

Introduction

Immigrant families have lower participation in means-tested social programs, such as Food Stamps, WIC, Medicaid, and TANF. Lower participation in these programs among immigrants had been due to fear, stigma and access.

- 1 in 4 children in the U.S. live with an immigrant parent
- Just under 2 in 4 of these children are living in poverty, making them income-eligible to participate in these programs

Utilization of social programs is related to immigrant families' well-being, as these social programs have been shown to support:

- Better physical health (Rockler et al., 2022);
- Greater access to nutritious food (Galletly et al., 2023);
- Increased access to preventative care, time-sensitive treatment (Lonquich, 2023; Rosenberg et al., 2022);
- Increased access to prenatal, postpartum care and improved birth outcomes (Miller et al., 2024);
- Coverage associated with fewer depressive symptoms (Jun et al., 2024); and
- Improved academic outcomes connected to SNAP participation (Beharie et al., 2017; Gassman-Pines & Bellows, 2018).

Previous research highlights the vital role that program enrollment staff and community-based organizations (CBOs) play in connecting families to resources that support their needs (Barnes & Gennetian, 2021; Small, 2006)

- Research Questions:**
- How do social service providers and CBO staff perceive access to social service programs for immigrant families with young children?
 - How do social service providers and CBO staff understand the opportunities and barriers in serving local immigrant communities?

Methods

This study is a larger four-phase mixed methods study designed to investigate the role of social policies and community characteristics in promoting the well-being of immigrant families in the U.S. over early childhood.

- **Data collection:** Interviews with key stakeholders
- **Analytical method:** Inductive grounded theory
- **Participants:** 6 program enrollment staff, state leaders, and representatives from CBOs that support or serve immigrant families

Participant Demographics (n=6)

Gender, Female	5 (83%)
Race/Ethnicity	
• White, non-Latine	3 (50%)
• Black, non-Latine	2 (33%)
• Declined to answer	1 (17%)
Country of Origin, United States ¹	5 (83%)
Organization Type	
• State Agency	2 (33%)
• Small CBO ²	2 (33%)
• Large CBO ³	2 (33%)
Number of Years in Current Role, <i>M</i> (Range)	14.8 (1.1 - 37.0)
Number of Years in Social Service Roles, <i>M</i> (Range)	21.3 (6.0 - 46.0)

Note. These data were compiled from the research team’s analyses of interview data and organizational documents.
¹Due to concerns of identifiable information, we did not report the country of origin for 1 interviewee.
²Small CBO = Community-based organization (CBO) with fewer than 10 employees.
³Large CBO = Community-based organization (CBO) with more than 50 employees.

Results

Theme 1: Structural Barriers Prevent Immigrant Families from Accessing Services

Dimensions:	Exemplar Quotes:
Limited access to services due services such as transportation and limited digital access	“The bus, our public transportation, is fairly nonexistent. It also doesn't align with where work is and what shift work is. I do see that as a challenge, like getting even to school. We've advocated for that as an equity gap where there's a lot of kids that are expected to walk one mile to school and they're in the neighborhoods. The parents - I will say that was the immigrant parents that raised the flag like, this doesn't feel safe to send my second grader walking to school alone.”
Language and literacy barriers limit ability access essential services	“And then shopping is always been difficult, you know, just for the program in general...So really it's I think shopping is definitely hard for everyone. And then if you don't speak English or the foods aren't custom to you, you may not know. You know, we've heard people like, I don't know what peanut butter is, so I'm not going to buy it.

Theme 2: Developing Innovative Approaches to Meet Immigrant Family Needs

Developing alternative service models, enhancing digital access, and investing in internal staff education to better meet the needs of immigrant families.	“...potential of online shopping. Hopefully this year we'll get that final rule. Um, and we are working with stores currently to do self checkout, which kind of takes that pressure off so they can go at their own pace. So Walmart and Shaws do self checkout and then Hannaford to you can do actually do a Hannaford to go pick up order. Um in New Hampshire. So in case families aren't comfortable interacting with the cashier they do have some other options.
Cross-sector collaborations, creation of safe spaces, and strategic partnerships with community-based organizations create sustainable solutions	“I lead the Our Early Childhood Coalition, which is a collection of service providers in the community. Um, so it's not like United Way does the backbone work for that. And they dedicate a portion of my, um, um, time to leading the coalition. But it's made up of lots of partners like Head Start and the public schools and, uh, um, health professionals, uh, our, um, our early supports and services, like all of the resources that much might touch a family with children that are like, uh, elementary school and younger, uh, through, you know, expecting a baby.

What social policies were we interested in?

- Nutritional Programs**
- Food stamps (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, SNAP)
 - WIC (Special Supplemental Nutritional Program for Women, Infants & children)
- Health Insurance**
- Medicaid (e.g., HuskyCT here in Connecticut)
 - Children’s Health Insurance Program
- Income Support**
- Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)

Discussion

- Structural barriers and organizational innovation are intertwined in shaping immigrant families’ experiences with social services.
- Immigrant families continue to face significant challenges accessing essential support due to transportation limitations, technology gaps, complex application systems, language barriers, and fear of immigration-related consequences. These systemic issues reinforce inequities in care and widen the gap between need and access.
- In response to these persistent obstacles and limited federal support, organizations are developing creative, community-centered solutions. Providers are adapting in real time to better serve immigrant families.
- Partnerships between community-based organizations and state agencies, along with the intentional creation of safe, welcoming spaces, reflect an emerging commitment to equity and culturally responsive care.

Takeaways

This project has deepened my understanding of the structural barriers that immigrant families face when trying to access essential services. Hearing their experiences made me more aware of how policies, language gaps, and system design can impact someone’s entire well-being. I was also inspired by the resilience and creativity of organizations that continue to support families through innovative, community-based approaches. Overall, by working with great mentors and immersing myself into this research project, I have grown by becoming more confident in myself, as we being more informed and educated on this issue.