

State-level immigration policies grow more common

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While immigration policy has been the purview of the U.S. federal government, nearly all states have taken a more-active role on the issue of unauthorized immigration in the past 15 years through actions such as making drivers licenses available regardless of immigration status and requiring employers to verify eligibility to work, according to a new RAND Corporation report.

States rarely examine the costs and benefits of such policies before enacting them, suggesting the need for a comprehensive tool to help state policymakers assess the full range of costs and benefits of immigration policies before they are adopted, researchers say.

Some states primarily enacted policies that place restrictions on unauthorized immigrants in the areas of employment, education, housing, health care and other aspects of daily life, according to the report. Other states took an opposite course, adopting policies that are unrestrictive toward unauthorized immigrants, such as granting qualified unauthorized immigrants access to in-state college tuition, access to [drivers licenses](#) and extending access to subsidized health care for qualifying pregnant women and children.

Some states embraced both types of policies, with 39 states adopting one or more of the policies examined by the report.

"An absence of comprehensive federal immigration reform has resulted in more states taking action on immigration issues," said Lynn Karoly,

the study's lead author and a senior economist at RAND, a nonprofit research organization. "The policies create benefits for some groups and losses for others, which suggests the need for a more-objective way of assessing the expected effects of these state-level immigration policies."

Researchers found the most common supportive [policy](#) was removing [immigration status](#) as a criterion for in-state tuition eligibility. The policy has been adopted in 20 states, including the six with the largest number of immigrants (California, Florida, Illinois, New Jersey, New York and Texas).

Finding very little pre-enactment assessment of the impact of such policies, Karoly and study co-author Francisco Perez-Arce created a cost-benefit framework that would allow policymakers and others to assess the economic and fiscal impacts of state-level immigration policies across multiples stakeholder groups and outcome domains.

While state-level immigration policies often have a specific goal such as restricting the number of unauthorized immigrants, the actions are also likely to affect groups not targeted by the policies such as authorized immigrants, U.S. citizens, and private firms. In addition to private costs or benefits, there may be gains or losses to the public sector at the local, state, or federal level, researchers say.

For example, increasing state and local immigration-related [law enforcement](#) may affect authorized immigrants and U.S. citizens if law enforcement costs increase overall or if greater immigration-related enforcement crowds out other law enforcement activity. The policies may also reduce participation in public programs and services or reduce civic engagement on the part of authorized immigrants and U.S. citizens.

"There is starting to be some evidence about who is affected by these policies beyond those who are the primary targets," Karoly said. "There

have been cases where the impact may spill over onto authorized [immigrants](#) and naturalized or native-born U.S. citizens."

One study of stricter enforcement of immigration laws at the local level, reviewed by the RAND researchers, found reduced participation in Medicaid by the U.S. citizen children of unauthorized parents. Studies of the impact of mandating use of electronic verification (known as E-Verify) before hiring workers suggest that naturalized U.S. citizens and native-born populations with low education levels also experience declines in employment, potentially because of a decline in labor demand.

Despite a growing body of evidence about the spillover effects of state-level policies, researchers found that few cost-benefit studies have been conducted to assess the full impact of state-level immigration policies.

RAND researchers say that the cost-benefit framework they developed can provide an avenue to develop more objective and balanced perspectives on the expected favorable and unfavorable effects of any state-level immigration policy.

Such assessments should include the dollar values associated with any outcomes, whether society as a whole benefits from the policy, and which groups are likely to experience net gains versus net losses.

Provided by RAND Corporation

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