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CONTRIBUTORS

OPINION

Precarious immigration status hurts families. It's time we do better.

Under our current immigration policy, most people with precarious status are treated as expendable, exploitable labour with limited rights.

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A child with disabilities who cannot enrol in school. A baby with a heart defect that cannot qualify for specialized formula. A soon-to-be mother who cannot stop working for fear she will be evicted, or worse, deported.

These are the heartbreaking stories of the patients we see with precarious immigration status, which include refugee claimants, temporary foreign workers and people without any documented status who live and work in Canada.

We've seen them suffer from abuse from their employers, enduring unsafe conditions and below minimum wage pay, putting their life and health at risk. We've seen photos of deplorable living conditions that abusive landlords or employers have subjected them to, with little to no options for recourse. We've struggled to get them lifesaving care because they don't have health insurance. We've seen children denied school and therapy because they can't provide the right visa stamp in their passport. We've heard the horrors of women trapped in violent relationships, threatened by partners that they'll be deported if they dare report the abuse.

The underlying diagnosis: insecure immigration status that denies them basic rights and protections.

As a family doctor and a pediatrician, our goal is to keep children, their families, and individuals of all ages healthy — and without a comprehensive and permanent federal plan to grant permanent residency to our patients with precarious status, we cannot do this. We have joined nearly 800 colleagues across the country [asking the federal government to fulfil its promise to ensure permanent residency for the 1.7 million people living and working in Canada with precarious, temporary or no immigration status, many of whom are children and youth](#). We also call on provinces to ensure universal health care coverage regardless of immigration status.

Like so many in health care, we know that immigration status is a foundational determinant of health. It provides access to other rights and essential services, and also relieves a tremendous burden of stress that exacts a significant toll on mental and physical health, especially on children and their families.

Without secure immigration status, our patients have trouble accessing necessary health care, including primary care and hospital services, leading to more severe untreated illness, and an increased risk of complications, and even death. Children with medical or developmental needs have few services they can access, a deep injustice considering that children do not choose where they live.

The COVID-19 pandemic has made it achingly clear how our collective health depends on protecting the health of all. A fair society means equal rights for all, including access to health care, for all people living and working in Canada.

People with precarious immigration status live and work in Canada; they put food on our shelves, they take care of our sick and our children, and have kept our country going as essential workers throughout the pandemic and beyond. They are our neighbours and community members. And yet, despite promises to do so, Canada has not yet provided them with the ability to access basic rights through permanent resident status. Under our current immigration policy, most people with precarious status are treated as expendable, exploitable labour with limited rights.

Our government has an opportunity right now to fix a historic wrong, by granting undocumented people living and working in Canada permanent resident status (otherwise known as “regularization”), and providing permanent residency to all living and working in Canada with precarious immigration status.

On Sunday, people from across the country will be calling on the federal government to deliver a comprehensive and inclusive regularization program. Any more delays will hurt the health of our patients and their families.

In solidarity with our patients, colleagues, and community members, we urge the federal government to fulfil its commitment to advancing equal rights for migrants, through permanent residency to all children and their families living and working in Canada, without exclusions. It's a prescription for better health and justice for all.

Vanessa Redditt is a family physician and Shazeen Suleman is a pediatrician. They are both in Toronto and work with newcomer children and families.

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