

# Enhancing the Inclusion of Latinx/@ Immigrants in New Mexico

Immigrant Well-being Project Policy Brief



## Understanding Latinx/@ Immigrant Experiences

Immigrants make vital contributions to New Mexico's society every day, especially right now during this COVID-19 pandemic. Latinx/@ immigrants are facing an increasingly hostile political, social, and economic climate. In this context, possibilities for social inclusion and meaningful integration have constricted, while psychological distress and other negative health outcomes among immigrants have increased. Our team conducted interviews with Latinx/@ New Mexican immigrant families. We found social-structural conditions could have a negative impact on immigrants' integration into society. All New Mexicans will benefit from policies that remove barriers to enhance immigrants' ability to survive and even thrive in New Mexico. Resettlement experiences after migration are affected by policies, practices, and opportunities of the new context, as well as by the actions of community organizations, which support migrants in legal and social aspects of their adaptation. More than half of New Mexico's population identifies as Latinx/@, and more than 10% of New Mexicans are foreign-born, with the majority (76.9%) from Latin America. Supporting our immigrant neighbors, workers, and colleagues is essential to creating a thriving economy and a stronger future for our state and for our nation.

*New Mexican immigrants experience five distinct trajectories of post-migration integration:*



- 1.** Continuous Inclusion
- 2.** Simultaneous Inclusion and Exclusion
- 3.** Continuous Exclusion
- 4.** Movement from Exclusion to Inclusion
- 5.** Movement from Inclusion to Exclusion



## Immigrants in the United States are facing an increasingly hostile political, social, and economic climate.

The Immigrant Well-being Project (IWP) is a part of the Transdisciplinary Research, Equity, and Engagement (TREE) Center for Advancing Behavioral Health at the University of New Mexico. IWP is a community-based participatory research (CBPR) effort to understand and improve the mental health of Latinx/@ immigrants by adapting and implementing a multilevel approach to engage Latinx/@ immigrants and university students in mutual learning and collaborative efforts to mobilize community resources. The project involves a partnership with four community organizations: *Encuentro*, *New Mexico Dream Team*, *New Mexico Immigrant Law Center*, and *Centro Sávilá*. The IWP is adapted from the Refugee Well-being Project (RWP), which was first implemented in 2000 in Michigan and has been in New Mexico since 2006.

## A Research-Community Partnership Approach

In 2018, we conducted an in-depth examination of the mental health needs, stressors, current political/economic/social context, and local solutions as experienced by 24 Latinx/@ recent and non-recent immigrants and their families. These interviews on average were about one hour and participants were compensated for their time. Our team held retreats in June and July of 2018 for collaborative data analysis. Academic partners trained community research team members on qualitative data analysis. Community members also participated in memo writing to further explore themes. In May 2019, at a final analysis retreat, during our in-depth discussion of the memos, we had a shared realization that participants' stories revealed "mobilities," or different trajectories of inclusion and exclusion within their post-migration experiences.

*“With everything that is happening at the national political climate, it all weighs on one, but it has also opened up opportunities [for] meeting people who are fighting against everything that is happening. It has given me the opportunity to find people like the [New Mexico] Dream Team, or the [New] Mexico Immigrant Law Center, who I think are helping me a lot to develop not only professionally, but personally as a person too.”*

- José, IWP Participant,

### Continuous Inclusion Trajectory

*“When I resolve my immigration status... I do not care about the salary or other things, but I do care about getting medical access.”*

-Claudia, IWP Participant,

### Continuous Exclusion Trajectory

In descending order from most to least common, we found that participants experienced the following trajectories of mobility:

**Continuous inclusion (8)** Connected to other people and organizations, having a viable job or source of income, participating in community activities, and describing their life in the United States and their well-being as primarily positive. Not necessarily immune from experiencing challenges and barriers.

**Simultaneous inclusion and exclusion (6)** Lack of discrimination experiences, ability to find a community, and better life in NM. However, mixed-status families experience a combination of successes and challenges.

**Continuous exclusion (5)** Lack of access to jobs, health, education, and other opportunities, which make it difficult to thrive in a new country. Socially isolated and not well-connected to family, friends, or organizations.

**Movement from exclusion to inclusion (3)** CBOs aided their mobility through helping them gain skills, know their rights, and self-advocate for a better life. Political climate affected the degree of inclusion but relationship with CBOs kept them resilient.

**Movement from inclusion to exclusion (2)** Increasing discrimination and racism experiences because of the changed social and political environment following Trump’s election.

All five trajectories were impacted by the current legal, social, and political context for immigrants, which affected their mental health and well-being!

Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) were integral to immigrants’ integration. However, the current context includes inflammatory rhetoric and structural violence, which impede the ability of CBOs to support immigrants in every aspect of daily life.

- ✓ Nearly all immigrants reported some form of discrimination and racism regardless of legal status.
- ✓ The lack of legal status restricted social mobility and increased experiences of unfair treatment.
- ✓ Experiences of mixed-status families were more complex because of the differential access to resources.
- ✓ Domestic violence, violence from the police, lack of access to resources, lack of respect, and inability to communicate are all forms of violence experienced by participants.
- ✓ Trajectories were gendered; women experiencing exclusion gained CBO support and moved to inclusion, while men experiencing inclusion then experienced discrimination with little CBO support and moved to exclusion.
- ✓ CBOs were critical for reducing or ending violence in the lives of participants.
- ✓ The intersection of violence and legal status shaped immigrants’ trajectories and interactions with CBOs.
- ✓ CBOs provided culturally responsive services, were empowering, and reframed the broader hostile societal narratives to help participants participate meaningfully in their communities and access needed resources.
- ✓ Increasing social relationships, social capital, and social networks are all key adaptation strategies that reduce the negative mental health impact of immigration stressors.

# Access to Resources is Critical

On March 27, 2020, the Coronavirus Act, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act left millions of immigrants behind. New Mexican immigrants are our neighbors; they make sure stores have fruit and vegetables, make and deliver food, as well as provide essential health care, and cleaning and maintaining hospitals. We all win when immigrants are able to fully participate in our schools, workplaces, and community. In this way, we are stronger together

Note: The use of the term “Latinx/@” in this project is the result of discussion among community and university research team members and feedback from other community members. The word was included as a term of reference in our interview questions. However, after a year of data collection, we noted that “Latinx” was not the preferred term for the majority of participants. Thus, in order to be most inclusive in the dissemination of our work, we have decided to use the term Latinx/@ as it includes Latino and Latina within the @, which were the terms with which most participants identified. Given the ongoing discussions around this term, we expect the academic and general consensus to change, but we did not want to privilege a predominantly academic term. In light of our community-based participatory research orientation, we will continue to make shared decisions about terminology.

## What Should Policy-Makers Do?

We urge senators and legislators to pursue bold and innovative ideas with a determination to create safer and more inclusive communities for all immigrants in New Mexico.

## Next Steps for a More Inclusive New Mexico

### New Mexico is a leader in many ways.

We are one of 15 states plus D.C. and Puerto Rico that have inclusive driver’s license policies for immigrants. New Mexico allows immigrants who are undocumented to obtain driver’s licenses, which not only helps them get better jobs, but also improves public safety, and reduces insurance premiums. We are one of 21 states (plus Washington D.C.) that have inclusive higher education policies for immigrants. New Mexico allows students, regardless of documentation, to pay in-state tuition at public colleges and universities and to obtain state federal aid, which over time will boost the skills and wages of the state workforce.

### Building on these strengths, we recommend these policy changes to protect immigrant rights and increase inclusivity:

1. **Minimum wage enforcement.** New Mexico has fewer than 10 investigators to address labor law enforcement infractions to ensure that all workers, regardless of immigration status, are paid the wages they are entitled to, and to help level the playing field for both businesses and workers in NM.
2. **Including immigrant children in health care policies.** Six states and the District of Columbia have inclusive health care policies for immigrant children. New Mexico is not included among them. We need to expand access to health coverage to all children, regardless of immigration status, which can lead to better long-term health outcomes, greater high school and college completion, and long-term economic benefits for immigrant children and for state and local communities.
3. **Ensure that eligibility for new UI relief is inclusive of all workers, regardless of immigration status.** Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA); added 13 weeks of extended UI benefits; and in certain states, \$600 was added to employees’ maximum weekly benefits
4. **Halt implementation of the Public Charge rule changes that took effect in February 2020, relating to the use of crucial safety net programs like SNAP and TANF.** The definition and criteria to qualify as “public charge” expanded on February 24, 2020. Under the Immigration and Nationality Act, an applicant may be denied if they are dependent on certain government safety net programs.

In sum, this study highlights the importance of community-based organizations in promoting individual agency and resistance, but severe constraints were also evident, underscoring the need for broader social change around immigrant rights. Anti-immigrant policies at the federal, state, and local levels are harmful to the mental health and well-being of Latinx/@ families. New Mexico can strengthen all families and communities through creating and staying the course with progressive and equitable immigrant-friendly policies that give all residents the opportunity to thrive. Today’s immigrants are an essential part of New Mexico’s history, present, and future, providing significant contributions to our society.