

Reversing Welfare Reform?

Examining the effects of policy changes on Mexican immigrant families

According to the 2016 Current Population Survey, immigrants and their U.S.-born children represent 27 percent of the U.S. population, or about 84.3 million people. In this context, immigration policy is the subject of vigorous debate, including whether and when immigrants should be allowed to access federal welfare benefits.

The 2002 Farm Bill reopened access to federal nutrition assistance for nearly two-thirds of immigrants who lost eligibility under Welfare Reform in 1996. However, in light of cuts to public benefits included in the Trump administration's proposed fiscal year 2018 budget, federal legislation could undo the bill's restorations.

In new research, Stephanie Potochnick, assistant professor of public affairs and public health at the University of Missouri, examines how the 2002 Farm Bill influenced food stamp participation and food insecurity rates among low-income Mexican immigrant households with children. Overall, her results suggest that immigration restoration efforts have reversed some but not all of the negative consequences of Welfare Reform.

Read on for the policy context and implications of this study, "Reversing Welfare Reform? Immigrant Restoration Efforts and Food Stamp Receipt among Mexican Immigrant Families" by Stephanie Potochnick, published in Social Science Research; 60, 88-99 (November 2016).



Research Brief

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Implications

- After the 2002 Farm Bill's welfare restorations, and particularly in the wake of the Great Recession, food stamp receipt increased for all low-income families, with the exception of those likely to be undocumented. However, immigrant households' food stamp receipt continues to lag behind that of U.S.-born households.
- Eligibility expansion under the 2002 Farm Bill appears to have had real, substantive effects for Mexican mixed-citizen immigrant families in particular. Specifically, more families received food stamps and fewer families were at risk for food insecurity.
- After passage of the 2002 Farm Bill, in Mexican mixed-citizen households, food stamp use increased among children who were already entitled to benefits as citizens before the welfare restorations. Because many parents in mixed-citizen immigrant families had been excluded from the food stamp program under Welfare Reform, they may have misunderstood that their children remained eligible or may have been afraid to apply on their behalf. The 2002 Farm Bill's restoration of parents' eligibility may have reduced confusion and fears.

Immigration restoration efforts have reversed some but not all of the negative consequences of Welfare Reform that affected Mexican immigrant households with children, including lower rates of food stamp receipt and higher risk of food insecurity.

Policy Background

- The primary objective of the food stamp program—now known as the Supplemental Nutritional Assistant Program (SNAP)—is to reduce food insecurity, which research has shown is associated with poor short- and long-term outcomes for children in development, physical health, psychological health, and academic well-being. SNAP provides billions of dollars in federal support to millions of families and children in the United States.
- The Welfare Reform law of 1996 federally barred non-citizen immigrants from receiving public assistance for at least 5 years of U.S. residence (10 years for food stamps), though it allowed states to determine their own supplemental program eligibility. Many legal immigrant families lost eligibility, whereas before they were eligible on the same terms as U.S. citizens.
- The 2002 Farm Bill (formally named the Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002) broadened access to and simplified application procedures for the food stamp program. Among other changes for all families, it reduced the food stamp noncitizen waiting period from 10 years to 5 years of U.S. residence and extended food stamp benefits to all non-citizen children and disabled individuals, making food stamps the most inclusive federal benefit for immigrant families.

About the Study

This study used data from the Current Population Survey Food Security Supplement (CPS-FSS). The CPS provides a large, nationally-representative sample by collecting monthly demographic and employment information from about 60,000 housing units across the United States; the CPS-FSS is an annual supplementary questionnaire that focuses on household food consumption patterns, food program receipt, and food security measures.

The study utilized a difference-in-difference model, which is frequently used in policy impact assessments, to identify policy associations based on differences in pre- and post- 2002 Farm Bill food stamp receipt and food insecurity risk of Mexican immigrants. However, because selection into the food stamp program cannot be controlled for, the analysis is not causal.

This brief is based on the full article: “Reversing Welfare Reform? Immigrant Restoration Efforts and Food Stamp Receipt among Mexican immigrant Families” by Stephanie Potochnick, published in *Social Science Research*; 60, 88-99 (November 2016).

Related studies include:

- “Decomposing the Household Food Insecurity Gap for Children of U.S.-Born and Foreign-Born Hispanics: Evidence from 1998 to 2011” by Irma Arteaga, Stephanie Potochnick, and Sarah Parsons, published online first in *Journal of Immigrant and Minority Health* (March 2017).
- “Local Immigration Enforcement Policies and Food Insecurity Risk among Mexican-Origin Immigrant Families with Children: National-Level Evidence” by Stephanie Potochnick, Jen-Hao Chen, and Krista Perreira, published online first in *Journal of Immigrant and Minority Health* (July 2016).
- “A Decade of Analysis: Household Food Insecurity among Low-Income Immigrant Children” by Stephanie Potochnick and Irma Arteaga, published online first in *Journal of Family Issues* (July 2016).

About the Author

Stephanie Potochnick is an assistant professor of public affairs and public health. Dr. Potochnick earned a Ph.D. in public policy at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and conducts research on the social demography of immigration and how programs and policies can promote the education and health of immigrant youth.

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