Mental Health Impact of U.S. Immigration Policies on Families

PHR Asylum Fact Sheet
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Overview
Migration policies and practices are major global determinants of physical and mental health. This PHR fact sheet is one in a series of three literature reviews which assess current clinical evidence on the mental health harms associated with immigration enforcement practices and immigration detention, and the health benefits of alternatives to detention. This fact sheet was authored by Catherine Bianchi, PhD, Corinne Lykins, PsyM, Pauline Levy Frydman, PsyM, and Michael Stoppiello, PsyM, of the Graduate School of Applied and Professional Psychology, Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey.

Immigration Policy Context
When President Trump assumed office, his administration returned to the “Secure Communities” program, which allows for wider powers of arrest for Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officials, replacing the Obama administration “Priority Enforcement” program, which focused on new arrivals. Recent federal data illustrates the resulting drastic rise in immigration enforcement targeting long-term residents without legal status. In addition to increased arrests in the U.S. interior, five of the highest volume ICE field offices have effectively stopped granting parole since early 2017 (compared to nine out of 10 asylum seekers being paroled in 2013), resulting in greater numbers of people being detained for longer.

As immigration enforcement places more individuals in immigration detention, for longer periods of time, and increases fear of arrest— including amongst asylum seekers— physical and mental health impacts for undocumented immigrants, asylum seekers and their family members become more urgent, especially for those escaping violence in their home countries. This fact sheet briefly outlines select mental health harms connected with U.S. immigration policies focused on detention, as documented in recent mental health academic literature.

Impacts on Undocumented and Mixed Status Families
The shift toward a policy of deterrence in U.S. immigration policy over the last four decades, including recent practices of family detention and separation, has contributed to poorer mental health outcomes for undocumented immigrant families.

Current U.S. immigration policies that favor mass deportation and detention practices have been associated with adverse long-term mental health effects for immigrant children and families, including those of mixed citizenship. In particular, these policies result in mass family disruptions and separations known to be traumatic to children and adult caregivers.

Policies that emphasize deportation of non-criminal immigrants substantially impact citizen children with undocumented parents. Children who experience, or live in fear of, the involuntary deportation of a parent display increased anxiety, sadness, and developmentally inappropriate clinging to caregivers and report more insecurity about the future. Interviews with mixed-status families attest to the profound impact of deportation on children:

“One mother, for example, explained that in the aftermath of her husband’s deportation, her four-year old son, ‘asked me for him so much, every day he cried, “When is my dad coming? Why isn’t my dad here with us?”’

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Children who experience, or live in fear of, the involuntary deportation of a parent display increased anxiety, sadness, and developmentally inappropriate clinging to caregivers.

**Impacts on Undocumented and Mixed Status Families continued**

The nature of losing a parent to deportation is especially traumatizing in that it occurs suddenly, often without opportunities for goodbyes and with variable durations of time before the family learns that a missing parent has, in fact, been deported. This is due to a lack of protocols governing family notification of deportation. In addition to the trauma of losing a parent to deportation, families may also encounter sudden poverty, particularly when a parent who is the main financial provider for a family is suddenly deported. This is a common occurrence, as immigration raids tend to target men and undocumented workers. One study points to the climate of “fear and social isolation” created by immigration raids in local communities, making mixed-status families unlikely to take advantage of available health care and mental health services.

**Impacts on Citizens and Permanent Residents**

In addition to the mental health cost for immigrant families, several studies have found that enforcement-focused immigration policies have a negative impact on U.S. citizens, particularly those of Latino heritage. Latino Americans living in states with punitive immigration policies have reported poorer mental health and increased psychological and emotional stress related to concerns about immigration policy. This suggests that discriminatory enforcement practices and anti-Hispanic/Latino immigration rhetoric become internalized by Latino U.S. citizens, ultimately “creating and perpetuating health inequalities.”

Latino U.S. citizens and permanent residents are also directly impacted by punitive immigration policies. Federal law requires only reasonable suspicion of undocumented status for immigration agents to conduct searches. The same standard permits officials to enforce border checkpoints within in a “100-mile border zone” of U.S. borders. Citizens and permanent residents of Mexican descent living in border states have reported intense levels of stress due to fears of deportation, being detained, and/or losing their status after discriminatory interactions with immigration officials. Mexican Americans and permanent residents have also reported being unlikely to report mistreatment during these interactions with immigration agents due to fear of retaliation, which impacts their mobility and access to services. State law mirrors this trend, such as SB 1070 in Arizona.

Punitive immigration policies, where immigration officials may act on the basis of suspicion alone, also deter Latino Americans and legal residents from participating in public health programs available to them out of fear of being detained or separated from their families.

Adverse effects on mixed-citizenship families have also been documented. U.S. immigration policies facilitate family separations not only directly, in the case of detention centers, but on a broader scale by offering few protections for undocumented parents of citizen children. One study notes the magnitude of children potentially affected by these policies, with up to 4.5 million children affected.

**Recommendations**

Public policy experts have advocated for alternatives to punitive immigration strategies, such as policies that favor community integration, and for involving health and mental health providers in the development of programming to meet the needs of immigrant families and children. These humane alternatives include directing funding away from deterrence efforts and toward settling immigrant families in the community as well as providing increased guidance, including legal counsel, to refugees navigating the asylum process. Utilizing existing case management models, which provide housing for asylum seekers outside of detention centers and coordinate legal, social, health care, and mental health services for migrant families on a broader scale has also been recommended.
Citizens and permanent residents of Mexican descent living in border states have reported intense levels of stress due to fears of deportation, being detained, and/or losing their status after discriminatory interactions with immigration officials.

Endnotes