

# **ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS' AID TOPS \$1 BILLION / A REPORT ON 1995 COSTS SAYS THAT BECAUSE THEIR U.S.-BORN CHILDREN ARE CITIZENS, BENEFITS WERE NOT DENIED.**

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## **Body**

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More than **\$1 billion** in **1995** welfare payments and food stamps went to **illegal immigrant** families because some of their **children** are U.S. **citizens**, according to a new government **report**.

Although a **child** born in the United States to an **illegal immigrant** automatically becomes a **citizen**, "when such a **child** receives assistance, the **aid** also helps support the **child's** family, raising concerns about the use of public assistance by those illegally in the United States," **said** congressional auditors in the Nov. 19 General Accounting Office **report**.

The Republican-controlled Congress requested the study as part of last year's welfare overhaul, which restricted direct access to public **benefits** by **illegal immigrants** but did **not deny benefits** to their **citizen children**.

"It's obvious that there's a huge loophole in immigration law," **said** Rep. Lamar Smith (R., Texas), among supporters of legislation that would require **children** to have at least one **citizen** or legal resident parent to be born **citizens**.

While the Clinton administration "clearly supports all federal efforts to deter **illegal** immigration, our mission also requires us to improve the health and economic self-sufficiency of all **citizens** . . . including the **citizen children** of **immigrant** parents," **said** June Gibbs Brown, inspector general of the Department of Health and Human Services, in a letter commenting on the **report**.

"It is important to note that **citizen children** are legally eligible for **benefits** on the same basis as other **citizens**, even if they have an **illegal** parent," Brown **said**.

Payments to **citizen children** of **illegal immigrants** accounted for about 3 percent, or \$700 million, of all **benefits** paid in fiscal **1995** under the welfare program known as **Aid** to Families With Dependent **Children**, **said** the GAO **report**.

A previous GAO study had found about 2 percent of lower total AFDC payments - or \$479 million - going to the **citizen children** of **illegal immigrants** in 1992.

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Almost all AFDC recipients also receive Medicaid, which on average provides more than \$1,000 a child each year for health-care expenses, the auditors said.

For food stamps, the GAO found about 2 percent, or \$430 million worth, went to the citizen children of illegal immigrants in fiscal 1995.

Nationally, 224,000 households headed by an illegal immigrant received the food stamps and 153,000 households, many overlapping, got AFDC.

The households averaged two citizen children each. More than 20 percent also supported noncitizen children not eligible for assistance.

The immigrant families getting help were largely concentrated in California, New York, Texas and Arizona. California alone accounted for \$720 million of the benefits paid. Ten percent of that state's AFDC and food-stamp caseload consists of families headed by illegal immigrants.

The GAO report said households headed by illegal immigrants also get Social Security payments for low-income children with disabilities - commonly known as Supplemental Security Income or SSI - and rent subsidies through the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Although comprehensive data were not available from Social Security, GAO auditors estimated that as of December 1996, at least 3,450 citizen children of illegal immigrants were getting SSI at an annual cost to the government of about \$17.6 million.

Until recently, citizenship status was not considered when HUD determined eligibility for rental assistance programs, and the agency did not keep such information about participants.

The GAO auditors noted, based on a California study, that the incidence of fraud in obtaining public assistance - by under-reporting family income, for example - appears to be no higher for households headed by illegal immigrants than for the general welfare population.

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