

Immigrant Families + Food Insecurity

Insights from Focus Groups with Immigrant Families in California and Service Providers

October 2018



The Project.

PerryUndem, in partnership with California Food Policy Advocates (CFPA), conducted two focus groups with Latinx parents in mixed-immigration-status families (at least one immediate family member who is an unauthorized immigrant) and one focus group with service providers who work with the Asian Pacific Islander (API) immigrant community.

The purpose was to gain insight into challenges relating to food insecurity and to learn more about the experiences of immigrant families when accessing private and public programs, with a special focus on food assistance. We also explored the issue of public charge and potential barriers families face to accessing services and programs for which they are eligible.

Methods.

We conducted these focus groups in September 2018 in Fresno, Los Angeles, and San Diego. The two groups held with Latinx parents were conducted in Spanish. Here are the details:

- 1 group with 10 Latinx parents in mixed-status families in Fresno (9/17).
- 1 group with 8 API service providers and community organizers in Los Angeles (9/18).
- 1 group with 7 Latinx parents in mixed-status families in San Diego (9/19).

Caution: This is qualitative research and should not be viewed as representative of all mixed-status families.

Summary.

Immigrant families are struggling. This theme emerged in all of the focus groups. Parents and service providers talked about financial pressures, particularly for seasonal workers. They feel that the cost of living in California is too high, which makes it hard for working families to make ends meet. Housing is a particular challenge. They say that even if jobs are easy to find, jobs with good wages are not.

Overt racism. Both the Latinx parents and API service providers feel racism is more overt these days, though it's certainly not a new problem. A number report being on the receiving end of racist comments and incidents.

Most seem to be accessing public programs. While many families would prefer keeping a low profile and avoiding government programs, the resources are necessary for their families. They are most comfortable receiving help through non-profits that they hear about through friends, family members, or their churches.

Many have trouble putting healthy, culturally appropriate food on the table. While only a few are dealing with consistent hunger issues, more report problems affording/accessing fresh foods, meats, and vegetables as well as culturally appropriate foods. For example, they say food banks tend to offer canned "American foods" and not the kinds of foods they want or traditionally eat.

Many worry about public charge. Some families are being advised by friends and even community organizations that they should not apply for CalFresh and Medi-Cal while trying to gain either a green card or full citizenship. Even those with legal permanent residence (aka "green cards") worry that using government benefit programs will negatively impact their ability to sponsor the immigration of family members living abroad.

Summary.

Despite worries about public charge, parents view public programs as essential and beneficial to their families. Many simply cannot turn down the assistance, particularly programs that help their children. Parents are willing to take risks so their child can see a pediatrician and access food.

Most find it difficult to interact with government programs. Some are not comfortable going to government offices or revealing sensitive immigration information. Some feel they are not treated well by caseworkers or are made to wait overly long. Most feel the process is confusing, complicated, and find in-person interviews difficult.

Language barriers are especially problematic for API immigrants applying for assistance. API service providers say that at enrollment offices for public programs, there are rarely translation services available for Asian languages – or if they are provided, they are low-quality. This means API immigrants are more confused, made to wait much longer, and are more intimidated by the process.

Help and advice from within their community is best. This is particularly true for API immigrants, but Latinx immigrant parents also mention that they prefer to get advice on health, access to food, legal issues, and immigration issues from friends, neighbors, their church community, and locally known, community based organizations.

Details.

These are hard times for immigrant families.

*“My daughter came home saying, mommy, some kid told me ‘Mexican, go back to your country.’ And it was a kid. And he was also Hispanic.”
– Latinx mother, Fresno*

*“If you don’t have debts, then you don’t have anything. If you want to use a car, but if you don’t have a good job, you have to be paying it off, little by little, so that way you can have something.”
–Latinx mother, Fresno*

Families are struggling financially. Money issues are top of mind, say the parents and service providers in the groups. Families say they are struggling with credit card debt and debt from car payments.

Parents in Fresno were facing different financial pressures. Agricultural workers in Fresno must make a seasonal wage last all year, especially when it is unclear if or how much work there will be the next season.

Cost of living is rising while wages are not. Almost all see the cost of living in California rising faster than wages. Even though they feel there are plenty of jobs, very few pay a living wage, particularly to immigrants. They are particularly concerned about rents and costs relating to housing. Several participants mentioned considering moving to a more affordable state.

Families are facing more overt racism and bias. This is not something new, but some feel it has become more acceptable to be overtly racist towards immigrants in the past year. Latinx parents say their children are hearing racists comments from classmates. API organizations say their clients report they are being asked more frequently to “speak English” at restaurants, stores, and elsewhere in their communities. These kinds of incidents are becoming commonplace.

Immigration enforcements efforts and current policies and attitudes toward immigrants leave many afraid. Fear of a family member being deported are widespread, rumors about public charge, and ICE raids in and near where families live are causing them stress. It is hard to plan for the future when the present is so uncertain.

Help in their communities.

Many know of places in their community where they can get help.

They know about food banks, free or low-cost health clinics, organizations that provide temporary monetary assistance, etc. They can name specific organizations that help low-income and Latinx families.

Most learn about these programs from word of mouth, or through churches or schools. Others say that in-language television and radio programs are good resources.

Even though help is available, it is not enough. Families and service providers say it is hard to get substantial, long-term help. They are frustrated that their income can disqualify them if they earn just a few dollars too many and even though they struggle month to month to pay the rent and keep the lights on. Agricultural workers are particularly challenged because their incomes vary so much from month to month.

Immigrant families are wary of feeding stereotype and want to show they are self-reliant. API organizations say that the families they work with worry about “taking too much.” This is especially true of the older immigrants, who may have more traditional views on self sufficiency than the younger generation. They say immigrant families in general want to be seen as self-reliant and hardworking, not taking from the government. Immigrant families worry that enrolling in programs can make them be seen as lazy or greedy, feeding negative stereotypes.

Older API immigrant adults may face more barriers to seeking help.

Service providers talked about more problems with isolation, transportation, and language when it comes to older API adults accessing programs.

Access to the healthy food is difficult.

While most families say they are not frequently experiencing hunger, many are struggling to put healthy food on the table on a regular basis. Parents feel that healthier, fresher foods are generally more expensive and more perishable, which means they are often beyond their budget. These parents point to finding low cost, high quality produce, meats, and dairy as a particular struggle.

Many rely on less healthy or cheaper foods to feed their families. In order to buy enough food, parents are buying cheaper foods, such as beans, lower quality meats, sugary cereals, and snack foods. This is particularly true near the end of the month when money is running short.

API immigrant families are struggling with culturally inappropriate foods from food banks. API advocates point out that food banks tend to provide canned goods or Americanized food like blocks of cheese. These are unappealing and unfamiliar foods and can make utilizing food banks difficult for API immigrant families.

Many seem to live in food deserts. The closest store is in some cases a corner store which may not sell produce or any healthy foods. While there may be grocery stores nearby, often times these parents find that prices are too high. “What are we going to do with a Whole Foods?”

Transportation is also a barrier to healthy foods. A number have unreliable transportation or must rely on public transportation. Some say this makes it difficult to leave their neighborhoods in search of healthier foods.

Older API immigrants struggle with access to food. One API provider says that her employees have to drive them to the grocery store in their free time. Many other older API immigrants are limited to taking public transportation to shop for groceries.

“I’m five minutes driving from the [grocery] store and when my car breaks down, it is just a sea of tears. I’m calling one family member or the other to see who can take me.”

–Latinx father, Fresno

Most are accessing some form of food assistance, including government programs.

Most have received assistance from WIC. Nine of ten Latinx parents in Fresno, for example, have participated in WIC. All seem to appreciate the program and feel positively towards it. They say it helps them address the nutritional needs of their young children.

Many have gone to food banks before. Some rely on food banks regularly (particularly in Fresno), while others just go when they have no other options and have to choose between buying groceries and paying rent.

Experiences with food banks are generally positive. While some have had negative experiences, such as unhelpful or judgmental volunteers, most say they feel comfortable going. Food banks that are part of churches or schools feel most welcoming to them. And as mentioned, API immigrant families may have less positive experiences with food banks because they do not offer culturally appropriate foods.

Many also are enrolled – or have children who are enrolled – in school/summer meal programs and CalFresh. Roughly half (8/17) of Latinx parents report being familiar with summer meals and all seemed to know about school meal programs. Parents feel these programs, including CalFresh, are important and helpful because food is a basic need.

They know about food assistance mainly through word of mouth. In the case of food banks, some Latinx parents said they just walked by a line one day and learned about it that way. Or they learn about programs from schools, churches, or community based organizations.

Most are familiar with public programs that serve low-income Californians, but some worry about stigma.

Many have experience with WIC, CalFresh/EBT and Medi-Cal. In fact, many of the Latinx parents in the groups are currently enrolled in these programs. They are less familiar with CalWorks.

"CalFresh" is not the preferred terminology for some parents. Some Latinx parents referred to the program as "EBT" or "food stamps." Some feel EBT cards remove stigma and feel good about using this card – and this name.

Many have emergency Medi-Cal and full Medi-Cal for their children. Most of the Latinx parents feel it is important that they are enrolled in Medi-Cal because like food, they see health care as a basic need, especially for their children.

Parents will overcome immigration worries when it comes to food and health. While Latinx parents in mixed-immigration status families say they want to keep a low-profile, they feel these programs are worth the risk, particularly for their children. API service providers also say many of their clients are enrolled in CalFresh and Medi-Cal

Some worry about stigma, poor treatment, when enrolling. One woman in Fresno mentioned that you couldn't dress too nicely while receiving benefits or people question if you "really need them." An API provider mentioned that South East Asian immigrants sometimes view the use of benefits like CalFresh as bringing shame on their community.

There are many barriers for immigrant families when applying for public benefits.

*“Language continues to be a huge barrier to people accessing services ... Even if an agency does provide some sort of translated information, often the translations are inaccurate or offensive. So that’s been an issue too.”
–API service provider, Los Angeles*

Wariness of government seems to be growing. Many of the Latinx parents and API service providers say there is more fear involved in going in-person to apply for a government program currently. Some API service providers have had clients ask their organizations to go through the process for them or to accompany them. Many immigrant parents feel that if they reveal too much or answer incorrectly, they could get themselves or other family members in trouble or possibly deported.

The bureaucracy is difficult to navigate. Multiple rounds of paperwork, in-person interviews, and unhelpful caseworkers make applying for assistance hard, according to parents and service providers. Most feel the process is overwhelming and unpleasant. Some Latinx participants in San Diego felt that caseworkers were openly racist.

Lack of translation services is a problem for API immigrants wanting to access public programs. API service providers say Asian language assistance for public programs is often nonexistent or is of poor quality. This makes it hard or even impossible for their clients to apply. Service providers also say staff and caseworkers at government offices show little empathy for people who are not English-proficient, often making them wait long periods before addressing their needs.

Though some appreciate in-person help, others wish there were more options that do not require face-to-face interactions. Being able to apply online or over the phone would be a good option for some and could counter some of the anxiety Latinx and API individuals feel. At the same time, many Latinx parents feel they are more likely to be successful if they go in-person to hand in their paperwork. One API provider suggests that an online application would allow an English fluent family member to help with the paperwork. The key is to offer different options for applying for assistance.

Public charge is a big concern.

Even if detention or deportation is not a fear, public charge is. Even many of those with citizenship feel that using programs could make it more difficult for their family members to come to the US in the future. Others with some sort of legal status, like a green card or TPS, feel that it will be harder to become citizens.

They are being given conflicting information on public charge. Some families have been advised to stop using public programs while applying for some sort of legal status. Others have been told that programs are safe for now. This information is coming from family members, friends, and community based organizations.

Some families are risking public charge, they have no choice. They need the short-term help to send their children to the doctor or put food on the table. This is an extremely stressful choice to have to make. But parents seem more willing to take on this risk for their children than themselves.

Families do not understand public charge rhetoric and feel the government is out of touch. Latinx parents feel they have the same needs as US born citizens. Food and health care are seen as basic needs. They believe that if the government could see that they worked hard and just needed a little assistance, there would not be a problem.

Top ideas to help immigrant families with food insecurity include expanding CalFresh to undocumented individuals and offering cash assistance to help families in need.

Below are some potential ideas that are designed to help families that might be struggling to put enough food on the table. These are just ideas and have not happened yet. Please read through the list and rate each one on a scale of 0 to 10, with a 10 meaning you feel very positively about this idea, and a 0 meaning you feel very negatively about this idea. After you're done, go back and place a star next to the idea you feel most positively about.

	# of times chosen as top reason	Rating (0-10)
Allowing all Californians, regardless of immigration status to get help through CalFresh. This means that the entire household, even family members without documents could qualify.	9	9.4
Giving California families, who are having trouble affording food, cash to spend on bills and to pay for basic needs like healthy foods.	8	8.5
Making it easier to apply and enroll into programs like CalFresh or WIC by phone or online.*	3	9.5
Increasing the amount and types of food available through organizations like churches, food banks, and schools so that more people can have access to more food and healthier food.	3	8.9
Health care providers giving out vouchers or coupons to their patients that could be used to get free, healthy food at stores and markets.	2	8.7
Schools giving parents vouchers or coupons that could be used to get free, healthy food at stores and markets.	0	9.1
Expanding the length of WIC so that mothers and caregivers can get help, even after their child turns 5 years old, which is currently when WIC runs out.	0	8.9

*This proposal was tested only in Fresno and San Diego.

All policy ideas are popular, but a few rise to the top.

There is a lot of support for all of the ideas that were tested. The theme across many of these ideas is expanding and easing access to programs that could benefit immigrant families in need. Latinx parents and API service providers just feel there are just too many barriers to public programs right now for immigrant Californians.

Expanding access to CalFresh is the top policy idea. Parents and service providers believe access to food is a universal need and feel CalFresh should reflect this by allowing low-income, undocumented individuals to access the program too. They feel the program is currently out of touch with the needs of immigrant Californians by placing barriers in the way of food.

Another top idea is providing cash assistance to low-income immigrant families. “If we need CalFresh then of course we need money!” Many feel that giving cash to needy families who are struggling to meet basic needs could really help them through tough times. They could use this money to buy healthier, more culturally appropriate foods, pay bills, pay rent, and get out of debt. Others point out cash could be used on necessary household products that CalFresh does not cover.

A few push back on cash assistance. Some Latinx parents feel that expanding access to CalFresh makes sense because it is exclusively spent on food – a basic need. But cash assistance feels too much like welfare, a handout, to some and they do not like that.

There is some discomfort around coupons. Overall there is support. But, in Fresno, some parent felt that coupons would be awkward to use and increases the likelihood that they would be judged in line at the grocery store and face more bias.

Need and uncertainty are rising among API organizations.

Uncertainty around immigration enforcement and public charge are holding back community organizations.

They are unsure what advice to give around enrolling in public programs or how long that advice will be valid. What may be safe to do and say one day, may not be the next.

Some have had to retrain staff and redirect resources due to immigration concerns.

Increasing legal resources may mean reducing support in other areas. One health service provider mentioned having to train her staff on how to interact with immigration enforcement should they raid their organization.

Organizations need to staff up. This will mean more employees to deal with increasing need, particularly if immigrant families begin to drop off public assistance due to recently proposed changes to the public charge rules.

There has not been a proportional increase in funding to meet the new needs. When asked what would be most helpful, the answer is “more money.” They would like to see an increase in grants in particular for the work their organizations do. Some service providers may need more funding just to maintain current services. Most feel frustrated because they see a growing need and know they cannot meet it.

Looking Forward.

Suggestions from parents:

Make applying for programs easier. Latinx parents in the focus groups say they are overwhelmed by paperwork requirements, don't always know the rules, and often feel mistreated when they apply. While many prefer going in-person to enroll, they would like more help and to be treated better. Some also suggest making it easier to enroll online or by phone to reduce anxiety around in-person enrollment (this was also an idea in the API service provider focus group).

Clarify rules on public charge. Parents in mixed-status-immigration families are confused by what they are hearing and are not clear about the risks they are facing. (API service providers also said they needed clearer guidance on public charge so that they are advising their clients correctly).

Emphasize the EBT card. Most of the parents feel good about using this card – they feel there is less stigma. It also is a catch-all term for other public programs and some prefer this term to “CalFresh.”

Expand access to public programs that meet basic needs to undocumented immigrants. They feel strongly that food and health care assistance (CalFresh, Medi-Cal) should not be withheld from undocumented family members in need. They also support cash assistance. They make clear that they are self-reliant, hardworking, but sometimes need help to meet basic needs (particularly the needs of their children).

Suggestions from API service providers:

Provide language assistance in a variety of Asian languages to allow better access to services and programs. Having translators onsite or at least Asian language resources online/by phone is important to get API immigrant families to engage and get the help they need.

Increase access to culturally appropriate foods. They point out that it does no good to offer food assistance but then provide food that immigrant families do not know how to prepare.

Update nutrition and health guidelines for the API community. These guidelines often use European or White American staples like bread and cheese. A purely western view of health and nutrition is too rigid. These are unfamiliar and unhelpful examples for many API immigrants.

Create immediate funding streams for immigrant families most in need. One API service provider felt that the trend of funding and grant giving is moving towards multi-year, evidence-based projects. But she felt in the current environment, there is more of a challenge in just meeting the day-to-day needs of some immigrant families. She recommended that funders should also support organizations that try to meet these kinds of basic needs.

