Immigration Enforcement Increases Food Insecurity Risk among Immigrant Children

By Rama Rani Sutradhar & Stephanie Potochnick

Efforts to revitalize mass deportations have resulted in the resurrection of localized immigration enforcement policies, and the arrest of nearly 150,000 unauthorized immigrants in 2017 alone. Notably, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) has called for the return of 287(g), a federal-local policing partnership administratively ended in 2012 due to growing criticism. Authorized in 1996, the 287(g) program delegated federal immigration powers to state and local law enforcement for the first time with the primary aim to target criminal offenders. Since then, 287(g) and its successor programs, i.e., Secure Communities and the Priority Enforcement Program, have been criticized for being misused as a means to universally deport unauthorized immigrants.

The recent return to localized immigration enforcement and 287(g) is likely to have a profound effect on Mexican-American U.S. citizen children, approximately 3.5 million of whom live with an unauthorized immigrant parent. Researchers from the University of Missouri and the University of North Carolina have found that the adoption of a 287(g) agreement by local law enforcement increases the food insecurity risk for Mexican non-citizen households with children by 10 percentage points. Food insecurity, a measure of household hunger, is a critical yet highly-preventable risk factor of child health and has long-term implications for immigrant integration. This research provides the first national-level evidence that local immigration laws negatively influence the health and well-being of immigrant families, specifically Mexican non-citizen families.
Key Findings and Implications

- Food insecurity is of particular concern for children of Mexican immigrants who are nearly four times more likely to experience food insecurity than U.S.-born non-Hispanic white children. Households that are food insecure frequently worry about running out of food, rely on low-cost unhealthy foods, and go hungry because there isn’t enough money for food. Consequently, these children are sicker, struggle more in school, and have life-long developmental and health challenges.

- Overall, the study found high levels of food insecurity among Mexican non-citizen households with children—approximately 30 percent were food insecure. Thus, the study’s finding that 287(g) program is associated with a 10 percentage point increase in food insecurity risk means that this program significantly increases the food insecurity risk of an already highly vulnerable population.

- The results of this study support findings from smaller-scale survey and qualitative research, which indicate deportations and local immigration enforcement heighten a community’s sense of deportability and severely disrupt children’s home life leaving them vulnerable to food scarcity and other preventable health risks.

- The evidence from this study suggests that current revival of local-level immigration enforcement efforts are likely to have harmful consequences for citizen immigrant children as well. As long as immigration policies seek to apprehend and deport adults, policymakers need to understand that there are consequences for the citizen children left behind.

Policy Background

- Until 1996, only the federal government had the power to enforce immigration laws. Since that time, a series of programs have extended immigration authority to local law enforcement agencies. The first of these programs, 287(g), was designed to target criminal offenders by allowing local-level enforcement to enforce federal immigration laws during routine policing activities. First used by local law enforcement in 2005, 287(g) was adopted by nearly 90 local communities during its tenure (1996-2012). The challenge was that some local law enforcement agencies used the program to detain as many unauthorized immigrants as possible through driver’s license checkpoints, traffic stops for minor offenses, and raids on homes and businesses.

- Critics argue that these local-level immigration enforcement efforts, and the record number of deportations that result from them, make Mexican immigrant families more vulnerable to hardships because Mexicans were the primary targets. Each year, about 90,000 parents—typically fathers—of U.S.-born citizens are deported, leaving single-mothers and children struggling to make ends meet. Critics also say these policies generate fear among Mexican immigrant families, many of whom already live in the shadows, such that they may not utilize vital social services and other support systems.
The results indicated that 287(g) was positively associated with food insecurity risk among Mexican non-citizen households with children. Mexican non-citizen households residing in a metro-area that adopted 287(g) were 10 percentage points more likely to experience food insecurity than their peers in metro-areas without 287(g). The associations were similar when they focused on the more vulnerable low-income households. Additionally, the study found that food insecurity risk was greatest in metro-areas that had used the program to remove unauthorized immigrants.

This brief is based on the full article:

Stephanie Potochnick and Jen-Hao Chen are from the University of Missouri and Krista M. Perreira is from the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill.

About the Policy Brief Authors
Rama Rani Sutradhar is a Ph.D. student at the Truman School of Public Affairs, University of Missouri. Her research interest is related to migration and remittances. She is currently on study leave from the Bangladesh Bank (the Central Bank of Bangladesh), where she works as a Joint Director in the Research Department.

Stephanie Potochnick is an assistant professor of public affairs and public health at the University of Missouri. Dr. Potochnick conducts research on the social demography of immigration and how programs and policies can promote the education and health of immigrant youth.