

**EVIDENCE SUMMARY
DECEMBER 2025**

What are the impacts of immigration legal services?

Legal representation is associated with increased legal success.

- Representation is associated with higher success rates across all immigrant groups—detained adults, non-detained individuals, children, and unaccompanied minors. This positive effect of legal representation persists even after controlling for other factors that influence case outcomes.

Legal representation enhances procedural compliance.

- Judges receive better-prepared cases when attorneys are involved. For example, detainees with representation, compared to those without, submit more documentation, make affirmative arguments for release, and present more legally relevant claims.

Context and judge background influence the effect of representation.

- The positive effect of representation differs across circuits, judges, and political environments.

Relatively inexperienced attorneys can be effective with institutional support from nonprofit organizations.

- Immigration attorneys, including relatively inexperienced ones, who worked for nonprofit organizations, were more likely to succeed than those who did not work in nonprofit settings.

Purpose of this summary

This document summarizes the state of available evidence regarding the impacts of legal services for immigrants.

What is meant by “immigration legal services”?

- Immigration legal services provide guidance and representation to clients navigating the immigration process, such as visa applications (“change of status”) and green card applications (“adjustment of status”). Legal services providers guide their clients through these processes, from eligibility evaluation to form completion. In deportation cases (“removal proceedings”), attorneys represent people in immigration court. Legal services also include public education on immigration law and policies and advocacy for fair and just immigration policies.^{1,2}

What does the evidence show?

Legal representation is associated with increased legal success.

- A national study used administrative data from the U.S. Executive Office for Immigration Review from 2013 to 2024 to analyze immigration court decisions (Eagly et al., 2025). “Success” was defined as grant of relief from removal (such as asylum) or termination (dismissal) of the removal case. Using this metric, the authors found that **immigrants were nearly five times more likely to succeed if they had legal counsel (64% versus 14%)**. Higher rates of success for those with counsel held for all custody statuses—detained, released, and never detained. Both children and adults, as well as the subgroup of unaccompanied children, were more likely to succeed with counsel. **With counsel, 73% of children succeeded in defending their removal case, compared to only 15% of those without counsel**, making them almost five times more likely to succeed. **For unaccompanied children, 82% succeeded with counsel, compared to only 11% without**, making them 7.5 times more likely to succeed. The authors noted that their findings are suggestive due to the correlational nature of the study, which makes it vulnerable to a selection effect (attorneys selecting to represent cases they deem likely to succeed).
- Two methodologically stronger studies lend further empirical support to Eagly et al.’s findings. Both studies were limited to one court. Stave et al. (2017) evaluated the impact of the New York Immigrant Family Unity Project, which provided representation for all detained low-income immigrants in deportation proceedings in one court, who were unrepresented at their initial hearing. By representing everyone, the selection effect was eliminated. The study compared the success rate for represented cases to similar unrepresented cases and statistically controlling for additional client and contextual factors that may affect outcomes. Client factors included the client’s years in the United States since their most recent entry, the number and type of notice to appear charges, the client’s legal status, whether they received bond, and their length of stay in detention prior to final disposition. Contextual factors were the percentage of asylum applications historically granted by the judge, the judge’s length of experience, the U.S. asylum grant rate toward the client’s country of birth, and the Immigration and Customs Enforcement field office that apprehended the client. The positive effect of legal representation persisted even after these differences were accounted for. Another study using a matched sample of represented and unrepresented detainees in central California showed that represented detainees had

¹ American Public University (2023). What does an immigration lawyer do? <https://www.apu.apus.edu/area-of-study/security-and-global-studies/resources/what-does-an-immigration-lawyer-do/>

² CLINIC (2024). About us. <https://www.cliniclegal.org/about-us>

significantly higher odds of being granted bond (Ryo, 2018). **These impact studies support the likelihood of a causal relationship between representation and legal outcomes.**

Legal representation enhances procedural compliance.

- In Eagly et al.'s (2025) national study described above, represented immigrants attended 94% of all hearings, demonstrating that **legal counsel strengthened system compliance.**
- A study of courtroom dynamics showed that representation alters what happens in hearings. **In immigration bond hearings, represented detainees submitted more documentation, made affirmative arguments for release, and presented more legally relevant arguments.** Judges did not vary their procedural behaviors across represented and unrepresented cases. However, the attorneys' and judges' procedural actions did not explain the positive effect of legal representation on hearing outcomes. This suggests that **attorneys also influence less observable factors—credibility, signaling, preparation, and relationships with courtroom actors.** For example, immigration judges and lawyers who have repeated interactions over time understand each other's preferences and working styles, contributing to successful case outcomes (Ryo, 2018).

Context and judge background influence the effect of representation.

- The impact of counsel varies significantly across judicial and political contexts. Using more than 1.9 million removal cases, Ryo and Peacock (2021) showed that the overall positive effect of legal representation is even stronger in courtrooms with female judges and experienced judges, during Democratic administrations, within the Ninth Circuit (encompassing Alaska, Arizona, California, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, Oregon, Washington, Pacific territories), and when judges had high caseloads. These findings indicate that **representation interacts with structural and institutional conditions and that expanding counsel alone cannot fully compensate for systemic disparities.**

Inexperienced attorneys can be effective with institutional support from nonprofit organizations.

- In a review of the knowledge base, Jordan (2016) reported that asylum seekers with representation were three times more likely to succeed than those without counsel. **Lawyers, including relatively inexperienced ones, who worked for nonprofit organizations, were more likely to succeed than other immigration attorneys,** demonstrating the influence of institutional backing, supervision, and training.

What are the implications for practice and research?

“Both quantity and quality representation are needed.”

(Jordan, 2016)

Improve efficiency and consistency in immigration court through access to counsel.

- Expanded access to counsel—whether through pro bono networks, nonprofit partnerships, or local initiatives—can support more timely, predictable, and well-documented proceedings, reducing strain on immigration courts with unprecedented backlogs. **Practical investments in case guidance, court reminders, and document preparation can improve compliance** and reduce unnecessary failures to appear, benefiting both authorities and respondents.
- Even less experienced attorneys, when supported by established nonprofit organizations, contribute to better-prepared cases and a more efficient adjudication process. **Supporting legal aid organizations enhances the quality of filings and evidence**, enabling judges to make decisions based on a complete record.

Examine the mechanisms that improve court efficiency.

- Studies should **investigate how preparation, credibility, and communication shape outcomes** and contribute to more accurate and efficient decision-making. Future research should also **explore how court capacity, staffing, and local legal culture interact with representation**.

Assess training and support models for legal services providers.

- Researchers should analyze how supervision, institutional backing, and professional development influence outcomes, **identifying practical strategies for scaling high-quality legal services**.

How did we identify evidence for this summary?

Included Studies

The Switchboard evidence database includes the following types of studies, categorized by the strength of their evidence:

Strong Evidence

Meta-analyses: systematic analyses of sets of existing evaluations of similar programs

Systematic reviews: syntheses of the best available evidence on specific research questions that use narrative synthesis focused on evaluations of the impacts of at least one specific policy, program, or intervention

Moderate Evidence

Published individual **impact evaluations** using randomized controlled trials (RCTs/C-RCTs), natural experiments, quasi-experimental techniques such as difference-in-difference (DID), instrumental variables (IV), regression discontinuity design (RDD), and propensity score matching (PSM) or other forms of synthetic matching, as well as fixed effects techniques with interaction terms

Suggestive Evidence

Published studies using methods including non-systematic literature review, uncontrolled before and after tests, post-test only, interrupted time series (ITS), cross-sectional regressions, longitudinal panels, cohort and case-controls, and purely qualitative techniques

Excluded Studies

The Switchboard evidence database excludes case studies, unpublished suggestive research, opinion papers, descriptive studies, and unpublished literature reviews.

Search Protocol

Studies included in the database focused on the United States. Studies included must have been published since 2016. To identify evidence, we searched the following websites and databases using the following population, methodology, and target outcome terms:

Websites and Databases	Population Terms	Methodology Terms	Target Outcome Terms
Primo Discovery Service Google Scholar ChatGPT	immigra*	“legal services” “legal representation” “legal orientation” “know your rights”	outcome impact

For databases or websites that permitted only basic searches, free-text terms and limited term combinations were selected out of the lists above, and all resultant studies were reviewed for relevance. Conversely, for databases or websites with advanced search capability, we made use of relevant available filters. All terms were searched in the title and abstract fields only in order to exclude studies that made only passing mention of the topic under consideration.

After initial screening, Switchboard evidence mapping is prioritized as follows: First priority is given to meta-analyses and systematic reviews, followed by individual impact evaluations when no meta-analyses or systematic reviews are available. Evaluations that are rated as impact evidence are considered before those rated as suggestive, with the latter only being included for outcomes where no evidence is available from the former.

Studies Included

Database and website searching identified 610 studies. Of these, 596 were determined to be duplicates or irrelevant to this search. 14 full-text articles were assessed for eligibility. 9 full-text articles were excluded due to not meeting one or more of the inclusion criteria pertaining to population, methodology, or target problem. 5 studies were eligible for inclusion. They are listed below, with hyperlinks to the abstracts or full text (when available).

Meta-Analyses and Systematic Reviews

None.

Impact Evaluations

Ryo, E. (2018). Representing immigrants: The role of lawyers in immigration bond hearings. *Law & Society Review*, 52(2), 503-531. [Full text](#).

Stave, J., Markowitz, P., Berberich, K., Cho, T., Dubbaneh, D., Simich, L., ... & Smart, N. (2017). *Evaluation of the New York Immigrant Family Unity Project*. Vera Institute of Justice. [Full text](#).

Suggestive Studies

Eagly, I. V., Shafer, S., & Moulton, R. (2025). Access to counsel in immigration court, revisited. *Iowa Law Review*, 111 (1). [Full text](#).

Jordan, E. R. (2016). What we know and need to know about immigrant access to justice. *South Carolina Law Review*, 67, 295-327. [Full text](#).

Ryo, E., & Peacock, I. (2021). Represented but unequal: The contingent effect of legal representation in removal proceedings. *Law & Society Review*, 55(4), 634-656. [Full text](#).

Supplemental Resources

The following studies did not meet the criteria to be included in the evidence summary but may provide additional context, guidance, or understanding of the topic.

Chand, D. E., Calderon, M. A., Hawes, D. P., & O'Keeffe, L. (2021). Serving immigrant communities: Effectiveness of nonprofit legal aid organizations in an age of heightened enforcement. *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, 32(3), 621-633. [Full text](#).

- James, C. (2019). Fairness and efficiency in removal proceedings. *Administrative Law Review*, 71(2), 391-412. [Full text](#).
- Jomaa, D., Ranasinghe, C., Raymer, N., Leering, M., & Bayoumi, I. (2022). The impact of medical legal partnerships: A scoping review. *University of Toronto Journal of Public Health*, 3(2). [Full text](#).
- Mellinger, H. (2021). Quality over quantity: Legal representation at the Asylum Office. *Law & Policy*, 43(4), 368-389. [Full text](#).
- Menjívar, C., & Lakhani, S. M. (2016). Transformative effects of immigration law: Immigrants' personal and social metamorphoses through regularization. *American Journal of Sociology*, 121(6), 1818-1855. [Full text](#).
- Kimball, S. L., Chergui, H., Syeda, H. S., Amin, S., & Eyllon, M. (2023). Immigration-related legal collaboration in primary care: Evaluating impact on knowledge and well-being. *Journal of Health Care for the Poor and Underserved*, 34(1), 246-262. [Full text](#).
- Patler, C., & Pirtle, W. L. (2018). From undocumented to lawfully present: Do changes to legal status impact psychological wellbeing among Latino immigrant young adults? *Social Science & Medicine*, 199, 39-48. [Full text](#).
- Peleg, T., & Loyo, R. (2019). Transforming deportation defense: Lessons learned from the nation's first public defender program for detained immigrants. *CUNY Law Review*, 22, 193-269. [Full text](#).
- Tipler, K., & Gates, A. B. (2022). Rights education without rights? Rights workshops and undocumented immigrants in the US. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 48(1), 291-307. [Abstract](#).