

Unauthorized Welfare:

The Origins of Immigrant Status Restrictions in American Social Policy

Cybele Fox

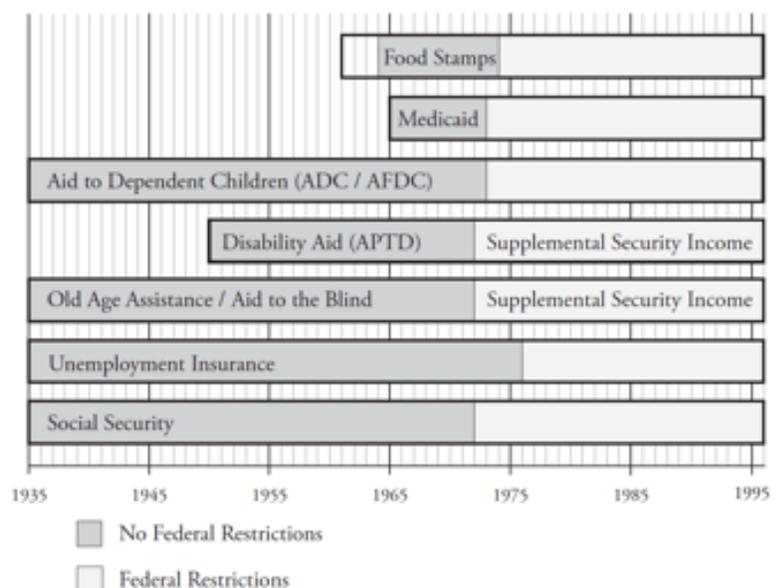
By Jasmijn Slotjes

Policy problem

“You lie!” US congressman [Joe Wilson](#) exclaimed, during the State of the Union in 2009, when President Obama assured congress that Obamacare would not apply to undocumented immigrants. Despite rumors, both political parties agreed that the new health benefits should not be extended to undocumented immigrants, underscoring the widespread consensus that these immigrants are not entitled to social assistance.

However, [Cybele Fox](#) shows in her recently published article, [“Unauthorized welfare: The origins of immigrant status restrictions in American policy,”](#) that this was not always the case. For nearly 40 years, undocumented migrants had relatively liberal access to social benefits. When the modern welfare state was founded in 1935, there were no federal laws barring non-citizens, even undocumented immigrants, from social assistance. This changed during the 1970s when undocumented immigrants were first barred from nearly all federal programs. This clear shift towards more restrictive policies during the 1970s can clearly be seen in Figure 1.

Fig. 1 Shift in federal restrictions to benefits for undocumented immigrants



Unintended consequences

The consequences of federal restriction were significant for undocumented immigrants, their families and those mistakenly presumed to lack papers—usually Latinos. People applying for assistance or seeking health care were sometimes targeted for special scrutiny based on surname, skin color, and foreign accent. These discriminatory practices resulted in denied help and service even when individuals were in possession of US citizenship.

The policy change also resulted in increased cooperation among welfare, health, and immigration officials. Some hospitals shared information about their patients with immigration officials. Rumors spread quickly about the danger of deportation when visiting health centers, resulting in delayed or complete avoidance of care. Cooperation between welfare and immigration officials also affected U.S. citizen children in mixed-status families, whose parents were threatened with deportation if they applied for benefits on behalf of their American-born children.

In order to protect the public health and ensure non-discrimination, state and local officials found over time that they had to continue providing limited services to undocumented immigrants. Yet with mandatory restriction, states were no longer reimbursed by the federal government for the costs of social assistance given to undocumented residents as they had been for almost forty years. Federal restriction heightened the perception of immigration as an “illegitimate burden” at the local level, reinforcing the logic of restriction. It also ushered in years of struggle between local, state, and federal officials over who was responsible for the social costs of undocumented immigration, sowing the seeds of discontent that helped propel the passage of restrictive immigrant policies more than twenty years later.

Undocumented migrants’ access to social welfare

The debate about undocumented migrants’ access to social welfare still carries on today. [Trump’s tweets](#) and [statements by other politicians](#) reinforce the idea that undocumented migrants are a burden on the social welfare system. However, undocumented immigrants are actually [barred from most social welfare programs](#).

Moreover, tax contributions by unauthorized immigrants have actually helped to shore up the finances of the Social Security system. The chief actuary of the Social Security Administration, for example, [calculates](#) that undocumented immigrants paid \$13 billion into the retirement trust fund in 2010, but only received \$1 billion of the benefits. All told, they have [contributed more than \\$100 billion to the Social Security system since 2005](#).

Fox’ article warns us about the consequences of restrictive immigrant policies. The [net fiscal benefit](#) of unauthorized immigrants to Social Security’s financial status offers food for thought in any discussion about the costs and benefits of unauthorized immigration, as well as the current consensus that undocumented immigrants should be excluded from social assistance.



This article by [Cybelle Fox](#) is part of a larger project focusing on the rise of citizenship and legal status restriction in American social welfare policy from the New Deal to the present. Keep an eye out on Fox’ personal page to read more about this project.