

Executive Summary

There are almost 35 million immigrants in the U.S., comprising 12 percent of the total population. Immigrants and their families contribute to both the diversity and the economy of the nation, offering the potential for vibrant, productive, and healthy communities. Yet, immigrants face several barriers to health and well-being. Some are the result of being disproportionately low-income and uninsured; others are unique, such as cultural and linguistic barriers, limited eligibility for public benefits, and bearing the brunt of unwelcoming public views, attitudes, and policies. Addressing these barriers not only benefits immigrant populations, but in turn strengthens entire communities, and the nation as a whole.

A Profile of the Immigrant Population

Seventy-four percent of immigrants in this country are here legally. This includes both naturalized citizens and noncitizens (including legal permanent residents, refugees and asylees, and temporary residents). About one-quarter are estimated to be undocumented immigrants, a number that is often overestimated and can lead to negative attitudes about immigration as a whole.

Six states, historically known as major immigrant gateways, were home to over two-thirds of the nation's total foreign-born population in 2000: California, New York, Texas, Florida, New Jersey, and Illinois. While the share of immigrants in these states remains high in absolute terms, the immigrant population has more than doubled in other parts of the country such as the Southeast, Midwest, and Rocky Mountain regions.

Poverty rates continue to be high for noncitizens in comparison to both native and naturalized citizens. Immigrants comprise a growing share of workers in America, making up half of those entering the workforce in the 1990s. And while this group represents roughly 12 percent of the total U.S. population, immigrants make up 20 percent of the nation's low-wage labor force.

The Evolving View of Immigration in the U.S.

A recent public survey found that many Americans are uneasy about the cultural impact of immigration, contending that immigrants are changing American culture and values when they ought to be adopting them. These findings illustrate a longstanding conflict between America's attitudes about immigration: whether immigrants should assimilate or increase the diversity of American culture. Ironically, the children of immigrants and immigrants who arrive in the U.S. as children hold views that are in many ways similar to those of nonimmigrants, raising questions about whether second-generation immigrants can help bridge the gap between immigrants and nonimmigrants.

Health Status of Immigrants

Paradoxically, recent immigrants are often healthier than their counterparts that have resided in the United States longer. But as newcomers begin to acculturate to the American way of life, their health status begins to converge with that of the general U.S. population. Their health behaviors (such as eating habits and food choices) change, often leading to negative health outcomes. Immigrants and their families also face unique challenges to health and well-being, including the following:

Lack of health care coverage—Concentration in industries that frequently do not provide private health insurance coverage, coupled with eligibility restrictions on public health insurance coverage, contribute to the high rate of uninsurance for immigrants. Over half (52 percent) of recent immigrants were uninsured in 2003, compared to 15 percent of native citizens.

Cultural and linguistic barriers to health care—New immigrants are often accustomed to different health care systems and may have different health beliefs, speak another language, or be limited English proficient. These barriers have been shown to impede access to quality health care at several entry points, from securing health insurance to receiving primary and preventive care to accessing specialty services.

Cultural adjustment and changing family dynamics—

In addition to the typical stressors that relocation involves, immigrants also face a period of cultural adjustment that may upset family dynamics. For example, parents tend to learn English more slowly than children, resulting in a reliance on their children for help with interpretation and with navigating community systems. This change in power dynamics can be detrimental, eroding the respect children are often expected to show for their parents.

Philanthropic Activities to Improve Immigrant Health and Well-Being

Foundations play an important role in ensuring the health and well-being of immigrant populations, and are engaged in activities such as:

*Building capacity in immigrant communities—*Grantmakers recognize that their work and accomplishments are intrinsically tied to a grantee's ability to be effective and adaptive, so funders offer multifaceted support to grantees along the way. Strategies range from providing basic technical assistance and training to large, multiyear initiatives that foster strategic partnerships among community members.

*Promoting immigrant integration—*Immigrant integration is defined as the weaving of newcomers into the social, economic, cultural, and political fabric of the receiving community. Several grantmakers are supporting activities that encourage mainstream organizations (such as schools, hospitals, and local governments) to recognize the important role they play in ensuring immigrant health and well-being.

*Expanding access and coverage for immigrants and their families—*The philanthropic community has examined access from many angles, seeking ways to break down barriers created by costs, culture, miscommunication, system structure, and differing notions about who and what should be covered by both public and private insurance. Efforts have focused on many vulnerable populations, including immigrants and their families, and grantmakers are working to expand coverage for this population, many of whom are not eligible for public insurance.

*Supporting education and outreach about eligibility and health care rights—*In response to several policy changes that have reduced immigrants' access to health coverage, several funders have supported efforts to inform immigrants of their rights and encourage enrollment in public programs.

*Increasing public awareness and understanding of recent immigrants—*Because misperceptions about recent immigrants often fuel negative attitudes, foundations are working to enhance the public's awareness and understanding of recent immigrants, in part by creating opportunities for increased interaction between immigrants and nonimmigrants.

*Addressing cultural and linguistic barriers to health care—*Health grantmakers are supporting several activities to reduce cultural and linguistic barriers in health care delivery settings, including improving the linguistic and cultural skills of providers and staff, expanding access to third-party interpretation, translating written materials into various languages, advancing research on innovative delivery models, and promoting advocacy and policy change.

As immigrants and their families continue to become a part of communities across the United States, foundations play an important role in recognizing newcomers' unique contributions, while also addressing their myriad health and social needs.