



Study: Immigrant-led households use 41% more welfare benefits

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New research suggests that the average immigrant household costs US taxpayers significantly more in public welfare benefits than households headed by natural-born American citizens do, adding fresh fuel to the national debate over immigration policy.

The study, released Monday by the Center for Immigration Studies (CIS), an organization that favors restrictions on immigration, looks at government programs providing cash, food, housing, or medical care that more than half of immigrant-headed households rely on to some degree. It attempts to put a price tag on those benefits, estimating that the average immigrant household costs taxpayers \$6,234, 41 percent more than the average native-born family.

This includes 33 percent more in cash welfare, 57 percent more food assistance, and 44 percent more Medicaid benefits. Public housing benefit costs are about the same for the two groups.

According to the study, authored by public policy analyst Jason Richwine, "illegal immigrant households" cost an average of \$5,692 in welfare benefits, less than those headed by legal immigrants. The research also concludes that immigrants from Central America and Mexico have by far the highest welfare costs of any region of origin.

"With the nation facing a long-term budgetary deficit, this study helps illuminate immigration's impact on the problem," Richwine wrote.

The new CIS study follows up on research released last September that concluded 51 percent of immigrant-headed households receive some form of welfare, much more than the 30 percent of native-headed households who receive welfare.

Based on the data available, Richwine attempts to explain the higher consumption of welfare benefits by pointing to the lower level of education held by immigrants and the larger number of children in the average immigrant household.

The report argues that being less educated and less skilled leaves immigrants in low-paying jobs and reliant on welfare programs. Since many benefits are geared toward children, larger families would be expected to use more of them.

The study concludes that the best way to remedy this situation is to allow less immigration by uneducated and unskilled immigrants.

Daniel Stein, president of the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR), an organization that advocates reducing immigration, said the CIS findings are not surprising, given the "de-skilling of the immigration flow relative to the average American." He decried immigration policies that favor family relationships more than job skills and abilities.

"This is the big quandary about immigration at a level that's considerably higher than the country needs," Stein said. He questioned why the US admits immigrants who lack the skills to get a good job and will cost taxpayers more money.

Other research based on different data has come to the opposite conclusion about the relationship between immigration status and welfare costs. The American Immigration Council argues that immigrants pay far more in taxes than they receive in benefits.

Researchers from George Washington University, Leighton Ku and Brian Bruen, attempted in 2013 to compare public benefits used by poor immigrants and poor native citizens. They found that low income non-citizens use fewer public benefits than low income citizens, and the benefits they do get have a lower value than those received by natives.

In a study published by the libertarian Cato Institute, Ku and Bruen explained that their analysis differs from some others because they evaluated individuals rather than households and they only focused on the poor because the public benefit programs in question are means-tested.

Alex Nowrasteh, an immigration policy analyst at the Cato Institute who edited the 2013 study, said this approach is the only way to get a true "apples to apples" comparison between the immigrant population and the native-born community.

"We thought it doesn't make sense to look at rich immigrants and rich natives when looking at programs for poor Americans," he said. Instead, the Cato researchers zeroed in on those who were actually eligible for these benefits.

Nowrasteh pointed to several flaws he sees in the CIS approach:

- Counting immigrant-headed households can include children who are born as US citizens and citizens who are spouses of immigrants.
- CIS does not account for differences in income and includes very wealthy citizens who may skew the results.
- The studies do not include Medicare and Social Security, the two largest federal welfare programs, which immigrants contribute more to and receive less from.

Walter Ewing, a senior researcher at the American Immigration Council, a group that promotes fair and humane immigration policy, also claimed the CIS study misrepresents the data to some degree. He said it is unfair to consider children of immigrants part of an immigrant household until they are 18 but then treat them as part of the native born community when they are tax-paying adults.

"This is a bit disingenuous given that all children are 'costly' when young because they consume educational and health services which they don't 'pay back' until they are adults in the labor force," Ewing said.

The patterns identified by CIS only emerge when one does not control for education, income, or number of children, said Randy Capps, director of research for US programs at the Migration Policy Institute, an organization that believes immigrants can create new social and economic assets.

"Once poverty is controlled, public benefit costs are actually slightly lower for immigrants," he said.

Richwine rejected those criticisms and defended his methodology.

While it is true that focusing on households ties US-born children to their immigrant parents, he argued "common sense" dictates that the child's presence in the country is a direct result of the parents' immigration. He also contended that welfare programs are structured around households and there are many that specifically benefit children.

Stein agreed that treating children of immigrants as a "byproduct" of immigration makes sense if one is trying to measure the burden on taxpayers.

"It's not really fair to pretend that the US citizens born here of immigrants are not part of the immigration flow," he said.

According to Capps, the household analysis magnifies the difference in welfare use, but "using a family or household as a unit of analysis makes sense because it is important to account for costs related to children in immigrant families, even if those children are U.S. born."

Richwine acknowledged that data suggests poor, uneducated immigrants use fewer welfare benefits than poor native citizens, but he argued they are also a much larger percentage of their community than poor natives are. He also questioned whether that fact makes them good candidates for residency and citizenship.

The CIS study explains that Medicare and Social Security were left out of the analysis because they chose not to include social programs that participants pay into before receiving benefits.

Nowrasteh suggested critics of the current system should focus on welfare reform rather than immigration reform. He has advocated an approach described as "building a wall around the welfare state," by reducing immigrant eligibility for public benefits.

"I want to cut down immigrant welfare use by reforming welfare," he said, rather than getting rid of immigrants. He feels welfare changes would have an impact more quickly.

The CIS report dismisses welfare reform as "not a policy change likely to occur in the near future." Richwine also questioned whether immigrant parents could legally be stopped from signing their US-born children up for benefits that American citizens are eligible for.

He noted that past efforts to restrict immigrant access to welfare benefits have failed or have been undermined by loopholes. Without abolishing or rolling back those programs, he does not believe reforms would be effective.

According to Richwine, the study demonstrated the flaws in current US immigration policy, which he described as "an irrational hodgepodge clearly not designed with American interests at heart," more than it did problems with welfare programs.

"The more important lesson here is immigration policy is just not being rationally carried out," he said.

An immigration system driven by the nation's interests would not welcome unskilled workers whose families will become dependent on the government, he argued.

Stein said people like Nowrasteh are envisioning a "libertarian abstract world" that ignores the economic and political costs of immigration. He believes allowing entry by uneducated immigrants who will accept low wages hurts less educated Americans and erodes the bargaining power of American workers seeking better conditions and higher pay.

According to Capps, it is possible that reducing the number of unskilled immigrants could open those jobs up to Americans, but if they continue to pay low wages, the workers will require the same government benefits the immigrants currently do. Shrinking the labor pool could raise wages, but it might also constrain the economy and reduce employment overall.

Ewing said groups like CIS and FAIR that support restricting immigration are looking at the welfare issue the wrong way.

"The most humane, practical, and beneficial way to deal with public benefit use among immigrants is to empower them to earn higher wages--not to beat them further into poverty by cutting their access to public benefits programs," he said.

He argued that a pathway to citizenship and naturalization would be a more effective way to reduce immigrant welfare use, as would English and adult education courses to give them the skills they need to get better jobs.

"Bemoaning that there are immigrants utilizing public benefits accomplished nothing constructive," Ewing said.