



Study: Majority of Immigrant Households Use Welfare

By [Steven A. Camarota](#) and [Karen Zeigler](#) on December 19, 2023

59% of Illegal-Headed Households, 52% of Legal

Washington, D.C. (December 19, 2023) — A new Center for Immigration Studies analysis of Census Bureau data finds more than half of immigrant households use at least one major welfare program. This is primarily attributed to the fact that the American welfare system is designed in large part to help low-wage workers with children, which describe a large share of immigrants.

Immigrants, including illegal immigrants, often receive benefits on behalf of U.S.-born, even if they themselves are not eligible. This research suggests that the ongoing border crisis and the enormous number of people released into the country will have profound implications for future welfare costs.

Steven Camarota, the lead author of the report and the Center's director of research, commented on the findings, saying, "A very large share of immigrants come to America, have children, struggle to provide for them, and subsequently turn to taxpayers for support." He emphasized, "While a majority of these households have a working member, giving employers access to low-wage workers often imposes significant costs on taxpayers."

Among the findings from the Census Bureau's 2022 Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP):

- Of all households headed by immigrants — naturalized citizens, legal residents, and illegal immigrants — 54 percent used one or more major welfare programs.
- The rate for households headed by the U.S.-born is also high at 39 percent, though the difference with immigrants is statistically significant.
- Compared to households headed by the U.S.-born, immigrants have especially high use of food programs (36 percent vs. 25 percent for the U.S.-born), Medicaid (37 percent vs. 25 percent), and the Earned Income Tax Credit (16 percent vs. 12 percent).
- We estimate that 59 percent of households headed by illegal immigrants use one or more programs, and for legal immigrant households it is 52 percent.
- Illegal immigrants can receive welfare on behalf of U.S.-born children, and illegal immigrant children can receive school lunch/breakfast and WIC directly. A number of states provide Medicaid to some illegal adults and children, and a few provide SNAP. Several million illegal immigrants also have work authorization (e.g. DACA, and some asylum applicants), allowing receipt of the EITC.
- No one program explains the higher overall use of welfare by immigrants. For example, excluding the extensively used but less budgetary costly school lunch/breakfast program, along with the WIC nutrition program, still shows 46 percent of all immigrant households and 33 percent of U.S.-born households use at least one of the remaining programs.
- The presence of extended family or unrelated individuals does not explain immigrants' higher welfare use, as the vast majority of immigrant households are nuclear families. Further, of immigrant households

comprised of only a nuclear family, 49 percent use the welfare system compared to 35 percent of nuclear family U.S.-born households.

- The high welfare use of immigrant households is not explained by an unwillingness to work. In fact, 83 percent of all immigrant households and 94 percent of illegal-headed households have at least one worker, compared to 73 percent of U.S.-born households.
- Immigrants' higher welfare use relative to the U.S.-born is partly, but only partly, explained by the larger share with modest education levels, their resulting lower incomes, and the greater percentage of immigrant households with children.
- However, even immigrant households without any children and those headed by immigrants with at least a bachelor's degree are more likely to use welfare than comparable U.S.-born households.
- Most new legal immigrants are barred from most programs, as are illegal immigrants, but this has a modest impact primarily because: 1) Immigrants can receive benefits on behalf of U.S.-born children; 2) the bar does not apply to all programs, nor does it apply to non-citizen children in some cases; 3) most legal immigrants have lived here long enough to qualify for welfare; 4) some states provide welfare to otherwise ineligible immigrants on their own; 5) by naturalizing, immigrants gain full welfare eligibility.

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