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BACKGROUND

- Children in immigrant families (CIF) are a fast-growing population and comprise about a quarter of all United States (US) children.¹⁻³
- Compared with children from non-immigrant families, CIF are more likely to live in poverty, be uninsured, and have food insecurity.^{1, 2, 4-8}
- The majority of CIF are US citizens, and many qualify for public benefits like Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP); Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC); and Medicaid.^{1, 9-11}
- Despite this, studies support a recent decline in public benefit use among CIF.¹²⁻¹⁶
- Though certain barriers such as immigration-related fear have shown to affect immigrant enrollment in public benefits, little data exist on factors that drive immigrant parent decisions to enroll or disenroll their child from public benefits.

PURPOSE

- To explore immigrant caregiver perspectives on barriers to public benefit use and healthcare access on behalf of their children.
- To identify ways that healthcare providers can support immigrant families who fear accessing healthcare or using public benefits because of immigration-related concerns

METHODS



We developed a qualitative semi-structured interview guide using an iterative process informed by literature and content expertise.



We performed purposeful sampling to recruit immigrant caregivers of hospitalized children, and trained facilitators conducted interviews in English or Spanish in March 2020.



Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and translated to English.



Three authors coded transcripts using Dedoose and identified themes using thematic analysis.

RESULTS

Themes and Representative Quotes From 12 Semi-Structured Interviews with Immigrant Parents

Figure 1: Barriers to Benefit & Healthcare Use

Fear of Immigration Status Repercussions

- Quote 1:** “The news are always saying that if we ask for government resources [...] that it will affect us if one day we want [...] to be residents or citizens”
- Quote 2:** “Most Africans don’t do food stamps. Yeah, because in our area we believe that if you do food stamps, when you file for your parents or when you file for your siblings, you will be denied”
- Quote 3:** “they can’t help us fix papers if you ask for that help. So, [my husband] said, ‘We better stop,’ and we stopped asking for help. We don’t have food stamps anymore. We don’t have WIC. [...] then they grew up and they didn’t have health insurance either. So, we had to work more. [...] But then when he got sick, of course, all the visits, [...] We had to pay for them [...] there were times when we didn’t have that much money and he said, ‘how are we going to do it now?’”

Government Mistrust

- Quote 1:** “So this is like a trap that the Government makes, well, you go and ask and at the same time they hook you so that you give your home information, and they go and grab you.”
- Quote 2:** “Well, when it gets that bad, I say that if they arrest me and give me my children, that’s fine. But there are people who say they are deported, and that the government keeps the children.”
- Quote 3:** “when Hurricane Harvey happened, we had neighbors who wouldn’t apply for the SNAP that the government was giving because they felt that the government would kind of use it to track them. [...] Their entire home was destroyed. They didn’t want any benefit.”



Fear of Deportation or Familial Separation

- Quote 1:** “My child, since he always watches the news...he talks about immigration. Lately when someone just knocks on the door, he comes out, runs, and turns off the light.”
- Quote 2:** “Even though the cage is made of gold, it’s still a prison. That’s what it feels like. You can have everything, but you’re locked up, that is, with your family.”
- Quote 3:** “sometimes they prefer to die from illness and not go to the doctor because of the immigration thing. They are afraid of immigration, that they might share their information to immigration”
- Quote 4:** “[the policeman] took my husband away in handcuffs and the children were crying [...] I can imagine how they felt about seeing their dad. Now, the children [...] know that their father is going to be deported”
- Quote 5:** “When I first came here, I was told that if you apply for housing and food stamps then that is saying that you can’t take care of your children and you can risk having your children taken away.”

Language Barriers

- Quote 1:** “It is difficult because not everyone has the same interest in providing an interpreter or something like that. Ah, they force you to be like stressed out in that part because they don’t provide an interpreter sometimes. Or sometimes it is difficult to understand them.”
- Quote 2:** “When I went to apply, they didn’t know Spanish. I felt that this did not sit well with the lady, that I did not speak [English]”

Discrimination/ Racism

- Quote 1:** “We left crying because of the way that person treated us, because I tell you, racism still exists. [...] But don’t they know that we’re all human beings, [...] that if we all helped each other, this would be a better world?”
- Quote 2:** “there has been a lot of racism [...] And, well, that intimidates you”

Intimidating Application Process

- Quote 1:** “I was very afraid of the [SNAP] interviews. They were scary, and I didn’t want to think about the interviews [...] WIC was an office there in town and there were Hispanic people. So, I knew them [...] I kind of felt more familiar. And not about the stamps because they were pure American.”
- Quote 2:** “they deny you on the one hand, they close you on the other, they leave you, it’s like a thousand walks on a tight rope.”

Figure 2: Resources and Interventions to Eliminate Barriers

Trusted Information Resources

- Healthcare Providers
- Univision/Telemundo
- Low-cost Spanish clinics

Recommended Interventions

- Counseling on how resource use affects immigration status
- Use of Spanish interpreter services
- Inclusion of diverse healthcare workforce
- Legal Referrals

- Quote 1:** “It would be very good if from the moment you arrive [to the hospital], if they would say, ‘look, if you don’t have the possibility to pay, without the state knowing your status, we can give you these options.’ [...]”
- Quote 2:** The hard part is really making sure that people will come [to the hospital] if they’re afraid. [...] Instead of the TV showing ‘if you ask for social assistance you won’t fix your status,’ let them say ‘you won’t fix it anyway, ask for the help’ or something like that [...] or in the low-cost clinics to have some information that says, ‘if your child doesn’t get better here, or you don’t see improvement, you can go to [a hospital] and you won’t have any problems.’”
- Quote 3:** “I go to the Hispanic clinics if there’s an emergency [...] because everyone there speaks Spanish”
- Quote 4:** “there were Hispanic people [at the WIC office]. [...] I knew them [...] I kind of felt more familiar. And not at the food stamps because they were only American.”

CONCLUSION

- Our semi-structured interviews revealed several barriers to public benefit and healthcare use among a diverse array of immigrant families
- We highlight the importance of healthcare provider education on immigration policies that affect the health of children, immigrant-specific barriers to resource use, and available community referrals.
- Our study findings may be used to inform development of educational materials for immigrant families who fear using public benefits – especially with trusted media organizations like Telemundo and Univisión.
- Our study also supports the need for a more diverse healthcare workforce
- Further research is needed on how to best (and most sensitively) screen and intervene on immigration-related fear as a barrier to public benefit and healthcare use among immigrant families. We hope our study will lead to creation of healthcare-based interventions and collaborations with trusted community organizations that connect children to resources that help maximize their developmental potential.

NEXT STEPS

- Interview coding a thematic analysis for this project is ongoing; we plan to submit a manuscript for peer-reviewed publication
- Mentors on this study are currently conducting an inpatient food insecurity screening and intervention study in partnership with the Houston Food Bank. This intervention includes food and assistance with public benefit enrollment. We plan to conduct a follow-up qualitative study assessing immigrant family perspectives on the efficacy of this intervention.

REFERENCES

