



51 Percent of Immigrant Households Receive Welfare Payments

A report released on September 2 indicates that 51 percent of households headed by an immigrant (whether legal or illegal) reported that they used at least one welfare program during the past year. This figure compares with 30 percent of non-immigrants households. The study defined welfare as Medicaid and cash, food, and housing programs.

The study, authored by Steven Camarota, the director of research at the non-profit Center for Immigration Studies (CIS), is titled: "Welfare Use by Immigrant and Native Households: An Analysis of Medicaid, Cash, Food, and Housing Programs." CIS uses the term "native" to contrast native-born Americans and immigrants. (The term has nothing to do with native American Indians.) Camarota notes that the report uses the terms "immigrant" and "foreign-born" synonymously. The foreign-born include all individuals who were not U.S. citizens at birth, including naturalized citizens, green card holders, illegal immigrants, and a small number of individuals on long-term temporary visas such as guest workers and foreign students.



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A summary of the study at the beginning of the report notes, in part:

- "In 2012, 51 percent of households headed by an immigrant (legal or illegal) reported that they used at least one welfare program during the year, compared to 30 percent of native households. Welfare in this study includes Medicaid and cash, food, and housing programs."
- "Welfare use is high for both new arrivals and well-established immigrants. Of households headed by immigrants who have been in the country for more than two decades, 48 percent access welfare."
- "Welfare use varies among immigrant groups. Households headed by immigrants from Central America and Mexico (73 percent), the Caribbean (51 percent), and Africa (48 percent) have the highest overall welfare use. Those from East Asia (32 percent), Europe (26 percent), and South Asia (17 percent) have the lowest."
- "Many immigrants struggle to support their children, and a large share of welfare is received on



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behalf of U.S.-born children. However, even immigrant households without children have significantly higher welfare use than native households without children — 30 percent vs. 20 percent.”

- “In the four top immigrant-receiving states, use of welfare by immigrant households is significantly higher than that of native households: California (55 percent vs. 30 percent), New York (59 percent vs. 33 percent), Texas (57 percent vs. 34 percent), and Florida (42 percent vs. 28 percent).”
- “Illegal immigrants are included in the SIPP [the Census Bureau’s Survey of Income and Program Participation]. In a forthcoming report, we will estimate welfare use for immigrants by legal status. However, it is clear that the overwhelming majority of immigrant households using welfare are headed by legal immigrants.”

CIS is known for favoring a reduction in immigration to the United States, mainly through stricter enforcement of U.S. immigration law to eliminate illegal immigration. However, the report indicates that CIS — while not being opposed to all legal immigration — has taken a serious look at its costs and favors making some changes. In a section under the heading, “Why Study Immigrant Welfare Use?” the report notes:

If immigrants have high use rates, it is an indication that they are creating a significant burden on public coffers. Means-tested welfare programs comprise a significant share of federal and even state expenditures.... If immigrant use of welfare is high, then it is an indication that immigration policy may need to be changed to select immigrants less likely to use these programs.

As for how immigration officials might select immigrants less likely to utilize welfare programs, the CIS report identifies certain categories where such usage is high. For example, under “Welfare Use by Sending Region,” the report notes that “households headed by immigrants from Central America and Mexico have by far the highest welfare use at nearly 73 percent,” as do “Immigrants from the Caribbean, Africa, and South America.”

In contrast, notes the report:

Rates tend to be lowest for immigrants from East Asia, Europe, and South Asia. South Asian immigrants in particular have low use rates relative to natives across the board, using significantly less welfare than natives overall and for most specific programs.

Another category studied is “Welfare Use by Education Level.” Not surprisingly, notes the report:

In 2012, 76 percent of immigrant households headed by a person who had not graduated high school used at least one welfare program. For immigrant households headed by someone with only a high school education, 63 percent used at least one welfare program.

However, the report notes that education alone does not result in low use of welfare by immigrants:

Table 5 shows that welfare use for the most-educated immigrant households is surprisingly high at 26 percent. This is a good deal higher than the 13 percent shown for college-educated native households.

The report makes the following conclusion:

Our legal immigration system admits large numbers of less-educated immigrants who are primarily the family members of immigrants already here. Most of these immigrants work, but many are unable to provide for themselves or their children and so turn to the welfare system. If we continue to admit large numbers of less-educated legal immigrants and allow illegal immigrants to remain,



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most of whom have modest levels of education, then immigrant welfare use will continue to be high in the future.

The CIS report was based on the Census Bureau's Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) and its methodology and findings were verified by Decision Demographics, an independent demographic consulting firm. Its findings were undoubtedly accurate. However, it is important to keep in mind that the basis of the organization's existence is immigration studies — not constitutional studies.

There can be many factors responsible for immigrants' higher utilization of welfare services, but the lower usage by immigrants from Asia and Europe suggest that immigrants who have lived in countries with thriving commerce have more experience in surviving in a free market economy than those who have immigrated from nations where the incentive to prosper has been stifled by years of socialism.

An important point that the CIS report may have missed, therefore, is that the problem is not so much immigration, per se, but the existence of overly generous (even unconstitutional) welfare programs in the United States that reward gaming the welfare system better than honest employment.

When the great waves of immigrants came to the United States during the late 1800s and early 1900s, there was little welfare in the United States, so the immigrants got whatever work they could find, some of it very harsh. Immigrants helped build the transcontinental railroad, the subways in New York and Boston, and worked in the mines of Kentucky and West Virginia.

My grandparents were the children of immigrants and my grandfather used to shine shoes after school on railroad trains and on the ferry crossing the Hudson between Jersey City and lower Manhattan to supplement the family's income. My grandmother ended her education after the eighth grade to work in the garment industry as a sewing machine operator, one of her first jobs being sewing stars on American flags during World War I. She later became a member of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union and continued in that work until the 1960s. Most of her coworkers were immigrants or the children of immigrants from Italy or Eastern Europe.

However, one thing immigrants of that generation did not do was collect welfare benefits, because such programs simply didn't exist. Consequently, if the Medicaid and cash, food, and housing programs that CSI cites in its report as being the source of "significant welfare costs" were nonexistent, then their cost would be zero.

Furthermore, it would be interesting to see how the absence of such programs would affect the number of people immigrating to America.

In addition to the cost, there is also the constitutional consideration. The Constitution of the United States does not authorize Congress to appropriate any money at all for such welfare programs. However, if the individual states want to do so, that is their prerogative, though of course the ideal is for the charity to be provided via the churches and other private efforts.

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