



# Safety Net Access in the Context of the Public Charge Rule

## Voices of Immigrant Families

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Growing evidence shows chilling effects in the current immigration policy context, whereby immigrant families are avoiding participation in public programs and other routine activities in their communities because of immigration concerns (Bernstein et al. 2019a, 2019b). Proposed changes to the public charge rule have contributed to this context. The changes, proposed in fall 2018, would alter how green card applications are assessed and would expand the definition of public charge to include receipt of noncash benefits, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Medicaid. To provide a window into chilling effects resulting from the proposed rule and their consequences, this brief shares insights from in-depth interviews conducted in March 2019 with 25 adults in immigrant families who reported that they or a family member avoided participating in noncash benefit programs in 2018 for fear of risking future green card status. The study highlights fear and confusion about the proposed public charge rule, a reliance on the media for information with few people seeking professional advice, and hardship for children and adults after losing access to public supports.

We identified several findings:

- Experiences of chilling effects on the ground
  - » Chilling effects appeared to be “spilling over” beyond those directly affected by the public charge rule (immigrants who do not yet have a green card). Interviewees described a wide range of people experiencing chilling effects, including foreign-born people without green cards, green card holders, and naturalized and US-born citizens.
  - » Whether to participate in programs was often a family decision made together with relatives. Children’s well-being was a frequent consideration.
  - » Interviewees most commonly avoided participation in SNAP and/or Medicaid. Some interviewees raised concerns about additional programs not listed in the proposed rule.
  - » Many interviewees indicated they heard about the proposed change to the public charge rule sometime in the previous year. They described a new and higher level of concern about participation in public assistance in 2018, which they linked explicitly to talk about a new rule that would penalize immigrant families for safety net participation.
  
- Access to information and decisionmaking about public charge
  - » Interviewees voiced fear and confusion about the basic features of the proposed rule. This included uncertainty about who the rule would apply to and whether it would apply to current green card holders and citizenship applicants, when it would be enforced, and which public programs would be considered.
  - » Most interviewees decided not to participate in programs given uncertainty about the rule and potential risks.
  - » Interviewees mainly reported the news media as their principal source of information on the proposed rule, though they also received information from relatives and social networks.
  - » Interviewees rarely mentioned people seeking professional legal advice; when they did, most reported that lawyers advised against participating in public programs. Interviewees also rarely mentioned consulting professionals in community-based organizations or government offices.
  
- Impacts of chilling effects and losing access to benefits
  - » Interviews suggested that as adults in immigrant families decided whether to disenroll from or opt out of public programs for which they or their relatives may have been eligible, most were aware of and concerned about the financial, physical, and/or mental health implications for themselves and their children.
  - » Most interviewees who reported losing access to benefits cited resulting financial, emotional, and/or physical hardship.
  - » Interviewees most frequently cited insufficient resources for food and adequate nutrition as consequences of stopping program participation. Many interviewees described coping

mechanisms like reduced spending on food, changing diets, and pursuing charitable resources, such as food banks.

- » Reduced access to medical care was the second-most-prevalent impact described. Interviewees noted that people who dropped Medicaid were forgoing treatment for chronic conditions and preventive medical care.
- » Interviewees emphasized the financial stress many families are facing and the key role public assistance can play in filling gaps for those with low incomes.
- » Interviewees suggested the current immigration policy climate, including the proposed public charge rule, is creating fear, stress, and emotional hardship for families.

## Background

The current administration has advanced sweeping changes to federal immigration policy, including heightened immigration enforcement, termination of temporary protections against deportation, and cuts to refugee and asylee admissions (Pierce 2019). In 2018, the administration also proposed expanding the criteria used in “public charge” determinations, in which immigration officials may deny applications for lawful permanent residency (green cards) or temporary visas to immigrants deemed “likely to become a public charge.”<sup>1</sup>

The new approach would make it more difficult for immigrants to get green cards or temporary visas if they have received or are deemed likely to receive cash and/or noncash public benefits. Departing from past practice where only primary reliance on cash benefits or long-term medical institutionalization were considered in public charge determinations, under the proposed rule, officials would consider an applicant’s use of either cash or noncash benefits as “negative factors,” as well as several personal characteristics, including income level, age, English proficiency, educational attainment, employment status, family size, health status, credit score, and other financial resources. The proposed rule, posted for public comment in October 2018, expanded the list of benefits to be considered in future public charge determinations to include SNAP, nonemergency Medicaid, Section 8 housing assistance, public housing, and subsidies for drug benefits under Medicare Part D.

In the context of the proposed rule and other immigration policy developments, immigrant-serving organizations are reporting heightened reluctance and fear in immigrant communities to receive public benefits for which adults and children may be eligible (Greenberg, Feierstine, and Voltolini 2019). A recent Urban Institute brief offering the first national estimates of these “chilling effects” found that one in seven adults in immigrant families reported that they or a family member avoided a noncash benefit program in 2018 for fear of risking future green card status (Bernstein et al. 2019b).

The proposed revisions to the public charge rule are likely exacerbating immigrant families’ avoidance of public benefits. Research has shown that eligible immigrant children and families face multiple barriers to participation in public programs, such as language or cultural barriers, lack of information, fears about immigration consequences and future opportunities to naturalize, or varying program eligibility statuses in multiple-status households, which contain multiple immigration or

citizenship statuses (Fix and Zimmerman 1999; Fortuny and Chaudry 2011), in addition to service providers' logistical and administrative challenges (Fortuny and Pedroza 2014). Other literature has focused on immigration enforcement initiatives' impacts on families' reduced access to safety net programs like Medicaid (Alsan and Yang 2018; Vargas 2015; Watson 2014). Lack of access to safety net programs to meet basic needs may have adverse health and well-being consequences for children and adults in these families and their communities (Pati and Danagouliau 2011; Van Hook and Balistreri 2006).<sup>2</sup>

Eligibility for many public programs is limited for noncitizens; green card holders must wait five years before becoming eligible for federal benefits, and temporary visa holders and undocumented immigrants are ineligible for federal programs. The 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act established the five-year waiting period and gave more autonomy to states to determine their policy priorities for public benefits. Several states chose to fill health coverage or nutrition assistance gaps with state-funded programs during the five-year waiting period but were largely barred from spending federal funds on noncitizens deemed unqualified under the new law. All noncitizens, regardless of immigration status, are eligible for emergency medical care under Medicaid, public health programs that offer immunizations and treatment of communicable diseases, noncash disaster relief, school breakfast and lunch programs, and assistance through homeless shelters or soup kitchens available to the community. Though people may be ineligible for federally funded benefits, some may be eligible for other programs and supports in certain states or localities.

People may be confused about the details of the public charge rule for several reasons, not least because of the rule's complicated nature and the uncertainty around if and when it will be implemented. The maze of eligibility rules is one barrier to immigrant families' access to the safety net (Fortuny and Chaudry 2011), shaping the larger context for recent developments over the proposed rule. In addition, people may not understand the distinction between emergency and comprehensive Medicaid coverage, which has much more restrictive eligibility for immigrants than emergency Medicaid coverage. Green card holders may mistakenly believe the naturalization process includes a public charge test. Though the proposed rule specifies otherwise, immigrants may not know whether program receipt by their eligible US-citizen children would be considered in a public charge determination, nor understand the distinction between Medicaid and the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP).

Immigrant families often include various immigration, residency, and citizenship statuses, such as US-born and naturalized citizens, green card holders, and people who lack permanent residence. These families are often referred to as "mixed-status" or "multiple-status" families. In this brief, we use "multiple-status," because "mixed-status" most commonly refers specifically to households including undocumented immigrants (Passel and Cohn 2009). Urban Institute research has shown chilling effects are spilling over beyond those directly affected by the public charge rule (future green card applicants) to families of green card holders and naturalized citizens (Bernstein et al. 2019a, 2019b).

In addition, other emerging immigration and public charge-related policy developments may further expand chilling effects. These include a potential Department of Justice rule on deporting green card holders on public charge grounds,<sup>3</sup> a new memorandum threatening financial consequences for

family sponsors whose relatives receive public assistance,<sup>4</sup> and continued efforts to restrict access for asylum seekers at the southern border, alongside expanded enforcement efforts within the US.<sup>5</sup>

## Research Approach

This brief provides a qualitative study complementing findings from survey data collected through the Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey (WBNS), a nationally representative, internet-based survey of adults ages 18 to 64, drawn from Ipsos’s KnowledgePanel.<sup>6</sup> The December 2018 round of the WBNS included an oversample of noncitizens, capturing nearly 2,000 nonelderly adults who are foreign born or live with one or more foreign-born family members (hereafter called “adults in immigrant families”). The survey included a module of questions focused on how immigrant families are perceiving and responding to the current immigration climate, including awareness of the proposed public charge rule, avoidance of public programs, and changes to routine activities and reluctance to interact with public authorities.<sup>7</sup>

To learn more about families’ experiences, our research team conducted follow-up telephone interviews with 25 of the 138 survey respondents who reported chilling effects, meaning they or a family member avoided participating in noncash public programs in 2018 (Medicaid or CHIP, SNAP, or housing assistance) because of worries about future green card status, and had indicated willingness to participate in a follow-up interview. A respondent could have defined family as both their immediate family and other relatives living with them or in another household.

We designed recruitment to capture variation in interviewees, with three criteria:

1. Survey language (English or Spanish)
2. Family immigration and citizenship status configuration: all foreign-born family members were naturalized US citizens, all foreign-born noncitizens had green cards, all foreign-born noncitizens lacked lawful permanent residence (green cards), or members had a mix of immigration and citizenship statuses (e.g., US-born respondents living with foreign-born family members)
3. Medicaid or CHIP chilling effects specifically reported for children

Using a recruitment script developed by the Urban team, Ipsos staff attempted to contact by telephone 112 of the 138 Spanish- and English-speaking respondents fitting these criteria to invite them to participate in a qualitative telephone interview. Of the 112 respondents, 5 (4.5 percent) refused to participate in the study.<sup>8</sup>

Ipsos successfully scheduled 32 respondents for an interview, 25 of which were successfully reached and interviewed. The semistructured telephone interviews were 25 minutes long, conducted in Spanish or English, and included questions on

- interviewees' and their family members' decisions not to participate in public assistance programs,
- their access to and use of safety net programs,
- the decisionmaking process and sources of information consulted when considering program participation,
- their awareness of the proposed public charge rule,
- the impacts of losing access to public programs and coping strategies employed, and
- other effects of the immigration policy climate on their families and their communities.

The Urban Institute's Institutional Review Board reviewed and approved the study. We assured respondents of protections to their confidentiality and have taken care in reporting results to protect their anonymity by excluding any information that could identify them.

The 25 interviewees were diverse in terms of states of residence, immigration and citizenship statuses, and ages. See all demographic details of the interviewee pool in table 1 at the end of this brief. Interviewees lived all over the country, with one-third in California and the next largest numbers in Florida and Texas. Others lived in Colorado, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Virginia. All lived in a metropolitan statistical area. Sixteen were female, and 17 were of Hispanic origin and primarily spoke Spanish. Most had multiple household members and were married. Ten were foreign born and not permanent residents or naturalized citizens, among them an asylee, an asylum seeker, and an interviewee with expired temporary protected status; most of the remaining interviewees were permanent residents or naturalized citizens, and two were born in the US (living with foreign-born family members).

During the follow-up interviews, six interviewees indicated they or their family members had not decided to avoid participation in noncash public programs because of immigration concerns.<sup>9</sup> There are several possible explanations for a mismatch between respondents' WBNS responses and the information they shared during the follow-up interview, including potential misunderstanding of the original survey question, as well as mode effects whereby respondents may have been less likely to reveal sensitive information in a one-on-one interview versus an online survey. For analyses in the first and third section of this brief on direct experiences and consequences of chilling effects, we excluded these six interviewees and focused only on the pool who indicated chilling effects in their family. However, we kept these interviewees in our analyses in other portions of the brief because they shared valid information on access to information and impacts for other community members, as well as perceptions of other effects of immigration policies in their personal networks and communities.

## Strengths and Limitations

Our study explores respondents' perspectives and is limited to what they were willing to share in the context of a telephone interview with a professional researcher. The qualitative results do not provide a nationally representative sample, but they illuminate details of lived experiences and fill in the "how,"

“why,” and “when” to complement quantitative survey results. When analyzing interview transcripts, we looked for patterns and frequency of types of responses and are careful to accurately describe the magnitude of responses. We used the following benchmarks for our reporting: “a few” was two to three interviewees, “some” was four to six, “many” was seven to twelve, and “most” was thirteen or more. We include direct quotations, and where relevant, provide both the original Spanish and an English translation. Two-thirds of all interviews were conducted in Spanish.

Qualitative data can provide a check on quantitative data by serving a validation role for purposes of continuous improvement. For example, the in-depth interviews suggested some respondents misreported their citizenship or immigration status in the WBNS.<sup>10</sup> As expected, some adults with more vulnerable immigration statuses tended to report a “safer” citizenship or permanent residency status. With the in-depth information collected, we were able to correct several respondents’ self-reported citizenship or immigration statuses; we report these cleaned results in table 1 under “respondent citizenship and immigration status.” During the in-depth interviews, we also discovered that some respondents may not have fully understood the questions on chilling effects in the WBNS. As noted above, six indicated in the qualitative interviews that they had not previously avoided program participation because of immigration concerns. We also learned that some did not understand the distinction between two separate WBNS survey items: “not applying for a program” versus “stopping participating in a program”; through the in-depth interviews, we probed and clarified which was accurate. We used this insight to shape analysis of the WBNS results in an earlier brief, in which the authors combined answers to those two questions (Bernstein et al. 2019b).

We recognize that in addition to a small sample size, selection biases affect the interviewee pool. For example, adults who are more risk averse and fear exposing their or a family member’s immigration status may have greater fear of participating. Finally, this research was conducted in only English and Spanish, so the study excludes perspectives of adults with limited English proficiency whose primary language is not Spanish. However, the stories we captured still reflect a range of experiences in immigrant families across the country. Learning more about their specific experiences on the ground complements the national quantitative survey results released in prior Urban Institute research.

## Experiences of Chilling Effects on the Ground

The interviews provided in-depth information on the experiences of individuals and families who experienced chilling effects in 2018. Excluding the six interviewees who indicated they had not avoided noncash programs because of immigration concerns, the findings among these 19 interviewees suggested chilling effects have spilled over beyond future green card applicants. Interviewees shared that families decided together whether to participate in programs, because such decisions have stakes for multiple household members, and children’s well-being was often a primary consideration. Interviewees most frequently avoided SNAP and Medicaid.

## Wide Range of People Affected

Most of the 19 interviewees who indicated that they or a family member avoided noncash safety net programs in 2018 spoke about decisions for their own participation in programs (and in some cases their close family members, including spouses and children in the household). Some shared instances of chilling among other relatives, like adult children, siblings, a cousin, or an uncle. Respondents who reported chilling were mostly green card holders or foreign-born people without a green card, but the group also included a few US-born and naturalized citizens.

The majority of interviewees described fear of risking prospects for permanent residence among an array of future green card applicants, including temporary visa holders (e.g., H1-B, student, asylee), asylum seekers, temporary protected status recipients, and potentially undocumented immigrants. But echoing findings from the WBNS results (Bernstein et al. 2019b), chilling effects also occurred among people not directly affected by the proposed public charge rule, spilling over beyond those planning to eventually apply for green cards. Interviewees described examples of current green card holders reporting chilling effects, articulating the fear that participation in public programs would affect their future citizenship applications, despite the fact there is no public charge test for citizenship applications. (The proposed expansion of public charge applies only to some green card and temporary visa applications, not to naturalization.)

One interviewee with a green card decided not to reapply for SNAP for fear of risking her citizenship application but kept Medicaid for her US-citizen children. She also noted that her mother-in-law had not applied for CHIP for her 4-year-old son for fear of endangering her current green card status. Another green card holder described confusion about whether benefit receipt would be considered in a future citizenship application, hearing contradictory information from different sources. She shared her concern about her future citizenship prospects:

*[Las] personas me decían... que eso [uso de beneficios] iba afectar a los inmigrantes para [poder convertirse en] ciudadanos americanos...Yo llevo bastante tiempo en este país, y no quiero que a mí me afecte en la ciudadanía. Yo quiero hacerme ciudadana.*

*People would tell me...that this [use of benefits] will hurt immigrants' chances of becoming American citizens...I have been in this country for quite some time, and I don't want this to hurt my citizenship chances. I want to become a citizen.*

## Family Considerations

Many interviewees lived in multiple-status households, containing multiple immigration and citizenship statuses, and referenced families spanning multiple households. For example, a respondent with a green card or temporary visa may have a naturalized or US-born spouse and/or US-born citizen children. Because many interviewees had relationships with relatives in other households and shared financial responsibilities, they too were affected by their relatives' less permanent immigration statuses. One green card holder shared that his brother, who had an H1-B visa, feared participating in a mortgage



support program and was living with him until he secured his own housing. Another described how his green card–holding girlfriend and her siblings helped pay for their mother’s rent, sharing that financial burden.

The interviews suggested decisions about program participation were often made with other family members, not only to solicit advice but because such decisions would affect them and the family’s survival strategies. One interviewee emphasized, for example, how families are on their own in dealing with the consequences of unexpected medical expenses or other basic needs:

*Sí, claro, afecta a toda la familia porque si le llega a pasar algo, pues lo tienen que solventar ellos...solos.*

*Yes, of course, it affects the entire family because if something were to happen, well, they would have to deal with it...on their own.*

In the context of family discussions about the risks of program participation, interviewees often expressed concern for the future of children in the family. Many interviewees described how decisions to not participate in programs would affect or had affected access to programs for US-citizen children. Many described not applying for or stopping participating in SNAP, in some cases in households where their US-citizen children and/or spouses would also lose access to that household-level nutrition benefit. One US-born respondent spoke about his green card–holding girlfriend, with whom he is expecting a child, being reluctant to sign up for SNAP for fear of risking her citizenship status, though he had convinced her to participate in the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) for their child. Though SNAP is listed as a benefit that would be considered in the proposed public charge rule, WIC is not. Another interviewee with a student visa described how he and his spouse were expecting a child to be born in the US but feared participating in any public programs and potentially risking their own future green card applications.

An interviewee cited his concern for his son’s well-being as the reason he and his wife decided not to participate in benefit programs. They decided not to apply for public benefits because they did not want that participation to affect their chances of staying in the country with their son:

*We felt that we need to stay here until our son grows up, [until] our son...is capable of handling himself. That will take several more years, and immigration status always has been a concern to us. So, we didn’t want to do anything that could endanger us applying for an immigration status that would allow us to stay here. So that’s the reason why we didn’t apply to things like Medicare [sic] and food stamps and any housing assistance. So, we knew that with our income level that we may be eligible, but we didn’t want to...We felt it’s more important for us to be able to stay here and work.*

Another interviewee explained that though unauthorized immigrants like herself are ineligible for most public programs, programs like Medicaid are important to support children in multiple-status families.

*Realmente, si uno no tiene papeles, no le dan ayuda a uno. Al que le dan ayuda es al que tiene. A mi pues no me dan nada de ayuda...A los que le ayudan son a los niños, cuando les dan Medicaid.*

*Realistically, if you don't have papers, you don't get any assistance. People with legal status get assistance. As for me, I don't get any aid...Children, they are the ones getting assistance, when they get Medicaid.*

Interviewees also articulated fears of deportation and losing authorized status among undocumented immigrants with citizen children who are eligible for benefits, as well as people with authorized status. Several interviewees said community members or relatives feared “losing their papers” for receiving government assistance. One interviewee shared that his neighbor stopped receiving SNAP because she feared being deported, which affected her children’s access to nutritious food. He also shared that his sister, who recently received her green card, was afraid her green card could be revoked or she could be deported and separated from her children.

## Programs of Concern

Consistent with the WBNS findings (Bernstein et al. 2019b), most interviewees identified SNAP and/or Medicaid as the programs, or one of several programs, they or their family members avoided. Some identified housing assistance, though a few clarified that they meant mortgage loan assistance programs.

One interviewee shared that his sister, who feared her green card would be revoked or she could be deported, pulled back from several services:

*[Ella] dejó todos. Estaba agarrando estampillas de comida y también las dejó. Iba a los doctores, y también ya casi no va a los doctores porque tiene miedo de que le vaya a afectar en el futuro.*

*[She] dropped out of all of them. She was getting food stamps but also stopped receiving those. She would go to the doctor, but she does not go as often anymore because she is afraid it will hurt her in the future.*

Interviewees frequently articulated concerns about program participation generally, and some interviewees raised concerns about additional programs *not* listed in the proposed rule. One interviewee said his girlfriend was concerned about applying for WIC and the earned income tax credit, neither of which are listed as programs for consideration in the proposed rule. Though tax credits through the health insurance Marketplaces are not mentioned in the proposed rule, one interviewee said he heard that a green card application might be penalized for receipt of those credits. Similarly, one interviewee said her cousin dropped out of emergency Medicaid, even though it is explicitly excluded from the proposed rule. This spillover to a wide range of programs echoes service providers’

observations of immigrants' confusion about and fear of accessing needed services, even those that would not be considered in the proposed public charge test.<sup>11</sup>

## Timing of Chilling Effects

Many interviewees indicated they heard about the proposed change to the public charge rule sometime in the previous year, with a few specifically identifying the second half of 2018, when news coverage of the public charge rule and the associated comment period were highly visible. (See further information below on the role of the media as an information source.) Several interviewees clearly articulated that these changes were new measures to penalize people for receiving public assistance like SNAP. For example, one interviewee said she heard last year that food stamp recipients would no longer be able to apply for green cards or citizenship:

*Empecé a escuchar exactamente el año pasado—no recuerdo bien el mes— cuando empezaron a decir sobre eso que iban a tomar medidas para la gente que recibiera estampillas, que ya no iban a poder aplicar, ya sea para una residencia o para una ciudadanía.*

*I started to hear about it exactly one year ago—I don't quite recall the month—when they started to say there would be actions taken against people who receive food stamps, that they would not be able to apply for residency or citizenship.*

Several others could not pinpoint when they heard about the policy changes that had caused the chilling effects but said that they had occurred during the current administration. Some interviewees did not specify the timing of their decisions to avoid programs; they spoke about their or their relatives' general avoidance of program participation for fear of risking future permanent residence.

## Accessing Information and Making Decisions about Public Charge and Safety Net Participation

The interviews suggested great uncertainty and confusion about what the proposed public charge rule meant and what its consequences would be for future immigration and citizenship applications. The 25 interviewees mainly reported getting information from popular media sources, though they also discussed relatives and social networks as important sources of information. Seeking professional legal advice or advice from community-based organizations or government agencies was rarely reported. Most concluded that not participating in programs was the best strategy given the uncertainty and potential risks.

### Confusion and Misinformation

Interviewees expressed uncertainty about who the rule would apply to and whether it would apply to current green card holders and citizenship applicants, when it would be enforced and whether it had become active, and what public programs would be considered. The chilling effects articulated among

green card holders and naturalized citizens, as well as fears about participation in a wide range of programs, suggested confusion and misunderstanding about basic features of the rule.

When asked explicitly about their knowledge of the proposed rule, interviewees provided an array of answers. Many did not recognize the term public charge or offered ideas that it had something to do with not being a burden on the government or receiving public assistance. Though only a few interviewees used the term “public charge” directly, it was clear that many of the 25 interviewees had heard some iteration of the proposed rule.

One interviewee commented that she and her peers were uncertain about how to react while waiting for the rule to become official. She did not know where things stood and what the status of the rule was:

*Específicamente sobre...que ya está la ley, no, no he escuchado nada...Queda en la duda uno todavía porque hasta que no lo hacen oficial o lo ve uno en las noticias, y en el periódico...Pues no, para mí no ha pasado todavía, pero está todavía la duda de '¿qué va pasar? ¿Qué va a suceder?'*

*Regarding whether...this specific law is in effect, no, I haven't heard anything...You're left in the dark until they make this official or until you see it in the news or in the newspaper...So in my view, it hasn't happened yet, but there's still a doubt about 'what will happen? What's next?'*

Several thought the proposed rule was already being implemented, and others said they did not know when that would happen. A few interviewees expressed concern that the information they received was both contradictory and potentially exaggerated, leaving them confused about how to interpret the information. One interviewee said:

*A veces se contradicen unas cosas con otras, porque primero sale un tipo de información que dice que [pueden ser afectadas] las personas que buscan algún tipo de residencia o ciudadanía americana, y por otro lado de repente dicen que están saliendo otras leyes, otras propuestas, para que uno [pueda] obtener más fácilmente dichas ciudadanía y residencia. Entonces una información se contradice con otra, y es [mejor] esperar a que sea la información real la que diga todo.*

*Sometimes rumors contradict one another, because first you'll hear one source that says people seeking some type of permanent residency or American citizenship could be affected, and a different source will suddenly tell you that there are new laws, other proposals, out there to make it more difficult to obtain said citizenship and residency. So one source contradicts the other, and it is better to wait for the true information to surface and have the final say.*

## Getting Information through Media and Personal Networks

Most interviewees' principal source of information on the proposed rule was the news media, with some citing television outlets, such as CNN, and the two major national Spanish-language networks, *Univision* and *Telemundo*. Other mediums mentioned included newspapers and radio. One interviewee said she had heard about the rule and the term public charge through the media:

*Sí, ese término [carga publica] es el que se ha escuchado mucho en [muchos tipos] de información pública. Tanto en internet, en periódico, en televisión. Y esa información mezclada con otra es la que nos ha puesto a pensar a no querer seguir buscando beneficios para asistencia.*

*Yes, that's the term [public charge] you're hearing a lot from [various sources] of information. Be it on the internet, in the newspaper, or on television. It's this information along with other sources that has made us consider not continuing to seek benefits to help us out.*

Only some interviewees mentioned actively researching on the internet to complement the information they heard. After news media, interviewees highlighted getting advice from family members. Among those reporting chilling effects, some reported seeking advice from family to inform their decisions on whether to participate in public programs. Others served as the consulted party for relatives considering their own program participation.

Most commonly, families advised caution in the face of uncertainty; in many instances, the fear of losing a green card or the opportunity to obtain a green card or citizenship in the future outweighed any other advice and led to decisions to stop participating or not enroll in programs. One green card holder seeking to become a citizen spoke to her son as she weighed her decision to participate in SNAP. Though her son showed her a resource stating that benefits use would not affect her situation, the mother reiterated that there was no assurance they had the most accurate information and recommended they play it safe given the uncertainty. She eventually convinced her son, a naturalized citizen, to also stop participating in SNAP, even though he needed the assistance because he pays child support and can't always make ends meet:

*Él [mi hijo] me leyó un escrito que decía que no, que realmente no era eso sino otras cosas las que iban a afectar. Pero yo le dije, mira, nosotros no sabemos. Y entonces también cerró sus sellos de alimento, no los pidió más, aunque también los necesita porque él es Uber y paga un child support de un niño y el dinero no le alcanza.*

*He [my son] read a document to me that said that no, things weren't that way, that it was going to have an impact on other things. But I told him, look, we don't know. So he also dropped his food stamp benefits, he didn't renew them, even though he needs them because he is an Uber driver and pays child support for his son and money is tight.*

Interviewees also mentioned getting information from informal networks of friends and neighbors, both in person and through social media. A few respondents mentioned consulting friends in similar circumstances during their decisionmaking process. This was especially salient for two interviewees with temporary student or employment visas, who mentioned they spoke with friends who, like themselves, were either waiting for a green card or hoping to obtain one in the future. One shared:

*So, we discussed among our friends. I have...many friends in the same phase, waiting for the green card. We didn't have any formal discussion, but informally we did discuss all these things and we thought okay, let's not take the risk of jeopardizing our green card process—if someone says tomorrow that you used it, and that's why we might not be able to proceed. So that's why we decided, okay, let's not do it.*

## Other Sources of Information

Interviewees rarely mentioned seeking professional legal advice. Two respondents did not personally consult a lawyer but reported hearing lawyers speak on news media and discourage viewers from seeking benefits. Among the four interviewees who had contacted a lawyer, three reported being advised to act conservatively and avoid benefits receipt. In fact, among the six interviewees who spoke about someone seeking legal advice, five reported being advised to drop out of benefits or not apply for them.

Interviewees rarely mentioned consulting professionals in community-based organizations or government offices either. In a few instances, consulted organizations appeared to have shared inaccurate information, or there had been a misunderstanding. One interviewee consulted a social worker at a community clinic, who suggested that if the proposal were to become retroactive, benefits the interviewee received up to nine years ago would likely affect her chances of applying for a green card. Moreover, a few respondents who attempted to seek such advice described barriers, such as discrimination and administrative constraints, that discouraged them from seeking further help from these resources. One described challenges with social services agencies, noting this had become more difficult in the context of the current administration:

*Yo he querido a veces agarrar una ayuda por mi discapacidad, y la verdad que [las personas en oficinas de] servicios sociales son un poco— no sé si son racistas o son muy, cómo le digo—su trato hacia nosotros es muy agresivo. No nos tratan muy bien. Como que no quieren dar la ayuda tan fácilmente; nos piden papeles exageradamente de todo, que uno compruebe que uno realmente tiene una discapacidad. Buscan hasta por debajo de las piedras para no darnos la ayuda que necesitamos, aunque seamos ciudadanos...Antes eran un poco más accesibles. Siento yo que el cambio se ha visto ahora que está este nuevo gobierno...Algo así, como que yo he visto más racismo ahora que antes.*

*I have sometimes sought out assistance for my disability, and honestly [people at] social service offices are a bit—I'm not sure whether they're racist or in a way—their attitude toward us is very aggressive. They don't treat us very well. It's as if they don't want to give us benefits all that easily; they ask us to fill out an exorbitant amount of paperwork, to prove that we truly do have the disability we claim to have. They make us jump through hoops to avoid giving us the help we need, even if we are citizens...Before, they were a bit more approachable. I feel this change has taken place with the current administration...So, I have seen more racism these days than I did before.*

Interviewees also mentioned a couple unusual sources of information. Some mentioned accessing information through local schools, which held meetings for parents to obtain know-your-rights information on immigration, and in one case, to get advice from lawyers. One interviewee, when asked if he had sought professional advice, said he spoke with a nurse at the hospital; he recognized that immigration policies were not her field of expertise, so she likely did not know much about his circumstances. Another mentioned that her local Mexican consulate provided classes aiming to inform immigrants, and one interviewee mentioned asking for information during a call with the health insurance marketplace exchange call center.

## Impacts of Chilling Effects and Losing Access to Benefits

The interviews suggested that as adults in immigrant families decided to disenroll from or opt out of public benefits, most were aware of and concerned about the financial, physical, and/or mental health implications for themselves and their children. Most of the 19 interviewees who reported they or a family member experienced chilling effects in the past year cited some resulting financial, emotional, or physical hardship. Changes to diet because of reduced food budget and avoidance of medical care were the most commonly cited hardships. Additionally, many interviewees spoke of the stress caused by increased financial instability and the importance of benefits as work supports to fill gaps for low-wage workers.

### Access to Nutritious Food

Interviewees most frequently cited lack of resources for food and adequate nutrition as impacts of stopping program participation; this makes sense given that SNAP, along with Medicaid, was the most commonly avoided program (Bernstein et al. 2019b). Many interviewees described coping mechanisms like reducing spending on food, changing diets, and pursuing charitable food resources, such as food banks.

One interviewee shared that with a fixed budget, losing access to SNAP puts pressure on a family's remaining funds to meet monthly expenses:

*Hemos tenido que arreglar [el presupuesto] porque cuando algo cambia y ya no está... Uno diseña su dinero y diseña lo que tiene para el mes... Cuando al otro mes cambia algo, como que ya no vas a tener sellos de alimento, ese dinero que tú invertías en comida, tienes que hacer arreglos.*

*We've had to shift [money] around because when one thing changes and is no longer there... You have a budget and plan your expenses for the month... If next month something changes, like if you no longer have food stamps, the money you used to spend on food must be shifted around.*

Additionally, interviewees noted that given rising costs for housing in certain markets and limited opportunities for wage growth or additional income, loss of program support most often affected their food budget. According to one interviewee in California:

*A lo mejor si comíamos [carne dos veces a la semana, ahora] he estado reduciendo la carne, porque como te digo, ha subido la renta, ha subido todo. Les [a mi familia] pongo más verduras, más frijoles. Aquí en California sube todo menos el salario.*

*Whereas before we might have eaten meat twice a week, now we have been cutting back on meat, because like I told you, rent has gone up, prices have increased. I feed [my family] more vegetables, more beans. Here in California, everything goes up in price except our wages.*

Several noted a change in diet and nutrition in their communities, especially for children. Several interviewees reported changing spending on food by looking for coupons and savings, avoiding eating out, and shopping at discount grocers. To reduce food costs, interviewees said families are forgoing more expensive products, such as meat and fresh produce, and consuming more beans, tortillas, or other low-cost foods. According to one interviewee:

*Yo pienso que sí ha afectado muchísimo porque ya no comen de la misma manera, porque todo está muy caro. Antes con las estampillas podían comprar más alimentos más variados. Pero ahora como no tienen esa ayuda, pues, se come lo que se puede. Si solamente podemos comer frijoles y tortillas, solo eso comemos. Anteriormente las estampillas les ayudaban a tener un poco más de alimentos, como verduras, carne.*

*I do think it has had a huge impact because people don't eat like they used to, because everything is too expensive. Before, people could purchase a greater variety of foods using their food stamps. But because we no longer have that aid, well, you eat what you can. If we only have beans and tortillas, then that's all we eat. Before, food stamps helped us buy a bit more food, like vegetables, meat.*

Another interviewee reflected on how these spending and nutrition resources vary week to week based on available resources, and some weeks they cannot afford the basics:

*Hay semanas que sí compramos todo lo que sería una canasta básica de comida, y hay veces que hemos dejado de comprar ciertas cosas porque no nos alcanza pues para comprarlo.*

*Some weeks we are able to buy enough to have a basic set of food staples, but there have been times we have gone without certain food because we just don't have enough money for it.*

In a few cases, interviewees noted that children and families in their communities were going hungry. Two interviewees observed that more families in their community are taking advantage of schools' free and reduced-cost meals for their children. One interviewee shared that the children in the community have noticed the policy change's impact on their access to food and that many children face hunger:



*Ahora, no hay niño tonto. Los niños le hablan de inmigración. Los niños le hablan de un miedo temible. Ya no pueden tomar leche porque el presidente nos está quitando el acceso a tomar leche. Los niños dicen, 'Ya no podemos tomar leche,' y señalan directamente a personas como responsables...Muchos niños están pasando hambre—no tiene idea. En la escuela también hay un programa de desayuno, y sinceramente yo he visto que ha aumentado la cantidad de niños que llegan a desayunar a la escuela.*

*Now, children aren't oblivious. Kids talk about immigration. Kids talk about a horrible fear. They can't drink milk anymore because the president is cutting their access to milk. Kids say, 'We can't drink milk anymore,' and point fingers directly at those responsible...Many children are going hungry—you can't even imagine. There's a breakfast program at school and honestly, I have seen an increase in the number of children who eat breakfast at school.*

Additionally, some mothers are pursuing alternative resources, such as food banks. However, two interviewees noted the lack of quality and variety available through local food banks, pointing out that the available food is limited compared with what they had been able to purchase with SNAP.

## Access to Health Care

Reduced access to medical care and treatment was the second-most-prevalent impact described. Interviewees noted that Medicaid had previously helped them and their family members receive treatment for chronic conditions, such as diabetes, and access preventive medical care and routine check-ups. Because they stopped participating in Medicaid, several interviewees were forgoing such medical care and only accessing doctors in emergency scenarios. Many noted the high cost of medical care in the United States and described how helpful public health supports were, especially for children:

*En este país el servicio médico es un servicio muy caro. Tener la ventaja de tener las ayudas médicas de programas del gobierno es una ayuda grandísima, más teniendo niños menores.*

*Health care in this country is extremely expensive. Being lucky enough to access government assistance to pay for health care is an enormous help, especially when you have young children.*

A few worried that without insurance, a single unanticipated medical cost could damage their savings and financial assets. One interviewee recalled a neighbor who took on debt to pay for her child's medical care. Another reported that she relies on family members to take her children back to Mexico for more affordable medical care. A third recalled that her cousin no longer has Medicaid, and she worries what one illness requiring out-of-pocket payment could do to his personal financial stability:

Él [su primo] siempre estaba acostumbrado a hacerse sus chequeos médicos, y ahorita no los va a recibir por un tiempo que esté en su proceso [para obtener la green card]. Entonces yo pienso que eso le va a afectar. De hecho, si [ha] afectado su economía porque si él tiene alguna enfermedad, él no puede acudir al Medi-Cal; entonces él lo tiene que solventar con un doctor particular que paga. Y en Estados Unidos, [todos esos tipos] de gastos son muy caros.

He [her cousin] was used to getting medical check-ups, but he won't be receiving them for the time being because he is currently in the process [of applying for a green card]. So, I think that will certainly hurt him. In fact, it has already affected his finances because if he has any sort of medical need, he can't lean on Medi-Cal; he has to pay out of pocket for a doctor. And in the US, the cost of medical care is very high.

Another shared that because of fear around the new public charge rule, immigrants in his community may incur debt when they need health care for their children:

Los ha afectado ya sea porque ya no tienen el dinero para comprar los alimentos; o a veces cuando se enferman más los niños, se endeudan cuando uno los lleva a la clínica, o más grave, al hospital. La atención medica es cara, y a veces con los trabajos que uno tiene, a veces no alcanza para cubrir esos gastos.

They've been affected, whether it be that they no longer have enough money to buy food; or sometimes, when the children get sick, they'll incur debt when they take them to the clinic, or worse, to the hospital. Health care is expensive, and given the types of jobs we have, sometimes we don't have enough to cover these kinds of expenses.

## Financial Pressures and Coping Strategies

Interviewees emphasized the financial stress many families face and the key role public assistance can play in filling gaps for those with low incomes. One interviewee described the stress of dealing with the high cost of living and its impacts on households:

*In general, we're just struggling financially because here in California, rents are super high and we're not making that much money and...basic expenses are very hard to meet. [Losing benefits is] just an extra burden on the household. The whole household.*

Interviewees made it clear that they see public benefits as a work support, not a replacement for work. Several interviewees described how assistance helps supplement low wages and seasonal variance in work. One interviewee who drove a school bus and did not have employment over the summer had previously used SNAP to support her family during wage gaps; without SNAP, she faced hardship during the summer months when her earnings dropped. Another interviewee noted that as a seasonal agricultural worker in Florida, her income varies based on the agricultural season and amount of work available. She previously fell back on SNAP to ensure access to food for her US-citizen children during lower-productivity periods in the fields. In her words:

*Por una parte, sí, me fue difícil porque era una ayuda extra que ocupaba para comprar los alimentos. Porque como trabajamos en los fields, ya sea [cosechando] fresas o vegetales de temporada, no todas las temporadas son buenas, y no todo el tiempo tenemos un salario fijo...A veces hay semanas que no hay trabajo, o a veces la temporada se pone mal, y muy apenas juntamos para salir [con] lo de la renta y comida y todo eso.*

*In a sense, it was difficult because it was an extra bit of aid to help us buy food. Because we work in the fields, picking strawberries or seasonal vegetables, and not all harvesting seasons are good, and we don't always have a fixed salary...There are some weeks when we don't have work, or sometimes we just have a bad season, and we just barely scrape together enough to pay for the rent, food, and everything else.*

Without access to public benefits, one interviewee noted his family is accumulating more debt, which hinders long-term financial independence. Another interviewee in California observed that her neighbors are spending less money in local businesses, instead saving up for potential costly emergencies like illness or a death. One interviewee described the regular trade-offs his family members make to reduce costs, including reducing use of electricity and hot water. Another interviewee observed neighbors seeking additional employment to cover costs; in households where only one parent may have worked previously, the interviewee noted that in many cases, she has seen both parents pursuing employment. A few interviewees shared that they could receive additional support from family members in the US or overseas.

Sharing a broader statement about this issue, one interviewee shared her perspective that being considered a “public charge” when receiving public assistance necessary to supplement full-time low-wage work is problematic:

*Aquí nadie es carga pública. Nosotros trabajamos muy duro en este país...pero fuerte. Y cada vez los precios son más altos...Cuando se le pide ayuda al gobierno...es que realmente la comida está elevada de precio...no alcanza el salario que uno tiene para pagar las rentas que están elevadas...Como ellos [el gobierno] brindan una ayuda de alimentos, pues, uno pide algo...para poder ayudar en los alimentos. Que eso es primordial en la persona...Comer para poder estar sano y poder trabajar. Yo no me considero una carga pública. Ni considero tampoco que las personas que reciben por necesidad esa ayuda de food stamps o de Medicaid...que sea una carga pública...La persona que trabaja en este país no puede ser una carga pública porque está dando de él mismo a este país, beneficiando a este país.*

*Here no one is a public charge. We work very hard in this country...extremely hard. And the cost of living is higher every day...When we ask for assistance from the government...it's because, truly, food is expensive...and our incomes are just not enough to cover the high cost of rent...So, because they [the government] offers help to cover the costs of food, well, we apply for a bit of help...to help cover the costs of food. Food, that is a primordial need for a person...Food, to be healthy and to be able to work. I don't consider myself a public charge. Nor do I consider others who, out of need, get help from food stamps or Medicaid...to be a public charge...Someone who is working in this country cannot be a public charge because that person is giving their all to this country, adding value to this country.*

## Other Effects of the Immigration Policy Climate

Interviews explored other effects of the broader immigration policy climate beyond avoiding safety net programs. In response to instability and unpredictability in immigration and enforcement policies, many of the 25 interviewees reported using protective strategies for themselves and their families and avoiding activities perceived as risky. A few interviewees reflected that they have not experienced any impacts of the immigration climate.

### Changing Routines

Most of the 25 interviewees cited examples of immigrants in their communities changing their daily activities or behaviors over the past year, but a few affirmed they have not observed changes in immigrants' routines.<sup>12</sup> Interviewees noted a general sense of fear in immigrant communities, leading immigrants to increasingly avoid spaces where immigration enforcement might occur, including public spaces, like schools and health clinics. According to one interviewee in California, families are not going out with their children as much, which affects the feeling in the community:

*Las personas ya no salen con sus hijos como antes con más tranquilidad. Sí, se ha visto eso más que antes. Como le digo, el ánimo de la gente ya no es el mismo.*

*People don't go out with their children with the same ease they had before. I have seen this now more than before. Like I said, people don't go about with the same spirit as before.*

Two interviewees noted how fear has affected children's educational opportunities, having observed some parents in their communities pulling their children out of school over concerns about immigration enforcement. Though they reported that the schools inform parents that they do not cooperate with enforcement, parents remained fearful, especially because some schools require identification information for children and parents. This concern was reportedly most acute for immigrant families with undocumented members rather than those on temporary visas or with permanent residency.

A few interviewees noted this fear has also affected immigrants' spending at local businesses, slowing down the local economy. One noted that her neighbors and fellow immigrants were being cautious with their spending:

*Sí, sí [el miedo] afecta todo esto porque la economía no fluye directamente igual como si no estuviera afectando, porque la gente siempre está con el miedo y no gasta su dinero. Porque está siempre con el temor de que vaya a pasar algo y no vayan a estar seguros, ni vayan a tener de donde recurrir para solventar algún tipo de emergencia.*

*Yes, it affects everything because the economy doesn't flow in the same way as it would without it [fear], because people are in constant fear and don't want to spend their money. Because they have the constant fear that something will happen to threaten their stability, and they won't have resources to draw upon to cover any sort of emergency.*

## Fear, Stress, and Uncertainty

Interviews suggested that the current immigration policy climate, including the proposed expanded public charge rule, is creating fear, stress, and emotional hardship for some families.

A few interviewees made a direct connection between the current immigration climate and mental health implications for themselves and other community members. One interviewee commented that she and her neighbors live in fear of deportation and observed that this constant fear that one's actions can have a negative consequence takes a toll. According to one interviewee:

*En lo emocional, es que casi siempre las personas tienen temor. Tienen temor de hacer cosas que [les] puedan perjudicar. Yo escucho mucho que las personas siempre están reservando su dinero para emergencias nada más. No es tanto que estén con el temor, verdad, de que pase eso. Yo pienso que es lo económico, en lo emocional. Yo pienso que todo esto afecta en lo emocional, en lo físico. Todas las personas están siempre con el miedo de que si hago esto después va a tener una repercusión.*

*Emotionally, it's almost always the case that people are afraid. They're afraid of doing things that will have negative consequences. I hear a lot about people constantly saving their money exclusively for emergencies. It's not so much that they are fearful that the emergency will happen, right? I think it's more about the financial, the emotional aspect. I think this all affects people emotionally and physically. People are constantly in fear that their actions have repercussions down the road.*

Another interviewee noted how children also carry this stress and uncertainty, which negatively affects their mental health and ability to engage at school. One interviewee who works with immigrant families observed:

*Families are being divided, and the children are worried and can't focus well in school, and that impacts in educational ways. And they're becoming depressed and worried, and the mom doesn't know how to deal with it, so a lot are seeking psychological services to be able to proceed.*

Even among respondents with green cards or citizenship, a few cited elevated fear of deportation for themselves. Some also observed that community members, even those with green cards, broadly experienced fear of immigration enforcement. One interviewee reported seeing fewer neighbors use local clinics and said it was because of fear of enforcement. Another reported that she stopped watching news of Immigration and Customs Enforcement, or ICE, activity because of the anxiety it caused her. Referring to the general volatile immigration policy climate, one interviewee described immigrants' vulnerability:

*Hay mucho en las noticias, lo que dice el presidente, que el shutdown que hubo, y que dice que va hacer esto y que va hacer el otro—pues entra la preocupación y el miedo. Como uno es inmigrante, pues tenemos cierta preocupación: ¿qué va a pasar?*

*There's a lot of talk in the news, things the president says, the shutdown that took place, and rumor has it that he is going to be doing this or that—so worry and fear creep in. As immigrants, we have a unique concern: what is going to happen?*

Several interviewees also expressed that the constant uncertainty affects their ability to plan for their families. One waiting for a green card shared that this meant “you just be ready to pack any day. That’s what I can say.” In his words:

*If something changes in, like, next five years and you have to move out, it will definitely affect our kids. Mentally it will affect them and physically, of course, it will affect them. So, we’re just trying to do long-term planning to see what’s best for our kids. And it’s currently become very uncertain.*

Another articulated similar uncertainty:

*I have a feeling, you know, of insecurity that you never know when they’ll say, ‘Okay, just go away.’ Maybe you’re out of the country, I feel like of course it’s going to happen, you go away and the news changes and you try to come back, and they say, ‘No, this is the rule and you have to follow it.’ So frequently changes can happen.*

## **Attitudes toward Immigrants**

Though most interviewees acknowledged the change in immigration climate at the federal level, respondents were mixed on whether attitudes toward immigrants within their local communities had changed. Many interviewees noticed some change in their community in the past year, both negative and positive. Negative changes included increased discrimination, racism, or profiling. A few interviewees specifically observed reactions among passersby to themselves or others speaking Spanish or reported that they had been treated dismissively in a benefits office because of limited English proficiency. Another interviewee identified increased Islamophobic attitudes.

But other interviewees said they had not felt or observed changes in attitudes toward immigrants. One affirmed that treatment, even by public entities, such as the department of motor vehicles, has not been affected.

Two respondents noted *increased* support from neighbors and local community institutions. One shared that more schools, churches, and local organizations had begun informing community members about immigrant rights in response to the current policy climate. Another noted that schools have been more proactive in providing materials and events in Spanish and sharing information about immigration policy developments.

Perspectives on the policy climate’s impacts across local communities varied. Interviewees’ perceptions of local attitudes sometimes diverged from common perceptions of the state-level immigration climate. An interviewee in California cited the threat of local immigration enforcement efforts, despite the state’s reputation for protective policies.<sup>13</sup> Conversely, an interviewee in Texas, better known for enforcement-oriented state policy,<sup>14</sup> noted her local community’s friendly climate toward immigrants.

## Discussion and Policy Implications

This study complements previously collected survey data on immigrants experiencing chilling effects and helps us better understand what some families are observing and experiencing on the ground. Our analysis of interviews conducted in March 2019 sheds light on the lived experiences of adults in families experiencing these chilling effects. The interviews helped uncover what factors into decisions about whether to participate in safety net programs given the current immigration policy context, including proposed changes to the public charge rule. The findings highlight fear and confusion about the rule and the risks it poses for future immigration and citizenship; a reliance on the media for information, with few people seeking professional advice; children's and adults' experiences of hardship after dropping public assistance; and negative impacts of the broader immigration policy climate for families, including changes to daily routines and extreme stress.

Discussions around the proposed rule are occurring within a broader context of anti-immigrant discourse and changing admissions and enforcement policies. Evidence has documented fear and chilling effects in immigrant communities related to the current administration's policy changes (Artiga and Ubrri 2017; Cervantes, Ullrich, and Matthews 2018; The Children's Partnership and California Immigrant Policy Center 2018; Greenberg, Feierstine, and Voltolini 2019; Roche et al. 2018). It is difficult to know how much of the chilling effects owes specifically to the expanded public charge rule versus the wider immigration policy climate, and we cannot answer this question with these data. But the qualitative data we collected in this study play an important complementary role to existing evidence. Though we cannot make any conclusions about how representative our data are of immigrant families across the country, they show that among our interviewees, most described a new and higher level of concern about participation in public assistance in 2018, which they linked explicitly to talk about a new rule that would penalize immigrant families for safety net participation. Though many interviewees were confused about which programs would be considered in the new public charge test, who would be submitted to the proposed test, and when the new rules would be enforced, many had changed their families' program participation for fear that immigration or citizenship applications could be negatively affected.

The interviews give us a window into the experiences of a wide variety of families trying to support themselves in an evolving immigration policy setting. These qualitative data are consistent with the earlier WBNS findings about chilling effects spilling over beyond those directly affected by the rule (immigrants who do not yet have a green card) and disproportionate effects on household with children (Bernstein et al. 2019b), as well as patterns of mental duress and reluctance to engage in the public sphere (Bernstein et al. 2019a). The interviews conducted for this study complement the earlier survey results by validating and enriching our understanding of what is happening on the ground and identify additional insights about family and community perspectives.

The wide range of people reportedly affected by such fears, from naturalized citizens to US-born children to green card holders to people with temporary status, reflects the centrality of immigrant admissions and the immigration system in the lives of so many people in the US. The associated

uncertainty is a structural feature of the US immigration system that shapes people's ability to plan for their and their children's future, invest in themselves and their communities, and live their lives. The interviewee pool, though limited in some ways, captured a diverse range of experiences: It included Indian H1-B holders awaiting their turn in the green card line, fearful that they could be forced to leave the lives they have built in the US. It included Mexican green card holders who have lived in the US for many years and have US-born children and fear being separated from them. It included temporary protected status recipients seeking ways to remain in the US. It included US-born people whose foreign-born spouses' immigration statuses have led them to avoid participating in public programs that could help their families thrive. Chilling experiences among this wide array of individuals and families help explain the ripple effects of restrictive immigration policies like the proposed public charge rule.

One practical policy concern centers on the challenge families face in understanding the proposed public charge rule and accessing accurate information to make informed decisions about program participation. The proposed rule has received considerable media attention and is in institutional limbo as of August 2019, while the government assesses the materials submitted during the fall 2018 public comment period and develops a final rule for imminent release. Stakeholders across the country working with immigrant families face a significant challenge in ensuring they have the correct information and that effective educational outreach, reflecting a clear understanding and messaging of what the rule does and doesn't mean, is prioritized.<sup>15</sup> We learned in the interviews that both English- and Spanish-language media were common sources of information on the public charge rule, and very few interviewees reported seeking out professional advice, whether from immigration lawyers, immigrant-serving organizations, or public agencies. We heard stories of getting information from family, social circles, and even schools. Most respondents said they were told to avoid public programs because of the uncertainty around the rule and the high stakes of risking future immigration status, citizenship, or family separation. Indeed, some media reports cite anecdotal evidence that non-English language media may be sending "alarmist" messaging on the proposed rule that errs on the side of convincing families to not participate in programs rather than risk their immigration status, adding to confusion and fear in the immigrant community.<sup>16</sup> This information challenge will remain a major issue once the final rule is released and as other public charge-related changes develop. Information and advocacy campaigns will continue to grapple with educating service providers, the media, and the public on current and updated policies. Crafting guidance for providing advice to individuals and families on risks and trade-offs may pose an even larger challenge.

As professionals and advocates shape such guidance, it is important to consider the potential risks to children's and adults' health and well-being that can result from losing nutrition benefits, health care services, and housing assistance. Early impacts cited in these interviews, like loss of access to nutritious food, forgoing preventive health care visits, and increased financial hardship, shed light on some immediate consequences of loss of access to safety net programs. The longer-term impacts for families and communities will need to be monitored as chilling effects likely expand and consequences unfold.



TABLE 1

## Interviewees' Demographic Characteristics

	Number of interviewees
<b>Interview language</b>	
Spanish	17
English	8
<b>Respondent citizenship and immigration status<sup>a</sup></b>	
Foreign-born, naturalized citizen	5
Foreign-born, permanent resident	7
Foreign-born, not a permanent resident	10
US-born	2
Unclear, not US born	1
<b>State</b>	
California	8
Colorado	1
Florida	5
New Jersey	1
New York	1
North Carolina	1
Pennsylvania	1
Texas	6
Virginia	1
<b>Country of origin</b>	
China	1
Cuba	3
Egypt	1
El Salvador	1
India	1
Mexico	9
Nicaragua	1
South Korea	1
United States	2
Venezuela	1
Unknown	4
<b>Gender</b>	
Female	16
Male	9
<b>Age</b>	
25-34	4
35-44	7
45-54	10
55-64	4
<b>Race/ethnicity</b>	
Hispanic	17
Non-Hispanic, other or multiple races	5
Non-Hispanic white	3
<b>Marital status</b>	
Married	14
Not married, not living with a partner	8
Living with a partner	3
<b>Educational attainment</b>	
Less than high school	3
High school graduate	3

	Number of interviewees
Some college	6
Bachelor's degree or higher	13
<b>Number of people in the household</b>	
1	3
2–4	16
5–6	6
<b>Household citizenship and immigration status</b>	
All foreign born are naturalized citizens	3
All noncitizens are permanent residents	8
All noncitizens are not permanent residents	6
Varied immigration and citizenship statuses	8

**Sources:** Interview language, country of origin, and household citizenship and immigration status were collected in the December 2018 round of the Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey. All other characteristics come from Ipsos’s panel profile questions, which respondents complete when they first join the KnowledgePanel.

**Notes:** Permanent residents are green card holders; we use the latter term in this brief.

<sup>a</sup> Respondent citizenship and immigration status is corrected based on information collected during the in-depth interviews.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Inadmissibility on Public Charge Grounds, 83 Fed. Reg. 51114 (Oct. 10, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> Emily M. Johnston, Genevieve M. Kenney, and Jennifer M. Haley, “Penalizing Immigrants for Obtaining Medicaid Coverage Puts Child and Family Well-Being At Risk,” *Urban Wire* (blog), Urban Institute, December 6, 2018, <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/penalizing-immigrants-obtaining-medicaid-coverage-puts-child-and-family-well-being-risk>.

<sup>3</sup> Yeganeh Torbati, “Exclusive: Trump Administration Proposal Would Make It Easier to Deport Immigrants Who Use Public Benefits,” *Reuters*, May 3, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-immigration-benefits-exclusive/exclusive-trump-administration-proposal-would-make-it-easier-to-deport-immigrants-who-use-public-benefits-idUSKCN1S91UR>.

<sup>4</sup> Margaret Talev and Justin Sink, “Trump Looks to Threat of Welfare Bills to Curb Immigration,” *Bloomberg*, May 23, 2019, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-05-23/trump-orders-government-to-collect-bills-for-immigrant-welfare>.

<sup>5</sup> Zolan Kanno-Youngs and Miriam Jordan, “Immigration Agency Says It Plans Deportation Operation Aimed at Undocumented Families,” *New York Times*, June 19, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/19/us/politics/trump-immigration-deportation-family-separation.html>.

<sup>6</sup> KnowledgePanel is managed by the survey firm Ipsos (and was formerly managed by GfK Custom Research). Panel recruitment is based on a stratified sampling methodology designed to provide representative information on the US population. Self-selected volunteers are not eligible to participate in the panel, and participants who lack internet access at home are provided with laptops and free internet access to facilitate participation. For more information about the KnowledgePanel and WBNS, see Karpman, Zuckerman, and Gonzalez (2018).

<sup>7</sup> For more detail, see Bernstein et al. (2019a) and (2019b).

<sup>8</sup> The remainder could not be reached for reasons such as disconnected calls, a wrong or unavailable phone number, or unreturned voice messages.

<sup>9</sup> These interviewees replied “no” to our initial question in the follow-up interview: “First I’m going to ask you some questions about your family’s use of public assistance benefits. We understand from your survey responses from December that you or a family member decided not to receive a public assistance benefit, [specify benefit], because of concerns about getting a green card. Is that correct?”

All six of these interviewees were foreign born, and half answered in English, but their primary language was neither English nor Spanish. This suggests English proficiency could have contributed to some respondents' misunderstanding of the WBNS questions. Some interviewees seemed reluctant or uncomfortable discussing public assistance receipt or immigration issues during the follow-up interviews.

In future work, additional probes could help assess the extent of measurement error (in both directions) of reported chilling effects.

- <sup>10</sup> This type of measurement error in surveys has been observed among adults who are unauthorized or have been in the US for a short time (Van Hook and Bachmeier 2013).
- <sup>11</sup> Helena Bottemiller Evich, "Immigrants, Fearing Trump Crackdown, Drop out of Nutrition Programs," *Politico*, Sept 30, 2018, <https://www.politico.com/story/2018/09/03/immigrants-nutrition-food-trump-crackdown-806292>.
- <sup>12</sup> See Bernstein et al. (2019a) for WBNS findings on immigrant families' reported avoidance of routine activities, like driving a car, talking to police or reporting crime, or going to public places, because of immigration concerns.
- <sup>13</sup> Michele Waslin, "How California Is Helping Protect Immigrants from Trump's Aggressive Immigration Enforcement," *Immigration Impact*, May 19, 2017, <http://immigrationimpact.com/2017/05/19/california-helping-protect-immigrants-trump-administrations-aggressive-immigration-enforcement/#.XUREBfJKhQJ>; Catherine Kim, "California Is about to Be the First State to Expand Health Care to Young Unauthorized Immigrants," *Vox*, June 12, 2019, <https://www.vox.com/2019/6/12/18653901/california-expand-health-care-unauthorized-immigrants>.
- <sup>14</sup> Matty Fernandez, "Texas Banned 'Sanctuary Cities.' Some Police Departments Didn't Get the Memo," *New York Times*, March 15, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/15/us/texas-sanctuary-sb4-immigration.html>.
- <sup>15</sup> See recent survey research from New York City to inform messaging strategies around public charge (New York City Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs 2019).
- <sup>16</sup> Ana B. Ibarra, "Clinics Struggle to Resolve Fears over Medicaid Sign-Ups and Green Cards," *KPCC*, January 15, 2019, <https://www.scpr.org/news/2019/01/15/87898/clinics-struggle-to-resolve-fears-over-medicaid-si/>; Olga Khazan, "Some Immigrants Choose between Food Stamps and a Green Card," *Atlantic*, April 25, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2019/04/trumps-immigration-proposal-hurting-immigrant-health/587908/>.

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