



**Abriendo Puertas**  
**Opening Doors**

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STRONGER COMMUNITIES. STRONGER AMERICA.

# Latino Infant Initiative Policy Agenda

**UNIDOSUS**

STRONGER COMMUNITIES. STRONGER AMERICA.

UnidosUS is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that serves as the nation's largest Hispanic civil rights and advocacy organization. Since 1968, we have challenged the social, economic, and political barriers that affect Latinos through our unique combination of expert research, advocacy, programs, and an [Affiliate Network](#) of nearly 300 community-based organizations across the United States and Puerto Rico. We believe in an America where economic, political, and social progress is a reality for all Latinos, and we collaborate across communities to achieve it.

For more information on UnidosUS, visit [www.unidosus.org](http://www.unidosus.org) or follow us on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), and [Twitter](#).

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**Abriendo Puertas**  
**Opening Doors**

Abriendo Puertas/Opening Doors (AP/OD) is the nation's first evidence-based parent leadership program designed by and for Latino parents with children between the ages of prenatal to five (PN-5) and adopted by diverse communities across the country.

The mission of AP/OD is to support parents as leaders of their families and as their child's first and most influential teacher in their child's first school—the home. AP/OD uses a two-generation approach that builds parent leadership skills and knowledge to promote family wellbeing and positive outcomes for children. Parents can be powerful agents of change in the lives of their children as well as their community. To that end, AP/OD provides space for parents/caregivers to build knowledge and social capital with information, resources, and activities they can use daily.

For more information about Abriendo Puertas/Opening Doors please visit <https://ap-od.org/>

# Latino Infant Initiative Policy Agenda

July 2023

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## INTRODUCTION

The Latino\* population in the the United States grew 23% between 2010<sup>1</sup> and 2020, from 50.5 million to 62.1 million. This increase is due overwhelmingly to births, not immigration. In that timeframe, 9.3 million Latino babies<sup>†</sup> were born.

However, while changing demographics reflect an increasingly multicultural and multilingual U.S. population, Latinos continue to experience under-representation and lack of recognition inconsistent for such a growing segment of the U.S. population.

Latinos face a myriad of inequities across systems that impact early childhood development and that continue to undermine the potential and future success of Latino infants, toddlers, and their families. This is characterized by educational, health, economic security, and immigration barriers as well as by other disparities. Addressing the specific needs of expecting Latino families and those who have young children under the age of three is crucial to build a prosperous future for the United States.

The prenatal to three-year period (PN-3) is widely recognized as crucial for child development. Early experiences during this time shape the brain's architecture and have long-lasting effects on learning, behavior, and health. Research shows that access to high-quality early childhood services correlates with improved academic success, educational attainment, future earnings, well-being, and reduced crime rates.<sup>3</sup> Prioritizing and investing in children and families during this period maximizes every child's potential. Therefore, this policy agenda focuses on one of the most critical stages of child development: from before birth to a child's third year of life.

This policy agenda was developed within the framework of the Latino Infant Initiative (LII), a collaboration between two leading organizations that serve the Latino community, UnidosUS and Abriendo Puertas/Opening Doors. The overarching goal of the Latino Infant Initiative policy agenda is to influence federal and state policies that will ensure that all Latino infants, toddlers, and



**By 2060,** the U.S. Census Bureau estimates that **the Hispanic population will more than double to 111 million people.**<sup>2</sup>

\* This document uses the terms “Hispanic” and “Latino” interchangeably to refer to persons of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central and South American, Dominican, Spanish, and other Hispanic descent; they may be of any race.

† We use the terms “infants,” “babies,” and “infant/toddler” interchangeably to refer to children from birth through 36 months of age.

their families, regardless of background or circumstances, have equitable access to high-quality, culturally and linguistically responsive programs and services that support their healthy physical, mental, and social development and learning. This policy agenda will provide a roadmap to the system-wide changes that are needed to advance this goal.

## OUR APPROACH TO AN EQUITABLE POLICY AGENDA

The following principles have guided our development of the Latino Infant Initiative policy agenda:

**The intersectionality of issues that families experience must be acknowledged and addressed cohesively.**

Our approach recognizes that the experiences of Latino infants and toddlers are shaped by multiple factors, including their culture, language, diverse abilities, and immigration status. We advocate for a comprehensive and integrated system of services that supports their healthy development and learning, including high-quality early education programs, family support services, health care interventions, economic opportunities, and other community resources. Collaboration and coordination among service providers and systems are essential to ensuring that families can access the services they need when they need them.

**Policies should be evidence-based and informed by research.** Policies must be grounded in the latest child development research to ensure that programs and services are responsive to the developmental needs of Latino infants and toddlers. We are committed to developing a system that provides age-appropriate, culturally and linguistically sensitive and responsive practices to support their growth and development.

**Policies must be child-centered and family-focused.** All PN-3 programs must be designed and implemented in ways that respect and affirm Latino families' culture, language, and heritage. Policies must consider special characteristics of the Latino community such as the multigenerational nature of many Latino families, mixed-language and mixed-status households, and lived experiences with discrimination.\* We aim to build a system that provides resources and support to families to help them feel welcome and engaged in their children's learning in meaningful ways.

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\* According to the 2023 National Latino Family Report, 48% of the respondents had experienced some kind of discrimination in the past 12 months. See, Abriendo Puertas/Opening Doors and UnidosUS, *National Latino Family Report* (2023). <https://nationalsurvey.ap-od.org/2023-report/> (accessed June 2023).

**The removal of barriers to access and enrollment is necessary to meaningfully advance equity.** We aim to provide equal opportunities for *all* parents, infants, and toddlers so they can access culturally responsive and linguistically appropriate programs and services, regardless of their background or circumstances. We strive to ensure that accurate information is readily available and accessible to families to facilitate their access to services, and we aim for increased enrollment and retention rates in early childhood programs to ensure that families can easily access the resources they need for their children.

## GOALS AND RECOMMENDED POLICY ACTIONS

To ensure that systems better meet the early childhood development needs of Latino infants and toddlers from prenatal to age three, policymakers should prioritize the following goals and actions:

### EDUCATION

Latino infants and toddlers in the U.S. face significant gaps in **early childhood education (ECE)**. Latino families with young children experience a lack of access to quality early learning and dual language programs,<sup>4</sup> widespread practices of language suppression,<sup>5</sup> and a limited understanding of the unique characteristics of Latino identity and culture.<sup>6</sup>

#### **Our 2023 National Latino Family Report<sup>7</sup> revealed:**

46% of Latino families with children under age three have not received any child care since birth.\*

\* Please note that child care refers to sending a child to a caregiver outside of your home at least 2-3 times per week or someone that may come to the home to care for the child.

Challenges encountered by Latino families include difficulties finding suitable programs with operating hours that match their working hours, cost of transportation, finding vacancies, and ineligibility due to narrow income thresholds.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, navigating the child care system itself can be confusing and frustrating for Latino parents, as they are faced with documentation requirements, work obligations, and language barriers.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, wages for early childhood educators, a significant portion of whom are women of color, are consistently among the lowest when compared to other professionals with similar credential requirements,<sup>10</sup> causing high turnover and making it difficult for programs to hire and retain staff.<sup>11</sup>

While Latino parents express a clear desire for their children to be bilingual and recognize the importance of maintaining their cultural and linguistic heritage,<sup>12</sup> too often they hear messages that they must minimize or abandon their home

language in favor of English for their child to be successful in school.<sup>13</sup> Latino experiences with language suppression contradict well-established research that young children have the capacity to learn two languages simultaneously and do not need to give up their home language to learn English.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, growing up bilingual brings advantages and benefits such as being able to communicate with all family members, fostering positive multi-generational family dynamics, having a healthier identity, and generating more job opportunities.<sup>15</sup>

Another challenge within the education system is the insufficient research specifically focused on Latino culture. For example, language development knowledge is based on the experiences of non-Latino societies,<sup>16</sup> and current measures of parent and family engagement primarily focus on “European American” families,<sup>17</sup> rather than acknowledging the unique and multifaceted aspects of Latino culture and family characteristics, such as multigenerational households and diverse family configurations.<sup>18</sup> As a result, our understanding of engagement behaviors unique to diverse ethnic groups is limited, which provides a narrow lens through which to acknowledge the assets and address the needs of Latino families in public policy.<sup>19</sup>

**GOAL 1: Improve access to high-quality, culturally and linguistically responsive early childhood education programs to serve more children, particularly dual-language learners (DLLs).\***

Latino families who participate in high-quality PN-3 programs have children with better outcomes in school readiness, cognitive development, and social-emotional development.<sup>20</sup> Yet, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, in 2021 Latino three- to five-year-olds had an enrollment rate of 48.6% in school, the second lowest of all captured racial and ethnic groups.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, the Government Accountability Office found that in 2011-2012 Latino children made up an estimated 35% of the eligible population for the Child Care Development Fund (CCDF), but represented only 20% of the population of children served by the CCDF.<sup>22</sup>

There is also a lack of bilingual programs and insufficient funding for Early Head Start, which leads to a majority of eligible Latino children going unserved, highlighting the need for critical investments to serve more children, particularly dual-language learners.<sup>23</sup> The 2023 National Latino Family Report shows that 65% of Latino parents would enroll their child in a bilingual program were one available, but only 52% of parents have enrolled or are planning to enroll their children in bilingual programs.<sup>24</sup> Access to bilingual programs

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\* For purposes of this policy agenda, dual-language learners refer to infants and toddlers that are learning two or more languages at the same time.



is critical since research has shown that children’s Spanish oral language skills make “significant direct and indirect contributions” both to English oral language skills and to word-reading in English,<sup>25</sup> which correlates with future school success.<sup>26</sup> In fact, the “home language is important for both social and cultural development, as well as academic achievement.”<sup>27</sup> It is important to highlight that Latino families speak a variety of languages at home, including English, Spanish, Portuguese, and indigenous languages, among others. Access to high-quality and culturally and linguistically responsive services and programs is essential for setting the foundation for the future success of Latino infants and their families.

### The federal government should:

- Increase funding for the Child Care Development Block Grant (CCDBG), Head Start (including Early Head Start and Migrant and Seasonal Head Start), Preschool Development Grants, and programs authorized by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and make funding less restrictive and accessible to a diverse set of providers, including community-based organizations. Addressing these funding issues would address the following needs:
  - Support the additional enrollment of 500,000 children under the age of three in Early Head Start.
  - Modify the income threshold so medium-income families can qualify for child care programs, and revise eligibility criteria for Early Head Start to 150% of the federal poverty level.
  - Set aside at least 5% of the Head Start appropriation for the national Migrant and Seasonal Head Start (MSHS) program\* and make \$5 million available to Hispanic Serving Institutions partnering with MSHS programs to expand educational opportunities for MSHS staff and parents.
- Create a dedicated funding stream to provide supplemental support for the development of dual-language learners.



\* The national Migrant and Seasonal Head Start (MSHS) program provides early childhood development, education and services to farmworker families and their children from birth until they are 5-years old. MSHS is the only Head Start model with a parental work requirement.

**States should:**

- Expand the number of children eligible for early intervention services that are culturally and linguistically responsive.
- Incorporate Presumptive Eligibility in Child Care, so families can access child care while their application is being reviewed.<sup>28</sup>
- Adopt child care subsidy policies that remove certain documentation requirements, offer alternative identification options other than providing social security numbers (SSNs), and provide applications in Spanish and other languages by phone.<sup>29</sup>

**GOAL 2:** Retain, support, and develop Latinos in the prenatal to age three workforce to meet the need for a diverse and qualified workforce that reflects today's multicultural and multilingual child population.

Latino parents face unique challenges in accessing culturally and linguistically responsive early childhood education programs, with many programs lacking sufficient bilingual staff or culturally and linguistically responsive curricula. Research shows that Latino children benefit from Latino educators who can provide effective and culturally sensitive support for dual-language learners. However, only 60% of the workforce serving classes with 25% or more Latino children are Latino.<sup>30</sup>

Nationally, about one in five (19%) of all ECE teachers are Latina.<sup>31</sup> ECE teachers confront enormous job responsibilities, while many of them work full time, raise their own families, and pursue a bachelor's degree as a condition of their employment. It is time for these educators to be fully recognized and compensated as highly skilled professionals. In fact, 91% of Latino parents and caregivers support an increase in compensation for early educators.<sup>32</sup> System-wide changes are necessary to support an ECE workforce that is expected to produce measurable outcomes in the learning and development of diverse young children.

**The federal government should:**

- Incentivize Head Start programs to hire more bilingual staff relative to the community they serve.
- Increase support and system alignment to facilitate teachers' degree completion, including a federal scholarship program.
- Develop a pathway for a more linguistically diverse ECE workforce by creating a federal funding stream and foster programs that help parents and family, friends, and neighbors (FFN) caregivers who speak languages other than English to pursue licensing, undergraduate and graduate degrees, and become part of the ECE workforce.

- Provide funding to support professional development and training opportunities for all ECE professionals (teachers, home visitors, speech therapists, early intervention providers, program administrators, nurses, etc.) in areas related to dual-language development, culturally and linguistically responsive practices, culturally responsive family engagement, and/or culturally responsive disabilities services and ensure that DLL evidence-based practices are adequately incorporated into teacher preparation and special education/speech therapy programs.

**States should:**

- Increase infant/toddler teacher compensation (salaries and benefits) to be commensurate with the demanding and challenging job responsibilities and the importance of infant development.
- Adopt policies that improve work conditions for early educators, including classroom size standards, educator-to-child ratios, professional support, nutritional standards, and family engagement goals so that educators have adequate time to focus on each one of their learners, develop individualized plans for each child, and communicate with the families on an ongoing basis.



**GOAL 3:** Support family engagement that acknowledges the historical legacy of language suppression and respects home language(s).

Research consistently highlights the critical role of family engagement in the development of Latino infants.<sup>33</sup> Studies also show that parent engagement significantly contributes to reducing the achievement gap among immigrant populations, with parent engagement playing the most significant role in increased achievement for Latinos.<sup>34</sup>

For generations, Latino families have been confronted by messages urging them to abandon their use of a home language. However, scientific evidence contradicts the notion that home languages hinder English language acquisition and school success,<sup>35</sup> and in fact, suppressing a child's minority language can have negative effects on their socioemotional well-being.<sup>36</sup> The most recent research indicates that infants have the capacity to develop and thrive in two languages, employing neuro-cognitive strategies that support their successful development.<sup>37</sup> Therefore, Latino parents and caregivers should be fully supported in their goal of raising their children bilingually.<sup>38</sup> This includes the engagement of Latino fathers who can play vital and valuable roles in promoting their infants' and toddlers' development and educational success.<sup>39</sup>

**The federal government should:**

- Disseminate culturally responsive information and culturally affirming research-based resources to parents that support infants' dual-language development.
- Increase funding for evidence-based home visiting programs and include training in cultural and linguistic responsiveness, prenatal care, child development, and father engagement.
- Create a national focus on Latino Infant Research-to-Practice (R2P) to develop and disseminate materials and technical assistance to support the capacity of programs serving Latino infants and toddlers to plan and implement culturally and linguistically responsive practices for children and their families. The initiative would perform the following functions:
  - Monitor and review the ongoing development of PN-3 research evidence.
  - Identify and disseminate information connecting key research messages and implications for parents and family members.
  - Create specific PN-3 research-based materials for various audiences, including Latino families, programs serving Latino infants and their families, and policymakers at the local, state, and federal levels.
  - Develop and launch a social media campaign to provide research-based messages and information to Spanish-speaking families, including the following topics: 1) the importance of early language development, including home and bilingual language development, 2) early literacy and school readiness, 3) early math development, 4) father engagement, and 5) health and child wellness, including mental health and socio-emotional well-being.
  - Create a project specifically for first-time/expectant Latino parents and provide information prior to the birth of their first child.

## HEALTH

Addressing the **health** disparities that Latino families experience is crucial for child development. Although Latinos have made enormous strides in securing health coverage since the Affordable Care Act (ACA) took effect, too many Latinos remain without coverage. More than half of uninsured Latinos qualify for health programs but are not enrolled. Moreover, according to 2022 data from the U.S. Census Bureau, Latino infants and toddlers are more likely to be uninsured and face health care disparities, with almost 20% of Latinos lacking health insurance coverage.



**Latino infants and toddlers are more likely to be uninsured and face health care disparities.**

Immigration status and state limitations on Medicaid expansion present barriers to health care access for the Latino community. When special COVID-19 coverage requirements ended on April 1, 2023, Medicaid programs began terminating families for the first time since February 2020, further exacerbating the lack of adequate prenatal and postpartum support for Latina mothers who are more likely to struggle with postpartum depression, at rates far higher than non-Hispanic women (as much as 40% more likely).<sup>40</sup>

Another key factor for healthy child development is food and nutrition. Prior to the pandemic, food insecurity among Latino households with children was higher than among non-Hispanic white households (17% vs. 10.7% in 2019).<sup>41</sup> During the pandemic and the economic crisis that followed, this disparity widened further (21.8% for Latinos vs. 9.7% for non-Hispanic whites in 2020).<sup>42</sup> Policies meant to alleviate food insecurity during the pandemic may have been less effective in Latino communities for various reasons, including avoidance of public services resulting from the lingering chilling effect of the federal public charge rule.\*

An increasingly key issue for Latino families is the impact of gun violence, which continues to spread across communities. Latino parents of young children cite this issue as a top concern that must be addressed by policymakers. Strikingly, 1 in 5 Latino parents say they or their children have *already* experienced gun violence.<sup>43</sup>

\* The public charge rule allows the government to deny admission or lawful permanent residence (known colloquially as a green card) to noncitizens who are deemed likely to become a “public charge,” meaning that they are likely to become primarily dependent on the government for subsistence. See USCIS, “Clarifying the 2022 Public Charge Final Rule,” [https://www.uscis.gov/sites/default/files/document/flyers/PublicChargeFinalRule2022\\_Infographic\\_V4\\_508.pdf](https://www.uscis.gov/sites/default/files/document/flyers/PublicChargeFinalRule2022_Infographic_V4_508.pdf) (accessed June 2023).

**GOAL 4: Improve access to health care, including mental health, for pregnant women and families of infants and toddlers.**

The prenatal period through the first three years of life is crucial to healthy development. The benefits of prenatal care include reducing adverse fetal, birth, and maternal outcomes, controlling chronic maternal health conditions, promoting safe medication use during pregnancy, and screening for fetal abnormalities. Furthermore, developing a secure attachment and relationship with a mother/caregiver is critical to the social-emotional development of an infant; when a mother's mental health is compromised it can affect the way she parents or emotionally attends to her child, thus putting herself and the child at risk for difficulty with emotional attachment and regulation.

However, Latino infants and their families are confronted by multiple disparities and inequities in prenatal and postpartum care within the current health system. And Medicaid coverage differs greatly by state. All states must provide certain minimum levels of coverage for low-income children and pregnant women, but some states go far beyond those minimums.

**For example:**

- People whose pregnancy ends when they are covered by Medicaid are guaranteed 60 days postpartum coverage, but states can extend such coverage through 12 months.
- Beginning in January 2024, children will be guaranteed 12 months of continuous coverage. However, several states have obtained waivers providing children with continuous Medicaid coverage from birth through age six.<sup>44</sup>

The Immigrant Children's Health Improvement Act (ICHIA) allows states to provide coverage for immigrant children and pregnant and postpartum individuals who have been lawfully residing in the United States for less than five years, waiving the 5-year "waiting period" that normally applies. Only 35 states have taken advantage of the option to eliminate this waiting period. Moreover, only 18 states have opted to offer health coverage to pregnant people regardless of their immigration status through the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP), which classifies such coverage as health care provided to the "unborn child."<sup>45</sup>

Federal funding is generally unavailable to provide health care to undocumented immigrants, except for medical emergencies and the CHIP "unborn child" option. However, several states use their own resources, without federal matching dollars, to provide undocumented immigrants with health coverage. Undocumented children are particularly likely to be covered through such state-only programs.<sup>46</sup>

**The federal government should:**

- Convert the above-described state options into guarantees that protect pregnant people, infants, and toddlers in every state. This includes providing full prenatal and postpartum coverage, irrespective of immigration status, and building on the current CHIP coverage option to cover prenatal care for everyone in need. It also includes providing 12 months of continuous postpartum coverage to people in every state.
- Pass the “Lift the Bar” Act, which extends Medicaid and CHIP coverage to all lawfully present, otherwise-eligible immigrants.
- Strengthen federal programs and policies that promote early support for families, such as adopting Medicaid and CHIP policies that remove barriers to participation and reduce gaps in coverage for Latino children.
- Incentivize states to provide access to family mental health services that are culturally and linguistically responsive for Latino families through Medicaid funding and other federal programs. This should include:
  - o Increasing funding for infant early childhood mental health services that are: 1) culturally and linguistically responsive and delivered in ECE settings serving Latino infants and toddlers; and 2) use multi-generational and whole-family approaches to ensure that mental health professionals bring a collaborative approach to working with program staff and Latino families.
  - o Requiring Medicaid managed care organizations to provide culturally and linguistically responsive mental health services while implementing pending regulatory proposals that lift the standards applicable to such organizations.<sup>47</sup>

**States should:**

- Take advantage of all options for accessing federal funding to extend Medicaid eligibility to immigrant families. This includes:
  - o Eliminating the 5-year waiting period for lawfully present immigrants to qualify for Medicaid and CHIP.
  - o Under the CHIP unborn child option, covering pregnant people, regardless of immigration status.
  - o Proposing waivers to guarantee children’s health coverage from birth through age six.
  - o Use state dollars to provide health care to low-income, immigrant families who are ineligible for federal funding, but who need health care and cannot afford it on their own.



**Nearly 50% of Latino parents of young children**

have been denied or terminated from the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program or SNAP.

**GOAL 5: Improve access to healthy and affordable food for families with young children and expecting parents.**

Having access to and consuming nutritious foods provides the essential building blocks for brain development, healthy growth, and a strong immune system. Yet far too many people in America, including Latino families and children, lack the basic ingredients needed for a healthy life, including consistent and affordable access to nutritious food. Federal nutrition programs, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), are essential tools for reducing food insecurity and improving health among

Latino children and families, but Latinos struggle to access them. Nearly 50% of Latino parents of young children have been denied or terminated from the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program or SNAP, and access to benefits is lower among expecting Latino families.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, WIC participation among eligible participants has declined over the past decade. Enrollment gaps and widespread food insecurity among Latinos result from barriers to program participation, the high cost of healthy foods, and monthly benefits that fall short of letting families put enough food on the table for the month.

**The federal government should:**

- Reauthorize the Farm Bill, without imposing additional work reporting requirements in SNAP while including the following SNAP provisions: improves benefit adequacy, extends benefits to Puerto Rico, lifts the five-year bar on participation for noncitizens, and eliminates eligibility limits and unrealistic barriers to participation.
- Pass a strong Child Nutrition Reauthorization bill that strengthens, expands, and protects child nutrition programs by:
  - Making permanent the flexibilities that allow for remote enrollment, services, and benefit issuance, and facilitating online ordering.
  - Requiring WIC agencies to extend certification periods (the period of time during which an individual may participate in the WIC program before needing to go through a recertification process) to two years for infants, children, and postpartum individuals.



**GOAL 6:** Address gun violence as a civil rights and public health crisis in response to community concerns for child well-being.

Latinos have suffered from huge losses in multiple recent mass shootings motivated by racism and homophobia, including Uvalde, TX (2022); El Paso, TX (2019); and Orlando, FL (2016). While mass shootings are highly visible events, more day-to-day gun violence is an epidemic in communities around the nation and enacts a terrible toll on the Latino community. Each year, more than 4,700 Latinos die from gun violence in the United States—about 13 deaths per day. An additional 13,300 are shot and injured every year. While Congress and the Biden administration enacted the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act in 2022—the first meaningful gun reform law in nearly 30 years—additional action is needed to reduce the epidemic of gun violence.

According to the 2023 National Latino Family Report, 62% of parents of young children are extremely concerned their child will be the victim of a school shooting, and 90% believe their state policymakers should do more to prevent school shootings.<sup>49</sup> Addressing gun violence is not simple—but many levers are better than one. The five pillars of Latino policy interests in gun violence are: 1) gun violence prevention, 2) gun safety, 3) community violence intervention, 4) prevention of school-based attacks, and 5) mental health supports.

**The federal government should:**

- Enact long-overdue, common-sense gun safety laws that protect our schools and other sensitive locations and include liability for gun manufacturers and a ban on assault weapons, as well as licensing and background checks.

**States should:**

- Require background checks prior to gun purchases and closing background check loopholes in gun sales.
- Pass safer storage and extreme risk (sometimes referred to as “red flag”) laws.
- Ban assault weapons and high-capacity magazines.
- Require permits to carry concealed guns in public.
- Raise the minimum legal age to purchase firearms to 21 years old.
- Prohibit people convicted of hate crimes from having guns.
- Implement policies that reduce gun violence by police.
- Invest in community violence intervention programming to address risks.
- Deepen mental health supports to address community, family, and individual trauma from gun violence.



**Latino children experience poverty** at a higher rate than non-Latino children, with 27% living in poverty compared to 9% of white children.<sup>50</sup>

## ECONOMIC SECURITY

A significant portion of Latino families live in poverty and face **economic barriers**, making it difficult to afford quality child care, health care, or nutritious food, and causing stress, which can hinder their children's development.

Latina women continue to face significant wage gaps, earning only 57 cents for every dollar earned by a non-Hispanic white man.<sup>51</sup> Regrettably, too many Latinos face challenges in accessing crucial benefits that can lift families out of poverty.

Latinos are the least likely of any racial or ethnic group to have access to paid family leave through their employer, at half the rate of whites.<sup>52</sup> The

Child Tax Credit and Earned Income Tax Credit are vital tools that have lifted millions of people, including children, out of poverty, yet these tools largely remain unavailable to children of families that do not have a social security number, even when the children themselves or one of their parents is a U.S. citizen. Latino children in the United States also face challenges to their well-being due to poor, unstable, or unaffordable housing.<sup>53</sup>

### **GOAL 7: Improve the economic well-being of pregnant women and families of infants and toddlers.**

Latinos have a higher-than-average labor force participation rate, start businesses at higher rates than their non-Hispanic counterparts, and wield significant purchasing power. Yet they remain overrepresented in low-wage occupations. Latinas also make up a growing share of the U.S. workforce, at 16% of the female labor force, and the number of Latina mothers in the workforce is rising, with 62.8% compared with 71.2% for all mothers. However, for every year that non-Latino white men work, Latinas must work an extra 10 months to make the same amount of money.<sup>54</sup>

Extensive research points to specific policies that help lift people out of poverty. The positive effects of paid family leave on maternal and child health, parent-child bonding, families' financial security, and maternal workforce attachment are well-documented.<sup>55</sup> While the recent expansions of the Child Tax Credit (CTC) in 2021 have contributed to a notable reduction in child poverty, it is essential to address the exclusion of 675,000 children with Individual Taxpayer Identification Numbers (ITIN) from accessing this tax credit—a disparity that remains unresolved. This exclusion perpetuates inequities and undermines the well-being of vulnerable children.



In terms of providing economic opportunity and building wealth, studies have shown that housing is a key factor in stabilizing families and supporting children.<sup>56</sup> Latino homeowners have 28 times the wealth of Latino renters, with a median net worth of \$171,900, compared to a \$6,210 median net worth for Latino renters. Increasing homeownership among Latinos will produce economic security, build intergenerational wealth, and reduce the current wealth gap between Latinos and non-Hispanic whites.

**The federal government should:**

- Adopt a national Paid Family and Medical Leave (PFML) program so that low-income Latino workers can take paid time off from work when sick or to care for a new child or for a seriously ill family member.
- Support equal pay for Latinas and close the Latina wage and wealth gap.
- Craft a tax code that reduces poverty among workers and families and that expands economic opportunity. The 2021 CTC expansions contributed to a significant decline in child poverty and should be made permanent. Furthermore, the eligibility of children with an ITIN, who were denied access to the CTC in 2017, should be restored. The Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), which has lifted approximately 5.6 million people—including 3 million children—out of poverty, should be strengthened, including by extending the benefit to the children of immigrant families.
- Provide a pathway to homeownership for Latinos by improving home buyer readiness, expanding access to credit, increasing housing supply, preserving homeownership to build intergenerational wealth, and increasing representation of Latino leadership at key housing and regulatory agencies.

## IMMIGRATION

The current **immigration** policies and practices in the United States present significant barriers for Latino families with infants and toddlers, necessitating the urgent adoption and implementation of policies that prioritize the well-being and dignity of immigrant communities. While the majority of Latino children are U.S.-born citizens, approximately half of them reside in mixed-status families, where at least one parent is a non-citizen. This unique family dynamic creates a multitude of obstacles as Latino families navigate the complex landscape of access to public programs and services that could help support infants and toddlers.



Undocumented individuals, Legal Permanent Residents (LPRs) who have been in the United States for less than five years, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), and Temporary Protected Status (TPS) recipients cannot access federal Medicaid programs, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP—also known as food stamps), federally funded cash assistance under the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program, and certain tax credits, among other benefits.<sup>57</sup> As a result, they are worse off when facing a crisis, like when a family breadwinner is detained or deported, leaving remaining family members to deal with the effects of financial strain and personal trauma.<sup>58</sup> The constant exposure to immigration enforcement activities also inflicts profound psychological trauma upon these young children, compromising their long-term mental health and well-being.<sup>59</sup>

**GOAL 8:** Pass policies that address the needs of all children and center the dignity and humanity of immigrants and their families.

The fear and uncertainty surrounding immigration enforcement measures force families to make difficult choices, often resulting in the sacrifice of essential preventive and prenatal care for themselves and their children. Furthermore, immigration enforcement practices contribute to housing instability within these communities. Families may face frequent displacement and the upheaval of their living situations, disrupting their children's educational continuity and stability.

In addition to these challenges, current immigration policies have been associated with increased food insecurity among Latino families. Research has shown that children in Latino households are less likely to enroll in nutrition benefits like SNAP and WIC and are more likely to experience food insecurity in areas where there is more local law enforcement cooperation with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). This has far-reaching consequences not only with child hunger, but also on their overall health, development, and educational outcomes.

Given the detrimental impact of current immigration policies and practices on Latino infants and children, there is an undeniable need for policies that center children and dignity.

**The federal government should:**

- Provide a pathway to citizenship for undocumented immigrants in the United States, which would remove the fear of family separation for those eligible and lift a quarter million children out of poverty.<sup>60</sup>
- Ensure that immigration judges are able to consider potential hardship to minor children in all removal decisions regarding their parents.\*<sup>61</sup>
- Exercise executive authority to prioritize immigration enforcement resources, including granting prosecutorial discretion in cases where (a) it is warranted for humanitarian reasons and (b) where an individual can demonstrate certain vulnerabilities—such as those who are pregnant or have children in the United States.
- Ensure regular training for all ICE personnel who may come into contact with children during enforcement activities on how to minimize trauma to children as well as how to implement relevant policies like the parental interest directive and protected areas policy and develop inter-agency guidance to ensure all relevant stakeholders are aware of these policies.

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\* Immigration law permits immigration judges to consider hardship to an individual's family members (spouse, parent, and children) in some removal decisions. In decisions regarding removals, people who have resided in the United States for more than ten years may ask for a form of defense to removal called "cancellation of removal;" in order to qualify for such relief, however, the person must be able to show hardship to minor U.S. citizen or legal permanent resident children that is "substantially different from, or beyond that, which would normally be expected from the deportation of an alien with close family members here." For undocumented parents with less than ten years presence in the United States, there is often no defense to removal available whatsoever, regardless of the hardship deportation will cause to the person's child(ren). See [here](#).

## CONCLUSION

In light of these compelling challenges and disparities, it is evident that comprehensive policy interventions are necessary to address the unique needs of Latino families and promote equitable opportunities to support their children's early development. By addressing these disparities and investing in the education and development of our youngest, we can create a more just and inclusive society where every Latino infant and toddler has a healthy

start to thrive and succeed in life. Providing a nurturing and stimulating environment can help parents and caregivers to promote the physical, cognitive, and emotional development of infants and toddlers, enabling them to thrive and reach their full potential. The demographic imperative compels urgent and strong action: local, state, and federal policymakers must work together to develop, finance, and implement equitable and effective policy solutions.

The Latino Infant Initiative policy agenda provides a comprehensive policy framework that addresses the diverse needs of Latino infants and toddlers, from prenatal to age three, and their families. Recognizing the critical importance of the prenatal to three-year period, this agenda acknowledges the profound impact of early

experiences on a child's development. Through an approach that considers the interconnectedness of issues that families experience, values research evidence, and embraces a child-centered and family-focused perspective, this agenda can serve as a roadmap for policymakers.

In the domain of education, the agenda emphasizes the importance of equitable access to high-quality early childhood education and care. It calls for investments in early education programs, professional development for educators, and culturally responsive curriculum and support services.

The health recommendations prioritize improving access to health care for pregnant women and families of infants and toddlers, including mental health services. The agenda highlights the need for comprehensive prenatal and postpartum coverage, regardless of immigration status, and the removal of barriers to participation in Medicaid and CHIP. Culturally and linguistically responsive mental health services, especially in early childhood settings, are deemed crucial for the well-being of Latino families.



Addressing economic disparities is also a vital component—the agenda underscores the significance of policies that promote economic well-being for pregnant women and families of infants and toddlers, including paid family and medical leave, equal pay for Latinas, and tax reforms that reduce poverty and offer economic opportunities. Moreover, increasing homeownership among Latinos is recognized as a means to reduce wealth gaps and provide long-term economic stability.

Recognizing the unique needs of immigrant families, the policy agenda advocates for comprehensive immigration policies that uphold the dignity of immigrant families. It calls for a pathway to citizenship for undocumented immigrants, consideration of potential hardship to minor children in removal decisions, and the implementation of humane enforcement practices that minimize trauma to children. Access to health care and social services for immigrant families is also emphasized.

We express our gratitude to all individuals and organizations who have contributed to the development of this policy agenda. Recognizing the urgency of the demographic imperative, we call upon policymakers, community leaders, and stakeholders to join forces in championing and advocating for the necessary systems changes that will positively impact the lives of Latino infants, toddlers, and their families. Together, we can build a more inclusive and equitable society that uplifts every child and cultivates their full potential.



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This policy agenda was made possible through generous support from the Pritzker Children's Initiative. The content of this publication is the sole responsibility of UnidosUS and Abriendo Puertas/Opening Doors and may not reflect the views of our funders. We are grateful to the following individuals and organizations who informed and provided feedback on the policy agenda:

- Adrian Pedroza, National Executive Director, Abriendo Puertas/Opening Doors.
- Alex Davis, Senior Associate, Penn Hill Group.
- Amalia Chamorro, Director, Education Policy Project, UnidosUS.
- Amarisa Barboa, parent, Future Focused Education.
- Amilcar Guzman, Program Officer, Pritzker Children's Initiative.
- Anthony Garcia, parent, Gads Hill Center.
- Brayan Rodriguez, Senior Policy Analyst, Economic Policy Project, UnidosUS.
- Cleo Rodriguez, Executive Director, National Migrant and Seasonal Head Start Association.
- Cristofer Ramos, Senior Immigration Advisor, UnidosUS.
- Danica Petroschius, Managing Principal, Penn Hill Group.
- Eva Rivera, Policy Director, Early Childhood Development, The Children's Partnership.
- Fred Genesee, Professor Emeritus, McGill University.
- Isabel Garcia, Executive Director, RCMA.
- Jacqueline Herrera, Program Coordinator, Waltham Family School.
- Javier Martinez, Managing Director of National Policy, Abriendo Puertas/Opening Doors.
- Joana Perez, parent, St. Anne's Family Services.
- Jose Rodriguez, President and CEO, El Concilio.
- Laia Fibla, Postdoctoral researcher, Concordia University.
- Maria Rodriguez, Fiscal Manager, Cypress Hills Child Care.
- Mayra Alvarez, President, The Children's Partnership.
- Melanie Monroe, parent, AVANCE.
- Miriam Calderon, Chief Policy Officer, ZERO TO THREE.
- Naja Ferjan Ramirez, Assistant Professor, University of Washington.
- Robert Stechuk, Director, Early Childhood Initiatives, UnidosUS.
- Samuel Kenney, Senior Policy Analyst, Economic Policy Project, UnidosUS.
- Stan Dorn, Director, Health Policy Project, UnidosUS.
- Steven Almazan, K12 Senior Program Manager, The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights.
- Susana Barragan, Policy Analyst, Economic Policy Project, UnidosUS.
- Tania Villarroel, Senior Policy Analyst, Early Childhood Education, UnidosUS.
- Teresa Granillo, Chief Executive Officer, AVANCE.
- Umaila Fatima, Policy Analyst, Health Policy Project, UnidosUS.
- Viridiana Benitez, Assistant Professor, Arizona State University.



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