

## Unemployment and Food Insecurity Amongst Immigrants in the United States

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- Immigrant-led households contribute to the U.S. economy in many ways.
- Changes in unemployment more greatly effects immigrants than natives with respect to food insecurity.
- The effect of unemployment is especially large for immigrant non-citizens, a group that receives little or no public assistance.
- Extending unemployment benefits to undocumented immigrant workers could provide support with food insecurity.

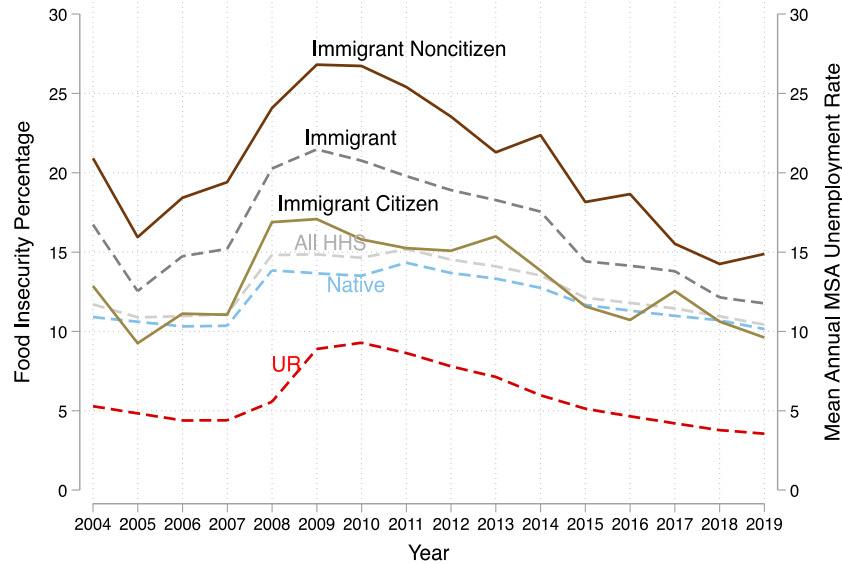
**Overview:** States provide unemployment insurance to eligible workers who lose their job through no fault of their own. This benefit typically excludes undocumented workers. **Colorado’s Benefit Recovery Fund**, the first of its kind, extends unemployment benefits to immigrants without work authorization, providing critical support to those who lose their job.

Immigrant-led households make significant contributions to the U.S. economy. They paid \$525 B in federal taxes in 2021 and accounted for 22.6 percent of all self-employed U.S. residents in 2022 (American Immigration Council, 2023). Immigrants’ labor force participation rate was almost 11 percent higher than native citizens in 2023 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023). Immigrants are more likely to work in riskier jobs, and their earnings are approximately 20 percent less than those of U.S.-born workers (Orrenius & Zavodny, 2009).

Despite their active economic contributions, immigrants often face numerous challenges and receive insufficient public assistance. For instance, immigrants are ineligible to apply for certain public assistance programs until they have established residency for five years. Even after becoming eligible, many immigrants either do not apply for these benefits or use fewer benefits than natives (Nowrasteh & Orr, 2018). Altogether, this may put immigrant households at greater likelihood of becoming food insecure when confronted with economic hardships.

Food insecurity (FI) is a significant problem in the United States as it is associated with numerous negative health outcomes such as lower dietary quality and the worsening of both physical and mental health (Essien et al. 2016; Gundersen and Ziliak, 2015; Reeder et al. 2022). Importantly, food insecurity is found to be procyclical with unemployment, getting worse as job numbers fall (Figure 1). Previous research also indicates that immigrant families in the US are more vulnerable to economic cycles and more likely to experience food insecurity compared to native households (Orrenius & Zavodny, 2009; Chaudry & Fortuny, 2010; Potochnick & Arteaga, 2018). Our study shows that unemployment has a significantly larger impact on FI for immigrants versus native US households. Policies to remedy food insecurity among immigrant households may be beneficial for both household members and the US economy.

**Analysis:** We estimate the effect of unemployment on household food insecurity by households’ immigration status, citizenship, and other factors that may influence how unemployment affects food insecurity. We combine metropolitan unemployment rates (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics) with household-level food insecurity measures from the Current Population Survey from 2004 to 2019.



**Figure 1.** Food insecurity by immigration and citizen status and mean unemployment rate (UR) 2004-2019

**Results:** We find that for a 1% increase in unemployment immigrants experience twice the increase in food insecurity compared to natives, (1.6% versus 0.8%.) While both immigrant non-citizens and immigrant citizens experience more food insecurity than natives when unemployment rates rise, immigrant non-citizens are affected more than immigrant citizens.

Higher education reduces the impact of unemployment on food insecurity and has a greater benefit for immigrant non-citizens compared to immigrant citizens. Yet education does not completely mitigate the risk of food insecurity for immigrants relative to natives. This pattern underscores the pervasive challenges that immigrants face, irrespective of their educational attainment.

We find no difference in the effects of unemployment on food insecurity between immigrants and natives from poorer households (below 185% of the poverty line). This reveals the primary role that poverty plays in influencing the cyclical patterns of food insecurity. Access to food assistance programs mitigates some of the negative impacts of economic downturns on food insecurity, but this is meaningful only for immigrant citizens eligible for benefits.

**Implications:** Our results confirm that immigrant non-citizens who typically lack access to benefits from many government safety net programs are more likely to experience economic hardship and are more sensitive to labor market fluctuations than natives. Immigrant citizens, who are impacted by unemployment more than natives, fare better than non-citizens. Citizenship, and by extension eligibility for governmental food assistance programs, plays a pivotal role in mitigating the detrimental effects of economic cycles.

Federal programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program could consider revising eligibility requirements for immigrant non-citizens to support families facing hardship. Moreover, states can fill gaps in federal food assistance programs by offering unemployment benefits to those without work authorization. Such efforts are already happening in Colorado, California, and New York (Wilson 2023; Visram 2023). Enhanced unemployment insurance can help stabilize household food consumption and thereby reduce food insecurity (Browning & Crossley 2001; Fu et al. 2023)

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