

Addressing Students' Basic Needs

We want to connect families with the resources they need to maintain their home and stability in the community.

– [Kristina Robertson](#), English Learner Program Administrator, Roseville Public Schools, Minnesota

Key Takeaways

- There is a constellation of factors that can impact an immigrant family's economic situation, along with housing or caregiving arrangements that may also be in flux.
- Staying attuned to clues can help educators identify challenges students are facing.
- Community organizations can play a valuable role in helping to meet the basic needs of immigrant students and families.

See this information online

Addressing Students' Basic Needs

- View online: <http://www.colorincolorado.org/immigration/guide/basic>
- Download PDF: <http://www.colorincolorado.org/immigration/guide/basic-pdf>

Complete guide: <http://www.colorincolorado.org/immigration/guide>

Excerpted from *How to Support Immigrant Students and Families*.

Keep in mind that immigrant families' economic situations may change

Why this matters

The ways in which immigration issues relate to families' economic situations are complex, especially when those situations or immigration policies change. Sometimes the changes are immediately visible; other times they are hidden, in part due to families' reluctance to draw attention to their situation.

Understanding how these issues are related is a good first step to addressing challenges that may impact students' abilities to be successful in the classroom. For example, students may not have some of their basic needs met. For example, breadwinners' employment situations may change because:

- they lose employment following an immigration raid, even if they were not detained (Gándara and Ee, 2018a)
- they choose to leave their jobs to avoid workplace immigration raids
- they experience extended, unexpected separations
- they are [detained](#) or deported
- they are limited in transportation options, especially if undocumented
- families are moving often, making it difficult to maintain employment.

In addition:

- Immigrant families may decide not to register for benefits regarding food, housing, medical care, and disaster relief, foregoing benefits they previously used.
- Children may be cared for by another adult, relative or older sibling.
- Immigration proceedings can be costly.
- Landlords and employers may exploit undocumented families.
- Families may be [scaling back on their expenses](#).
- Families may be uncertain about how future policy changes will impact their situation.
- Families may be concerned about proposed rule changes related to legal immigrants using public benefits (“public charge” rules) and deciding to turn those benefits down. See more on the “public charge” issue [in our related resource section](#).



Examples from the field

[ELL administrator](#) Kristina Robertson writes,

We are now seeing the financial effects families have experienced – for example, if a father has been the main wage earner and he is detained, the family is missing significant income. This impacts their ability to pay the rent or mortgage, buy food and in some cases impacts transportation if the remaining parent doesn't have a driver's license.

In addition, if the detained person is released on bail, our immigrant lawyer consultant said they would likely have to pay thousands of dollars for the bond. If a person is detained for many weeks, they are likely to lose their job and the family may lose their housing and have to start in a new community.

[Service providers who work with immigrant families](#) are also beginning to see the impact of economic uncertainty on the families they serve. Lariza Dugan-Cuadra, Executive Director, of the Central America Resource Center (CARECEN), notes, “Our attorneys are doing quasi-social work. Unable to work and pay rent, many of those awaiting their immigration proceedings have become homeless or unstable in the process.” News outlets [NBC 4-New York](#) and [KCUR Public Radio](#) have reported that many families are foregoing benefits such as food stamps through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and preliminary research presented in late 2018 shows that the number of immigrant families enrolled in SNAP [dropped 10% in 2018](#). While there may be a variety of reasons for the change, researchers cite families' concern about immigration status as likely to be a key factor (see more on this topic in the next section about the “[public charge](#)” rule).

Kristina also confirms that she is seeing this on the ground:

We've also had a huge drop in our government food benefits program locally even for legally born children...currently our food pantries are strained to the max as families try to make use of local support...This also means they are less likely to take advantage of other school programs that their children may qualify for such as school lunch. (Personal communication, November 21, 2018)

There are also reports that some immigrant families are foregoing [medical immunizations](#), while researchers with the Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP) report that families of young children are skipping [medical appointments](#), prenatal care, therapeutic services, hospital visits, and registration for programs like WIC for fear of immigration enforcement (Cervantes, Ullrich, & Matthews, 2018, p. 15).



In addition, as a general rule, undocumented families have less access to health care and preventive services. (You can read more about that topic in this [related report](#) from the Migration Policy Institute.) Some localities are working to help address these gaps; for example, [The Washington Post](#) reports that in April, “the school board in Las Cruces, N.M., passed a resolution promising to provide free and reduced cost meals, rides, health care, education and extracurricular services to undocumented immigrant students.”

One teacher who filled out our survey writes,

Eye-opening for me was when I took a survey of the number of students who work after school at full time jobs; often second shift late into the night. Helping to pay rent becomes a priority. Often, school falls by the wayside...It was surprising for me to find that 10 out of 10 ELLs in one particular class all worked in their home countries in agriculture as child laborers. Younger children went to school in the mornings and worked in the fields in the afternoons. Older children worked in the mornings and went to school in the afternoons.

Proposed changes to the “public charge” rule

In September 2018, the White House announced a proposed rule change that would make it harder for legal immigrants to get green cards if they receive certain kinds of public assistance. When considering if a person is admissible to the United States as an immigrant or is eligible for legal permanent residence status, the government considers whether a person is likely to become a “public charge,” meaning a person is likely to become dependent on public assistance.

Benefits previously considered in this determination included cash assistance/welfare (such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families or Supplemental Security Income) or federal assistance in paying for long-term care.

Under the proposed rule change, the list of benefits would be expanded to include non-emergency Medicaid (with some exceptions for services through school and disability programs); food stamps through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP); enrollment in Medicare Part D program subsidies for prescription drugs; and Section 8 rental and housing vouchers. It has not been decided whether the Children’s Health Insurance Program, or CHIP, would be counted as a “public charge” program.

Some categories of immigrants would be excluded from the rule. Green card applicants would be judged on whether they themselves use the benefits, and not on whether other family



members or dependents such as children use the benefits; nevertheless, the impact of immigrants not using these programs is likely to extend all members of a household.

Many immigrants have already started to [withdraw from benefit programs](#), even though the rule has not yet taken effect. In addition, as Kristina noted above, schools are receiving questions about enrolling free- and reduced-price lunch programs and some families have begun to withdraw from these programs. **Free- and reduced-price meal programs are not included in this rule, and some districts are taking steps to communicate that information to families.** ([Education Week reports](#) that Head Start, the federal school lunch program, and services provided under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act are also not included in the proposed changes.)

If the rule change takes effect, it will likely start in 2019. See more about the recent "public charge" rule proposal from [Education Week](#), [ABC News](#), and [The New York Times](#). Analysis of possible impacts has been compiled by [Grantmakers Concerned with Immigrants and Refugees](#) and the [Kaiser Family Foundation](#), which estimates millions of children in immigrant families could be impacted by the rule, most of whom are U.S. citizens, not including immigrants who withdraw from programs because of confusion about the new rules.

Note: If you'd like to discuss this topic with students, take a look at this [lesson plan about the public charge rule change](#) from Immigrants Rising.



Proposed changes in public housing regulations

In Spring 2019, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development proposed tightening restrictions in order to prevent mixed-status immigrant families from accessing federal housing subsidies. The proposal is currently under review. [According to The Washington Post](#),

"Current rules already bar undocumented immigrants from receiving federal housing subsidies but allow families of mixed-immigration status to live in public housing as long as one person is eligible. The eligible person could be a child born in the U.S. In addition to citizens, lawful permanent residents, refugees and asylum seekers are also eligible for housing assistance."

Tips for getting started

- Look for clues about what is happening in students' lives rather than asking questions.
- Take time to listen to students when they wish to talk to you.
- Keep an eye out for economic distress among your students.
- While it is important not to make assumptions or draw unwanted attention to families, consider having some discreet conversations if you notice an issue.
- Talk with counselors, social workers, or administrators about how to best support families struggling to make ends meet.
- Keep in mind that immigration status may impact ability to secure basic services or benefits, such as:
 - Food
 - Housing and utilities (such as heating assistance in the winter)
 - Social-emotional/mental health services
 - Medical and dental care
 - Transportation
- Think about broader solutions if there seems to be wide-scale issues impacting multiple families, including [partnering with organizations](#) that can help address basic needs.
- Look for ways to increase access to these services broadly. One respondent to our survey wrote, "All of our immigrant families are given access to the meals program, community help, and free- and reduced-lunch when they enroll at our schools."
- Keep in mind that students may be afraid to share what is happening for fear of being separated from family members or siblings.
- Keep in mind that immigrant and newcomer families may also have specific needs related to natural disasters. Learn more in [Why Immigrant Families May Have Unique Needs Before, During, and After Natural Disasters](#).

Recommended resources

- [Social and Emotional Needs of Middle/High School ELLs](#) (Colorín Colorado)
- [Health-Related Resources for Immigrant and Refugee Families](#) (Grantmakers Concerned with Immigrants and Refugees)
- [Health-Related Resources: Supporting Immigrant Families](#) (Californians Together)



Recommended videos

- [Community Schools and ELLs project](#) featuring Wolfe Street Academy in Baltimore, Maryland
- [Video Playlist: Educators Reflect on Maslow's Hierarchy of Need](#)



Community schools: A strategy for success

Districts across the country — including rural, suburban, and urban districts — are embracing the community school strategy as a way of addressing students' needs in order to help them succeed. Community schools serve as the hub for the community and can offer a wide range of services and activities (ideally determined with students and families) to support student success. You can learn more about how community schools can support ELLs and immigrant students from the following:

- [Community Schools and ELLs project featuring Wolfe Street Academy in Baltimore, Maryland](#)
- [Community Schools: A Strategy for Success](#) (Colorín Colorado)





Sibling responsibilities

Older siblings may be taking care of younger siblings after parents are detained. This kind of situation has been documented by teachers whose students were [being cared for by an older sibling](#), had major caretaking and breadwinning responsibilities, or were being prepared to take care of younger siblings in the event of detention.

In talking with educators about sibling responsibilities, UCLA researchers studying the [impact of immigration enforcement on schools](#) noted, “Many students are legal residents, because they were born here, but their parents are still on immigrant status, so there have been several students having to get jobs or stay at home and take care of younger siblings. This has led to an increase in concern about keeping up with grades” (Gándara and Ee, 2018a, p. 16). The team also shares the following quote:

[My student] told me that her mom is teaching her how to make food and feed her baby sister in case the mom is taken away (p. 12).

Researchers from the Center for Law and Social Policy studying the impacts of immigration enforcement on young children (2018) share this quote:

“One little boy was writing down what he knew how to cook—peanut butter sandwiches and cheese sandwiches — in order to reassure his frightened five-year-old sister that they would be okay if their parents were deported” (p. 8).

In addition, older children in families who are separated due to immigration or other circumstances may have significant responsibilities for younger siblings. For example, teacher Diana Alqadhi notes that many of her middle school students from Yemen in Dearborn, Michigan have come to America without their mothers, who are waiting for visas. This situation results in significant caregiving responsibilities for the students.



Ensure that students experiencing homelessness have appropriate support

Why this matters

When immigrant students experience homelessness, they have additional educational rights under the federal McKinney-Vento Act (KIND and NAEHCY, 2010). Homeless students may not have documents required for school enrollment (U.S. Department of Education, 2015), yet they are still guaranteed a right to a free public education. See more on this issue from the following:

- [*Immigration and Schools: Supporting Success for Undocumented and Unaccompanied Homeless Youth*](#) (KIND & NAEHCY, 2010)
- [*Educational Rights of Immigrant Students*](#) (AFT tip sheet)

The authors of the above report from KIND and NAEHCY explain that reasons for homelessness in this population include:

- coming to the country unaccompanied
- separation from family as a result of parental deportation
- separation from family as a result of limited space/rules at homeless shelters
- separation from family as a result of abuse, neglect, abandonment, or family discord
- being forced to leave home as a punishment for pregnancy or revealing that they are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender.

The researchers also note that undocumented homeless youth face unique challenges because they:

- cannot work legally
- are not eligible for most health insurance, health care services, and financial aid.

Students may also be afraid to reveal that they are homeless, as in the story Anne Marie Foerster Luu shares in the recommended video below, “A Student Who Was Homeless.”

It is also important to note that some immigrant students may be:

- sharing housing with other families
- moving often due to immigration concerns
- having trouble establishing housing when they arrive in a new community.



Tips for getting started

We recommend the [report](#) by KIND and NAEHCY for additional legal guidelines related to this population, as well as the [tips](#) and strategies included in the guide for educators and immigration attorneys.

Recommended resources

For additional information on this issue, see the following:

- This [related report](#) on homeless newcomer youth in Toronto (Center for Addiction and Mental Health, Canada)
- [Far from Family, Alone, Homeless and Still Just 18](#) (*The New York Times*)

Recommended videos

- [Student Story: A Student Who Was Homeless](#) (Anne Marie Foerster Luu, ESOL Teacher – Maryland)
- [Challenges Families Face: Affordable Housing](#) (Nathaniel Provencio – Principal, Minnieville Elementary School, VA)

