



AMERICAN
PSYCHOLOGICAL
ASSOCIATION

Immigration Policy: A Psychological Perspective

The American Psychological Association (APA) supports practical, humane immigration policies that highlight the needs of immigrants and their families.¹ While APA recognizes the need to balance immigration policies with national security and public safety, immigrants are disproportionately likely to experience stress and other mental health concerns which can be exacerbated by harmful public policies, particularly those that enforce family separation. The APA bases its immigration policy on the research that proves that separating families is not good for the mental health of individuals involved.



Immigrants are at increased risk of psychological harm due to the stressors of fleeing their home country and acculturating to new lives in the United States

Research shows that immigrants experience unique stressors related to the psychosocial upheaval that led them to flee their home countries, the often traumatic journey to the United States, and the ongoing stress of starting a new life away from their family and culture.^{2,3} Once they arrive, they are often marginalized from mainstream American society which can lead to prejudice, discrimination, and ultimately additional stress.

Living under the threat of deportation is particularly stressful and can lead to serious health issues

Deportation is also a significant concern of newly arrived undocumented immigrants.⁴ Living in an environment of chronic insecurity and threat with limited access to supports can lead to complex emotional trauma.⁵ Research demonstrates that immigrants who fear deportation are much more vulnerable to heart disease, asthma, diabetes, depression, anxiety, and post-trau-

matic stress disorder,^{6,7} and their children are more likely to experience psychological distress, academic difficulties, and disruptions in their development.^{8,9}

Family separation is especially harmful

Children and families who are separated as they seek to enter the United States experience significant psychological consequences. Data suggests that the longer parents and children are separated, the greater the reported symptoms of anxiety and depression are for children.¹⁰ Sustained parental separation also predicts ongoing difficulty trusting adults and institutions, as well as reduced educational attainment.¹¹ These neg-

ative outcomes of separation reflect the disruption of the parent-child relationship—a relationship that is a central part of healthy psychological development and a protective source of resilience for children exposed to traumatic life experiences.¹² Sudden and unexpected family separation is also associated with negative outcomes for children, including housing instability, food insecurity, interrupted schooling and behavioral/emotional responses such as fear, anxiety, aggression, and changes to sleep and appetite.^{13,14,15} Parental deportation can have a long-term negative impact on children (most of whom are American citizens) into adulthood.¹⁶

APA RECOMMENDATIONS

- **APA supports legislation that protects “Dreamers” by providing a path to citizenship for undocumented youth who were brought to the United States through no fault of their own.**
- **APA supports immigration policy that keeps families together.**

- ¹ American Psychological Association. (1998). APA resolution on immigrant children, youth and families. Retrieved from <http://www.apa.org/about/policy/immigrants.aspx>.
- ² Lustig, S. L., Kia-Keating, M., Knight, W. G., Geltman, P., Ellis, H., Kinzie, J. D., ... & Saxe, G. N. (2004). Review of child and adolescent refugee mental health. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 43(1), 24-36.
- ³ American Psychological Association, Presidential Task Force on Immigration. (2012). Crossroads: The psychology of immigration in the new century. Retrieved from <http://www.apa.org/proxyu.wrlc.org/topics/immigration/immigration-report.pdf>
- ⁴ American Psychological Association, Presidential Task Force on Immigration, 2012
- ⁵ Robjant, K., Hassan, R., & Katona, C. (2009). Mental health implications of detaining asylum seekers: Systematic review. *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 194 (4). 306-312. Doi: 10.1192/bjp.bop.109.053223
- ⁶ Martinez, O., Wu, E., Sandfort, T., Dodge, B., Carballo-Dieguez, A., Pinto, R., ... & Chavez-Baray, S. (2015). Evaluating the impact of immigration policies on health status among undocumented immigrants: A systematic review. *Journal of immigrant and minority health*, 17(3), 947-970.
- ⁷ Gordon, J.S. (2017, February 10). Living in fear of deportation is terrible for your health. *Washington Post*. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2017/02/10/living-in-fear-as-a-refugee-in-the-u-s-is-terrible-for-your-health/?postshare=1171486997027791&tid=ss_mail&utm_term=.65bef24dcfb8.
- ⁸ Brabeck, K., & Xu, Q. (2010). The impact of detention and deportation on Latino immigrant children and families: A quantitative exploration. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences*, 32(3), 341-361.
- ⁹ Suárez-Orozco, C., Yoshikawa, H., Teranishi, R., & Suárez-Orozco, M. (2011). Growing up in the shadows: The developmental implications of unauthorized status. *Harvard Educational Review*, 81(3), 438-473.
- ¹⁰ Suárez-Orozco, C., Bang, H. J., & Kim, H. Y. (2010). I felt like my heart was staying behind: Psychological implications of family separations and reunifications for immigrant youth. *Journal of Adolescent Research* 26(2), 222-257.
- ¹¹ American Psychological Association, Presidential Task Force on Immigration, 2012
- ¹² Lustig et al., 2004
- ¹³ Dreby, J. (2012). The burden of deportation on children in Mexican immigrant families. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 74(4), 829-845.
- ¹⁴ Chaudry, A., Capps, R., Pedroza, J.M., Castañeda, R.M., Santos, R., & Scott M.M. (2010) *Facing our future: Children in the aftermath of immigration enforcement*. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute.
- ¹⁵ Chaudry et al., 2010
- ¹⁶ Dreby, 2012