



Policy Principles to Advance the Wellbeing of Children of Immigrants

One in four children in the United States is a child of immigrants, and the vast majority are U.S. citizens. Throughout our history, children of immigrants have helped to make our nation stronger, and as the fastest growing child population, they continue to be critical to our future prosperity.

Like all children, children in immigrant families need good nutrition; high quality health care; a healthy living environment; and stable, nurturing caregivers—but harsh immigration policies and immigrant eligibility restrictions undermine these very foundations. As a result, children in immigrant families face higher rates of uninsurance, poverty, and food insecurity as well as greater barriers to public benefits and income support, including those for which they are eligible. Additionally, our immigration laws often fail to consider the best interests of children, and the real or perceived threat of separation from a parent due to immigration enforcement creates instability and constant stress for children in mixed-status families, with serious consequences for their long-term development.

In order to achieve equity and ensure that all children in the United States can thrive, we must address the needs of children of immigrants across our policies. Those needs are comprehensive and must reflect the totality of the child’s wellbeing. Our policies should also reflect the diversity among children in immigrant families and consider how race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, and ability affect child development.

As organizations committed to advancing the wellbeing of children, we urge Congress and the Administration to incorporate the following principles in policy decisions:

A clear path to citizenship

Over 5 million children have at least one undocumented parent, and nearly half a million U.S. citizen children have a parent who is either a Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) or Temporary Protected Status (TPS) recipient. About one million children in the United States are undocumented themselves. Thus, it is imperative that Congress pass an inclusive, affordable, and expeditious path to citizenship into law. The path to citizenship should provide access to those who would be otherwise eligible for critical health coverage and public benefits and include individuals who are unable to meet education and employment requirements, such as young children or parents who are caring for children.

Advance the health, educational success, and economic security of children and their families

All children, including immigrant children, must have access to the full range of public benefits and economic supports that promote healthy development and reduce child poverty, such as health care (including mental health), nutrition assistance, affordable child care, and tax credits like the Earned Income Tax Credit and Child Tax Credit. Immigrant children must also have equitable access to education programs—from early childhood through postsecondary—including access to financial aid for higher education. Essential health care, public benefits, and economic supports should cover all members of immigrant families, including parents, as research has documented that child health is closely linked to that of their parents. All programs that serve children and families must address systemic barriers to ensure equitable access for immigrant families, such as promoting language access and cultural competency, partnering with trusted local community-based organizations, strengthening transportation access, and removing burdensome paperwork requirements. Policymakers must also work together with stakeholders to address impacts of structural racism and discriminatory policies by investing in and promoting culturally sensitive approaches to support mental health and healing for children and families in immigrant communities.

Promote family unity and child wellbeing in immigration policy

Immigration enforcement officials should not needlessly separate children from their parents, legal guardians and other relatives at the border or in the interior. All policies and decisions regarding admissibility, enforcement, detention, and deportation of children and their parents must duly consider the best interests of children, including prioritizing release and community-based alternatives to detention. The immigration system must also be strengthened to ensure that families are able to reunify faster, including addressing lengthy backlogs, repealing punitive bars to entry, and providing deported parents with an opportunity to return to reunify with their families. All enforcement policies at the border and interior should include specific protections for children, including training and accountability protocols for all immigration enforcement officials that come into contact with children and use of experts in child wellbeing for screening and other enforcement activities involving children. For children who are in the custody of the federal government, policies must build on protections provided by the Flores Settlement Agreement and the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act (TVPRA) to ensure that children are placed in family and small, community-based settings, are safely and promptly released to a sponsor in the United States, and have legal representation, independent child advocate services, and post-release services, including physical and mental health services, to support their immigration case and integration in the United States.