

IMMIGRANT FINANCIAL INTEGRATION INITIATIVE



UNDERSTANDING THE FINANCIAL BEHAVIORS AND ATTITUDES OF LATINA/O IMMIGRANTS

Survey Brief Number 4

The Mission Asset Fund's Immigrant Financial Integration Initiative (IFII) recently conducted an extensive in-depth survey to analyze the financial attitudes and behaviors of Spanish-speaking Latina/o immigrants who either live or work in San Francisco's Mission District. The Mission District is a historic gateway for new immigrants and provides a vibrant, living context to understand many of the complex issues that low-income immigrant families confront across the country. This Survey Brief is part of a series that analyzes the results from 250 survey respondents and 7 focus group discussions conducted to look at how low-income immigrants integrate into the financial mainstream. Following are key findings which analyze Latina/o immigrants' use of public benefits in San Francisco.

Public Benefits

Our nation's immigration laws put an *"Immigrants Not Welcomed"* sign in front of social safety net programs.

Legal immigrants - regardless of income or need - are restricted for 5 years from participating in social safety net programs like CalWORKs, Food Stamps, and SSI. Undocumented immigrants are categorically ineligible to receive public assistance with only a few exemptions like emergency medical care.

Exactly when immigrants need help the most is when our immigration laws deny them assistance. The MAF survey found that while 91% of recent immigrants (those living in the U.S. for up to 5 years) make less than \$19,200 per year, only 5% reported participating in restricted public benefit programs. In sharp contrast, 23% reported having accessed some form of public assistance from unrestricted programs.

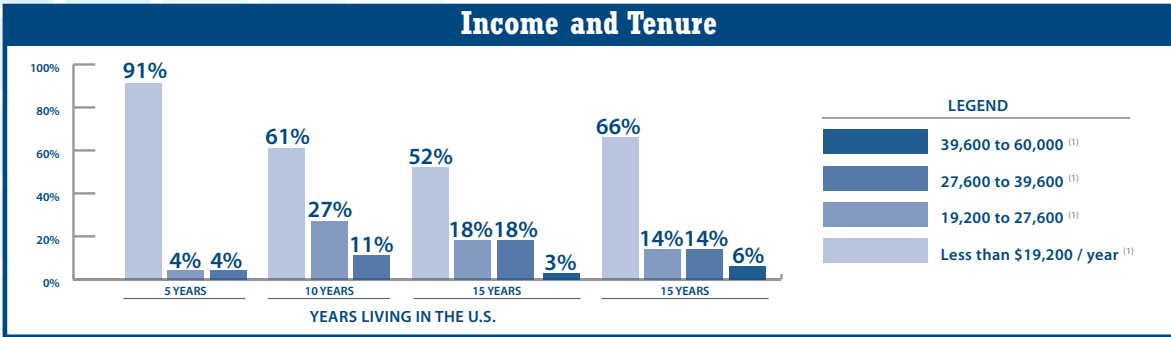
Immigrant eligibility requirements are causing wide spread confusion over who is qualified for what program and by when. Such confusion is actually delaying participation for immigrants that may actually qualify for public assistance. The MAF survey found that only after 10 years of lifting such restriction

that there was an uptake in participation in safety net programs. For CalWORKs and SSI, participation jumped from 3% for those living in the U.S. for 10 years to 13% for those living here for 15 years; for Food Stamps, participation jumped from 16% to 23% in the same time frame.

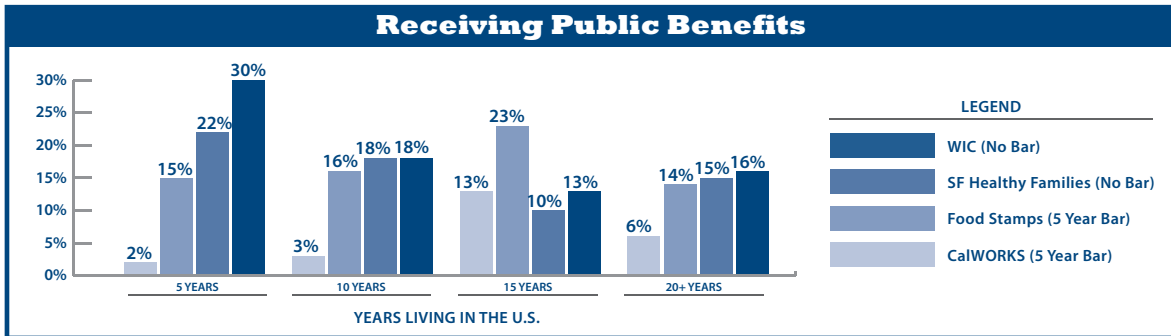
Without access to safety net programs, immigrants can only turn to community organizations for help; they are going to soup kitchens, community food banks, senior nutrition programs, community health clinics, and any group that may actually lend a helping hand. In the Mission, many social service organizations have consistently reported sharp increases for help from immigrant families.

Low income working immigrants are especially vulnerable in these tough economic times; they are dealing with extreme economic hardships made worse by being turned away from safety net programs. Community organizations are answering the calls for help, but they are being stretched beyond their capacity to address the depth of need in immigrant communities.

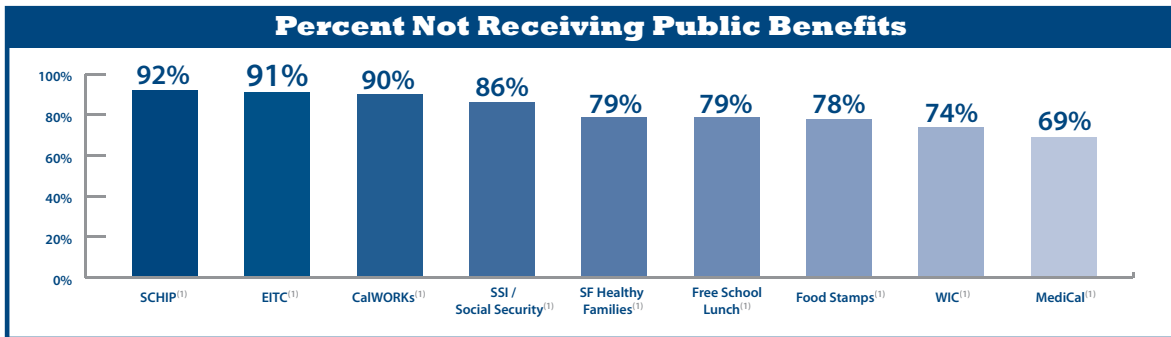
Hard working immigrants deserve better. They contribute to making our country thrive and should have access to safety net programs when they need it most.



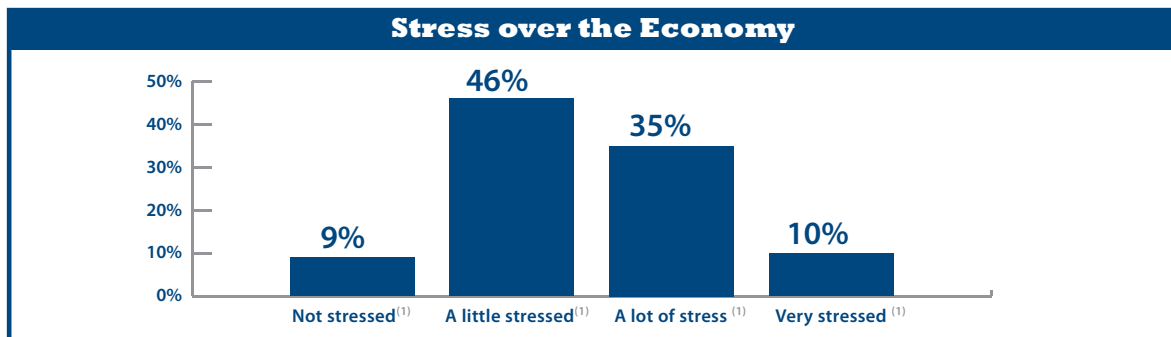
Sources: (1) MAF Survey, 2009



Sources: (1) MAF Survey, 2009



Sources: (1) MAF Survey, 2009



Sources: (1) MAF Survey, 2009

Key Survey Findings

5% of immigrants who have lived in the U.S. for up to 5 years have participated in restricted public benefit programs that impose a 5 year bar; **23%** of recent immigrants have participated in unrestricted public benefit programs

8% of immigrants who have lived in the U.S. for 15 years have participated in restricted public benefit programs; **18%** of immigrants who have lived in the U.S. for 15 years have participated in unrestricted public benefits

Participation in specific programs:

92% reported **never** receiving benefits from the State Children’s Health Insurance Program

91% reported **never** receiving tax benefits from the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC)

90% reported **never** receiving cash benefits from CalWORKS

86% reported **never** receiving Supplemental Security Income (SSI)

79% reported **never** receiving health benefits from the SF Healthy Families

79% reported **never** participating in the Free School Lunch program

78% reported **never** receiving Food Stamps

74% reported **never** receiving Women Infant & Children (WIC) Support

69% reported **never** receiving health benefits from MediCal

DEMOGRAPHICS

MAF Survey Respondents

- 250 Spanish-speaking immigrant Latinas/os that live and/or work in the Mission
- 22% are recent immigrants (5 years or less in the U.S.)
- 78% are established immigrants (more than 5 years in the U.S.)
- 55% are female
- 45% are male
- 66% earn less than \$19,200 per year (30% of SF AMI)

SF Mission District

- 71,611 residents ⁽⁴⁾
- 31,000 Latinas/os ⁽⁶⁾
- 31% speak only Spanish ⁽⁶⁾

SOURCE:

⁽⁴⁾ San Francisco Neighborhood Market DrillDown, Social Compact, March 2008

⁽⁶⁾ Socio-Economic Profile of the Mission District, MEDA, February 2006

TAKE AWAY MESSAGES

- Comprehensive Immigration Reform must remove the “unwelcomed” sign in front of safety net programs
- Public benefit program restrictions based on immigration status such as the five-year waiting period should be removed for legal immigrants
- Strengthen the capacity of immigrant-serving community organizations that are key in helping immigrant families integrate into the mainstream

Methodology

MAF utilized a participatory action research model to conduct the survey and focus groups. MAF created a survey of 35 questions to gather information about respondents' personal, household, and financial situation. We also inquired about their views and attitudes about finances and financial institutions. In the course of 6 weeks (May to June 2009), MAF staff and volunteers collected 250 surveys from respondents that represented 10 different countries in Latin America. The survey has a margin of error of plus/minus 6%.

MAF conducted on-site presentations with the staff and clients of other community based and social service organizations in the Mission District. Volunteers conducted targeted outreach to merchants, street vendors and Latina/o immigrant students. Participants in MAF's Individual Development Account (IDA) program and peer lending circles program ("Cestas Populares") also took part in the survey. MAF invited 70 survey respondents to participate in 7 segmented focus groups to learn more of their views, experiences and attitudes towards money.

MAF will publish a forthcoming working paper with a full analysis of the survey and focus group data, detailing key insights, and public policy and financial product recommendations that can better facilitate the immigrant financial integration process.

Acknowledgements

MAF would like to thank the **Annie E. Casey Foundation** for their generous support of the Immigrant Financial Integration Initiative (IFII). We are also very grateful to the members of the Financial Integration Study Working Group which includes: **Janis Bowdler, Jose Cisneros, Sarah Gordon, Kathy Li, Leigh Phillips, Nick Pagoulatos, Ida Rademacher, Bárbara J. Robles, and Refugio Rochin**. Their feedback and support throughout the process was critical. And the volunteers that helped collect surveys and conduct focus group discussions were vital to the success of the initiative overall. Finally, the data and analysis expressed in this Survey Brief are solely those of MAF staff.

THANK YOU!

MAF gratefully acknowledges the support of the following foundations that enable us to expand access to financial services, savings and investment opportunities for low-income and immigrant residents of the Mission District – thank you!

Bank of America, Citibank, Federal Home Loan Bank of SF, Friedman Family Foundation, Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr. Fund, Levi Strauss Foundation, SF Foundation, SF Mayor's Office of Community Investment, United Way of the Bay Area, and the Walter and Elise Haas Fund

1500 South Van Ness Ave., #200, San Francisco, CA 94110

voice: 415-738-2559 fax: 415-738-2088

www.missionassetfund.org/ifii