

Children of Recent Immigrants: National and Regional Trends

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INTRODUCTION

Sixty-five percent of the children of recent immigrants are low income. For these children, the challenges in academic, physical, emotional, and social development usually associated with economic insecurity are likely to be exacerbated by language barriers, the process of migration and acculturation, and restrictions on access to safety net programs. Two-thirds of children of low-income, recent immigrants live in the South and West, with an increasing proportion moving to the South. Nationwide, 85 percent of these children live with parents who are employed, and 71 percent live with married parents. Still, almost half (45 percent) of children of low-income, recent immigrants have parents who do not hold a high school degree, and 47 percent of these children are under age 6, placing them at risk for the negative impacts of low income on early development. Immigrant families limited access to the work supports and public benefits offered to other low-income families increases their financial and social vulnerability.

THE AUTHORS

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Over the past decade, the United States experienced a 25 percent increase in the number of children living with immigrant parents.¹ Today, over 11 million children—half of them low income—live in households with only immigrant parents.² Over 3 million children live in households with *recent* immigrant parents, meaning their parents immigrated within the past 10 years. Among these children, *two-thirds* are low-income.

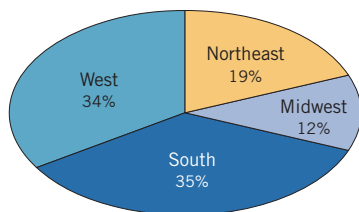
Although fewer than 10 percent of all low-income children have parents who are recent immigrants, for these children, the challenges in academic, physical, emotional, and social development usually associated with economic insecurity are likely to be exacerbated by language barriers, the process of migration and acculturation, and restrictions on access to safety-net programs.³

This report looks at regional differences in how children in recent immigrant families fare—their economic circumstances, family characteristics, and public benefits use—and the implications for public policy. All recent immigrants, documented and undocumented, are included, although it is likely that undocumented immigrants are underrepresented in the analysis.⁴

South and West Home to Most Children of Recent Immigrants

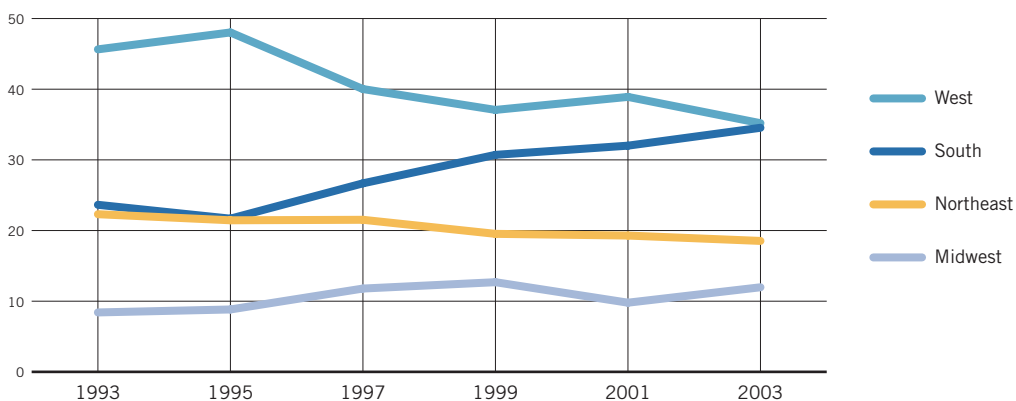
Children of recent immigrant parents primarily live in the South and West,⁵ with both regions accounting for slightly more than a third (35 percent in the South and 34 percent in the West) of all children in this group (see Figure 1).

Figure 1:
Distribution of Children
in Recent Immigrant
Families, by Region, 2003



Over the last decade, there has been a dramatic shift from the West to the South among children of recent immigrants (see Figure 2). In 1993, almost half (46 percent) of all children with recent immigrant parents lived in the West, while only 24 percent lived in the South. Low-income children in general are increasingly likely to live in both the West and South, particularly since 1999.⁶

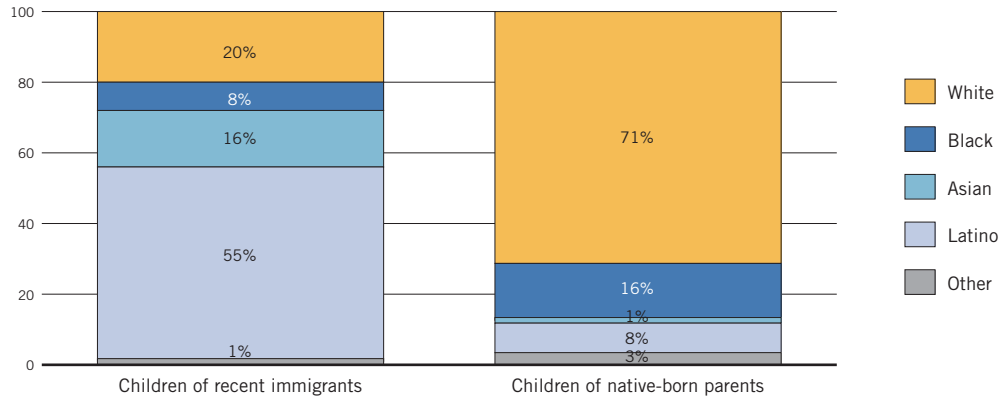
Figure 2:
Percent of Children
Living with Recent
Immigrant Parents,
by Region, 1993-2003



Most Children of Recent Immigrants are Latino

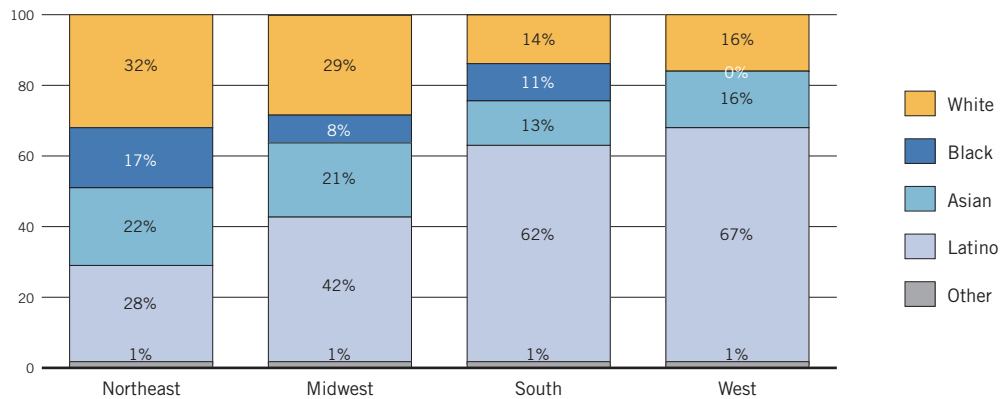
More than half (55 percent) of all children whose parents are recent immigrants are Latino;⁷ about one out of every five is Asian (16 percent) (see Figure 3). Among children whose parents are native-born, Latinos account for only 8 percent and Asians only about 1 percent.

Figure 3:
Race/Ethnicity of Children in the United States by Parents' Immigration Status, 2003



In three regions, Latinos are the largest racial/ethnic group among children of recent immigrants (see Figure 4). In the West, two-thirds of children of recent immigrants are Latino, while fewer than one-third are in the Northeast.

Figure 4:
Race/Ethnicity of Children of Recent Immigrant Parents, by Region, 2003



Many Recent Immigrant Parents were Born in Mexico

Forty-one percent of the children of recent immigrants live with parents who are from Mexico (see Figure 5). Only 13 percent of children of recent immigrants have parents who were born in the next four largest nations of origin combined—India, Cuba, the Philippines, and China.⁸

Mexico is the primary country of origin for recent immigrant parents in three of the four regions. In the Northeast, it falls to second, behind the Dominican Republic (see Table 1).

Figure 5:
Country of Parents' Birth for Children Living with Recent Immigrant Parents, 2003

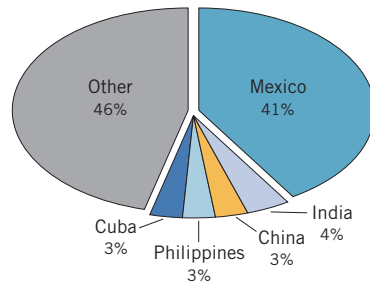


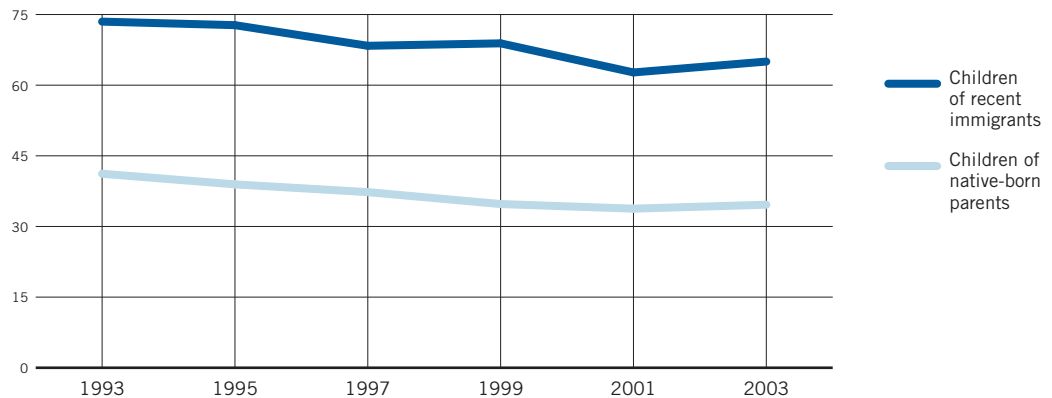
Table 1:
Top Contributing Countries for Recent Immigrant Parents, by Region, 2003

Northeast		Midwest		South		West	
Dominican Republic	8%	Mexico	38%	Mexico	39%	Mexico	61%
Mexico	6%	India	8%	Cuba	7%	Philippines	4%
China	5%	Poland	4%	India	4%	El Salvador	3%

Children of Recent Immigrants are Likely to be Low-Income

Approximately two-thirds (65 percent) of the children of recent immigrants live with parents who are low-income (see Figure 6). This is almost twice the percentage of children living with native-born parents who are low-income (34 percent). Between 1993 and 2001, the percentage of low-income children declined, regardless of whether their parents were immigrants. While the proportion of children living in low-income families has increased among the general population in the last few years, the rise among children of recent immigrants has been more dramatic than among children of native-born parents.

Figure 6:
Percent of Children who are Low Income, by Parents' Immigration Status, 1993-2003



High Rates of Employment and Marriage for Low-Income, Recent Immigrants

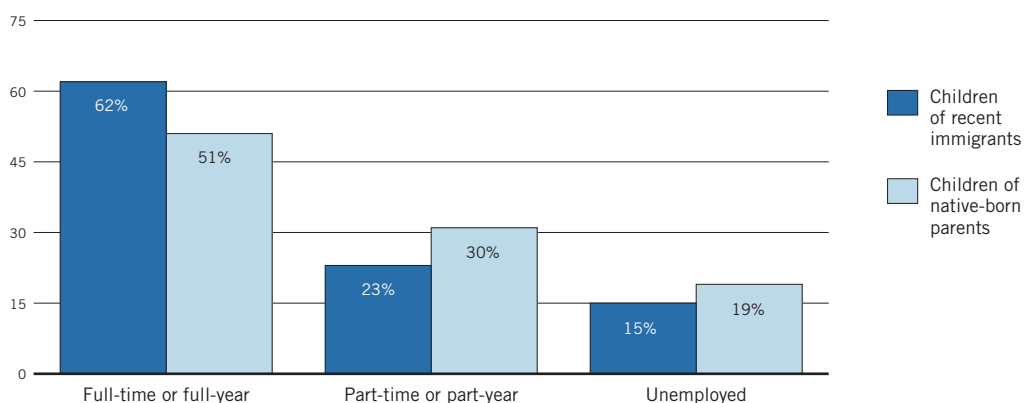
Children of low-income, recent immigrants are more likely to live with parents who are employed and who are married than children of low-income, native-born parents.⁹

Most Parents Working

Despite the high rates of low-income among children of recent immigrants, their parents' employment levels are high. Almost two-thirds (62 percent) of children living with low-

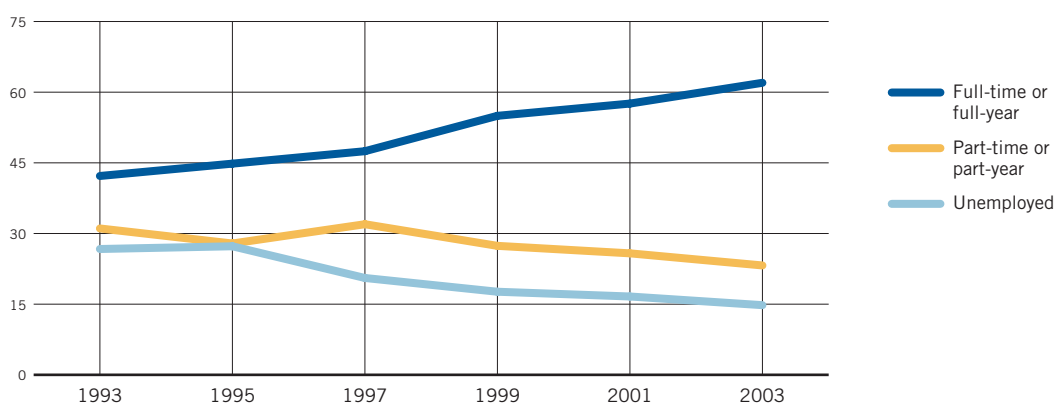
income, recent immigrants, live with parents who work full-time, year-round (see Figure 7). An additional 23 percent live with parents who work either part-time or full-time, part-year. In contrast, only half of the low-income children living with native-born parents have parents who work full-time, year-round.

Figure 7:
Parents' Employment
Among Children in the
United States, by Parents'
Immigration Status, 2003



Full-time, year-round employment among low-income, recent immigrant parents has steadily increased over the past decade (see Figure 8).

Figure 8:
Parents' Employment
Among Children of
Low-Income, Recent
Immigrants, 2003



In every region, low-income, recent immigrant parents are more likely to be working than are low-income, native-born parents. Children living with low-income, recent immigrants in the South have the highest percentage of parents who work full-time, year-round (65 percent) and one of the lowest percentages of parents who are unemployed (12 percent) (see Table 2). Children living in low-income, recent immigrant families in the Northeast have the lowest percentage of parents who work full-time, year-round (53 percent) and the highest percentage of unemployed parents (20 percent).

Table 2:
Parents' Employment
Among Children of
Low-Income, Recent
Immigrants, by Region,
2003

	Northeast	Midwest	South	West
Full-time, full-year	53%	63%	65%	63%
Part-time or part-year	28%	26%	23%	20%
Unemployed	20%	11%	12%	17%

Parents are Married

Seventy-one percent of children of low-income, recent immigrants live with married parents. The percentage of children with low-income, native-born parents who are married is substantially lower—42 percent. The proportion of children living in households headed by married parents who are low-income, recent immigrants is high across all regions, ranging from 68 percent in the Northeast to 73 percent in the West.

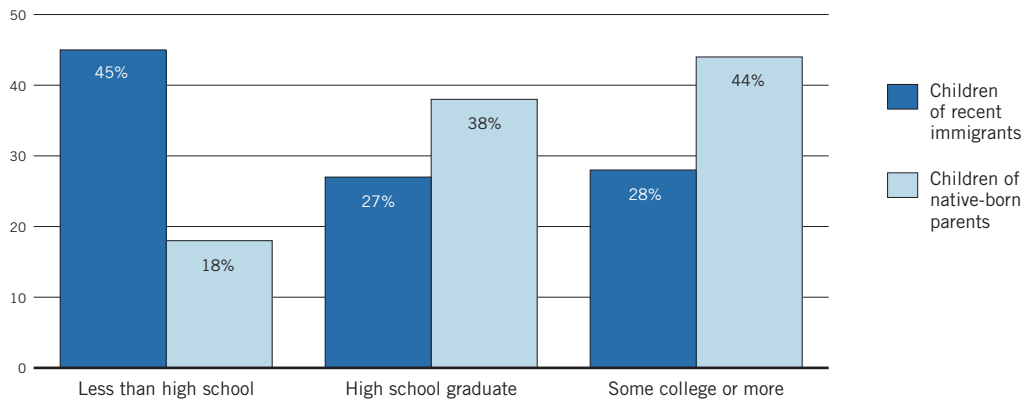
Children of Low-Income, Recent Immigrants at High Risk for Economic and Social Problems

Children of low-income, recent immigrants also face numerous obstacles that place them at risk of even greater economic insecurity, such as low levels of parental education, being young, as well as low utilization of public benefits despite continued need.

Parental Education Level is Low

Low-income, recent immigrant parents have substantially lower education levels than low-income, native-born parents (see Figure 9).¹⁰ While the parents of 55 percent of children in low-income, recent immigrant families have attained at least a high school degree, the proportion among children in low-income, native-born families is 82 percent.

Figure 9:
Parent Education Level of Low-Income Children in the United States, by Parents' Immigration Status, 2003



Low-income, recent immigrant parents of children in the West have the lowest education level; 57 percent of children of low-income, recent immigrants live with parents who have attained less than a high school degree (see Table 3). By comparison, 27 percent of children of low-income, recent immigrants in the Northeast live with parents who have less than a high school degree.

Table 3:
Parental Education Level Among Children Living with Low-Income, Recent Immigrant Parents, by Region, 2003

	Northeast	Midwest	South	West
Less than high school	27%	40%	45%	57%
High school	31%	31%	28%	24%
Some college or more	43%	30%	28%	19%

Children Likely to be Under Age 6

Young children are more likely to experience the long-term negative effects of family economic insecurity. Children of low-income, recent immigrants are more likely to be young than children of native-born parents: almost half (47 percent) are under the age of 6, compared to over one-third (36 percent) of children of native-born parents. The median age of children of low-income, recent immigrants is 6 years old, compared to 9 years old for children living with low-income, native-born parents. The predominance of young children among children of low-income, recent immigrants is true in all regions.

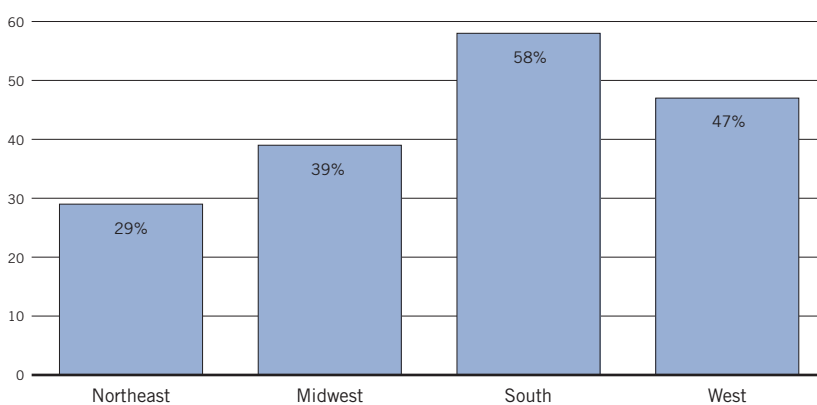
Health Insurance Coverage is Low

While the overwhelming majority of immigrants work, a disproportionate number work in low-wage jobs, in small firms, and in labor, service, or trade occupations that do not offer employer-based health insurance. This occupational pattern, coupled with federal restrictions on immigrant access to public benefits, such as health insurance, largely explains why children of low-income, recent immigrants are significantly more likely than children of low-income, native-born parents to be uninsured.¹¹

Nationally, half (47 percent) of all children living with low-income, recent immigrant parents are not covered by any type of health insurance. This is substantially higher than the percentage of uninsured among children living with low-income, native-born parents (22 percent).

The percentage of uninsured children among children of low-income, recent immigrant parents varies across regions, ranging from 29 percent in the Northeast to 58 percent in the South (see Figure 10).

Figure 10:
Percent of Uninsured
Children of Low-Income,
Recent Immigrants,
by Region, 2003



Public Benefits Utilization is Declining

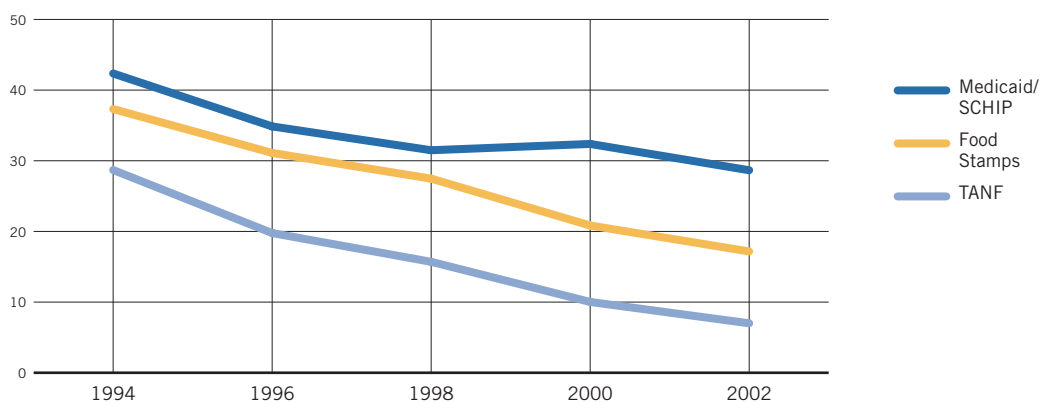
The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA) severely limited access to public assistance programs for children of recent immigrants. The majority of legal immigrants were banned from participation in any federal means-tested benefits programs for five years after arrival in the United States. Since then, the federal

government has partially restored access to selected programs (primarily SSI and food stamps) for certain immigrants. Some states have also created their own state-funded programs to assist legal immigrants who are deemed ineligible for federal safety net programs during the five-year ban, but few provide services that are comparable to their federal counterparts. Still, many legal immigrants who came to the United States after 1996 remain ineligible for public assistance programs (see Figure 11).¹²

Declines in participation in public benefit programs have been much sharper among immigrants than among native-born citizens.¹³ In part, this is explained by confusion over eligibility and fear of repercussions for future immigration status. Food and housing insecurities, as well as health difficulties, continue to plague immigrant families in comparison to native families. Children of immigrants are significantly more likely to live in families that: (1) have difficulty affording food, (2) pay at least 50 percent of their income toward housing, and (3) live in crowded homes. Children of immigrants are also significantly more likely to lack medical care and to be in poor health.¹⁴

For children living with low-income, recent immigrant parents, participation in the food stamp program, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), and public health insurance programs dropped 54 percent, 76 percent, and 32 percent respectively, between 1993 and 2003 (see Figure 11). Over this same period, participation among children living with native-born parents declined 26 percent, 61 percent, and 6 percent.

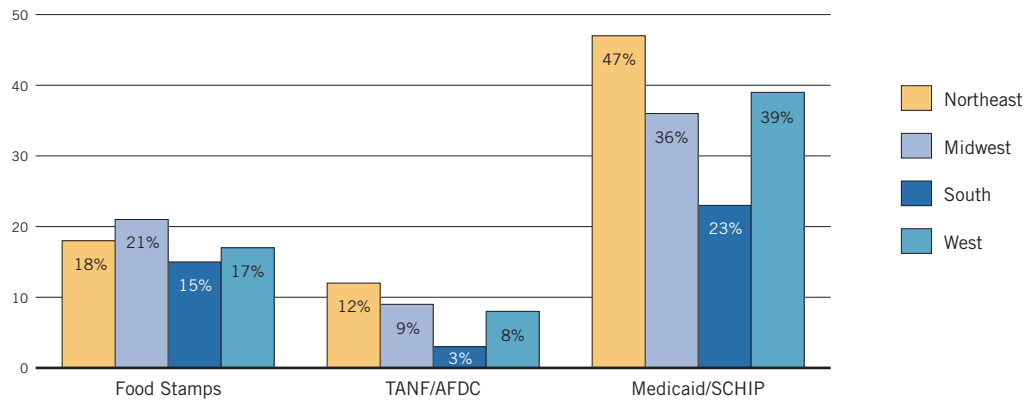
Figure 11:
Public Benefit Utilization
of Children of Low-Income,
Recent Immigrant Parents,
1993-2003



Benefit Program Use Lowest in the South

Nationally, 17 percent of children with low-income, recent immigrant parents live in households receiving food stamps, 7 percent live in households receiving TANF, and 34 percent receive public health insurance. The South has the lowest rate of public benefit use for children of low-income, recent immigrants: 15 percent live in households receiving food stamps, 3 percent live in households receiving TANF, and 23 percent live in households receiving public health insurance (see Figure 12). Use of these benefit programs is substantially higher among children with low-income, native-born parents in all regions.

Figure 12:
Public Benefits Utilization
of Children of Low-Income,
Recent Immigrants
by Region, 2003



Policy Implications

Children of recent immigrants are much more likely to be low-income than are children of native-born parents. This is particularly true in the South, where children of recent immigrants are increasingly likely to live. Even though employment levels among recent immigrant parents are highest in the South, low-income rates have increased substantially in this region since 2001. Furthermore, children of low-income, recent immigrants in the South are the least likely to use public benefits. The national findings in this brief are comparable to those described in other recent demographic reports.¹⁵

The majority of children of low-income, recent immigrants, across regions, have employed, married parents. Thus marriage-related anti-poverty strategies and programs to increase labor force participation, the foci of recent TANF reauthorization bills, are unlikely to benefit this population. Programs that make work pay for low-income families, such as increasing the minimum wage and the protection and expansion of the federal Earned Income Tax Credit program (EITC) would be greater supports for children of low-income, recent immigrants.¹⁶ To maintain employment, working parents need affordable, stable child care arrangements. Continuing to expand child care subsidies would help all low-income families.¹⁷ Furthermore, immigrant parents in particular would benefit from programs that increase English-language proficiency. The limited English language proficiency of many immigrants has been shown to negatively impact their earnings.¹⁸ TANF reauthorization provides a valuable opportunity to utilize English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) instruction as a strategy to move vulnerable immigrant families toward economic security.¹⁹

While the changes in welfare legislation formally placed greater restrictions on immigrants, the law has affected many of our most vulnerable citizens as well. About half of the children of recent immigrants (53 percent) were born in the United States, making them American citizens. Research shows that immigrant parents are unlikely to enroll eligible children in benefit programs when adults in the family are ineligible.²⁰ Furthermore, there is a growing body of evidence that confusion among caseworkers and immigrants regarding eligibility, as well as fears of repercussions of public benefit utilization on future efforts to naturalize, sponsor family members, or remain in the country, have prevented participation among a significant number of eligible low-income immigrants.²¹

Working immigrants, like native-born citizens, are taxpayers. They help bear the costs of education, infrastructure, and programs for families in need. Recent immigrants, particularly those that have lived in the United States for five years or less, would benefit from a restored government safety net. If TANF and Medicaid benefits are not fully reestablished during PRWORA reauthorization, states could be given the option to provide federally funded cash assistance and health care benefits to recently arrived immigrants.

Endnotes

1. This report uses the same definition of immigrants as the U.S. Census Bureau. Individuals born in the United States, in Puerto Rico, or in an outlying United States territory, are defined as native-born. All other individuals are defined as immigrants. Only children living in households in which all parents are immigrants are included. Children living with mixed-status parents (i.e., with one native-born parent and one recent immigrant parent) are excluded. Analyses indicated that this group differs significantly on a number of demographic characteristics. They comprise less than 5 percent of the children living with low-income parents in the United States.
2. Estimates for all figures and tables are based on the authors' analyses using the U.S. Current Population Survey (CPS), Annual Social and Economics (ASEC) supplements, 1994-2004. Low-income is defined as twice the federal poverty level or \$37,700 for a family of four in 2004.
3. Shields, M. K. (Ed.). (2004). Children of immigrant families. *Future of Children*, 14(2) <www.futureofchildren.org/pubs-info2825/pubs-info.htm?doc_id=240166>.
4. The CPS is a household survey that collects data from immigrants, regardless of legal status. However, as in most surveys, undocumented immigrants are often undercounted. The CPS does weight the data to account for underrepresentation of undocumented immigrants and other hard to count populations; however, because the real number of undocumented immigrants is difficult to ascertain, they are still likely to be undercounted in the data.
5. The U.S. Census regional categorizations are used.
6. Koball, H. & Douglas-Hall, A. (2003). *Where do children in low-income families live?* New York, NY: National Center for Children in Poverty, Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health <www.nccp.org/media/liv03-text.pdf>.
7. The designation Latino includes individuals, of any race, who self-identify as Hispanic. Whites include non-Latino whites only. Blacks include non-Latino blacks only. Asians include Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders. The category of "other" includes Native-American children, as well as children identified in the March 2003 CPS as having more than one race.
8. China includes all those who responded with China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, or the Paracel Islands.
9. Parental employment is defined by the employment level of the parent in the household who maintained the highest level of employment in the previous year. Full-time/year-round is defined as working at least 50 weeks and 35 hours per week for the majority of those weeks. Part-time is defined as working less than 35 hours per week for the majority of weeks worked. Full-time, part-year is defined as working less than 50 weeks and working full-time in the majority of weeks worked.
10. Parental education level is defined as the education level of the most highly educated parent who lives with the child.
11. The Kaiser Commission on Medicaid and the Uninsured. (2004). *Immigrants and health coverage: A primer*. Washington, DC: The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, June 2004 <www.kff.org/uninsured/loader.cfm?url=/commonspot/security/getfile.cfm&PageID=44857>.
12. Greenberg, M. & Rahmanou, H. (2004). Looking to the future: A commentary on children of immigrant families. In M. K. Shields (Ed.), Children of immigrant families. *The Future of Children*, 14(2), pp. 139-145 <www.futureofchildren.org/information2826/information_show.htm?doc_id=240619>.

13. Rates of receipt of public benefits derived from CPS data are not comparable to those derived from administrative data sources (e.g., the figures reported in NCCP's 50-State Policies database).
14. Capps, R. (2001). *Hardship among children of immigrants: Findings from the 1999 National Survey of America's Families*. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute <www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/anf_b29.pdf>.
15. For other sources see: Hernandez, D. (2004). Demographic change and the life circumstances of immigrant families. In M. K. Shields (Ed.), *Children of immigrant families. The Future of Children*, 14(2), *The Future of Children*. 14(2), pp. 16-47 <www.futureofchildren.org/usr_doc/hernandez_revised.pdf>; Reardon-Anderson, J., Capps, R. & Fix, M. (2002). *The health and well-being of children in immigrant families*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute <www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/310584_B52.pdf>; Capps in endnote 14; and Larsen, L. (2004). *The foreign-born population in the United States: March 2003*. Washington, DC: US Census Bureau <www.usagcls.com/Foreign-Born%20Population.pdf>.
16. For more information on making work pay, see: Cauthen, N. K. & Lu, H. (2003). *Employment alone is not enough for America's low-income children and families* (Living at the Edge Research Brief 1). New York, NY: National Center for Children in Poverty, Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health <www.nccp.org/pub_lat03a.html>.
17. Undocumented immigrants are unlikely to benefit from such programs.
18. Fremstad, S. (2002). *Immigrants and welfare reauthorization*. Washington, DC: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities <www.cbpp.org/1-22-02tanf4.pdf>.
19. Singer, A. (2004). Welfare reform and immigrants: A policy review. In P. Kretsedemas & A. Aparicio (Eds.), *Immigrants, welfare reform, and the poverty of policy*. Praeger Publishers <www.brook.edu/dybdocroot/urban/pubs/200405_singer.pdf>.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid. See also Greenberg & Rahmanou in endnote 12.