



# 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.<sup>1</sup> 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.

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## 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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup>

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.<sup>4</sup>

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## 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.<sup>5</sup>

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.<sup>6</sup>

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.<sup>7</sup> 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?””<sup>8</sup>*

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## 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.<sup>9</sup>

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.<sup>10</sup> This is a common occurrence, as immigration raids tend to target men and undocumented workers.<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup>

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## 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.<sup>13</sup>

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.”<sup>14</sup>

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 a “100-mile border zone” of U.S. borders.<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup> State law mirrors this trend, such as SB 1070 in Arizona.<sup>18</sup>

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.<sup>19</sup>

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.<sup>20</sup>

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## 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.<sup>21</sup> 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.<sup>22</sup> 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.<sup>23</sup>

# 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

1. Physicians for Human Rights' Asylum Network Program is an initiative which recruits, trains, and supports a network of clinicians around the United States to provide forensic evaluations for asylum seekers and to grow the evidence base to advocate for human rights-based immigration policies.
2. "Immigration Court Cases Now Involved More Long-Term Residents," Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse (TRAC) Immigration, April 19, 2018, accessed October 12, 2018, <http://trac.syr.edu/immigration/reports/508/>.
3. "Hot Spots with Highest Growth in Immigration Court Backlog," Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse (TRAC) Immigration, April 19, 2018, accessed October 12, 2018, <http://trac.syr.edu/immigration/reports/497/>; "Where are Immigrants with Immigration Court Cases Being Detained?" Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse (TRAC) Immigration, April 2018, accessed October 12, 2018, <http://trac.syr.edu/immigration/reports/504/>; "Damas v. Nielson - Complaint," American Civil Liberties Union, March 15, 2018, accessed October 12, 2018, <https://www.acu.org/legal-document/damus-v-nielson-final-complaint>.
4. This literature used the following methodology: peer-reviewed articles were obtained from PsycINFO, EBSCOhost and PsycARTICLES online databases, using search terms "U.S. immigration policy" and "public health," "immigration policy" and "mental health impact," and "public health solutions" and "immigration." Additional information relevant to the topic of public policy and immigration were sourced through the American Civil Liberties Union website and the Urban Institute's 2007 report for the National Council of La Raza on the impact of immigration policy.
5. Thomas Gammeltoft-Hansen, and Nikolas F. Tan, "The End of the Deterrence Paradigm? Future Directions for Global Refugee Policy," *Journal on Migration and Human Security*, no. 1 (2017): 28; Derrick Silove, Zachary Steel, and Charles Watters, "Policies of Deterrence and the Mental Health of Asylum Seekers," *Jama* 284, no. 5 (2000): 604. doi:10.1001/jama.284.5.604.
6. Joanna Derby, "US immigration policy and family separation: The consequences for children's well-being," *Social Science & Medicine* 132, (2015): 245-251. doi:10.1016/j.socscimed.2014.08.041; David K. Androff, Cecilia Ayon, David Becerra, Maria Gurrola, et al., "US immigration policy and immigrant children's well-being: The impact of policy shifts," *J. Soc. & Soc. Welfare* 38, no. 1 (2011), 77-98; Cerola Suarez-Orozco, Irina L.G. Todorova, and Josephine Louie, "Making Up For Lost Time: The Experience of Separation and Reunification Among Immigrant Families," *Family Process* 41, no. 4 (2002): 625-43, doi:10.1111/j.1545-5300.2002.00625.x.
7. Randy Capps, Rosa Maria Castañeda, Ajay Chaudry, Robert Santos, "Paying the Price: the Impact of Immigration Raids on America's Children," Urban Institute for the National Council of La Raza, October 31, 2007, accessed October 12, 2018, <https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/46811/411566-Paying-the-Price-The-Impact-of-Immigration-Raids-on-America-s-Children.PDF>; Derby, "US Immigration policy," 245-251.
8. Derby, "US Immigration policy," 245-251.
9. Androff, Ayon, Becerra, Gurrola, et al., "US Immigration Policy," 77.
10. Derby, "US Immigration policy," 245-251.
11. Derby, "US Immigration policy," 245-251; Androff, Ayon, Becerra, Gurrola, et al., "US Immigration Policy," 77.
12. Capps, Castañeda, Chaudry, and Santos, "Paying the Price," 51.
13. Samantha Sabo and Alison Elizabeth Lee, "The Spillover of US Immigration Policy on Citizens and Permanent Residents of Mexican Descent: How Internalizing 'Illegality' Impacts Public Health in the Borderlands," *Frontiers in Public Health* 3, (2015), 155. doi:10.3389/fpubh.2015.00155.
14. Edward D. Vargas, Gabriel R. Sanchez, and Melina D. Juárez, "The Impact of Punitive Immigrant Laws on the Health of Latina/o Populations," *Politics & Policy* 45, no. 3 (2017): 312-37. doi:10.1111/polp.12203.
15. <https://www.acu.org/other/constitution-100-mile-border-zone>.
16. Sabo and Lee, "The Spillover," 155.
17. *ibid.*
18. *ibid.*
19. Lisa J. Hardy, Christina M. Getrich, Julio C. Quezada, Amanda Guay, Raymond J. Michalowski, and Eric Henley, "A Call for Further Research on the Impact of State-Level Immigration Policies on Public Health," *American Journal of Public Health* 102, no. 7 (2012): 1250-253. doi:10.2105/ajph.2011.30054.
20. Michael J. Sullivan, Roger Enriquez, "The Impact of Interior Immigration Enforcement on Mixed-Citizenship Families," *BCJL & Soc. Just.*, 36, no. 33 (March 2016): 33-57.
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22. Ophelia Field and Alice Edwards, "Alternatives to Detention of Asylum Seekers and Refugees," UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), April 2006, accessed October 12, 2018, <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/protection/globalconsult/4474140a2/11-alternatives-detention-asylum-seekers-refugees-ophelia-field.html>; Karen Musalo and Eunice Lee, "Seeking a Rational Approach to a Regional Refugee Crisis: Lessons from the Summer 2014 'Surge' of Central American Women and Children at the US-Mexico Border," *Journal on Migration and Human Security* 5, no. 1 (2017) doi:10.14240/jmhs.v5i1.78.
23. Field and Edwards, "Alternatives to Detention."



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