

Immigrants' use of welfare in California:
The impacts of the welfare time limit
among immigrants and non-English-language households.

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Immigrants comprise a substantial share of the total welfare population, despite efforts by Congress when it drafted TANF to limit immigrant participation. Estimates by the Urban Institute put the share of immigrants in TANF in 1999 nationwide at approximately 13%, even though federal TANF policy imposed a five-year bar on welfare receipt for most immigrants who immigrated after August 22 1996. Even so, many immigrant families receive aid despite this five-year ban for two reasons: children born in the United States to non-qualified immigrants are eligible for TANF because they are citizens; and twenty states, including California and New York (two states with large immigrant populations), use state funds to make TANF cash assistance available to all legal immigrants. Immigrant households constituted approximately 40% of California's households in AFDC/CalWorks programs during the 1990s, according to estimates from the SIPP and CPS. (Brady et al., 2002).

This paper brings together data from disparate sources to accomplish two goals: first, to describe characteristics of immigrants families receiving aid in California; and second, to explore whether the impacts of reaching the TANF time limit are the same for immigrants and non-immigrants, in California.

For the first part of the paper, we provide an overview of immigrants' use of welfare in California, drawing both on statewide administrative data and on county data from six California "focus" counties which together constitute more than half of the state caseload (thereby comprising a substantial fraction of the national welfare caseload, and an even larger fraction of the nation's caseload of immigrants receiving aid.) The focus counties to be studied are diverse, including the large urban counties of Los Angeles, Orange, and Alameda (where Oakland is located) along with the very rural Central Valley county of Tulare, and the urban/rural counties of Sacramento and Riverside (which is a rapidly-growing county just east of Los Angeles). In these counties, the proportions of cases that are child-only range as high as 49 percent, compared to the statewide proportion of 36 percent; more than half of child-only cases are families with nonqualified immigrant parents.

We have information about these families' demographic characteristics, welfare receipt and experiences with the welfare system (such as grant levels, exemptions and sanctions), and can infer information about their earnings from the size of the grant. We will compare immigrants'

to non-immigrants' use of aid, transitions off aid, and participation in paid work. Although this portion of the project is largely descriptive, it fills a substantial gap in our knowledge of immigrants' use of welfare in California.

The second portion of the paper focuses in on the experiences of families reaching the time limit. We investigate whether the impacts of the grant cuts that timing-out families face affect immigrant households of various ethnicities and backgrounds differently from non-immigrant households. We use data from a large, two-wave California survey of families who are approaching the welfare time limit in the six counties named above (n=1,797 at Wave 1), linked to administrative data reporting respondents' welfare participation over time and their quarterly earnings. Importantly for our purposes, the full survey was fielded in English, Spanish and Vietnamese, and in an abbreviated form through simultaneous translation in any other language (made possible by telephone simultaneous interpretation). About one quarter (27%) of the respondents were immigrants, and one quarter (23%) of interviews were in a language other than English (a ratio similar to the 21 percent of recipients statewide who speak a language other than English).

Study families were interviewed twice: six months prior to their anticipated date of timing out and again six months after the time-limit date passed. California imposes a sixty-month time limit only for adults; children can continue to receive reduced grants through the state-funded Safety Net program, so at the time of the second wave a substantial number of families were still on aid but receiving a Safety Net grant that was smaller by about \$150 than the full CalWORKs grant.

The survey data indicate that California's long-term welfare users face substantial employment barriers associated with language, health and mental health challenges, and low levels of education. Half the respondents reported at least one of seven barriers that limited employment (depression, anxiety, a stressful event, alcohol use, drug use, domestic violence, or a limiting illness or disability that affected themselves or a family member).¹

We use the two wave panel to examine how children and youth in immigrant and non-immigrant families are affected by the changes that come with reaching the time limit. We have some measures that describe children specifically, and others that pertain to the entire family. For several reasons, immigrants, especially non-English-speakers, might experience the time limit differently than non-immigrants. These cases more often have two parents rather than one, and more often are employed but with low enough earnings to still qualify for a welfare grant. As such, they may be less likely to qualify for the exemption categories that would permit them to remain on welfare. Put differently, their welfare receipt may be more often associated with low wages than with barriers to employment per se. One result could be that with the lower Safety Net grants and correspondingly lower income thresholds to qualify for the Safety Net program, immigrant families may more often transition off cash aid entirely when they reach the time limit. It is also possible that information and networks may be important in determining which families receive time-limit exemptions. The survey inquired in detail into the knowledge recipients had

¹ "Time Running Out: A Portrait of California Families Reaching the CalWORKs Time Limit in 2004." Second Report from the Evaluation of California's Five-Year Welfare Time Limit. Rebecca A. London and Jane G. Mauldon

about the time limit regulations, and our earlier research established that immigrants, especially foreign- language-speakers who spoke languages other than Spanish or Vietnamese had significantly lower scores on indices that measure understanding of the time limit, net of other factors. Their lack of knowledge may mean that fewer immigrant families seek, and receive, exemptions from the time limit. To test these hypotheses, we model the determinants of children's post-time limit case status: Safety Net, regular CalWORKs (for those whose parent(s) do not reach the time limit due to extension or exemptions), and off aid entirely.

We also examine changes in indicators of child well-being over the two-wave panel, including measures of family hardship (insufficient food, need to use a food bank, utility shut-offs, evictions, and so forth); teen pregnancy, school suspension and expulsion, and interactions with law enforcement (for older youth); and access to health care and health insurance coverage. Results for the sample as a whole show that families with more health and mental health employment barriers (in the areas of health, mental health and education) fared worse on the measures of hardship and child wellbeing, both before and after timing out.² The most disadvantaged families were more likely to go to the Safety Net and less likely to earn their way off aid. Yet to be ascertained, however, is whether these patterns varied by immigrant status or language. In short, the second part of the paper will explore the determinants of the wellbeing of immigrant recipients and their children when they reach the welfare time limit in California, and compare them to non-immigrant families.

²“Navigating the Welfare Time Limit in California: How do Families Fare?” J. Gilbert-Mauldon, R.A. London, H. Sommer. Chapter in *Child poverty in America Today*. Vol 4: *Children and the State*. Barbara A Arrighi and David J. Maume, eds. Praeger. 2007.