



Fact Sheet: Immigrants and Public Benefits

Are undocumented immigrants eligible for federal public benefit programs?

Generally no. Undocumented immigrants, including DACA holders, are [ineligible](#) to receive most federal public benefits, including means-tested benefits such as Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, sometimes referred to as food stamps), regular Medicaid, Supplemental Security Income (SSI), and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). Undocumented immigrants are ineligible for health care subsidies under the Affordable Care Act (ACA) and are prohibited from purchasing unsubsidized health coverage on ACA exchanges.

Undocumented immigrants may be eligible for a handful of benefits that are deemed necessary to protect life or guarantee safety in dire situations, such as emergency Medicaid, access to treatment in hospital emergency rooms, or access to healthcare and nutrition programs under the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for [Women, Infants, and Children \(WIC\)](#).

Are legal immigrants eligible for federal public benefit programs?

Only those with lawful permanent resident (LPR) status, but not until they have resided as a legal resident for five years. LPRs – sometimes referred to as green card holders – [do not have full access](#) to all public benefit programs and are subject to limitations before being eligible for federal means-tested benefits, including Medicaid, the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP), TANF, SNAP, and SSI. Such limitations include the “five-year bar,” which requires the individual to have maintained LPR status in the U.S. for five years before being eligible for benefits. However, under some federal benefit programs, this requirement can be bypassed when the recipient has worked [40 quarters](#) under a visa. Quarters worked by parents when the immigrant was a dependent child, or by a spouse while married to the immigrant, count towards the immigrant’s 40 quarters.

LPRs are eligible to apply for Medicare and Public/“Section 8” Housing as well, as long as the five-year bar is fulfilled. For LPRs to become eligible for Social Security benefits for both retirement and disability, they are required to have completed 40 quarters of work in addition to having maintained LPR status for five years.

Certain [additional categories](#) of immigrants, specifically refugees, asylum seekers, and victims of human trafficking or domestic violence have the same eligibility requirements for federal benefits as LPRs. Individuals on non-immigrant and temporary visa holders are ineligible for benefits.

Are immigrants eligible for state benefit programs?

In some states, yes. Twenty-six states make immigrants eligible for [state-funded](#) benefit programs. [Most of these states](#) either offer assistance to families or provide access to healthcare to otherwise uninsured immigrants. Examples of these programs are New York’s [Safety Net Assistance](#), California’s [CalFresh](#) Food Assistance Program, and California’s [Cash Assistance Program for Immigrants \(CAPI\)](#).

What is the protocol for “mixed-status families,” i.e., undocumented parents with citizen children?

Like any U.S.-born citizen, U.S. citizen children of undocumented parents can receive federal benefits if they meet eligibility requirements without penalty. Similarly, the child’s eligibility does not change their parents’ or any other family members’ eligibility for that benefit.

How much do legal immigrants use federal public benefit programs?

Legal immigrants use federal public benefit programs at lower rates than U.S.-born citizens. As recently as [2013](#), the rate at which non-citizens have used public benefit programs was less than that of U.S.-born citizens. [For example](#), 32.5 percent of native-born citizen adults receive SNAP benefits compared to 25.4 percent of naturalized citizen adults and 29 percent of noncitizen adults. In addition to immigrants’ lower rate of SNAP usage, they also receive lower benefit values, costing the program less.

How much do immigrants contribute to support public benefits programs?

Both documented and undocumented immigrants pay more into public benefit programs than they take out. According to [Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy](#), undocumented immigrants contribute an estimated \$11.74 billion to state and local economies each year. However, undocumented immigrants are not eligible for many of the federal or state benefits that their tax dollars help fund.

Additionally, a few states have completed studies demonstrating that immigrants pay more in taxes than they receive in government services and benefits. A [study](#) in Arizona found that the state’s immigrants generate \$2.4 billion in tax revenue per year, which more than offsets the \$1.4 billion in their use of benefit programs. Another [study](#) in Florida estimated that, on a per capita basis, immigrants in the state pay nearly \$1,500 more in taxes per capita than they receive in public benefits.

Do undocumented children have access to a public education?

Yes. In accordance with the Supreme Court ruling in *Plyer v. Doe*, all immigrant children, regardless of status, [have access to a public education](#) and are eligible to attend public schools for grades K-12. Undocumented immigrants [are also eligible](#) for the Head Start program as it is not considered a federal public benefit program – any child who is otherwise eligible, regardless of their or their parents’ immigration status, may enroll in Head Start or Early Head Start.