

'Chilling Effects' Seen From Welfare Reform; Caseload Drop Sharper Among Immigrants

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Body

The use of public benefits has declined more sharply among immigrants than U.S. citizens, largely because welfare reform legislation has had "chilling effects" on many noncitizens who were actually eligible to apply for such assistance, according to a new study.

In an analysis of Census Bureau survey data, Urban Institute researchers Michael Fix and Jeffrey S. Passel concluded that "noncitizens accounted for a disproportionately large share of the overall decline in welfare caseloads that occurred between 1994 and 1997." The use of cash welfare benefits by noncitizen households fell 35 percent during that period, compared with a 15 percent decline among citizen households, they said. The same patterns held true for food stamps and Medicaid.

But the study showed that, although their welfare usage rates dropped faster, a larger percentage of immigrants received cash assistance, food stamps and Medicaid than citizens -- both before and after the 1996 welfare reform law was passed. In 1997, for example, 9 percent of noncitizens used cash welfare and 10.8 percent used food stamps, while citizens had usage rates of 6.7 percent and 6.8 percent, respectively, in the same categories.

The 1996 law imposed restrictions on legal immigrants' access to welfare, set time limits on the eligibility of refugees and placed bars on access to services by "unqualified immigrants." The study said that the law's "chilling effects" on applicants might have been more consequential by discouraging "immigrants from using health, nutrition or other types of benefits, despite the fact that many remain eligible." The study attributed these effects in part to confusion among immigrants and providers about who remains eligible and to fears that receiving welfare could lead to deportation or other penalties under laws intended to bar immigrants from becoming "public charges."

The Clinton administration is likely to use the study to buttress arguments for budget requests aimed at further restoring health, nutrition and cash benefits to vulnerable legal immigrants, including children, pregnant women and newcomers who are disabled, researchers said.

The Center for Immigration Studies, a Washington think tank that supports reducing immigration, said it does not dispute that fewer immigrants are seeking benefits for which they are eligible. But the problem is that, in tinkering with welfare eligibility, Congress failed to limit the admission of those likely to need welfare in the first place, said Steven Camarota, a resident scholar at the center.

"Instead of fixing immigration policy, [Congress] tried to micromanage immigrant policy, with perhaps some unintended effects," he said.

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Fix, the Urban Institute's director of immigration studies, said the reform law's unintended effects have included discouraging welfare usage by refugees and the U.S.-born children of immigrants, as well as slowing enrollment in new health insurance programs for the working poor.

Refugees had substantially higher usage rates of cash welfare, food stamps and Medicaid than noncitizens in general, the study showed. In 1997, nearly a quarter used welfare -- down from a third in 1994, but still far above the 9 percent figure for all noncitizens.

The higher usage rates among noncitizens generally "are due to the fact that immigrant households are poorer and more likely to contain children, not because noncitizens have a greater disposition toward receiving benefits," the study said. When the researchers compared only poor households with children, they found that the welfare usage rates of noncitizens fell below those of citizens.

Fix said it was impossible to tell how much of the decline in welfare use among noncitizens was attributable to the law's effects in weeding out illegal immigrants who had been receiving benefits improperly. The institute received suggestions that this was one of the factors behind an earlier finding of a 71 percent drop in noncitizens' welfare use in Los Angeles from 1995 to 1998, Fix said.

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