

Survey: Cost of Path to Citizenship May Leave Many Aspiring Americans Undocumented

PICO National Network survey of families with undocumented family members reveals need to reduce costs to make Senate bill workable

WASHINGTON — As the Senate Judiciary Committee continues working through amendments on proposed immigration legislation this week, a new membership survey of families who have undocumented family members reveals that high costs from fines and fees are likely to be the greatest barrier to legalization in the Senate proposal, followed by the challenge of providing documentation of employment.

Released today, the confidential survey of 718 families who are members of PICO National Network, the largest faith-based organizing network in the country, provides valuable information about the needs and priorities of immigrant families who are at the center of the debate in Washington. The survey also details top priorities for improving the legislation and a snapshot of undocumented residents including information about the length of their residence in the United States, the prevalence of mixed-status households and how often a family member has been detained. The survey also contains personal testimonies from families torn apart by the current broken immigration system.

“Immigrant families need a roadmap, not roadblocks,” said Msgr. Fernando Ferrarese, pastor of Immaculate Conception Catholic Church in Queens, New York City, and a member of PICO National Network. “This survey is a reminder of just how high the stakes are for immigrant Americans as the Senate debates changes to immigration legislation. Immigration reform that leaves millions of aspiring Americans still undocumented will be a failure. We pray that Washington will heed the concerns of the families who are at the center of this debate and will not make earning citizenship so onerous and expensive that millions are left behind.”

Nearly 2-in-5 (39 percent) of respondents said that costs, which include \$2,000 in fines and unspecified fees, could be a barrier for their families to apply for legal status and citizenship. Current estimates of the Senate bill put the number closer to \$4,000 per person. With many mixed-status families containing more than one aspiring American, families face paying multiple fines for all members to earn citizenship. Another quarter of respondents (26 percent) said they would be unable to meet requirements to document employment because they are working in occupations such as day laborer, domestic or homemaker, working part time or are self-employed.

Some respondents said that they had trouble affording the cost of their children applying for Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), which requires a \$465 fee, with some people saying they had to choose which of their children would apply.

These concerns were reflected in the respondents’ priorities for improvement in immigration reform legislation. When asked to rank their concerns, making the path to citizenship less than 13 years long was the top priority, followed by promoting family unity by protecting people’s ability to bring family members to the country, lowering fines and costs, and removing a requirement to show proof of employment to be able to apply for citizenship.

“To make the cost of citizenship so high that some people are left undocumented is antithetical to our American values,” said Eddie Carmona, Campaign Director, PICO’s Campaign for Citizenship. “Immigrants are often doing back-breaking work at low wages, and for many, legal status is the key to a better life. As people of faith, we recognize that each person is made in God’s image with inherent dignity and worth, not just defined by their job or income.”

On average, undocumented immigrants in the survey have been living in the United States for 15 years. Six-in-ten undocumented immigrants in the survey live in mixed-status households where some people are citizens or permanent residents and others lack any legal status. In many cases, children who are citizens have parents who are undocumented. Many respondents shared painful stories of losing their spouses and parents to deportation, the trauma caused to children and the fear of living without status.

The full survey report is available online at: www.piconetwork.org/familysurvey. The confidential online survey contained 18 questions and gathered information on 718 families and 2,257 individuals. While not a representative random sample of all families, it provides valuable information about the needs and priorities for immigrant families who belong to faith communities involved in PICO National Network’s Campaign for Citizenship and will inform advocacy efforts moving forward.

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PICO National Network is the largest grassroots, faith-based organizing network in the United States. PICO works with 1,000 religious congregations in more than 200 cities and towns through its 60 local and state federations. PICO and its federations are non-partisan and do not endorse or support candidates for office. PICO urges people of faith to consult their faith traditions for guidance on specific policies and legislation. Learn more at www.piconetwork.org.

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