents.¹⁸

FOR MORE INFORMATION, CONTACT

Dinah Wiley, Public Benefits Policy Attorney | wiley@nilc-dc.org | 202.216.0261 x. 4

¹ IMMIGRANTS' HEALTH CARE COVERAGE AND ACCESS (Kaiser Commission on Medicaid and the Uninsured, Aug. 2003), www.kff.org/uninsured/loader.cfm?url=/commonspot/security/getfile.cfm&PageID=22152, at 1.

² Randy Capps, Michael Fix, Jeffrey Passel, Jason Ost, and Dan Perez-Lopez, PROFILE OF THE LOW-WAGE IMMIGRANT WORKFORCE (Urban Institute, Nov. 2003), www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/310880_lowwage

[immig_wkfc.pdf](#), at 1. In this study, “immigrant” means “noncitizen” and “low wage labor force” includes those earning under 200 percent of their state’s prevailing minimum wage.

³ *Id.*

⁴ Carmen DeNavas-Walt, Bernadette D. Proctor, Cheryl Hill Lee, INCOME, POVERTY, AND HEALTH INSURANCE COVERAGE IN THE UNITED STATES: 2005 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006), www.census.gov/prod/2006pubs/p60-231.pdf, at 16.

⁵ Randy Capps, et al, 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), at i.

⁶ “Young children,” here, is defined as children under 6 years of age. *See* note 7.

⁷ Randy Capps, et al, THE HEALTH AND WELL-BEING OF YOUNG CHILDREN OF IMMIGRANTS (Urban Institute, Feb. 2005), www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/311139_ChildrenImmigrants.pdf, at 35.

⁸ These statistics are for 2005. *See* Randy Capps and Karina Fortuny, IMMIGRATION AND CHILD AND FAMILY POLICY (paper presented at the Urban Institute and Child Trends Roundtable on Children in Low-Income Families, Washington, DC, Jan. 12, 2006), at 5.

⁹ The Pew Hispanic Center estimates that in March 2005 the noncitizen population was 25.5 million, and the Census Bureau’s Current Population Survey estimate of the total U.S. population in March 2005 was 291,166,000. *See* Jeffrey S. Passel, THE SIZE AND CHARACTERISTIC OF THE UNAUTHORIZED MIGRANT POPULATION IN THE U.S.: ESTIMATES BASED ON THE MARCH 2005 CURRENT POPULATION SURVEY (Pew Hispanic Center, Mar. 2006), <http://pewhispanic.org/files/reports/61.pdf>, at 4; U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, <http://www.census.gov/cps/>.

¹⁰ Allison Barrett, CHARACTERISTICS OF FOOD STAMP HOUSEHOLDS: FISCAL YEAR 2005 (U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Analysis, Nutrition and Evaluation, Alexandria, VA, 2006), at 21. 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 (U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, Feb. 1997); *see also* Michael Fix and Jeffrey Passel, TRENDS IN NONCITIZENS’ AND CITIZENS’ USE OF PUBLIC BENEFITS FOLLOWING WELFARE REFORM: 1994–97 (Urban Institute, Mar. 1999).

¹¹ Allison Barrett and Anni Poikolainen, FOOD STAMP PROGRAM PARTICIPATION RATES: 2004 (U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, Alexandria, VA, 2006), at 2–4.

¹² *Id.* at 10.

¹³ Capps, et al, *supra* note 7, at 22.

¹⁴ FINDINGS FROM THE NATIONAL AGRICULTURAL WORKERS SURVEY (NAWS) 2001–2002: A DEMOGRAPHIC AND EMPLOYMENT PROFILE OF UNITED STATES FARM WORKERS (U.S. Dept. of Labor, Mar. 2005), www.doleta.gov/agworker/report9/naws_rpt9.pdf, at 3.

¹⁵ ECONOMIC REPORT OF THE PRESIDENT TRANSMITTED TO THE CONGRESS FEBRUARY 2005 (U.S. Govt. Printing Office, 2005), available at http://fraser.stlouisfed.org/publications/ERP/issue/1699/download/14051/ERP_2005.pdf, at 93.

¹⁶ Giovanni Peri, IMMIGRANTS, SKILLS, AND WAGES: MEASURING THE ECONOMIC GAINS FROM IMMIGRATION (Immigration Policy Center, Mar. 2006), www.aifl.org/ipc/infocus/2006_skillswages.pdf, at 1. *See also* PAYING THEIR WAY AND THEN SOME: FACTS ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF IMMIGRANTS TO ECONOMIC GROWTH AND PUBLIC INVESTMENT (National Immigration Law Center, Sept. 2006), www.nilc.org/immspbs/research/research003.htm.

¹⁷ Robert Pear, “White House Seeking to Restore Food Stamp Aid for Noncitizens,” NEW YORK TIMES, Jan. 9, 2002.

¹⁸ Lake, Snell, Perry, and Associates, survey commissioned by the National Immigration Law Center (May 2002), report available at www.nilc.org/immspbs/research/Survey_Imm_Access_to_Bs.PPT.