

Deseret News

Immigrant kids under cloud

Report says many suffer financially and from continuing ill will

By James Thalman

Deseret News

Published: Monday, Nov. 2, 2009 10:05 p.m. MST

Immigrant children in Utah are growing in number, but fewer than some people think are here with undocumented parents. And many are suffering financially and have less opportunity because of continuing ill will toward Mexican immigrants, legal or not.

Those are a few of the conclusions of a recent report by Voices for Utah Children, the child policy and advocacy group. Although immigration seems to be on everyone's mind these days, children's issues are usually well in the background in newspapers and other public accounts, said report author Terry Haven.

The report looks at all types of demographic data and the implications on government policy the findings might have. It also reviews the impact of Utah's new immigration reform law and the effect on children of recent roundups of illegal immigrants at area businesses.

"We don't have a clear picture at all for what life is like for these kids, so we decided to find out," Haven said.

Since 2003, the number of immigrant families has risen to 132,000 from 93,000, or to 16 percent of the total Utah population from 13 percent, a Voices for Utah Children survey of immigrant families shows.

Turns out they are more likely to live in two-parent households than other kids, the survey said. They also are less likely to live in mother-only households, their mother is likely to work outside the home, and they don't tend to be enrolled in formal pre-school programs.

Despite stereotypes that their parents only speak Spanish, more than half — 57 percent — of children in immigrant families speak English exclusively or very well, according to the report.

English fluency has widespread effects on the lives of kids and their potential in the future, Haven said. The more fluent a parent is, the more wages they earn, the report states, noting that a person's level of English fluency has a direct connection to how engaged a family is in its wider community.

Those who aren't fluent are more likely to avoid contact with their wider community in a number of ways, believing that the less they have to do with the outside, the less hassle they will have from government agencies.

Fluency has implications in very real ways, Haven said. "The concern today is that this anti-immigration sentiment keeps children who are born here at a distance and at a disadvantage simply because their parents are immigrants."

Any interaction with public and private agencies, such as insurance companies and banks, is pretty much avoided, Haven said. Hence, almost two-thirds of immigrant families do not have employer-provided medical insurance.

And almost 70 percent said they are concerned that immigration officials will raid their workplace at any time, according to the report.

"This all takes a toll on immigrant children," Haven said, noting that the immigrants surveyed came to the United States for many of the same reasons that refugees come here — economic conditions, fear that their family was not safe, education — and yet the societal response to each group is different.

"We welcome the refugees, help them get settled, help them navigate the government systems and help them adapt to a new culture and geography. We ?nd them work and more," she said. "The immigrant, however, is regarded as an interloper taking our jobs, threatening national security and even our way of life."

The fact is the anti-immigration mind-set is as American as apple pie, said Charles Hirschman, a sociology professor at the University of Washington. Each wave of immigrants to come ashore since the 1750s was said to bode all kinds of ill.

People here already have been quick to label those coming behind them as illiterates, paupers, criminal and crazy, Hirschman said.

There has always been a faction of anti-immigration, he said. The current one is probably more widespread in its fervor, and it is particularly hampering a generation of children's capacity of pursuing a decent future.

For example, many illegal immigrants whose children are citizens don't get them benefits or enroll them in government help agencies to which they are entitled because they have learned that any government attention is likely to turn into something that will abruptly dismantle their families.

e-mail: jthalman@desnews.com

© 2010 Deseret News Publishing Company | All rights reserved