



Children in Immigrant Families

The Foundation for America's Future

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Keywords

• Latino • Immigrant • Health care

Key points

- The consequences of the 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act Amendments (INAA) resulted in a dramatic shift in those who immigrated to the United States.
- Children in immigrant families (CIF) are changing the demographics of the United States.
- As one examines the health and well-being of CIF, one needs to not just start from the present but also understand their past.
- There are differences in the health status that first-generation immigrant children experience as opposed to second- or third-generation US children.
- Overall, low-income immigrants are likely to be more uninsured than low-income United States-born citizens because of decreased access to public and private health insurance.

INTRODUCTION

The United States is one of the few countries of the world where immigrants are considered core to the country's foundation. It has been the children of those immigrants who have made the nation successful and a leader in the global community. One of our national symbols, the Statue of Liberty, proclaims, "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free." This message has been heard around the world by those seeking freedom and an improved economic status. They have come not only seeking

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freedom and economic opportunities for themselves but also hoping to create a new and rewarding life for their children and subsequent generations. Over the years, the push-pull of the immigration process has basically remained the same. The push from the country of origin has been created by persecution, violence, lack of freedom, and limited economic opportunities. The pull to the United States has centered on the freedoms of our society and the economic opportunities of our country. Yet, the value that we philosophically place on immigrants is clouded by the reality of the history of the immigrant experience and the legislative efforts to shape it. This article on children in immigrant families (CIF) addresses the health and well-being of CIF; it starts with background information on the history of immigration to the United States including recent changes and the demographic impact it has had on the US population, particularly its children.

FROM THE PAST TO THE PRESENT: IMMIGRATION POLICY

The first immigration law of the country was the Naturalization Act of 1790, which establishes that only “white persons of good moral character” could become citizens in the newly formed United States [1]. Early in our country’s history, most of the immigration came from Northern Europe, primarily England, Germany, and Ireland. Immigrants from Ireland came after the social disruption caused by the potato famine of the mid-nineteenth century, whereas others came for religious freedom and economic opportunity. Citizenship became more of a racial issue with the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act that prohibited naturalization of Chinese individuals, and an ethnic issue with the 1921 Emergency Quota Act and Immigration Act of 1924, which put quotas on individuals from Southern and Eastern Europe [1]. Among these immigrants were Jews, Italians, and Slavs. These legislative actions were intended to maintain the racial makeup of the United States stable. Post World War II in 1952, racial restrictions were abolished, but a quota system with ethnic preference was maintained in the Immigration and Nationality Act that sought aliens with skills needed in the United States to spur economic growth. The eventual elimination of racial/ethnic-based immigration legislation was accomplished with the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act (INAA) which eliminated national origin quotas and developed immigration regulations based on family reunification and employment skills. It also set, for the first time, a quota for Western Hemisphere immigration and a 20,000 immigrant limit for countries from the Eastern Hemisphere.

The consequences of the 1965 INAA resulted in a dramatic shift in those who immigrated to the United States. In 1960, 75% of foreign-born individuals living in the United States were from Western and Northern Europe. Since 1965, there has been a persistent drop in the proportion of foreign-born individuals in the United States from Western and Northern Europe, down to 12.1% in 2010, and concurrently, there has been a significant increase in the proportion of foreign-born individuals from Latin America and Asia, 53.1% and 28.2%, respectively [2]. Furthermore, higher birth rates

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