

# **Voices from the Margins: How Legal Status Shapes Immigrant Access to Healthcare, Employment, and Education Throughout History and Today**

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## **Abstract**

Immigrants make up 15% of the U.S. population, with roots stretching back to the colonial era in the 1600s. For centuries, they have been instrumental in driving economic growth through their labor and perseverance. However, recent policies—such as the mass deportations under President Trump—have deepened systemic inequities. This study explores how immigrants navigate barriers in healthcare, employment, and education, drawing on interviews with four Latino and Asian immigrants. Findings highlight structural challenges linked to immigration status, including workplace exploitation, social discrimination, and gaps in rights awareness—some due to policy loopholes, others due to limited knowledge of legal protections. The study calls on policymakers and society to address these injustices while acknowledging immigrants' vital contributions, and emphasizes the importance of immigrant communities staying informed about their rights.

**Keywords:** Immigration, Historical Analysis, Healthcare Access, Employment, Education

## **Introduction**

As of January 2025, immigrants make up 15.6% of the U.S. population—over 53.3 million of the 340.1 million residents—with more than 60% of them actively participating in the workforce.<sup>1</sup> Immigrants now represent 19.2% of the total U.S. civilian labor force, contributing to over 17% of the nation's economic output.<sup>2</sup> Yet, shifting immigration policies, particularly under the current Trump administration, have significantly affected their lives. Over 200,000 deportation orders were issued in the past year alone, altering the experiences of both documented and undocumented immigrants.<sup>3</sup>

This study examines how immigrants navigate life in the United States, including access to healthcare, employment at a living wage, and quality education. Drawing from four in-depth interviews with individuals of Latino, Asian, and American-born Asian backgrounds, this research highlights the systemic challenges immigrants face in the workplace, healthcare, and

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<sup>1</sup> Camarota, S. A., & Zeigler, K. (2024, May 13). Foreign-Born Population Grew by 5.1 Million in the Last Two Years. Retrieved July 18, 2025, from CIS.org website:

<https://cis.org/Report/ForeignBorn-Population-Grew-51-Million-Last-Two-Years>

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of Labor. (2024). FOREIGN-BORN WORKERS: LABOR FORCE CHARACTERISTICS — 2015. Retrieved from <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/forbrn.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Hesson, T. (2025, March 4). Trump's immigration enforcement record so far, by the numbers. Retrieved August 11, 2025, from Reuters website:

<https://www.reuters.com/world/us/trumps-early-immigration-enforcement-record-by-numbers-2025-03-04/>

education systems due to their immigration status. While these injustices are troubling, they also offer insight to meaningful reform and opportunities for growth. Here, we investigate the research question “How does gender and legal status affect NJ immigrants’ ability to receive impactful healthcare, living wage job offerings, and access to quality education?”

## **Literature Review: Historical context**

### **Immigration during the Colonial Era and Early Republic:**

In 1603, the first batch of immigrants arrived in the U.S. The English colony settled in Jamestown, Virginia, and grew by trading tobacco crops.<sup>4</sup> They established an economy reliant on exploited labor—including indentured servants and, later, enslaved Africans. Thus began the first and longest era of immigration, lasting until the American Revolution in 1775. Settlements grew throughout the country, starting from the initial English colonies’ footholds in the New World, expanding as far as British America. This colonial era brought immigrants mainly from Northern Europe, primarily of British, German, and Dutch origins, 90% of whom became farmers. While these Northern European settlers gained land and economic mobility, racialized legal hierarchies emerged early. Enslaved people and indentured laborers were systematically excluded from rights, healthcare, and education, foreshadowing how immigration status would later dictate access to opportunity.

The Naturalization Act of 1790 was the first law passed by the U.S. Congress to establish a uniform rule for granting citizenship to foreign-born individuals. At the same time, however, it also explicitly restricted citizenship to “free white persons,” institutionalizing racial barriers to legal rights.<sup>5</sup> It also granted citizenship to children born abroad to U.S. citizens and free white individuals of good character. The law was also the first law to define eligibility for citizenship by naturalization. Importantly, however, this exclusion denied non-white immigrants—and later groups like Asian laborers—protections in employment, property ownership, and civic participation.

In 1808, the U.S. passed the “Act Prohibiting the Importation of Slaves”, ending the legal importation of enslaved people from Africa. This act banned transatlantic slave trade but entrenched slavery’s legacy, leaving enslaved people without legal personhood or access to basic services.<sup>6</sup> These policies created enduring disparities: legal status determined not just citizenship, but one’s ability to secure quality healthcare, stable work, and education, even among the early centuries.

### **19th Century: Mass Migration & Nativism:**

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<sup>4</sup> Jamestown Settlement | Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation, VA. (n.d.). Retrieved from [www.jyfmuseums.org website: https://www.jyfmuseums.org/visit/jamestown-settlement](https://www.jyfmuseums.org/visit/jamestown-settlement)

<sup>5</sup> H. R. 40, Naturalization Bill, March 4, 1790 | U.S. Capitol - Visitor Center. (2025). Retrieved July 20, 2025, from [Visitthecapitol.gov website: https://www.visitthecapitol.gov/artifact/h-r-40-naturalization-bill-march-4-1790](https://www.visitthecapitol.gov/artifact/h-r-40-naturalization-bill-march-4-1790)

<sup>6</sup> The Slave Trade. (2016, August 15). Retrieved July 20, 2025, from National Archives website: <https://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/slave-trade.html>

The 19th Century brought about an influx of immigrants from all over the world. The 1840s-1850s saw the Irish seeking asylum from the Great Famine, with over 2 million immigrants arriving into the U.S. This influx significantly impacted the demographics of the United States, with Irish-born people making up over one-third of all immigrants in the mid-19th century.<sup>7</sup> Germans also flocked to the U.S., increasing more than 10 fold compared to the previous years. From that year until World War I, almost 90 percent of all German emigrants chose the United States as their destination.<sup>8</sup> After settling in, many immigrants wrote letters to their friends and family back home, describing the opportunities they had found as residents, prompting a series of "chain migrations", and surges of new arriving immigrants.

While European immigrants faced nativist hostility, their whiteness granted them eventual access to citizenship, voting rights, and public institutions—advantages denied to non-white groups. For example, Irish immigrants, though initially marginalized, leveraged political networks to secure jobs in civil service and urban industries, while German communities established bilingual schools. Legal inclusion for white immigrants facilitated upward mobility in employment and education.

However the process of immigration was not that easy for everyone. Chinese immigration to the U.S. boomed in the 1850s, with the 2nd Industrial Revolution increasing the demand for railroads and engendering numerous jobs.<sup>9</sup> The Chinese sought new opportunities to earn money, and immigrated as cheap sources of labor to build railroads. Soon, however, a series of economic downturns in the 1870s led to rising resentment towards Chinese workers and the Asian population, whom many viewed as economic competitors for work.

This hostility culminated in 1882, when the government passed the *Chinese Exclusion Act*, institutionalising anti-Chinese sentiment nationwide. Their immigration process necessitated a period of internment on Angel Island, typically for up to 2-4 years before entering the country. On the island, they faced more racist and demeaning treatment, undergoing several rounds of harsh interviews during which they would be intentionally asked a series of almost impossible questions in order for the government to confirm their identity.

Most importantly, however, Chinese immigrants faced employment exploitation, medicalized racism, and education barriers. They were denied skilled jobs and paid lower wages than white workers, subjected to Angel Island's "disease screening" that justified prolonged detention and invasive exams, echoing modern healthcare exclusion. Moreover, many states even barred

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<sup>7</sup> Irish Catholic Immigration to America | Irish | Immigration and Relocation in U.S. History | Classroom Materials at the Library of Congress | Library of Congress. (2015). Retrieved July 20, 2025, from The Library of Congress website:

<https://www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/immigration/irish/irish-catholic-immigration-to-america/>

<sup>8</sup> A New Surge of Growth | German | Immigration and Relocation in U.S. History | Classroom Materials at the Library of Congress | Library of Congress. (2015). Retrieved August 1, 2025, from The Library of Congress website: <https://www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/immigration/german/new-surge-of-growth/>

<sup>9</sup> Emery Sims, "Giving Every Applicant a Square Deal," speech, in *The Chinese Exclusion Act and Angel Island: a Brief History with Documents*, by Judy Yung (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2019), 112

Chinese children from public schools, forcing segregated alternatives. These policies linked legal status to institutional access, creating patterns that persist today.

The 19th Century also saw the creation of the Know-Nothing Party, an anti-immigrant, anti-catholic political party that was highly nationalistic. Formed to combat foreign influences and uphold and promote traditional American ways, the Know-Nothing party sought to limit the political and social influence of immigrants, gaining considerable traction and briefly becoming a major political force. Though short-lived, their platform—calls for literacy tests, extended naturalization periods, and anti-immigrant rhetoric—prefigured later policies like the *1924 Immigration Act*. Their legacy underscores how legal status has long been weaponized to restrict rights, shaping who could safely work, learn, or seek medical care.

### **20th Century: Restrictions, Exclusions, and the Civil Rights Era**

The late 19th and early 20th Century was a period defined by restrictions and exclusions. Most notably, the Chinese Exclusion Act caused nation-wide anti-Chinese sentiment. This resentment was echoed in the Immigration Act of 1924 (Johnson-Reed Act) that established national origin quotas, favoring Northern/Western Europeans and excluding Asians. These laws codified a hierarchy of citizenship that restricted healthcare access by associating non-white immigrants with public health threats, limited employment opportunities to low-wage, exploitative industries (e.g., railroad construction, agriculture), and barred educational mobility, as exclusionary laws discouraged long-term settlement for Asian families.

The Mexicans also faced similar injustices during the 20th Century. Most notably, the Mexican Repatriation of 1929 deported between 300,000 to 2 million Mexicans from the U.S., majority of which were legal citizens.<sup>10</sup> The program was driven by the economic hardship of the Great Depression, with the government aiming to reduce public welfare costs and make jobs available for native-born Americans, another group heavily affected by immigration and the Homestead Act the previous century.<sup>11</sup> However, the situation for Mexicans only worsened throughout the 20th Century. Operation Wetback of 1954 was another mass deportation of Mexicans. The operation was under President Dwight D. Eisenhower and created by Joseph May Swing, a retired United States Army lieutenant general and head of the United States Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). As a result, the tactics used to deport the Mexicans were often harsh and military style.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Mexican Repatriation (1929-1936) - Immigration History. (2020, February). Retrieved August 1, 2025, from Immigration History website: <https://immigrationhistory.org/item/%E2%80%8Bmexican-repatriation/>

<sup>11</sup>Analysis: The Repatriation of Mexicans and Mexican Americans | EBSCO. (2021). Retrieved August 1, 2025, from EBSCO Information Services, Inc. | [www.ebsco.com](http://www.ebsco.com) website: <https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/history/analysis-repatriation-mexicans-and-mexican-americans#:~:text=The%20repatriation%20of%20Mexicans%20and%20Mexican%20Americans%20during%20the%20Great,means%20to%20reclaim%20its%20citizens.>

<sup>12</sup> Hernández, Kelly Lytle (2006). "The Crimes and Consequences of Illegal Immigration: A Cross Border Examination of Operation Wetback, 1943–1954". *Western Historical Quarterly*. 37 (4): 421–444. doi:10.2307/25443415. JSTOR 25443415.

The late 20th Century, however, did bring about some advantageous changes for immigrants. Passed in response to the influx of refugees from Southeast Asia after the Vietnam War, the 1980s Refugee Act established a formalised asylum system, establishing a comprehensive framework for refugee admissions and resettlement.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986 legalised 3 million individuals—mostly of Hispanic descent—securing economic and social opportunities as legal residents of the United States and gaining protection from deportation.<sup>14</sup>

### 21st Century: Security, Polarisation, and Federal Laws

The 21st Century has seen a lot of changes for immigrants in the United States, particularly in the recent decade. In 2002, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) was created for the purpose of improving the security of the United States. The DHS oversees customs, border, and immigration enforcement, emergency response to natural and manmade disasters, antiterrorism work, and cybersecurity. Since then, the DHS has focused on countering drug smuggling, particularly fentanyl, and strengthening partnerships to improve overall homeland security efforts.<sup>15</sup>

In 2012, the DHS established the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) policy. DACA provides temporary protection from deportation and work authorization to certain undocumented immigrants who came to the U.S. as children.<sup>16</sup> These young unauthorized immigrants became known as DREAMers, after the reform bill that Congress failed to pass titled the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act. DACA granted prosecutorial discretion to various immigration authorities, however did not provide a pathway to legal status. Since 2012, roughly 790,000 young unauthorized immigrants have been able to have more secure status in gaining social security cards, protection from deportation and separation from their families, and rights to work.<sup>17</sup>

### Current Federal Policies

#### Trump Administration Immigration Changes:

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<sup>13</sup> Chapter 1 Purpose and Background. (2025, February 26). Retrieved August 1, 2025, from USCIS website:

<https://www.uscis.gov/policy-manual/volume-7-part-m-chapter-1#:~:text=The%20Refugee%20Act%20of%201980,protection%20under%20the%20Refugee%20Convention>.

<sup>14</sup> Research Guides: A Latinx Resource Guide: Civil Rights Cases and Events in the United States: 1986: Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986. (2017). Retrieved August 1, 2025, from Loc.gov website: <https://guides.loc.gov/latinx-civil-rights/irca#:~:text=Congress%20enacted%20the%20Immigration%20Reform,complete%20interviews%20and%20medical%20examinations>.

<sup>15</sup> *Homeland Security Starts with Hometown Security*. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/dhs-accomplishments-fact-sheet.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) (2012) - Immigration History. (2020, February 5). Retrieved August 1, 2025, from Immigration History website: <https://immigrationhistory.org/item/deferred-action-for-childhood-arrivals-daca>

<sup>17</sup> Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) (2012) - Immigration History. (2020, February 5). Retrieved August 8, 2025, from Immigration History website: <https://immigrationhistory.org/item/deferred-action-for-childhood-arrivals-daca/>

Currently the Trump administration has made a significant impact on policies regarding immigration, passing a series of executive orders including Protecting American Communities from Criminal Aliens that targets states and local jurisdictions which obstruct the enforcement of federal immigration laws, as well as the Invocation of the Alien Enemies Act Regarding the Invasion of The United States by Tren De Aragua (TdA) which permits DHS to apprehend and remove all Venezuelan citizens 14 or older who are identified as members of TdA and not U.S. Citizens from the country.<sup>18</sup>

Trump has also expanded the Migrant Operations Center at Naval Station Guantanamo Bay to Full Capacity, to increase space for the detention of deported persons and high-priority criminal aliens unlawfully present in the U.S..<sup>19</sup> Other notable executive orders include: Guaranteeing the States Protection Against Invasion, Protecting the United States from Foreign Terrorists and Other National Security and Public Safety Threats, Securing our Borders, Protecting the Meaning and Value of American Citizenship, and more.

### Current State Policies

#### New Jersey State:

The state of New Jersey is where all the interviews are held. Thus, to understand the stories of the interviewees better, it is necessary to understand the benefits provided by the state.

Key state laws include the Immigrant Trust Act which restricts state and local cooperation with federal immigration enforcement and aims to ensure immigrants can access public services and feel safe without fear of deportation.<sup>20</sup> In addition, New Jersey has policies regarding the protection of immigrant's rights in employment, healthcare, and education. The New Jersey Wage Theft Act (WTA) took effect in August 2019, and strengthens employee protections against wage theft by expanding employer liability and increasing penalties.<sup>21</sup> The strong penalties for employers stealing wages provides some protection against exploitation of immigrant workers. Moreover, it provides undocumented workers with the opportunity to sue if taken unfair advantage of.

The Cover All Kids program of New Jersey allows for immigrants to qualify for state-funded Medicaid (NJ FamilyCare) regardless of immigration status.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, emergency medicaid

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<sup>18</sup> Trump's 2025 Executive Orders | Holland & Knight. (2025). Retrieved August 8, 2025, from Hklaw.com website: <https://www.hklaw.com/en/general-pages/trumps-2025-executive-orders-chart>

<sup>19</sup> Expanding Migrant Operations Center at Naval Station Guantanamo Bay to Full Capacity. (2025, January 29). Retrieved August 8, 2025, from The White House website: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/expanding-migrant-operations-center-at-naval-station-guantanamo-bay-to-full-capacity/>

<sup>20</sup> Murphy, P., & Way, T. (n.d.). State of New Jersey If you encounter an immigration agent or other law enforcement in a public space. Retrieved from [https://www.nj.gov/humanservices/njnewamericans/newcomers/docs/KnowYourRights-com\\_en.pdf](https://www.nj.gov/humanservices/njnewamericans/newcomers/docs/KnowYourRights-com_en.pdf)

<sup>21</sup> CMS, O. (2025). Wage & Hour Compliance | File a Wage Complaint. Retrieved August 11, 2025, from Nj.gov website: <https://www.nj.gov/labor/wageandhour/claims-appeals-investigations/file/>

<sup>22</sup> NJ Covers All Kids. (2025). Retrieved August 11, 2025, from NJ Covers All Kids website: <https://nj.gov/coverallkids/>

covers all undocumented immigrants in the case of emergencies or pregnancies. Many county health programs also offer low cost clinics for uninsured immigrants, helping to alleviate financial and physical burdens.

According to Plyler v. Doe, all children, including undocumented students, guaranteed free public education.<sup>23</sup> New Jersey also provides translators and bilingual programs (e.g., for Spanish, Haitian Creole). According to the 2013 Tuition Equity Act, also known as the New Jersey Dream Act, undocumented students who want to pursue higher education can qualify for in-state tuition if they attend NJ high school for 3+ years and graduate. Financial aid is also provided for DACA recipients.

## Methodology:

### Statistical Analysis of BLS Data:

We first compute our immigration data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) in this paper [Stats Paper] that leverages a  $\chi^2$  test of independence to test for association between citizenship status and whether the workers worked for pay in the last week, and a two-proportion z-test at the 95% confidence level to check whether the proportion of citizen workers offered health insurance are greater than non-citizen workers who are offered health insurance. Then, we use k-modes and k-prototype to create clusters of the entire dataset, analysing the groups that the entire U.S. population falls under, and identifying the implications of each data cluster. Finally, we use Catboost to conduct supervised learning, using the current data to predict if the person has health insurance, checking to see what factors have the largest relationship with health insurance availability.

### Immigrant Interviews:

To explore the lived experiences of immigrants, this study employed qualitative in-depth interviews, allowing participants to share their narratives in their own words. The research was designed to prioritize ethical considerations, cultural sensitivity, and methodological rigor. Participants were respectively from the Ecuadorian immigrant community and the Chinese immigrant community. Given the potential vulnerabilities in the current political climate, special attention was paid to informed consent, confidentiality, and minimizing harm. All participants were informed of their participation in the interviews and gave consent to their data usage in this research.

Interviews followed a semi-structured format, combining predetermined open-ended questions with flexibility for follow-up probes based on participants' responses. Questions were designed to elicit detailed accounts of migration journeys, settlement experiences, challenges, and coping strategies, focusing on areas relating to education, employment, and healthcare. For example, prompts included: "Can you walk me through your decision to migrate?" and "What has been your most difficult adjustment since arriving in this country?" Interviews were conducted in the participant's preferred language, with bilingual researchers used when necessary. Sessions

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<sup>23</sup> Plyler v. Doe, 457 U.S. 202 (1982). (2015). Retrieved August 11, 2025, from Justia Law website: <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/457/202/>

lasted between 20 and 30 minutes and were recorded (with permission) to ensure accurate transcription. To enhance trust and comfort, interviews took place in settings chosen by participants, including community centers, and private homes.

Following data collection, interviews were transcribed verbatim. Throughout the process, reflexivity was maintained by documenting researcher biases and assumptions to ensure the findings authentically represented participants' perspectives. This approach not only enriched the depth of the data but also upheld ethical commitments to respectful and empowering research with immigrant communities.

### Interview Results

The study's findings highlight both the challenges and adaptive strategies of immigrants in navigating U.S. systems of healthcare, employment, and education. Participants' experiences reveal patterns of socioeconomic mobility alongside persistent structural barriers that affect integration outcomes. The study contained four interview participants. Two Ecuadorian immigrants, one of which is undocumented, and two Chinese immigrants, one first generation and the other second generation. For confidentiality purposes, all immigrants will be referred to as immigrants A, B, C, D with their following backgrounds:

**Immigrant A:** Ecuadorian, entered undocumented, later obtained documentation

**Immigrant B:** Ecuadorian, Non-Documented

**Immigrant C:** Chinese first generation immigrant, Documented

**Immigrant D:** Chinese second generation immigrant, Documented

### Living Wage Job Offerings:

#### *Immigrant A:*

His narrative reveals the significant impact of legal status on employment opportunities. He arrived undocumented at age 17 and experienced exploitation early on: "My old boss where I work, he got me insurance for a car. He took advantage of me and took the money. For the last week I did the job without pay." He also shared how another employer misused his identity, stating, "Another boss promised to use my card to help me get insurance, but when I checked my card, he put his sister, his mom, all on my card instead." These experiences reflect the vulnerability of undocumented immigrants to unfair labor practices. Despite these hardships, over years of work, he obtained documentation and his determination and honesty eventually earned him trust in his community: "I do the houses around here; they like me because I'm honest and hardworking." His perseverance led him to become an accomplished general contractor, starting his own company: "I work hard and now I am doing bigger projects, I have 16 guys in my team."

#### *Immigrant B:*

Immigrant B emphasized that better payment and opportunities motivated their migration: "There's a lot of businesses back there [in Ecuador], but they don't make money. Just losing money and losing money. I came here to work with my family on business." Despite arriving with

no English knowledge, “know[ing] only the numbers,” they balanced work and learning simultaneously, expressing that: “It was difficult here, because I was learning and working at the same time. I didn’t know anything.” His experience reflects barriers he had to face as an undocumented immigrant, including language limitations and the challenge of managing multiple responsibilities. Financial constraints also limited their ability to send remittances, stating that he couldn’t “send too much money back to my family. Only a couple thousand.” Despite these hardships, the participant expressed a willingness to work hard regardless of lack of formal benefits: “Just having insurance. Everything else I can work for.”

#### *Immigrant C:*

Immigrant C’s employment opportunities were largely accessed through community networks: “Found jobs through family and friend networks,” starting with a referral to Bloomberg and later working in cost accounting for a Taiwanese garment company. His extended work in the textile industry leveraged family ties as he explained that his “grandfather owned a sweater business in Taiwan.” The participant acknowledged ongoing racial identity challenges in the workplace, expressing that “you’ll always be seen as Asian,” underscoring persistent perceptions despite his integration and citizenship. He emphasized that “English fluency” was crucial for career success, highlighting that language proficiency intersects with immigration status to determine hiring and advancement.

#### *Immigrant D:*

Immigrant D is still a student in school and has had no employment experience yet.

### **Healthcare Access:**

#### *Immigrant A:*

Immigrant A reported limited access to healthcare, noting, “Right now I don’t have insurance,” and “Not really” when asked if he was aware of insurance options. He framed healthcare access around self-prevention rather than treatment: “So far I’m healthy, you know, I didn’t have to go get medical help or things like that,” and “I prevent myself from getting sick; I eat good food, don’t eat processed food.” His narrative shows that even documented immigrants may lack health insurance, often prioritizing work and family support over medical care: “I just have to make work happen because I have family, I have parents,” even when sick. This underscores systemic barriers to healthcare despite legal status and the pressures immigrant men may face to fulfill provider roles.

#### *Immigrant B:*

Lack of legal documentation severely restricted healthcare access. The participant reported no health insurance and reliance on medicines brought from their home country: “I don’t have health insurance. I got my medicine from my own country, I take that whenever I get sick. Every time I go back to my country I bring more.” When ill, they managed illnesses at home without professional care: “One time I had the flu, I just stayed home for 14 days and took my own medicine.” This illustrates how undocumented status creates barriers to receiving impactful healthcare, compelling immigrants to rely on informal or alternative methods of treatment.

*Immigrant C:*

The participant relies on Medicaid for healthcare coverage and reported no out-of-pocket costs for managing chronic illness: “No out-of-pocket costs for medications, like my heart disease treatment since 2018.” He tends to avoid unnecessary medical visits, stating, “Only go for annual checkups or emergencies,” and criticized the system’s bureaucracy: “You need referrals for specialists, which can be inconvenient.” His dietary habits reflect community integration, initially dependent on Philadelphia’s Chinatown and noting how “Taiwanese food options are now widespread.” Socially, “90% of my friends are Asian,” indicating a preference for ethnic community networks that provide support and cultural continuity.

*Immigrant D:*

In line with cultural attitudes, minor health issues are generally treated at home with over-the-counter medication: “If it’s a common cold, fix it at home before going to the doctor.” This approach indicates a preference for self-care and possible cautiousness about utilizing formal healthcare resources unless necessary. This is consistent with immigrant family practices emphasizing personal responsibility and minimal reliance on the healthcare system unless urgent.

**Access to Quality Education:**

*Immigrant A:*

In terms of education, Immigrant A did not pursue formal education upon arriving in the U.S.: “I had education in my country, but here I don’t. I just start work.” However, he expressed hope for his daughter’s educational opportunities: “My daughter will get a student loan for school.” This reflects the intergenerational aspirations of immigrant families, despite limited access during the first generation. Immigrant A’s story also touched on broader challenges affecting immigrant communities, including deportations: “I saw the moms, grab their kids and have to leave them. It’s a very painful situation.” Legal uncertainties contribute to educational disruptions and emotional strain on families.

*Immigrant B:*

Despite initial language barriers, the participant invested in their education by taking English classes, which they paid for themselves: “I went to school here for English. I paid for it. My friends told me about it. I studied for 2 winters.” This demonstrates proactive efforts to improve access to opportunities despite legal and financial obstacles. However, as undocumented immigrants often face limited formal educational support, they bear the full burden of self-financing their skill acquisition.

*Immigrant C:*

Migrating at age 12 from Taiwan, this participant faced early language and cultural barriers: “I repeated 6th grade to improve English” and “took ESL classes” in a predominantly white school where he was one of few Asian students. Despite these challenges, he graduated from a U.S. university with a business degree. Reflecting on his children’s schooling, he noted mixed

outcomes: “My older son struggled academically, while my younger son excelled,” but observed improvements in schools’ support systems over time: “Schools now have more resources for immigrant families compared to my time.” This suggests that legal status as a citizen, combined with language acquisition, enabled educational opportunities, though immigrant children may still face varied outcomes.

*Immigrant D:*

This participant attends one of the most diverse schools in the region and reported no experiences of discrimination. She described cultural differences in academic expectations: “Values of grades and expectations are very different” between her family and peers. While her family is not pushy about grades, she is motivated personally: “My friends are not worried, but I am.” Support systems such as school counselors play a significant role: “School counselors are very helpful throughout the process.” She also noted learning from her older brothers who have more experience navigating the education system. This reflects the nuanced experience of second-generation immigrants, balancing parental influences with personal academic goals and benefiting from institutional supports.

**Gender and Legal Status Intersection:**

*Immigrant A:*

Immigrant A’s experience illustrates the intersectionality of gender and legal status. As a male immigrant, he explained that his primary focus was on economic provision: “I just have to make work happen, because I have family, I have parents. My wife stays home to take care of the kids.” His assumption of provider responsibilities influenced his reluctance to seek medical care and his persistence despite exploitation. Legal status clearly shaped his vulnerability to abuse but also enabled gradual advancement in his career. His reflections on ICE deportations and family separations emphasize the broader social impact of immigration policy on stability and well-being: “I hope president Trump stops deporting people, separating families. They’re good people.”

*Immigrant B:*

While the participant did not detail gender explicitly, their focus on supporting family through business and work highlights the economic pressures faced by many working immigrants. Their statement, “Life as an immigrant: it’s difficult but we’re all trying,” reflects common resilience among undocumented immigrants who confront legal exclusion but remain committed to providing for their families. The absence of health insurance and the need to self-treat illness underscore vulnerabilities tied to undocumented status, magnified by the pressures to maintain work and financial support despite health challenges.

*Immigrant C:*

Becoming a U.S. citizen was straightforward: “Test questions were simple, like ‘What color is the White House?’” Nevertheless, he faced casual racism, especially during adolescence when people screamed “slurs from passing cars in high school.” Although his children are U.S.-born, they are still perceived as “foreign” due to their Asian appearance, illustrating how racial identity

shapes social inclusion beyond legal status. The participant also expressed that current geopolitical tensions affect his community: “U.S.-Taiwan-China tensions indirectly affect us, reducing tourism and business from China.”

#### *Immigrant D:*

She expressed concerns about new immigration laws impacting her and her diverse social network: “Asian and white friend. Scared of new immigration laws, Korean and mix of white, worried about the community around her.” This reflects the ongoing anxiety among immigrant communities and their families about legal stability and community safety despite her own second-generation status. Although she “doesn’t go back to China often,” cultural connection remains strong through her grandparents: “I speak Chinese to them,” underscoring the role of family in preserving language and heritage. The participant also mentions that their sense of independence is balanced with respect for cultural heritage: “my parents were not born here, I can’t lean on them to learn things and need to focus on myself.” This highlights challenges second-generation immigrants face in reconciling parental limitations due to language or system navigation and their own responsibilities. She noted, “I always try to ‘sign up for things, if my dad was able to do it, I should be able to do it,’” illustrating the expectation for self-sufficiency. Importantly, she described language as a special bond with her parents and culture: “Having a language to share with them is really special and should be looked into,” emphasizing the emotional significance of bilingualism in immigrant families.

### **Analysis and Discussion**

The experiences of New Jersey immigrants highlight the significant and intertwined roles that legal status and gender play in shaping access to healthcare, living wage jobs, and quality education.<sup>24</sup>

#### **Legal Status and Access**

Legal status emerges as a fundamental determinant of immigrants’ opportunities and vulnerabilities. Undocumented immigrants encounter frequent exploitation in the labor market, including withheld wages and identity misuse, underscoring their limited ability to protect themselves legally. They are also disproportionately excluded from formal healthcare systems, often relying on medicines brought from their home countries and self-care for illnesses. For documented immigrants, legal status affords some protection and improved job prospects; however, barriers persist, particularly regarding access to health insurance. Even those with legal status may forgo medical care due to prioritizing family and work responsibilities or facing complex healthcare bureaucracy.

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<sup>24</sup> While the above interviews have provided a humanitarian perspective to the current political situation, the findings of this study should be interpreted with caution given the sample size. It was narrower than anticipated due to participants’ fears around disclosing their legal status amidst ongoing enforcement pressures and deportation risks. This constraint likely limited the diversity and scope of immigrant experiences represented, especially among undocumented populations who remain highly vulnerable.

## **Gender and Economic Responsibilities**

Gender intersects importantly with legal status. Male immigrants often assume primary provider roles, which drives a strong work ethic even amidst exploitation and poor health conditions. This results in postponement or avoidance of medical care due to economic pressures. In contrast, female second-generation immigrants experience different gendered dynamics, balancing personal educational ambitions with limited parental support systems shaped by language and cultural gaps. These women often develop greater self-reliance and navigate institutional processes independently while maintaining important cultural and familial ties.

## **Language, Cultural Capital, and Community Support**

Language proficiency and cultural capital significantly influence integration and access. Immigrants arriving with limited English face compounded difficulties in education and employment, needing to invest time and resources to acquire linguistic skills while managing work. Community networks, including family businesses and ethnic connections, serve as critical pathways to employment and social support. School counselors and diverse peer environments are valuable for second-generation immigrants, facilitating academic success and mitigating discrimination experiences. Maintaining cultural and linguistic links within families, especially through communication with older generations, remains central to identity and emotional well-being.

## **Racialization and Social Inclusion**

Despite legal status and citizenship, racial identity continues to shape immigrant experiences. Some immigrants encounter casual racism or are perpetually marked as “foreign” due to their appearance, affecting social inclusion and sense of belonging. These racialized experiences coexist with systemic challenges and highlight the limits of legal status in fully ensuring equitable treatment.

## **Implications**

Overall, these findings illustrate that while legal status is a primary factor determining immigrants' formal access to jobs, healthcare, and education, it does not operate in isolation. Gender roles, language barriers, cultural identity, and racialization intersect to influence immigrant outcomes. Policies aimed at improving immigrant well-being must consider this complexity, ensuring protections against labor exploitation, expanding access to healthcare regardless of status, supporting language acquisition, and addressing persistent racial biases. Furthermore, strengthening community-based resources and culturally sensitive institutional supports can enhance immigrants' capacity to thrive in New Jersey.

## **Conclusion**

Gender and legal status significantly shape New Jersey immigrants' ability to access impactful healthcare, living wage jobs, and quality education.

Immigrants, especially those who are undocumented, face major barriers to healthcare access. Recent changes to New Jersey's Medicaid policies are making it harder for immigrant families to maintain health insurance, with stricter eligibility rules, frequent redeterminations, and new work requirements being introduced over the next several years. Many lawfully present and undocumented immigrants risk losing coverage due to these bureaucratic obstacles and because the definition of "qualified immigrants" is being restricted. Out-of-pocket costs, even for Medicaid expansion populations, are expected to rise. While legislation like the federal HEAL Act aims to eliminate barriers by restoring Medicaid and CHIP eligibility to lawfully present immigrants and removing exclusions for undocumented immigrants from the ACA marketplace, such reforms have yet to be fully enacted, leaving many without coverage or forced to rely on alternative remedies and community support.<sup>25</sup>

Employment-wise, New Jersey's minimum wage has risen to \$15.49 per hour for most workers, with wage and hour laws protecting all employees<sup>26</sup>—including undocumented immigrants. Recent laws further protect workers from employer coercion related to immigration status, reinforcing the right to earn minimum wage regardless of legal background. However, immigrants, especially those who are undocumented, still face workplace exploitation, job insecurity, and may work outside formal channels, limiting access to upward mobility and benefits such as health insurance. Their undocumented status discourages them to take any defensive legal action despite exploitation in fear of government deportation.

Both federal law (per *Plyler v. Doe*, 1982) and state policy require New Jersey public schools to enroll children regardless of immigration status, guaranteeing free K-12 education to all. The New Jersey Department of Education and local school districts have developed resources and policies to address the unique needs of immigrant students, including planning for immigration enforcement and trauma associated with family separation. Despite these previously mentioned protections, some recent proposals have threatened to impose tuition charges for students lacking legal status<sup>27</sup>—a move that has faced strong opposition and has not been implemented. Support services, counselors, and language resources are increasingly available, but immigrant students may still face hurdles related to language, adjustment, and stress linked to fears of enforcement or changes in immigration law.

Although New Jersey and the United States have enacted laws and policies designed to protect immigrants' access to healthcare, fair wages, and quality education, persistent

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<sup>25</sup> H.R.5008 - 118th Congress (2023-2024): HEAL for Immigrant Families Act of 2023. (2023). Retrieved from Congress.gov website: <https://www.congress.gov/bill/118th-congress/house-bill/5008>

<sup>26</sup> CMS, O. (2024). Department of Labor & Workforce Development | New Jersey's Minimum Wage to Increase to \$15.49/Hour for Most Employees on Jan. 1. Retrieved August 15, 2025, from Nj.gov website: [https://www.nj.gov/labor/lwdhome/press/2024/20241008\\_minwage.shtml](https://www.nj.gov/labor/lwdhome/press/2024/20241008_minwage.shtml)

<sup>27</sup> POLITICO Pro: Trump administration pushes states to exclude immigrant students from in-state tuition. (2025). Retrieved August 15, 2025, from @POLITICOPro website: <https://subscriber.politicopro.com/article/2025/07/trump-administration-immigrant-student-tuition-00477791>

discrimination and exploitation remain realities for many. The fear of deportation, lack of legal status, and limited understanding of their rights prevent countless immigrants from standing up against unfair treatment or seeking available resources. Many work under vulnerable conditions or forgo needed healthcare due to these anxieties and gaps in knowledge. This highlights the necessity for ongoing outreach, education, and enforcement to bridge the divide between legal protections and the lived experiences of immigrant communities. Robust legal frameworks are essential, but without community empowerment and information, rights too often remain unused and unenforced.

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