

NEW IN AMERICA

CHALLENGES FACED BY IMMIGRANTS WHO ARE CHILDREN AND POLICIES THAT COULD HELP



Q&A
WITH THE EXPERTS

Expert Shelly Culbertson talks about why the numbers of immigrant families are growing in the United States and the kinds of policies we'll need to support immigrant children.



SHELLY CULBERTSON has led more than ten studies about refugees and immigrants, with particular focus on education, jobs, humanitarian assistance, and technology. She is a researcher at the RAND Corporation. Her research has been featured in many media outlets, including *Newsweek*, *CNN*, *Fox News*, *NPR*, and *U.S. News and World Report*. She earned a master's degree in public administration (M.P.A.) in public policy and international development from Princeton University.

How many immigrants are in the United States today?

The word immigrant refers to someone who has moved from another country to your country. For example, my husband is an immigrant. He moved to the United States from Italy. In fact, most people in our country have ancestors who were immigrants. It is part of the American story. So many of us can trace our family back to another part of the world, including Africa, Central and South America, Asia, Europe, and the Middle East.

Today, the United States has about 51 million immigrants. That is about 14 percent of all the people in the country. Between 10 million and 11 million of these immigrants are undocumented. This means that they do not have legal papers to be in the United States.

How many of today's immigrants are children?

There are about 18 million kids in the United States who are immigrants themselves or are children of immigrants, meaning that they have a mom or dad who is an immigrant. This is a lot of kids—about one in every four!

What makes families immigrate to the United States?

People come to the United States for many different reasons. Most people come because they want to get a better job, or there is a lot of poverty where they come from. They want to give their children a chance at a better life. Some people move because their family moved, and they want to be close to them. Some people come here to go to college. There are also others who come here because there is a war or gang violence in their own country. These people are called refugees or asylum seekers. They want to be here because it is safer for their families.



What are some of the benefits of immigration?

There are a lot of benefits of immigration. When people come to the United States and work, they are offering their knowledge, skills, and efforts to our society. They also bring diversity, sharing their cultures and perspectives with all of us. To me, having so many people from all over the world means that my daily life is richer. Learning about different cultures, including food and music, is fun. It is also important to know about other parts of the world. And it is good for us to be able to look at our own country from another point of view.

Do immigrants face challenges when arriving in the United States?

Yes, many do. Some need to learn English as a new language. Many need to try to settle into a new community and way of life. Some need to learn how to work in the United States, as work can be different in every country.

When kids arrive, they may also need to learn English. They also need to settle into new schools. Usually, what they are expected to learn in school is different from the school where they came from. They may find that they need to learn different subjects than they were learning before, or they may need to catch up to the other children in their class. And of course, they need to make new friends.

What policies could help new immigrant kids and their schools?

We did a study on education of immigrant kids who are undocumented or are seeking asylum and who arrived in the United States by crossing our southwest border. These kids are coming to the United States in record numbers now. And about 70 percent of teachers in the United States now have English language learners in their classrooms, but not all teachers have the right kind of training to help students who speak another language learn English. We recommended a couple of potential policies that could help this group, including more and better training for teachers so they can help those kids. This is an area of education policy that needs a lot of attention. The situation can be challenging for the students and for the teachers.

What is one surprising thing that you have learned in your research about immigration policy?

In the past, the people crossing the U.S. southwest border and entering the United States as undocumented immigrants were mainly adults looking for work. This has really changed in the past few years. Many more families and children are coming to the United States this way. They are coming because they are fleeing gang violence or seeking better economic opportunities.



What are some big policy issues facing immigration in the United States today?

Immigration is a very hot topic in political debates right now. There are a lot of big questions facing us. How many immigrants should the United States accept per year? What are some better ways of managing immigration at our borders? What should happen with people who are already in the United States but do not have legal permission to be here? That question is particularly important for kids who came without the proper paperwork and who grew up here. Some of these children have spent their whole life in the United States but may not have the right paperwork to stay here. There is a proposed law called the DREAM Act (The Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act). This would allow undocumented immigrants who came to the United States when they were kids to have residency and the right to legally work here.

References and additional sources of information

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This tool describes work documented in *Engaging Youth with Public Policy: Middle School Lessons to Counter Truth Decay*, by Andrea Prado Tuma and Alice Huguet, TL-A387-1, 2022 (available at www.rand.org/t/TLA387-1). The RAND Corporation is a research organization that develops solutions to public policy challenges to help make communities throughout the world safer and more secure, healthier and more prosperous. RAND is nonprofit, nonpartisan, and committed to the public interest. RAND’s publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. **RAND**® is a registered trademark.

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