



SIX WAYS TRUMP “PUBLIC BENEFITS” POLICIES HARM CHILDREN



On August 12th, the Trump administration proposed a new rule to change the criteria considered when the U.S. government decides whether to extend visas or grant permanent residency (“green cards”). These criteria—which are inextricably tied to a history of bias in the immigration process—have long included evidence about the likelihood of the immigrant becoming dependent on public benefits. But the approach that is now used focuses on cash benefits, such as Supplemental Social Security (“disability”) or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (“welfare”). The proposed rule will expand that to the main non-cash benefits used by immigrants: the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), or food stamps; Medicaid; and housing vouchers and other housing subsidies. The rule, if unchanged, will go into effect in 60 days barring judicial action (17 states plus DC have brought two lawsuits against the administration, alleging that the rule redefines the term “public charge” inconsistently with Congress’ intent in the Immigration and Nationality Act; that it violates constitutional equal protection guarantees by effectively targeting immigrants from poorer areas in Asia, Latin America, and Africa; that it infringes on states’ rights to protect their own residents; and that it punitively, arbitrarily and capriciously targets immigrants for using public benefits programs that are used by about half the country’s residents).

School breakfast and lunch programs are not included for consideration in the proposal rule. But current policy automatically enrolls students in the federal free and reduced-price school meal program if their families receive food stamps—without having to fill out a separate application. Accordingly, if immigrant families avoid SNAP, they are less likely to receive the meals. Moreover, earlier this summer the administration proposed eliminating this automatic enrollment process.

How might these changes impact children from immigrant families who need food stamps and other assistance? Research from the National Education Policy Center suggests that the consequences could be dire.

- 1. Immigrant children from low-income families could lose services they need because their parents are afraid that the benefits could damage their chances to remain in the country:** Even before these most recent policy changes were announced, immigrants, documented and undocumented alike, were on high alert as immigration enforcement was shifted from people with criminal records to anyone and everyone who was undocumented—with even U.S. citizens caught up in the raids. In a [2018 report](#) co-authored by Jongyeon Ee, NEPC Fellow Patricia Gándara of UCLA describes a teacher survey about the impact of such policies on schools. Educators reported that immigrant parents, fearing deportation, were afraid to sign any forms, including those that qualified their children for core services such as free or reduced-price meals. Such fears, even when technically inaccurate (as in the case of a family living in the U.S. on unexpired visas), are reasonable in the current context, and the new policies will almost certainly add fuel to the fire. For example, although school meal programs are not included for consideration in the proposal rule, we can expect that fearful families will nonetheless decline this public benefit. In short, immigrant parents must make tough choices between getting their children the nutrition, healthcare, and housing they need, and fears that they are reducing the odds that their families will be permitted to remain in the country.
- 2. Schools that serve low-income students could lose funding:** The percentage of students who qualify for free and reduced-price meals is a critical—if flawed—means of assessing the poverty rate of each school. If children are no longer automatically enrolled in the program, [275,000 students](#) could lose eligibility for the program. Not only might this impact the children themselves, it could affect the funding their schools receive. That's because everything from state funding formulas to federal programs use free and reduced-price meal eligibility to distribute funds earmarked for students from low-income families. Even if the schools lose that funding, they will likely continue to serve the same low-income students—they will just have less funding available to serve them.
- 3. The loss of nutrition and health benefits can literally kill a child—or at least reduce her odds of living a healthy life:** When legal immigrants lost access to food stamps in the years after 1990s “welfare reform,” babies’ birth weights declined, parents reported that they were less healthy as children and adolescents, school absence rates increased, and kids experienced more doctor visits and hospitalizations, NEPC Fellow Diana Whitmore Schanzenbach of Northwestern writes in a [2018 paper](#). In a [2016 study](#), Schanzenbach and her co-authors found that childhood access to food stamps is associated with a reduced likelihood of “metabolic syndrome,” which combines measures of obesity, body mass index, and the presence of chronic conditions such as diabetes and high blood pressure. Schanzenbach also describes research that finds that access to Medicaid reduces infant and childhood mortality and even extends into the next generation—with childhood Medicaid recipients themselves giving birth to healthier babies.

- 4. The loss of nutrition and health benefits leads to poorer educational outcomes:** Schanzenbach also summarizes research that finds that children who spend more time on Medicaid are more likely to graduate from high school, complete college, and score higher on exams in grades eight and four. Similarly, food stamp recipients are more likely to graduate from high school.
- 5. If parents hesitate to sign up for health and nutrition benefits offered through schools, their children may miss out on the benefits of the very educational model with the best chance of helping them succeed in life:** Community schools are a research-based model that offers enriched academic opportunities such as extended learning time and active family and community engagement. A core component of this model is that the school provides so-called “wraparound services” such as health, meals, and housing assistance. Well-implemented community schools demonstrate great promise at improving student outcomes, especially for historically lower-achieving student groups such as English learners and children from low-income families. If parents are coerced to prevent their children from participating fully in this model, their offspring may be missing out on key educational opportunities.
- 6. Housing and health care are foundational to learning:** Children facing housing insecurity and unmet medical needs come to class having to overcome daunting challenges. As NEPC Fellow David Berliner has explained, when we deny children these and other basic necessities we deny them opportunities to learn—a reality also examined throughout the book *Closing the Opportunity Gap*, edited by NEPC Fellows Prudence Carter and Kevin Welner.

NEPC Resources on Equity and Social Justice

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