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How a Pathway to Citizenship Can Help Children Thrive



Members of the Children Thrive Action Network

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Introduction

As Congress considers passage of a pathway for immigrant youth; Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) recipients; people with Temporary Protected Status (TPS); and essential workers, it is important to consider the impact for their children and families. Children of immigrants make up approximately one in four of all children in the United States and are the fastest growing segment of the child population.¹ Of these children, more than five million have a parent who is undocumented or is a recipient of DACA or TPS.² Nearly one million children are undocumented themselves.³ Providing a pathway to citizenship to immigrant youth as well as the parents of millions of children, the majority of whom are U.S. citizens, is a critical step to help comprehensively support the healthy development and long-term success of children and youth in immigrant families.

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A path to citizenship for Dreamers

Dreamers, or immigrants who entered the United States as children, have grown up in the United States and face an uncertain future in the country they call home. During the pandemic, an estimated one million Dreamers served in frontline jobs in essential industries, including health care, caregiving, and agriculture.⁴ While a path to citizenship for Dreamers has robust support among the American public as well as bipartisan support in Congress, legislation remains to be passed into law.

In 2012, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security created the DACA program, which granted eligible young people relief from deportation and improved access to higher education; career opportunities; and basic necessities, such as a driver's license or credit card.⁵ The program's effects, especially on health and wellbeing, are well-documented.⁶ For instance, research shows that individuals who gained DACA status had better birth outcomes.⁷ This year, approximately 640,000 current DACA beneficiaries are pursuing a college degree or participating in our workforce.⁸

However, the DACA program has been under threat multiple times. This year, a federal judge ruled that the program was unlawful and ordered the Biden administration to stop processing new applications.⁹ While DACA was a huge success and granted many immigrant youth protections, it was always temporary and limited. The program excluded many Dreamers over the years due to its narrow age and education requirements, leaving many vulnerable to deportation. Moreover, beneficiaries of the program still face barriers to higher education, including access to federal financial aid.¹⁰ Although DACA recipients do have increased health insurance coverage over undocumented immigrants,¹¹ they also face barriers to health coverage. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has not yet expanded eligibility for the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP), Medicaid, and the Affordable Care Act exchanges despite DACA recipients being lawfully present.¹² Providing Dreamers a path to citizenship is long overdue and would grant immigrant youth more stability to further build their lives and futures in the country they call home.

A path to citizenship for people with TPS

Congress created TPS to protect individuals already in the United States from returning to unsafe situations in their country of origin.¹³ Many people with TPS have resided in the United States for over 20 years, around 68,000 of whom arrived as children under the age of 16.¹⁴ Approximately 273,000 U.S. citizen children have parents who are TPS beneficiaries from El Salvador, Honduras, and Haiti.¹⁵ People with TPS have supported the country as essential workers during the pandemic,¹⁶—continuing to be, as they always have been, vital parts of our communities and economy. A recent U.S. Supreme Court decision makes the need for permanent protections for people with TPS all the more necessary. In *Sanchez v. Mayorkas*, the court established that people with TPS who originally entered the U.S. without inspection cannot adjust their status to legal permanent resident.

Without permanent immigration status, people with TPS and their families would face terrible decisions: either separate from their U.S. citizen children, or return to a country they haven't been to in years with children who only know the United States as their home. A path to citizenship for people with TPS would provide critical relief to hundreds of thousands of families who simply want to live freely and provide for their loved ones.

A path to citizenship for essential workers

Thousands of Dreamers and people with TPS have worked in essential industries during the pandemic. In total, over five million undocumented immigrants work in essential jobs, including farmworkers, care workers, and health care workers.¹⁷ More than a quarter of immigrant essential workers are farmworkers.¹⁸ Overall these essential workers are parents to 3.5 million U.S. citizen children.¹⁹

Working these jobs has put immigrant families at greater risk of contracting COVID-19, as social distancing and working from home is often not possible and personal protective equipment is not always available. Additionally, these essential workers were excluded from most federal COVID-19 relief measures; until the passage of H.R. 133, children in mixed-status families were excluded from COVID-19 stimulus payments.²⁰ Because of those exclusions and being overrepresented among the workforce, mixed-status families faced a disproportionate economic impact throughout the pandemic.²¹ Our nation cannot continue to benefit from the essential work of immigrants and leave them at risk of deportation and family separation. We should recognize their contributions to our nation through a path to citizenship.

Family unity and better health for children and families

The consequences of failing to provide permanent solutions for immigrant populations are dire, particularly for children. Approximately five million U.S. citizen children have at least one parent who is undocumented or is a DACA recipient or person with TPS.²² Given the precarious state of their parents' status, these children often live in fear of losing a parent. Increased immigration enforcement results in children being less likely to live with their parents.²³

Children separated from their parents due to detention or deportation experience toxic stress, often exhibited in increased fear; anger; crying; and changes in sleeping and eating habits. They also face higher rates of being placed into foster care.²⁴ Children also experience these threats to their physical and mental health at the mere possibility and fear of family separation.²⁵ The impacts of toxic stress can be lifelong, including developmental disorders among children whose parents knew a deportee²⁶ and a rise in substance abuse among children with deported parents.²⁷ Additionally, families often experience economic hardship, including instability in housing and nutrition, because of a parent's deportation or detention.²⁸ Separation from parents or primary caregivers also deny children important foundational relationships that help them regulate their emotions; meet developmental milestones; and more fully engage with their family, peers, and community.²⁹ A path to citizenship would allow children to live without the fear and trauma of family separation.

Undocumented parents also face additional stressors associated with their lack of permanent immigration status which often translate to poor developmental outcomes for their children. For example, undocumented parents have less access to stable jobs with worker protections and benefits like paid leave, making them less available to spend time with their children and contributing to stress that trickles down to their children, with consequences to both their mental and physical health.³⁰

Improved success in school for immigrant children and youth

Better educational outcomes

A path to citizenship would allow immigrant children and children in immigrant families to learn and thrive in school. While most children of immigrants are U.S. citizens, approximately 620,000 K-12 students in the United States are undocumented.³¹ Research shows that immigration enforcement decreases children's attendance in schools and increases chronic absenteeism.³² Furthermore, the stress of immigration enforcement often undermines students' achievement and success in school.³³

This impact is also felt in early education—one study found that immigration raids decreased Hispanic enrollment in Head Start by 10 percent.³⁴ Research also shows that immigration enforcement and other anti-immigrant policies make it more challenging for schools and early education providers to serve children and families, including additional stress on teachers and care providers.³⁵ In a 2017 survey, 85 percent of educators surveyed reported higher levels of stress and anxiety due to their students' immigration-related concerns.³⁶ A path to citizenship would decrease these harmful impacts of immigration enforcement; improve children's school attendance and achievement; and better allow them to grow and learn in a school environment.

A path to citizenship would also improve parent engagement. While parent engagement improves educational outcomes, undocumented parents' fears about immigration enforcement and documentation requirements often put up obstacles to their involvement in their children's education.³⁷ A path to citizenship would give parents confidence to support their children's education and participate in educational events.

Supporting immigrant educators

It's also important to note that a pathway to citizenship would also support teachers and early education providers who have DACA or TPS, or who are undocumented, keeping them in our classrooms. Immigrant educators help increase ethnic, racial, and linguistic diversity for our increasingly diverse child population.³⁸ Nearly 15,000 DACA recipients serve as educators, who are in a precarious position given their temporary status.³⁹ Immigrants also make up over 18 percent of the early care and education workforce, a number that has tripled since 1990 given increases in demand.⁴⁰ Supporting educators and care providers with long-term job security would grant stability for them and their students, allowing both of them to focus on learning.

Bolstering U.S. Cities' early care education investments and economic mobility efforts

By promoting the schooling of immigrant children, particularly young children, a path to citizenship would bolster current city-based investments in early childhood education as a means to promote economic mobility. In response to a report, which found that economic mobility opportunities were declining in major cities across the U.S. Southeast and other geographic regions, cities have prioritized investing in their early care educational systems (e.g., creating public pre-k programs) and young families.⁴¹ One in four young children (age 0-6) in the U.S. are children of immigrants, 40 percent of whom have a non-citizen parent.⁴² Therefore, to be successful, these early care education system investments must address the unique needs of immigrant families.

Better access to higher education for Dreamers

Finally, a path to citizenship would help undocumented students pursue higher education. New American Economy estimates that more than 450,000 undocumented students are currently enrolled in higher education,⁴³ and the Migration Policy Institute estimates that nearly 100,000 undocumented youth graduate from U.S. high schools every year.⁴⁴ Immigrant youth are vital to their local economies, yet have historically been left with limited options upon graduation from high school, sometimes even being barred from enrolling in public universities. The cost of a higher education is also often a barrier. Many Dreamers are first generation college students, come from families with low incomes, and lack access to federal financial aid and other forms of assistance.⁴⁵

In recognition of the importance of immigrant students, more than half of the states have implemented policies to provide in-state tuition and, in some cases, state financial aid and other supports to undocumented students.⁴⁶ A path to citizenship, however, would further ease financial and other barriers to higher education for undocumented youth across the country, enabling them to achieve their higher education goals.

Better access to critical supports for children and their families

Children of immigrants and their families who lack lawful status also face multiple structural barriers to critical public services and programs that support their healthy development, including the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP); Medicaid; nutrition assistance; and housing benefits. The vast majority of children of immigrants are U.S. citizens and are often eligible for these benefits. However, barriers like cumbersome application processes; lack of language access; and fear of enforcement based on immigration status prevent children of immigrants and their families from utilizing programs that contribute to children's health, development, and economic stability.⁴⁷ In places with intensified immigration enforcement, survey research has found diminished trust in government as a source of health information among Latinos, including U.S. citizens.⁴⁸ Additionally, recent changes to the immigration system, like the Trump administration's public charge rule, had a chilling effect that led families to avoid critical services for which they were eligible.⁴⁹

Despite the serious and disproportionate impacts of the pandemic on their communities, immigrant families have been hesitant to access relief programs specific to the pandemic for which they are eligible.⁵⁰ Though the government stated that COVID-19 testing, treatment, and vaccines would not be used against immigrants in a public charge determination early in the pandemic,⁵¹ surveys by state-based and national organizations found that families did not access medical treatment for COVID-19 because they were concerned about their immigration status, even when they were sick.⁵² An Urban Institute survey of immigrant-serving organizations found that families were avoiding programs like unemployment insurance, the Paycheck Protection Program, and Pandemic Electronic Benefits Transfer (P-EBT), despite the fact that families also reported that cash, food, and employment were the most pressing needs during the pandemic.⁵³ Though the public charge rule is no longer in effect, research shows that immigrant families are still afraid to access benefits for which they or their family members may be eligible.⁵⁴ A path to citizenship would remove fear of immigration-related consequences for using benefits. It would give families greater access to supports that are critical to their children's healthy development and our collective recovery.

Health Care

More than one in three children in the United States are on Medicaid or CHIP,⁵⁵ both of which support children's healthy development and address high medical costs for families. However, uninsured rates for U.S. citizen children of immigrants are double that of their peers with citizen parents, and undocumented children are almost completely barred from accessing health care.⁵⁶ Rates of uninsurance among citizen children with non-citizen parents rose between 2016 and 2019, paralleling the policy changes on public charge.⁵⁷ Additionally, research shows that when parents are insured, children are more likely to be insured.⁵⁸ Thus, a path to citizenship would allow more children and their parents to gain access to health care benefits; support children's health; stave off financial instability; and free up money for families to spend on their children's other needs.

Accessing health care can be a particular struggle for children with undocumented immigrant parents. Increased immigration enforcement and barriers to driver's licenses for undocumented immigrant parents increases the likelihood their children will have an unmet medical need and will not have a regular health care provider.⁵⁹ Not having a regular provider is linked to obtaining health care for preventable conditions through the emergency room, which is significantly more costly for the health care system.

Additionally, undocumented immigrants have faced multiple barriers to obtaining COVID-19 vaccines, including uncertainty about eligibility and fear of interacting with government resources.⁶⁰

Nutrition

Nutritious food is critical to child development. Despite the fact that the vast majority of children of immigrants are U.S. citizens, they experience food insecurity at higher rates than other children because of their parents' immigration status.⁶¹ Immigration enforcement makes food insecurity worse among immigrant families.⁶² These inequities worsened during the pandemic, when the whole country struggled to put food on the table.⁶³ The Trump Administration's public charge rule further exacerbated food insecurity risks for immigrant families. In their December 2020 report, the National Immigration Law Center and the Food Research and Action Center found that immigrants were the most afraid to access the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), compared to other federal nutrition programs, due to fear of immigration consequences.⁶⁴ When children lack consistent access to healthy food, they are at risk for malnutrition and other adverse health, educational, and developmental consequences.⁶⁵ Since SNAP helps parents put food on the table for the whole family, it is a vital defense against childhood food insecurity.⁶⁶ Citizenship would alleviate food insecurity for more children and address years of disparities in access to nutritious food for children in immigrant families. When children of immigrants have access to SNAP they are healthier at birth and in later childhood and have fewer school absences in later childhood.⁶⁷

Housing

Immigrant households are more likely to struggle to pay rent and experience housing insecurity, which has negative implications for children's healthy development.⁶⁸ Increased immigration enforcement increased the likelihood of experiencing overcrowded housing and inability to pay rent among immigrant families.⁶⁹ Studies show that housing instability and homelessness can have long-

term and adverse physiological, academic, and economic effects on children who experience them. Housing instability, which includes being behind on rent and making multiple moves, is associated with increased risks of poor child health, including hospitalizations.⁷⁰

The Trump administration's public charge rule and the pandemic further exacerbated housing instability for immigrant families. In 2019, more than 1 in 7 adults in low-income immigrant families (26 percent) reported that they or a family member avoided a noncash benefit program for fear of negative repercussions for their green card status. Out of those families, one-third specifically avoided housing subsidies.⁷¹ Though immigrant households with children are facing high rates of housing insecurity and other forms of economic hardship as a result of the pandemic, 7.2 percent of immigrant households with children still avoided accessing housing assistance in 2020 due to immigration concerns.⁷² A path to citizenship would help parents obtain more stable, higher paying jobs to pay rent and keep a roof over their families' heads. It would also expand access to housing subsidies for families who need it.

Economic benefits for children, their families, and the country

Providing a path to citizenship for Dreamers, people with TPS, essential workers, and their families has proven benefits for our economy. A recent study by the Center for American Progress found that providing a path to citizenship for undocumented populations would increase the U.S. gross domestic product (GDP) by billions of dollars, create new jobs, and increase wages for American workers.⁷³

What's more, the economic benefits of a path to citizenship extend even further when the impact on children is taken into account. A 2019 landmark study by the National Academy of Sciences found that child poverty costs our country upwards of \$1 trillion per year due to increased healthcare costs and lost economic output.⁷⁴ In contrast, increased family income improves children's long-term physical health, educational outcomes, and earnings as adults.⁷⁵ The national poverty rate for children with undocumented parents is 34 percent—more than double the national poverty rate for children in the United States. A pathway to citizenship would lift more than a quarter of a million children out of poverty.⁷⁶

This legislation would allow parents to secure more stable, higher paying jobs to provide for themselves and their children, increasing family income and children's future earnings. The average family income would be estimated to rise over 10 percent for undocumented workers who could become citizens. Those increased earnings would also result in over \$300 million in additional state and local taxes, not to mention the boost to the local economy through increased spending.⁷⁷ A pathway to citizenship is estimated to increase the United States' GDP by \$1.7 trillion over ten years and create nearly half a million new jobs.⁷⁸

U.S. citizenship also means families have greater access to income supports that help lift children and families out of poverty, like the Child Tax Credit (CTC). The expanded CTC under the American Rescue Plan is projected to cut child poverty by more than half.⁷⁹ Research shows that after just the first month of payments under the American Rescue Plan's expanded CTC, child poverty rates decreased by 4 percent, representing 3 million children no longer in poverty.⁸⁰ One study also estimated that the CTC expansion will generate \$1.9 billion in state and local revenue and support over 500,000 full time

jobs in the next 12 months.⁸¹ The full benefits of the CTC to children, their families, and our country cannot be felt if immigrant children are left behind, as they currently are.⁸² By increasing family income and expanding access to the CTC and other tax credits, a path to citizenship has clear economic benefits for immigrants, their children, and our economy.

Conclusion

The American people agree that every law and policy must be guided by a “best interest of the child” standard.⁸³ However, children have historically been disregarded or targeted for intentional cruelty in U.S. immigration policy decisions. For children of immigrants, or children who are themselves immigrants, Congress’ failure to pass a path to citizenship for undocumented people has inflicted harm, including family separation and toxic stress that can have long-term impacts on children’s healthy development. A pathway to citizenship would improve child outcomes, including better mental and physical health; improved access to healthcare and other benefits; better educational outcomes; improved economic security; and family unity. Immigrants and their children are vital to a successful recovery from the pandemic as well as for the long-term prosperity of our country.

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