



Mixed-Status Immigrant Families Disproportionately Experienced Material Hardships in 2021

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Mixed-status immigrant families, where one or more members are undocumented and all other members are either US citizens or have lawful immigration status, are in a difficult predicament. Because they lack work authorization, undocumented family members often have limited economic opportunities and low-paying jobs that exclude employee benefits and worker protections.¹ They are also restricted from accessing federal safety net programs and are under constant threat of immigration enforcement. Immigrant families may fear enrolling their children in safety net programs, even when children may be eligible, because of immigration-related concerns,² including the risk of undocumented parents' deportation.³ Limited data on the undocumented population make it difficult to assess such families' well-being and how it compares with families with more secure immigration statuses.

To help fill the gap in knowledge of material hardships experienced by mixed-status families, we drew on data from the Urban Institute's December 2021 Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey, a nationally representative survey of adults ages 18 to 64.⁴ We assess material hardships in the previous 12 months among adults in mixed-status families, adults in families with permanent residents, adults in families with naturalized citizens, and adults in all-US-born families.⁵

¹ Hall, Matthew, and Emily Greenman. 2015. "The Occupational Cost of Being Illegal in the United States: Legal Status, Job Hazards, and Compensating Differentials." *Int Migr Rev.* 2015 Summer;49(2):406-442. doi: 10.1111/imre.12090. Epub 2018 Jul 19. PMID: 26190867; PMCID: PMC4503328.

Joshi, Pamela, Abigail N. Walters, Clemens Noelke, Dolores Acevedo-Garcia. 2022. "Families' Job Characteristics and Economic Self-Sufficiency: Differences by Income, Race-Ethnicity, and Nativity." *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences* Aug 2022, 8 (5) 67-95; <https://doi.org/10.7758/RSF.2022.8.5.04>.

² Haley, Jennifer M., Dulce Gonzalez, and Genevieve M. Kenney. 2022. "Immigration Concerns Continued to Deter Immigrant Families with Children from Safety Net

Programs in 2021, Compounding Other Enrollment Difficulties." Washington, DC: Urban Institute.

³ Vargas, Edward. 2015. "Immigration Enforcement and Mixed-Status Families: The Effects Of Risk Of Deportation on Medicaid Use." *Child Youth Serv Rev.* 2015 Oct;57:83-89. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2015.07.009>. Epub 2015 Jul 26. PMID: 26435562; PMCID: PMC4592159.

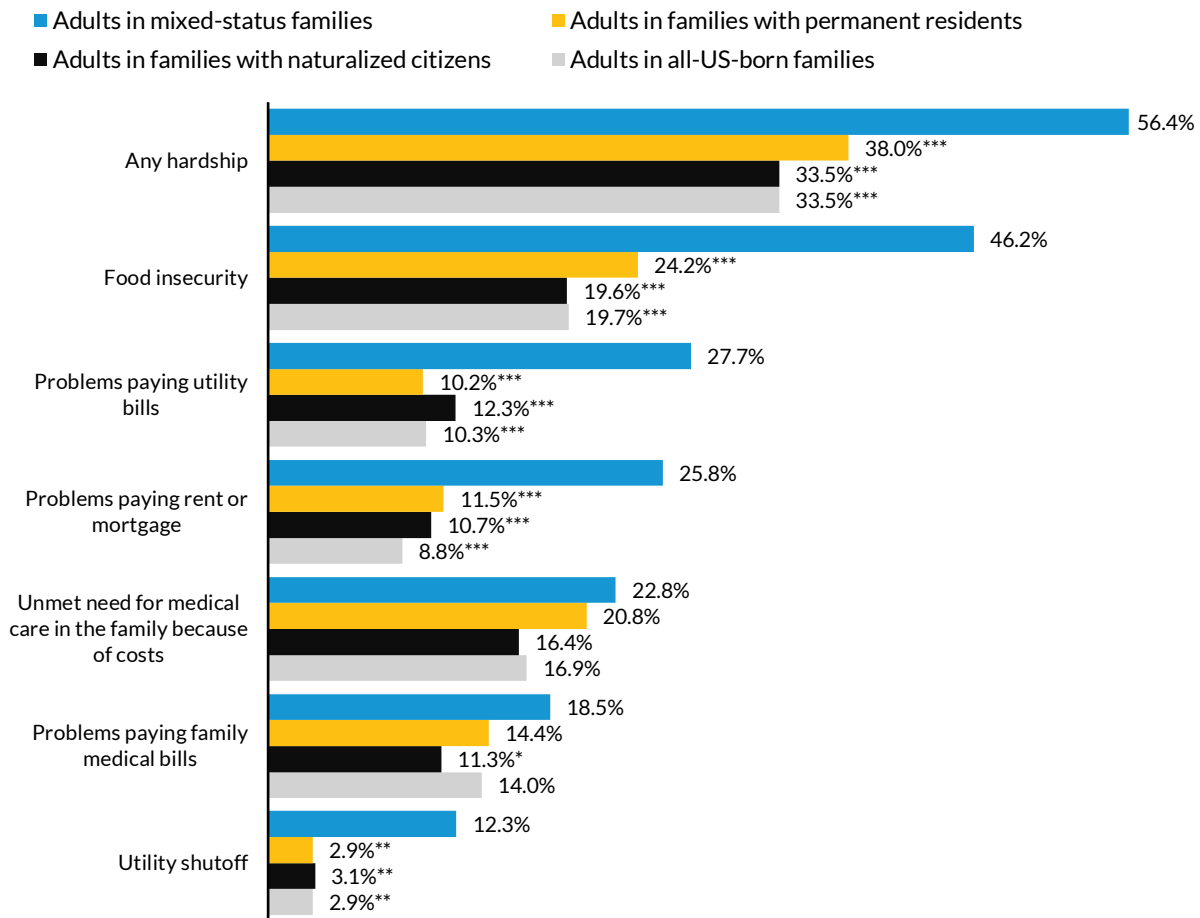
⁴ For more information about the WBNS' design and limitations, refer to <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/well-being-and-basic-needs-survey>.

⁵ We define mixed-status families as those where one or more members are undocumented and all other members have citizenship or lawful status. We define families with permanent residents as those where all noncitizen family members are permanent residents; such families may include naturalized foreign-born and US-born family members, including the respondent. We define families with naturalized citizens as those where all foreign-born family members are naturalized citizens; such families may include US-born family members, including the respondent. We define all-US-born families as those in which all members were born in the US.

Findings

Adults in mixed-status families were more likely than adults in families with other immigration statuses and all-US-born families to report material hardship in 2021 (figure 1). Over half (56.4 percent) of adults in mixed-status families experienced at least one form of hardship compared to over one-third in families with permanent residents (38.0 percent), families with naturalized citizens (33.5 percent), and families with all-US-born members (33.5 percent).

FIGURE 1
Material Hardships Experienced in the Past 12 Months Among Adults Ages 18 to 64, by Family Citizenship and Immigration Status, December 2021



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Source: Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey, December 2021.

*/**/*** Estimate differs significantly from that for adults in mixed-status families at the 0.10/0.05/0.01 level, using two-tailed tests.

Nearly half (46.2 percent) of adults in mixed-status families reported food insecurity, a share much higher than that for adults in families with permanent residents (24.2 percent), adults in families with naturalized citizens (19.6 percent), and adults in all-US-born families (19.7 percent). Compared with other adults, adults in mixed-status families were also more likely to report problems paying utility bills (27.7 percent) or rent or mortgage (25.8 percent) and experience utility shutoffs (12.3 percent). Adults in mixed-status families were also more likely than adults in families with naturalized citizens to report problems paying family medical bills (18.5 percent versus 11.3 percent). Adults in families with permanent residents generally had similar rates of hardship compared with adults in families with naturalized citizens and those in all-US-born families, except in food insecurity and problems paying rent. Notably, levels of material hardship were similar between adults in families with naturalized citizens and adults in all-US-born families.

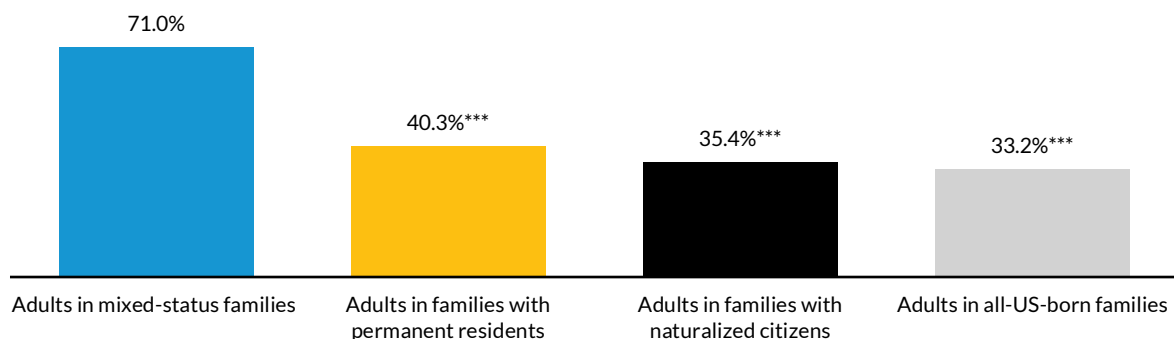
Adults in mixed-status families were more likely to have low family incomes, defined as family income below 200 percent of the federal poverty level (FPL), than other adults (data not shown). Two-thirds (66.6 percent) of adults in mixed-status families reported having low family incomes compared with about one-third (37.7 percent) of adults in families with permanent residents, adults in families with naturalized citizens (30.2 percent), and adults in all US-born families (30.5 percent).

The economic precarity of living in low-income and high-hardship families could have negative repercussions on children's health and well-being and their education and economic prospects as adults.⁶ Adults in mixed-status families were much more likely than those in other families to have a child in the family (figure 2): 71 percent of adults in mixed-status families lived with children under age 19 compared with 40.3 percent of families with permanent residents, 35.4 percent of families with naturalized citizens, and 33.2 percent of all-US-born families.

⁶ Acevedo-Garcia, Dolores, Pamela K. Joshi, Emily Ruskin, Abigail N. Walters, Nomi Sofer and Carlos A. Guevara. 2021. "Including Children in Immigrant Families in Policy Approaches to Reduce Child Poverty." *Academic Pediatrics*, Volume 21, Issue 8, Supplement, 2021, Pages S117-S125, ISSN 1876-2859, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acap.2021.06.016>.

FIGURE 2

Share of Adults Ages 18 to 64 with a Child Under Age 19 in the Family, By Family Citizenship and Immigration Status, December 2021



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Source: Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey, December 2021.

*/**/** Estimate differs significantly from that for adults in mixed-status families at the 0.10/0.05/0.01 level, using two-tailed tests.

Policy Implications

Mixed-status families are disproportionately experiencing material hardships. The alarming rate of materials hardships and the number of people in mixed-status families, now estimated at 22 million,⁷ highlights the urgency of addressing underlying factors that contribute to these disparities. Our findings support previous research⁸ on how immigration policies designed to limit access to employment and safety net supports for undocumented individuals can affect other members of their family. Adults in mixed-status families were much more likely than those in other families to have a child in the household, and prior research shows that children in immigrant families with at least one unauthorized immigrant parent tend to be citizens.⁹ As such, more inclusive safety net policies that prioritize the needs of children over the immigration status of their family members could be considered.¹⁰ For instance, the later rounds of the economic impact payments during the pandemic did not require that all family members have a social security number for a family to receive these payments, which may have made it easier for citizen children with undocumented parents to receive benefits for which they were

⁷ Fwd.us. 2021. "Immigration Reform Can Keep Millions of Mixed-Status Families Together." Retrieved on 1/25/2023. <https://www.fwd.us/news/mixed-status-families/>.

⁸ Enriquez, Laura. 2015. "Multigenerational Punishment: Shared Experiences of Undocumented Immigration Status Within Mixed-Status Families." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 77 (4): 939–53. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jomf.12196>.

⁹ Capps, Randy, Julia Gelatt, Ariel G. Ruiz Soto, and Jennifer Van Hook. 2020. "Unauthorized Immigrants in the United States: Stable Numbers, Changing Origins." Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute.

¹⁰ Acevedo-Garcia, Dolores, Pamela K. Joshi, Emily Ruskin, Abigail N. Walters, and Nomi Sofer. 2021. "For Children in Immigrant Families: A Review Of Three Social Policies." *Health Affairs* 2021 40: 7, 1099–1107.

eligible.¹¹ Similar inclusive policies could be extended to other benefits, such as the federal Earned Income Tax Credit, which currently excludes some mixed-status families because of complex social security and other requirements.¹² Government agencies could also work to dispel misinformation¹³ and confusion by addressing the immigration concerns that overshadow participation in government programs among eligible members in mixed-status families.¹⁴

The little variation in income and most material hardships between families with permanent residents, naturalized citizens, and all-US-born members may point to the greater economic stability that could be associated with more secure immigration statuses (i.e., permanent residency or citizenship).¹⁵ The inability of most undocumented individuals to adjust to lawful permanent resident status¹⁶ contributes to limited access to jobs, much of the social safety net, and upward economic mobility.¹⁷ If a goal of policymakers is to reduce hardships among low-income families and improve equitable access to safety net programs and economic opportunity, then the unique circumstances of mixed-status families, which can include members eligible for these programs, must be considered.

Data Limitations

Our analysis includes 261 adults in mixed-status families, 568 adults in families with permanent residents, 932 adults in families with naturalized citizens, and 6,449 adults in all-US-born families. The share of immigrant adults who are undocumented in the WBNS is about 16 percent, which is lower than other imputation-based estimates that place this percent around a quarter of the U.S. immigrant

¹¹ Gelatt, Julia, Randy Capps and Michael Fix. 2021. “Nearly 3 Million U.S. Citizens and Legal Immigrants Initially Excluded under the CARES Act Are Covered under the December 2020 COVID-19 Stimulus.” Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute.

¹² Internal Revenue Service, “Who Qualifies for the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC),” last updated January 25, 2023, available at <https://www.irs.gov/credits-deductions/individuals/earned-income-tax-credit/who-qualifies-for-the-earned-income-tax-credit-eitc>.

¹³ Guelespe, Diana, Paola Echave, and Julio Salas. 2022. “Do It for Your Children”: Mixed-Status Families’ Experiences with the Stimulus Checks. Washington, DC: Urban Institute.

¹⁴ Gonzalez, Dulce, Hamutal Bernstein, Jennifer M. Haley, and Sonia Torres Rodríguez. 2021. “How Federal and State Leaders Can Reach Immigrants and Build Their Trust in the Safety Net.” Washington, DC: Urban Institute.

¹⁵ Sumption, Madeleine, and Sarah Flamm. 2012. *The Economic Value of Citizenship for Immigrants in the United States*. Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute.

Enchautegui, Maria E., Linda Giannarelli. 2015. “The Economic Impact of Naturalization on Immigrants and Cities.” Washington, DC: Urban Institute.

Peri, Giovanni, Reem Zaiour. 2021. “Citizenship for Undocumented Immigrants Would Boost U.S. Economic Growth.” Washington, DC: Center for American Progress.

¹⁶ American Immigration Council. 2021. “Why Don’t Immigrants Apply for Citizenship? There Is No Line for Many Undocumented Immigrants.” Washington, DC: American Immigration Council.

¹⁷ Bean, Frank D., Susan K. Brown, and James D. Bachmeier. 2015. *Parents without papers: The progress and pitfalls of Mexican American integration*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Hall M., Greenman E., Farkas G. (2010). “Legal Status and Wage Disparities for Mexican Immigrants.” *Social Forces*, 89 (2): 491–513. <https://doi.org/10.1353/sof.2010.0082>.

population.¹⁸ The discrepancy could be related to issues such as sample coverage, nonresponse, or measurement error.¹⁹ The WBNS is only fielded in English and Spanish, so it does not fully capture the experiences of adults in immigrant families who speak other languages.²⁰

Diana Guelespe is a senior research associate in the Income and Benefits Policy Center and a member of Urban's inaugural 2022–24 Equity Scholars Program. She is a sociologist with over 20 years of experience working with immigrant and refugee communities at the local, state, and national levels. Her qualitative research on mixed-status immigrant families and their daily challenge of driving without a license led to subsequent changes in state and local policies to improve access to driver's licenses for undocumented immigrants in Illinois and Washington, DC. It has also served as a resource to community groups in other states seeking similar policy changes. Prior to joining Urban, she conducted policy analysis for Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service. Guelespe's previous academic work includes serving as the assistant director of the Consortium on Race, Gender and Ethnicity at the University of Maryland. She also served as director of research and evaluation at the Center for Social Justice Research, Teaching and Service at Georgetown University. Guelespe received her BA in anthropology and MA in political science from Northeastern Illinois University, and a PhD in sociology from Loyola University Chicago.

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Dulce Gonzalez is a research associate in the Health Policy Center at Urban. She forms part of a team working on the Urban Institute's Well-Being and Basic Needs Survey. Gonzalez conducts quantitative and qualitative

¹⁸ Following common practice in survey research, family members are considered undocumented if they are not permanent residents and are not in the US on a student visa, a work visa or permit, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), Temporary Protected Status (TPS), asylum or refugee status, or another document which permits them to stay in the US for a limited time. See Young, M.E.D., Madrigal, D.S. 2017. "Documenting Legal Status: A Systematic Review of Measurement of Undocumented Status in Health Research." *Public Health Rev* 38 (26). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40985-017-0073-4>.

Budiman, Abby. 2020. "Key Findings about U.S. Immigrants." Washington, DC: Pew Research Center.

Capps, Randy, Julia Gelatt, Ariel G. Soto, and Jennifer Van Hook. 2020. "Unauthorized Immigrants in the United States: Stable Numbers, Changing Origins." Washington, DC: Urban Institute.

¹⁹ Van Hook, Jennifer, and James D. Bachmeier. 2013. "How Well Does the American Community Survey Count Naturalized Citizens?" *Demographic Research* 29 (1): 1–32. <https://doi.org/10.4054/DemRes.2013.29.1>.

²⁰ We estimate this exclusion affects between 5 and 15 percent of nonelderly adults in immigrant families.

research focused primarily on the social safety net, immigration, and barriers to health care access. Her work has also focused on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on nonelderly adults and their families. Before joining Urban, Gonzalez worked at the Georgetown University Center for Children and Families and at the nonprofit organization Maternal and Child Health Access. Gonzalez holds a BA in economics from California State University, Long Beach, and a master's degree in public policy from Georgetown University.

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