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IMMIGRATION
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Supporting Immigrant Youth: A Guide for School Counselors

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Immigrant-origin children and youth represent one of the fastest-growing populations in U.S. schools, comprising 26% of all children nationwide.¹ Across the United States, school counselors are uniquely positioned to support these students' socioemotional, academic, and college and career development. Guided by the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) Student Standards,² the work of school counselors promotes essential learning strategies, self-management skills, and social skills.

This Immigration Initiative at Harvard Educator Brief provides school counselors with essential knowledge about the diversity of immigrant experiences and evidence-based strategies to effectively support immigrant-origin students across all developmental domains.



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IMMIGRANT-ORIGIN STUDENTS

When working with immigrant-origin children and youth, it is important to recognize the diversity of the immigrant experience. Since the 1960s, migration from Latin America and Asia has increased substantially. Today, many new immigrants are from Mexico, India, and Cuba.³ Though the public often discusses issues of immigration around illegality, the truth is that the majority of immigrant-origin children and youth are U.S. citizens.⁴ Others may occupy a variety of legal statuses, including being undocumented, having temporary protected status, or being a permanent resident. There are others who might be seeking asylum or who are dependent upon their parents' visa status.⁵ In addition, it is important to recognize that immigrant-origin children and youth may live in mixed-status households. About 5.1 million U.S. citizen children and youth live in households where a family member may be in a precarious legal situation.⁶

The diversity of immigrant-origin children and youth extends beyond legal status and encompasses varying linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The latter is explored in previous educator briefs which highlight the experiences of Latine, Asian, Black, and MENA immigrant children and youth.⁷ Recognizing the diversity of immigrant-origin children and youth along racial, linguistic, class, and legal status is essential for school counselors to provide tailored services.

IMMIGRANT-ORIGIN STUDENTS AND SOCIOEMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Immigrant-origin students navigate a complex socioemotional landscape shaped by the cumulative stresses of migration, acculturation, and, too often, discrimination and exclusion.⁸ Many first-generation students have experienced traumatic events before, during, and after migration – including violence, family separation, detention, or life-threatening journeys – that can have profound impacts on their well-being and school



adjustment. Both first- and second-generation students may be exposed to the effects of intergenerational trauma as well, shaped by the hardships their parents and caregivers have endured. Upon arrival, immigrant-origin students frequently encounter acculturative stress as they work to navigate unfamiliar cultural norms, a new language, and a new educational system, often while simultaneously managing adult-like family responsibilities. Undocumented students and those in mixed-status families face the added burden of fear around deportation and family separation, which can produce chronic anxiety that undermines concentration, motivation, and overall school engagement. These challenges are compounded by experiences of racialization, xenophobia, and discrimination – which can erode students' self-esteem and sense of belonging. School counselors, attuned to these layered socioemotional challenges, are uniquely positioned to provide the relational support, psychological safety, and coping resources immigrant-origin students need to thrive.

A foundation of cultural humility, identity affirmation, and anti-racist practice is necessary to support all areas of development, especially socioemotional development of immigrant-origin students. School counselors play a vital role in creating emotionally safe and inclusive environments where

students' languages, family structure, migration experiences, and cultural backgrounds are honored. School counselors who recognize the systemic barriers immigrant-origin students face can create lessons and interventions that validate the lived experiences of students while highlighting their strengths and resilience.

Attending to students' socioemotional development can take a variety of forms. For elementary school counselors, this often includes dedicated time for classroom lessons. For middle and high school counselors, the use of small groups and/or individual check-ins might be more common. Regardless of format, immigrant-origin students benefit from school counselors who are attentive to their social/emotional needs through a variety of strategies and interventions:

Classroom Lessons

- Incorporating books that feature the varying experiences of migration helps normalize the act of migration for young children. The inclusion of books that discuss the migration journey as well as the post-migration experience can provide an opportunity for students to better understand the reasons why people migrate as well as the mixed emotions that come with moving to a new country.

- Discussing books that feature the experience of family separation provides an opportunity for students who are experiencing family separation due to migration, detention and/or deportation to process their emotions and feel understood. Some immigrant-origin students grow up separated from extended family members due to restrictions on migration. Others may be experiencing the removal of their parents or loved ones by immigration enforcement.
- Intentionally teaching social skills focused on self-confidence, emotional regulation, and social awareness helps provide students with practical coping strategies that support resilience, ease transitions, and assist them in adjusting to new social and cultural environments.

Small Group and Individual Sessions

- Fostering a space for immigrant-origin students to discuss their experiences with discrimination based on perceived immigration status, race, language(s), or cultural practices can help immigrant children and youth work through feelings of shame and diminished belonging and begin to rebuild confidence. It is important for school counselors to understand how immigrants are oftentimes racialized as “illegal.”⁹ This is especially common among those who identify as Latine. In addition, Asian immigrant children and youth might experience being seen as foreigners despite their long histories in the United States.¹⁰ In a similar vein, Black immigrants most often endure the legacy of racism whereas MENA immigrants often experience bullying due to their religious identities.¹¹ Because these experiences can have a significant impact on students’ emotional health and sense of



self, individual counseling offers an important setting for affirming their diverse identities and fostering psychological safety as well as self-awareness.

- Creating peer mentoring groups can cultivate a sense of belonging and community amongst immigrant-origin students. This is especially true for newly arrived students who might not yet have established relationships with peers and might be encountering difficulties as they navigate a new educational system. Peers can be great sources of knowledge and support. Peer mentoring also reinforces key ASCA mindsets (particularly those related to school connectedness and confidence) while promoting essential social skills.
- Ensuring access to extracurricular activities, including social and cultural clubs as well as sports, can help foster immigrant-origin students’ sense of belonging. These spaces outside of the classroom can provide opportunities for them to not only form relationships with other trusting adults, but with other peers with whom they might not regularly interact given the high incidence of segregation which immigrant-origin students who are classified as English learners might experience throughout the school

day.¹²

- Teaching emotional regulation skills and coping strategies that can be tailored to the unique stressors immigrant-origin students may experience can help students manage anxiety, acculturative stress, and the uncertainty that often accompanies transition. Strategies include problem-solving skills, identifying trusted adults, and grounding techniques.

Collaborations with Stakeholders

- Working alongside district and school administrators, school counselors can advocate to secure additional mental health services that specialize in addressing trauma. Because immigrant-origin students may have experienced traumatic events throughout the migration process, school counselors should partner with clinicians and mental health organizations trained in such interventions as Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (TF-CBT), culturally-rooted healing practices, and prolonged exposure therapies.
- Collaborating with teachers to strengthen classroom practices can support the social emotional



well-being of immigrant-origin students. School counselors can offer guidance on culturally responsive strategies that foster a welcoming classroom environment and share common emotional responses so teachers are accurately interpreting student behavior as a potential product of acculturative stress, uncertainties at home, or recent transitions rather than signs of disengagement or defiance.

- Partnering with community-based organizations — specifically, legal aid organizations and/or immigrant non-profit organizations — school counselors can advocate to provide legal resources for immigrant families. Providing opportunities to access Know Your Rights information as well as helping to create a family preparedness plan can help ease immigrant families' anxiety.¹³
- Advocating for Dream Resource Centers¹⁴ on school campuses are another support system for which school counselors alongside educators and administrators can advocate. These centers work to provide spaces in which immigrant-origin students, regardless of legal status, can safely access mental health services and legal help.¹⁵ In these spaces, immigrant-origin students are more likely to receive cultural mentoring from people that affirm their unique experiences and are committed to removing barriers impeding their success.¹⁶

IMMIGRANT-ORIGIN STUDENTS AND ACADEMIC DEVELOPMENT

Immigrant-origin students bring formidable strengths and aspirations to their academic lives, yet they also face a set of distinctive academic challenges that school counselors must understand to effectively support them. For many first-generation students, the foundational challenge is language acquisition: while conversational fluency may develop relatively quickly, achieving the deep cognitive academic language proficiency necessary to succeed in rigorous coursework typically takes many more years.¹⁷ Standardized assessments — developed and normed primarily for native-born English speakers — may fail to accurately reflect these students' actual knowledge or academic potential, resulting in misplacements and gatekeeping that narrow rather than expand their educational opportunities.¹⁸

Immigrant-origin students with limited or interrupted formal education face additional hurdles, as gaps in prior schooling compound language challenges and increase vulnerability to dropping out. Many immigrant-origin students — particularly those classified as English learners — are too often tracked into remedial coursework that is disconnected from college and career pathways, reflecting systemic inequities rather than students' true capabilities.¹⁹ Racial and economic segregation further concentrates immigrant-origin students in schools that are under-resourced and unprepared to address their multifaceted needs. These structural barriers, not the students themselves, are the primary obstacle to academic success,²⁰ and school counselors play a critical advocacy role in dismantling them.

School counselors work to ensure that all students have the supports they need to be academically successful. This includes intentionally affirming students' cultural assets, diverse educational multilingualism. School counselors can empower immigrant-origin students to build confidence and to access the opportunities they deserve.



In large and small group settings, school counselors help students develop skills and strategies to attain their academic goals. Equally important is the work school counselors do in collaboration with families, teachers, administrators, and community partners to identify and remove barriers impeding student success.

Classroom Lessons

- Linking familiar character traits (i.e., responsibility, perseverance, self-discipline, respect) to concrete academic routines provides culturally responsive support that helps students understand they possess strengths from their home culture and family values that can translate to success in a new educational context. For example, school counselors might show how perseverance supports working through challenging tasks or how responsibility connects to completing assignments.
- Running goal setting lessons can be particularly supportive for immigrant-origin students who often face unfamiliar academic expectations and barriers outside of school. School counselors can introduce and model structured tools like goal ladders to help students break down tasks, strengthen self-management and perseverance skills, and build confidence through achievable steps.

- Teaching students how to manage their time is a valuable intervention. When faced with fast-paced coursework, new academic norms, and responsibilities outside of school, immigrant-origin students benefit from having explicit instruction by the school counselor on how to develop weekly planning routines (i.e., using a planner, blocking time for schoolwork and other responsibilities). These routines can offer structure and reduce stress.
- Developing self-advocacy skills can be empowering for immigrant-origin students. School counselors can spend time reviewing the different support systems available to immigrant-origin students and how they can reach out to teachers and others for assistance. Counselors providing examples and extending opportunities for students to practice asking for help can also be extremely valuable to newly arrived immigrant students who might still be acquiring English vocabulary.
- Discussing the multiple academic and social benefits of bilingualism during class and family presentations can help address misconceptions about sustaining home language practices alongside learning English. It is important that school counselors learn and promote the multiple pathways to the Seal of Biliteracy, which begins with elementary school students having access to bilingual programs and continues with middle and high school students having access to home language in addition to world language coursework. This

Seal of Biliteracy is one that all high school students across the country can now obtain.²¹

Small Group and Individual Sessions

- Designing academic plans for immigrant-origin students should account for their unique circumstances, particularly for those who have recently arrived and are enrolling in high school. It is important to remember that immigrant-origin students have the right to a K-12 education (see 1982 *Plyler v Doe* case).²² Whereas high schools continue to refuse enrollment to newly arrived immigrant students due to age,²³ school counselors are in a position to advocate for immigrant youth's right to a K-12 public education in accordance with their state laws.²⁴ Given that many states allow access to a free and public K-12 education until students are 21 years of age, school counselors are encouraged to create academic timelines that honor the credits newly arrived immigrant students might have completed in their home countries. Additionally, students should be granted the maximum allotted time to complete high school. For example, a 16-year-old that has 0 credits would start their high school career as a freshman. Newly arrived immigrant students should not be rushed to acquire English, complete high school graduation requirements, and prepare for postsecondary life on a detrimentally tight schedule.
- Meeting regularly with immigrant-origin students, especially as middle and high school students, to discuss academic goals in relation to their college and career goals is

encouraged. School counselors should learn students' interests, strengths, and abilities as well as advocate for their placement in appropriately rigorous classes, ensuring that language differences are not mistaken for lower academic potential. School counselors play an important role in ensuring students access coursework that is tailored to their academic and career interests which might include enrolling in honors, Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate, and Career and Technical Education classes. Likewise, school counselors are encouraged to make connections between school and work.²⁵

- Facilitating small groups focused on core study skills (note-taking strategies, organization systems, and time management) can equip immigrant-origin students with practical tools for navigating the academic environment. These small groups build essential learning strategies, promote self-efficacy, and help students develop important self-management competencies.⁴

Collaborations with Stakeholders

- Engaging in equity audits as a school counseling team will help counseling teams not only identify achievement and opportunity gaps but the structural causes of those inequities. It is important to recognize that educational inequities are a result of systemic issues, not because of a student's cultural, familial, or individual attributes.²⁶ These equity audits should consider both linguistic and nonlinguistic factors (e.g. immigration status, first-generation college student, race, socioeconomic status, disability status) that are shaping the educational trajectories of immigrant-origin students.²⁷ The solution to educational inequities should be informed by an intersectional approach and be comprehensive in nature.

- Fostering close collaboration with teachers can help ensure that immigrant-origin students have access to a rigorous curriculum. Many immigrant-origin students, especially those who are classified as English learners, are often relegated to coursework that is remedial in nature. Often immigrant-origin students who are classified as English learners are susceptible to being tracked into non-college-and-career pathways. Because school counselors often work with teachers to create students' course schedules, it is imperative that the course selection process is designed in such a way that reduces the barriers that might exclude immigrant-origin students from academically challenging coursework. This includes the imposition of English proficiency as a prerequisite for college-preparatory coursework.
- Advocating for student supports like access to tutoring is essential for the academic success of immigrant-origin students, especially in more demanding courses and for those who are still learning English. School counselors are encouraged to work with local colleges and universities to offer tutoring as well as community organizations who might already be offering their own afterschool tutoring. Extending access to college-preparatory coursework requires supports be in place to ensure students' success.
- Championing for consistent professional development for content-area teachers, especially those who are teaching immigrant-origin students who are classified as English learners focused on how teachers can integrate content and language

can be extremely helpful to demystify the notion that only ESL teachers are responsible for the academic success of students labeled as English Learners. It also prepares content-area teachers to support their immigrant-origin students, both those recently arrived and those designated as long-term English Learners.

- Hosting family engagement sessions that intentionally support and encourage family participation enhances students' academic success. With presentations and documents, ensure that families have access to a translator, translated copies, or sessions in their home languages. Additionally, consider the schedules of working-class families and offer family engagement sessions at times where they will be able to attend.

IMMIGRANT-ORIGIN STUDENTS AND COLLEGE & CAREER READINESS DEVELOPMENT

Immigrant-origin students and their families often bring exceptionally high educational aspirations. Migration itself is frequently understood by families as an investment in their children's futures yet the path from aspiration to postsecondary attainment is strewn with structural obstacles that school counselors must help these students navigate. Immigration status creates a patchwork of eligibility restrictions that vary dramatically by state, shaping who can access in-state tuition, state financial aid, and professional licensure, which can leave many students and families confused and discouraged. Undocumented students, in particular, face severe financial constraints, since federal financial aid remains unavailable to them, limiting their higher education options to private scholarships and state-level programs where they exist. Further, first-generation college students — a designation that describes many immigrant-origin youth — encounter

the college-going process without the benefit of family members who have navigated U.S. higher education, making each step, from applications to FAFSA to selecting a major, unfamiliar terrain. Cultural and financial concerns about loans, distance from family, and balancing work with academics can further dampen college persistence.

- School counselors who understand these barriers — and who are equipped with knowledge of the diverse pathways available to immigrant-origin students — are essential allies in helping this population convert their aspirations into educational and career realities. They play an important role in ensuring that all immigrant-origin students access opportunities to explore their career interests, develop their academic skills, and work towards attaining their postsecondary goals. Because immigrant-origin students represent a variety of backgrounds, it is important that school counselors utilize culturally responsive strategies as they work to confront structural injustices impacting the postsecondary trajectories of immigrant-origin students.

Classroom Lessons

- Starting early with lessons that link postsecondary pathways to a full spectrum of career possibilities, helps immigrant-origin students imagine futures that reflect their strengths and interests, rather than the narrow roles often depicted in media or assumed based on language background. When school counselors introduce immigrant-origin students to diverse career options, the students get the opportunity to see themselves reflected in careers that align with their skills and passions, expanding their sense of what their future can hold. Delivering information about the college-going process, especially

the financial aid process, should encompass the role immigration status plays in immigrant-origin students' ability to make decisions about postsecondary education and training. It is important to understand that we are not advocating for school counselors to ask students for their immigration status. Instead, school counselors should be discussing the different financial options that exist for students based on their circumstances, just as school counselors might explain the specific financial aid process for students who are McKinney Vento recipients. We want to reiterate that immigrant-origin students should never be put into a position where they need to self-disclose their status in order to receive appropriate help.

- Fostering opportunities for immigrant-origin students and families to hear from other students and their families about the college-going process and their college experiences can help reassure them that a college education is possible. School counselors should be mindful of the distinct financial aid concerns immigrant families might have and the fact that they might be averse to loans. Recognizing the impact of structural barriers on the financial aid process is essential for school counselors to assist immigrant-origin students and their families in identifying culturally appropriate solutions.
- Acknowledging the diversity of postsecondary trajectories includes school counselors discussing small business entrepreneurship as a viable career pathway for immigrant-origin students, especially those who are undocumented.²⁸ It is important to emphasize that postsecondary education and training can help them acquire the necessary skills needed for their chosen line of work. School counselors can partner with organizations like Immigrants Rising to equip their immigrant-origin

students with the business acumen needed to become successful entrepreneurs.²⁹

- Incorporating a range of culturally responsive resources can help immigrant-origin students see themselves in future college and career pathways. Books that affirm multilingualism as an asset for postsecondary success and professional opportunities can spark meaningful discussions about possibilities, identity, and strengths. School counselors can also expose students to diverse careers through short videos and guest speakers who reflect students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Additionally, digital career exploration tools and virtual tours offer accessible introductions to an array of training pathways and professions.³⁰
- Hosting inclusive career fairs and expos requires the inclusion of employers and career pathways that are accessible to all students. When these events only highlight pathways requiring documentation or driver's licenses from which immigrant-origin students might be barred from accessing, immigrant-origin students' ability to engage and envision realistic futures is hampered. Ensuring a diverse set of accessible pathways not only affirms the varying cultural experiences of immigrant-origin students but enables them to meaningfully plan for their future.

Small Group and Individual Sessions

- Creating small groups to prepare immigrant-origin students for particular milestones like the transition from high school to college can be extremely helpful especially for those who are first-generation college students. It is not uncommon for first-generation college students to commit to postsecondary education and not show up in the fall. This

phenomenon is known as summer melt.³¹ Yet school counselors can help prepare immigrant-origin students to be successful by reviewing college deadlines for the completion of assessments as well as course scheduling and submission of financial aid forms. In addition, school counselors can help students become acquainted with the multiple offices on their college campuses that are there to help. These small groups can also help function as a space to discuss worries and concerns about what college life might look like and how they might balance school and outside responsibilities (e.g. work, family, caretaking of siblings, church).

- Meeting with immigrant-origin students and their families to review financial aid offers can help them better understand the total cost of attendance. While not all immigrant-origin students are first-generation college students, many of their families might be navigating the U.S. higher education system for the first time. Utilizing culturally responsive strategies, school counselors can create a safe space for parents to express their concerns and explore a variety of differential financial aid options. It is important that school counselors be mindful of the varying levels of comfort with financial aid options like loans.

Collaborations with Stakeholders

- Advocating for eliminating exit exams as a high school



graduation requirement. These high-stakes exams have resulted in students classified as English learners, many of whom are of immigrant backgrounds, graduating high school without a high school diploma.³² Instead, school counselors can advocate for multiple pathways to graduation.³³ School counselors should remain up to date with the various graduation pathways available to students, especially because recently arrived immigrant youth enrolling for the first time in U.S. schools as high school students might need a personalized high school graduation plan that considers previous schooling and their future college and career goals.

- Working with local community organizations to ensure that local scholarships are accessible to all students, regardless of citizenship status. Many immigrant-origin students share identities with other marginalized groups of students including students of color, students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, and first-generation college students who often encounter great difficulties in securing enough financial resources to pay college tuition and related costs. As change agents, school counselors can partner with local community organizations to not only remove barriers to aid but work to address financial concerns.
- Recognizing that all students regardless of immigration status have the right to a K-12 education (see 1982 *Plyler v Doe* case), school counselors must also be aware that access to a postsecondary education is not a guaranteed right. This means that some states like South Carolina have imposed restrictions on first-generation immigrant students who desire to pursue a college education.³⁴ Unlike South Carolina, states like California and New York have sought to extend the right to higher education and access to state financial aid.³⁵

School counselors must be aware of the varying state policies related to college access, financial aid, and professional licensure requirements to better advise first-generation immigrant students.³⁶

- Developing consciousness about how immigrant-origin students are navigating a patchwork of policies can help school counselors identify how they can work alongside policymakers to increase students' access to college and careers. State policies often determine who has access to in-state schools, in-state tuition, and in-state aid as well as professional licensure and certification requirements. For example, Pennsylvania until 2024 barred non-citizens from teaching in K-12 public schools.³⁷ Encouraging students to pursue postsecondary education and training necessitates that school counselors work to dismantle barriers that impede immigrant-origin students' access to college and careers.

IN CONCLUSION

Across the United States, there is a growing diversity of immigrant-origin students attending K-12 schools in not just urban areas, but suburban and rural areas. This reality means that school counselors must be equipped with the knowledge and skills necessary to foster immigrant-origin socioemotional, academic, and college and career development. Important to this work is doing so through a culturally responsive lens, one that affirms the diversity of cultural identities and values which immigrant-origin students and families possess. In addition, serving immigrant-origin students calls on school counselors to recognize the many forms of structural injustice to which their students are subject. Finally, it is important for school counselors to engage in ongoing reflective practices to identify and challenge assumptions or personal biases that might influence



their perceptions of immigrant-origin students. We encourage school counselors to embrace the role of change agents and draw upon these recommendations and resources to ensure that all our immigrant-origin students thrive.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

List of Related IIH briefs

- Jendi, S., Mason, A., Nasir, B. & Suárez-Orozco, C. (2023). Understanding and supporting MENA and Muslim students. Immigration Initiative at Harvard. https://immigrationinitiative.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/DECEMBER-2023_Understanding-Supporting-MENA-Muslim-Students_FINAL-VERSION_12.21.23.pdf
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School and School Counseling Guidance Examples

- [UTLA: Immigration Resources for Educators](#)
- [Santa Ana Unified School District: School Counseling Support for Undocumented Students and Families](#)

Professional Development Opportunities for School Counselors

- [ASCA Annual Conference](#)

- [ASCA Resources: Support Immigrant Students](#)
- [CUNY-IIE PK-12 Educator Professional Development](#)

Key Organizations Working with Immigrant Youth

- **K-12 School Focused**
 - [National Newcomer Network](#)
 - [California National Newcomer Network \(CANN\)](#)
 - [Internationals Network](#)
 - [ImmSchools](#)
 - [The Immigrant Learning Center](#)
 - [Immigrant Connections](#)
 - [Re-imagining Migration](#)
- **College and Career Focused**
 - [Immigrants Rising](#)
 - [The Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration](#)
 - [Higher Ed Immigration Portal](#)
 - [First Gen Empower](#)
 - [UndocuProfessionals](#)
- **Advocacy**
 - [United We Dream](#)
 - [Immigration Advocates Network](#)
 - [Kids in Need of Defense \(KIND\)](#)
 - [AMICA Center for Immigrant Rights](#)
 - [Immigrant Legal Resource Center](#)
- **News Outlets Dedicated to Immigrant Students**
 - [EdSource](#)
 - [Education Week](#)
 - [fwd.us](#)
 - [The 74](#)

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About The Immigration Initiative at Harvard (IIH)

The Immigration Initiative at Harvard (IIH) was created to advance and promote interdisciplinary scholarship, original research, and intellectual exchange among stakeholders interested in immigration policy and immigrant communities. The IIH serves as a place of convening for scholars, students, and policy leaders working on issues of immigration—and a clearinghouse for rapid-response, non-partisan research and usable knowledge relevant to the media, policymakers, and community practitioners.

