

The Trump administration's new plan to punish legal immigrants

By Editorial Board

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THE TRUMP administration's crusade against illegal immigration tends to grab the headlines, but it obscures the equally concerted attack on the legal variety — including authorized immigrants with valid documents, many of them with U.S. citizen spouses and children, who lead settled, productive lives in the United States.

Among the most radical examples of that campaign is a proposal, [reported](#) by The Post, that would overhaul long-standing rules by reclassifying huge numbers of legal immigrants who receive an array of tax and other benefits, including for health and nutrition, as “charges.” They would be denied green cards as legal permanent residents and potentially subject to deportation, or barred from entering the country in the first place if deemed “likely” to need such assistance.

The administration's blueprint, a product of the Homeland Security Department now awaiting preliminary approval from the Office of Management and Budget, would have sweeping effects. It would cover not only benefits granted to current legal immigrants but also to their U.S. citizen spouses and children. For instance, if an American-born child receives Medicaid or health insurance subsidies, that could be grounds to disqualify his parent from receiving a green card.

The most recent version of the plan leaves fuzzy the possibility of deporting legal immigrants whose offense would be to have received benefits. The real target seems to be choking off the flow of future immigrants deemed “likely” to receive benefits — by utterly arbitrary guesswork and mushy criteria that would be applied by U.S. bureaucrats evaluating their applications.

It's hard to overstate the proposed rule revision's draconian effects. Under the existing system, federal officials are authorized to deny green cards to immigrants who receive what are called “cash” welfare benefits — mainly under Temporary Assistance for Needy Families or elderly and disabled people who receive cash assistance under the Supplemental Security Income program. In the administration's plan, working-class immigrants would be penalized if they claimed practically any benefit for which they qualified — even the earned-income tax credit, which is used by tens of millions of American workers and whose effect is to promote employment.

The impact would be particularly devastating for individuals and families with children, who might now use any one of several health and insurance benefits — without which they are far more likely to land in a hospital emergency room, at considerable cost to the public. The chilling effect of the new rule might dissuade many such families, fearing the repercussions of receiving such benefits, from seeking the care their children need. How is that in America's interest?

Immigrant families pay billions of dollars in taxes and over time have accrued to the nation's enormous benefit. Those benefits, in addition to the country's increasingly acute shortage of workers, are ignored by the administration in its quest to reduce the foreign-born share of the population. In fact, government figures show that legal immigrants are no more likely than native-born Americans to claim public benefits. By punishing immigrants for doing so, the administration would impoverish the nation.