

# Disabled Immigrants Face Compounding Barriers to Education and Employment

*Insights from an Expert Convening and Future Research Directions*

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Despite growing attention to addressing racial, ethnic, and other inequities in many domains, limited research explores whether and how society's marginalization of people with disabilities compounds for immigrants to produce inequitable financial outcomes.<sup>1</sup> When accessing education and employment—two important contributors to financial well-being (Grigal et al. 2019; Wehman et al. 2015)—immigrants with disabilities<sup>2</sup> face multiple and intersecting challenges because of not only their disability status (Aron and Loprest 2012; Bonaccio et al. 2020; Druckman et al. 2021), but also related to their citizenship and immigration status, race, ethnicity, and language (Bachmeier and Bean 2011; Cano, Calvo, and Chu 2023; Gonzalez et al. 2023; Hall, Greenman, and Farkas 2010; Portes and Rumbaut 2014; Singh and Lin 2013). Understanding the unique barriers disabled immigrants face in education and employment is critical to advancing the financial well-being of this population.

This summary highlights key takeaways from a convening of nine experts from universities, research organizations, and community organizations knowledgeable about the intersection of immigration and disability (table 1). The conversation, which took place in July 2023, was held in both English and Spanish. The goal of the meeting was to identify barriers to financial well-being among immigrants with disabilities in education and employment. We also discussed how the Protection and Advocacy systems (P&As), which provide legal representation and advocacy for people with disabilities, can help better inform this population of their rights as disabled people and how community-based organizations (CBOs) can bridge gaps in access to education and employment supports. We conclude this summary with some directions for future research based on the convening. The primary takeaways from the convening include:

## **Barriers to Education**

- Immigrant families with disabled students must navigate educational systems that do not recognize how their disability, language, social, and economic needs compound.
- Immigrant families with disabled students are often unaware of the disability services available to their K–12 children, while institutions often lack the ability to understand and support these students and families in ways that acknowledge their cultural and linguistic backgrounds.
- Parents of disabled immigrant children in K–12 are often left out of decisionmaking for education plans for their children because of parents' limited English proficiency, a lack of information or assistance in multiple languages, and related reasons.
- In higher education, students with disabilities must advocate for themselves to obtain accommodations, but many disabled immigrant students face additional constraints, like language barriers, that their US-born peers do not encounter.

## **Barriers to Employment**

- Vocational rehabilitation programs, which provide job training services and help disabled people find, secure, and retain employment, have not been sufficiently updated to provide services for immigrants with disabilities in the languages they need and with appropriate sensitivity to their cultural and linguistic background.
- Discrimination and immigration status barriers make obtaining and maintaining employment difficult for immigrants with disabilities.

## **How Protection and Advocacy Systems and CBOs Can Support Disabled Immigrants**

- Protection and Advocacy systems can support disabled immigrants and their families, but more effective outreach is needed.
- CBOs that serve immigrants and disabled people can make greater efforts to provide disabled immigrants with information about organizations that would advocate on their behalf and legal resources.

## **BARRIERS TO EDUCATION**

1. ***Immigrant families with disabled students must navigate educational systems that do not recognize how their disability, language, social, and economic needs compound.***

Convening participants emphasized that disabled students in immigrant families can have a multitude of economic, social, language, and other needs in addition to those related to disability. For example, immigrant families tend to have higher rates of material hardship, such as food insecurity, compared with all-US-born families, and these rates are likely to be even higher for immigrant families with disabled members, given disabled immigrants' low incomes (Echave and Gonzalez 2022; Bernstein et al. 2022). Participants also remarked that students with disabilities in immigrant families could face additional social stressors that take a negative toll on their mental health and either create or exacerbate related disabilities. Unique stressors for disabled immigrant students can include the need to interpret for family members, fear of immigration enforcement or deportation for self or family members, and trauma—especially for those fleeing violence or persecution in their home country (Capps et al. 2020; Sangalang et al. 2019; Villanueva and Buriel 2010).

Further, some participants noted that disabled immigrant students with limited English proficiency are often channeled into either English language learner programs or special education services rather than receiving support for both needs. Compared with other school-age students, English language learners are more likely to be diagnosed with learning disabilities, such as speech and language impairments, but less likely to be diagnosed with other types of disabilities, such as autism.<sup>3</sup> This may suggest that some children in immigrant families who might need English language supports are instead diagnosed with a disability (Morgan et al. 2015). To better serve students with disabilities in immigrant families, participants emphasized educational systems will need to not only address students' disability-related needs but also provide supports for English language learners and help families meet their basic needs.

2. ***Immigrant families with disabled students are often unaware of the disability services available to their K-12 children, and institutions often lack the ability to understand and support these students and families in ways that acknowledge their cultural and linguistic background.***

Convening participants stressed that disability-related services and protections exist for students, but immigrant families with disabled students are often unaware of these. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is a federal law that guarantees disabled students access to free public education and

special education and services such as early intervention for children with developmental disabilities.<sup>4</sup> Although about 12 percent of students served under the IDEA are English language learners, convening participants remarked that educational supports were not designed to help disabled students in ways that acknowledge their cultural and linguistic background.<sup>5</sup> For example, even families who might be aware of or accessing services can face challenges navigating disability services if, for example, the related resources are not translated into the languages that disabled students and their parents need. These barriers could contribute to poor educational outcomes among disabled students in immigrant families: for example, relative to other disabled students, disabled English language learners have lower high school graduation rates.<sup>6</sup>

Additionally, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, which protects the rights of disabled people participating in federally-funded programs and activities such as public schools, and the Americans with Disabilities Act, which protects against discrimination in government services, programs, and activities, including in public schools irrespective of whether or not they receive federal funding, also offer legal protections for disabled students.<sup>7</sup> However, convening participants explained that immigrant families might not be aware that they can seek enforcement of their disabled student's rights through the US Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights if a public school fails to comply with federal law. Convening participants also indicated that some immigrant families may also fear seeking legal aid to enforce their rights because of the parent's or child's immigration status, despite immigrant children's right to equal access to public education regardless of their or their parent's citizenship or immigration status.<sup>8</sup>

**3. *Parents of disabled immigrant children in K-12 are often left out of decision making for education plans for their children.***

Participants explained that primary and secondary schools can—both intentionally and unintentionally—undermine immigrant parents' ability to make decisions about their disabled child's education. Research shows parental involvement is key to a child's academic success (Castro et al. 2015). For immigrant parents of students with disabilities, however, it can be challenging to be involved in their child's education because they have to simultaneously navigate the complexity of the US education system, the special education system, language barriers, unfamiliar cultural norms, competing personal and family demands, and a lack of culturally and linguistically accessible information (Bravo-Ruiz and Flynn 2022; Gomez Mandic et al. 2010; Rios, Aleman-Tovar, and Burke 2020).

Convening participants noted that in K-12 settings, immigrant parents are at greater risk of being left out of decisions about their children's Individualized Education Programs than parents who are not immigrants because of their limited English proficiency and some schools' failure to provide information and assistance in multiple languages. Under civil rights law, schools must provide parents with these services and information about their child's education in a language they understand, but that does not consistently happen.<sup>9</sup>

**4. *In higher education, students with disabilities must advocate for themselves to obtain accommodations, but many disabled immigrant students face additional constraints that their US-born peers do not encounter.***

Transitions into higher education can be difficult for all students with disabilities, but especially so for students with disabilities in immigrant families, according to convening participants. The increased difficulty level of college courses may also increase a student's need for accommodations. However, accommodations for students with disabilities are not as widely advertised in higher education, compared with K-12, when students

have access to Individualized Education Programs or other services (Bolt et al. 2011). Further, obtaining the accommodations disabled students need to succeed academically requires significant self-advocacy.

According to convening participants, these challenges are compounded for disabled students in immigrant families. Participants emphasized that it can be intimidating for students with disabilities in immigrant families to advocate for themselves to obtain academic accommodations. The process of requesting accommodations can be especially confusing and challenging for non-English speaking students if resources are unavailable in the languages students prefer and with the appropriate sensitivity to their cultural backgrounds.

Additionally, to request accommodations, students must disclose a disability to their institution's administrative office. As some participants explained, this can be challenging for students who have tried to mask their disability for cultural reasons or fear of stigma. Disability documentation requirements (i.e., evaluation results that verify the existence of a disability) also tend to vary across postsecondary institutions, as there are no clear standards on what qualifies as a "current" and "substantial" learning limitation (Madaus, Banerjee, and Hamblet 2010). Inconsistent requirements for students to prove that they have disabilities across institutions, a lack of awareness about available accommodations, feelings of stigma, and language barriers can impede the success of postsecondary disabled students in immigrant families.

## **BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT**

### **1. *Vocational rehabilitation programs have not been sufficiently updated to provide services for immigrants with disabilities.***

The vocational rehabilitation (VR) system, which provides job training services and helps disabled people find, secure, and retain employment, was originally designed for disabled veterans under the Soldier's Rehabilitation Act of 1918.<sup>10</sup> It was later extended to civilians with disabilities in 1920. In recent years, VR programs across some places in the US have been criticized for delays in service and lacking the staff and funding to ensure successful job placements and educational opportunities for participants.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to these issues, convening participants noted that VR programs have not been sufficiently updated to match the current racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity of the US, often failing to provide services in culturally and linguistically effective ways. Participants noted that immigrants with limited English proficiency must overcome language barriers to qualify for scholarships or training programs offered by local rehabilitation services (Rfat, Zeng, and Trani 2023). They also explained that VR programs use job assessments that are often not relevant to the professional goals and skill levels of many immigrants with disabilities. For instance, one participant explained that immigrants with disabilities who want to pursue a career in higher education may be placed in training programs for entry-level manual labor, such as construction, which is not applicable to their goals. This discrepancy between their professional goals and the trainings available, combined with language barriers, immigration-related eligibility requirements, and limited awareness of available VR programs can further exclude immigrants with disabilities from the workforce (Mirza 2012).

### **2. *Discrimination and immigration status barriers make obtaining and maintaining employment difficult for immigrants with disabilities.***

When seeking employment or professional advancement, immigrants with disabilities may encounter employment discrimination because of disability and immigration status, as well as other factors, including race, ethnicity, and language (Gomberg-Muñoz 2010; Gonzalez et al. 2023; Misra et al. 2021).

Lack of lawful immigration status also poses barriers to employment opportunities. Undocumented immigrants are often limited to jobs that offer low wages and require a high degree of physical labor because these are often the only occupations where employment is possible (Hall and Greenman 2015; Orrenius and Zadovny 2009). Undocumented immigrants with mobility disabilities and/or visual impairments can be precluded from these types of jobs, further constraining their employment prospects and financial well-being.

Some immigrants who are in the process of applying for legal immigration status can obtain temporary work permits that allow them to legally work in the US.<sup>12</sup> However, these workers also often face employment uncertainty because of the need to regularly renew such permits. Participants noted that disabled immigrants with work permits may need additional assistance when renewing their permits because of language barriers and unfamiliarity with the process. Additionally, participants noted that the lack of a permanent immigration status could dissuade disabled immigrant workers from disclosing a disability and seeking the accommodations they need (Walter et al. 2002).

## HOW P&As AND CBOs CAN HELP REMOVE BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT AND EDUCATION

### 1. *P&As can support disabled immigrants and their families, but more outreach is needed.*

P&As are a network of federally mandated and financed organizations that are part of the National Disability Rights Network. They protect the rights of disabled people in all 50 States and DC by providing legal representation and advocacy for people with disabilities, and encouraging system change.<sup>13</sup> While some P&As are beginning to engage more with immigrants, participants noted outreach to these populations is not yet widespread.

### 2. *CBOs that serve immigrants and disabled people can make greater efforts to provide disabled immigrants with information about organizations that would advocate on their behalf and legal resources.*

CBOs are effective messengers because their staff often share the same cultural and linguistic backgrounds as the communities they serve (Vu et al. 2016). However, CBOs are often narrowly focused on either disability- or immigrant-related services.

Participants noted that CBOs and their staff could benefit from capacity building and additional resources to provide services that address needs at the intersection of disability and immigration. Leveraging immigrant-serving organizations' rapport with their clients could help bridge gaps in awareness about the availability of disability-related advocacy and legal supports and resources. CBOs that serve people with disabilities could similarly provide targeted resources for immigrants in their community. For example, Access Living, an independent living center that provides advocacy, independent living skills, transition support, and other services for people with disabilities, developed "Know Your Rights" toolkits and workshops for immigrants with disabilities so families have more information about the types of accommodations they can request when detained by Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

## DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

As described above, immigrants with disabilities face structural barriers because of not only their disability status but also their nativity and immigration status, race, ethnicity, language, gender, and other factors. Interventions to support the financial well-being of disabled immigrants will need to be equally multi-faceted and responsive to these intersecting and compounding barriers.

While convening participants highlighted important barriers to financial well-being for disabled immigrants and their families, further research is needed to quantitatively and qualitatively understand the challenges they face in accessing education and employment. Importantly, research that can identify systematic barriers and opportunities

to reduce or eliminate those barriers will be crucial to narrowing inequities. Drawing on themes that emerged during the convening, we highlight a few directions for future research:

- **Systematically assess how immigration status, disability, and other socioeconomic and demographic factors combine to restrict the educational success and employment opportunities for immigrants with disabilities and identify changes in policy and practice that would improve their outcomes.** More research is needed on the challenges immigrants with disabilities face (e.g., structural barriers and discrimination in education and employment, income inequalities, health inequities, etc.) and how these compound for those who are part of other marginalized communities (e.g., racialized groups, mixed-status families, people with limited English proficiency). Identifying evidence-based policies that can address these barriers will also be needed.
- **Measure access to disability services in education spaces.** By determining the extent to which immigrants with disabilities and their families are supported in K–12 and higher education, we can better assess how a lack of services shapes educational and financial trajectories and identify changes that would improve those trajectories. More research is also needed on how educational institutions can help disabled immigrant students transition from K–12 to college and employment more successfully.
- **Measure access to employment and career advancement services.** Future research could assess the extent to which immigrants with disabilities are benefiting from programs that support employment and career advancement for people with disabilities and how greater access to such programs could improve outcomes for immigrants with disabilities.
- **Identify and address knowledge gaps with respect to familiarity with disability rights among immigrants.** Understanding whether immigrants with disabilities are aware of their rights and the extent to which P&As successfully conduct outreach to these populations can help identify and close gaps in current services.

**TABLE 1**  
**List of Convening Participants and Affiliations**

Name	Affiliation
Mustafa Rfat	Department of Social Work at the Brown School Washington University in St. Louis
Mia Ives-Rublee	Center for American Progress
Katherine Pérez	The Coelho Center for Disability Law, Policy and Innovation
Mansha Mirza	Department of Occupational Therapy at the University of Illinois Chicago
Lisette Torres-Gerald	TERC
Michelle Garcia	Access Living
Jose Luis Hernández	Inmigrantes con Discapacidad
María Cioè-Peña	Division of Education Linguistics at the University of Pennsylvania
Rooshey Hasnain	Department of Disability and Human Development at the University of Illinois Chicago

Source: Urban Institute convening participants.

**NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> We use the term “immigrant” to refer to people who live in the US and were born abroad. This includes immigrants and refugees who entered through various admissions pathways and encompasses a range of nativity and immigration statuses, including naturalized US citizens, undocumented immigrants, and immigrants with lawful permanent residence or other lawful immigration status.

<sup>2</sup> In this summary, we use the terms “people with disabilities” and “disabled people” interchangeably to employ [people-first](#) and [identity-first language](#). We recognize that not all group members identify the same way and that language evolves.

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- <sup>3</sup> “OSEP Fast Facts: Students with Disabilities Who Are English Learners (ELs) Served under IDEA Part B,” US Department of Education, April 8, 2022, <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/osep-fast-facts-students-with-disabilities-english-learners>.
- <sup>4</sup> “About IDEA,” US Department of Education, accessed September 27, 2023, <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/about-idea/>.
- <sup>5</sup> “OSEP Fast Facts.”
- <sup>6</sup> “OSEP Fast Facts.”
- <sup>7</sup> “Postsecondary Institutions and Student with Disabilities,” ADA National Network, accessed September 27, 2023, <https://adata.org/factsheet/postsecondary>.
- <sup>8</sup> “Educational Services for Immigrant Children and Those Recently Arrived to the United States,” US Department of Education, accessed September 27, 2023, <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/rights/guid/unaccompanied-children.html>.
- <sup>9</sup> “Information for Limited English Proficient (LEP) Parents and Guardians and for Schools and School Districts that Communicate with Them,” US Department of Justice and US Department of Education, accessed October 31, 2023; “Schools’ Civil Rights Obligations to English Learner Students and Limited English Proficient Parents,” US Department of Education, accessed November 30, 2023, <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/ellresources.html>.
- <sup>10</sup> Department of Public Health and Human Services (DPHHS). 2023. Vocational Rehabilitation History. Retrieved from: <https://dphhs.mt.gov/assets/detd/SRCouncil/VRHistory.pdf>
- <sup>11</sup> Meredith Kolodner, “Problems Plague Vocational Rehabilitation,” *Disability Scoop*, September 21, 2026, <https://www.disabilityscoop.com/2016/09/21/problems-plague-voc-rehab/22777/>.
- <sup>12</sup> “Employment Authorization Document,” US Citizenship and Immigration Services, accessed November 30, 2022, <https://www.uscis.gov/green-card/green-card-processes-and-procedures/employment-authorization-document>.
- <sup>13</sup> For more information on P&As, see “Protecting Rights and Preventing Abuse of People with Disabilities,” [acl.gov](https://acl.gov), accessed November 30, 2023, <https://acl.gov/programs/aging-and-disability-networks/state-protection-advocacy-systems>.

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