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What Psychological Science Says About Immigration and Immigrant Health

The American Psychological Association (APA) supports immigration policies that consider the well-being of immigrants, including the provision of appropriate medical, mental health, and social services. Decades of psychological, economic, and related research has shown that immigrants are valuable members of United States (U.S.) society and show strong resilience. However, many immigrants face pervasive stressors, beginning with poverty and violence spurring the departure from their home countries, continuing along often dangerous journeys to the U.S. and as they acclimate to new lives in the U.S.¹ Accordingly, immigrants are disproportionately likely to experience stress and other behavioral health concerns.²

IMMIGRANTS BENEFIT HOST SOCIETIES

It is in the U.S. national interest to support the health of immigrants. Immigration is beneficial to host countries, contributing to economic, cultural, and social growth. Immigrants drive innovation and productivity,³ stimulating local economies, starting businesses, creating jobs, enhancing productivity, and increasing consumer spending.⁴

PUNITIVE IMMIGRATION POLICIES ARE HARMFUL

Immigrant health is harmed by damaging public policies that increase fear and hinder access to appropriate supports and services.⁵ For example, the fear of deportation results in children's poor emotional well-being and deficient academic performance.⁶ Also, due to the fear of deportation and harassment from law enforcement, immigrants often shy away from accessing health services.^{7,8}

Children are especially susceptible to negative mental health effects of not only being separated from their families, but also of simply being afraid that they will be separated. Research has consistently demonstrated the negative impacts of family separation on immigrant mental health.⁹ For example, one study of immigrant children in schools found that those who had experienced long separations from their parents reported more signs of depression and anxiety than those who had not experienced long separations.¹⁰ Family separation, or fear of separation, may result in children's stress or distress, depression, anxiety, behavioral and emotional issues, or sleep disturbances. Parents or caregivers can also experience stress or distress, depression, anxiety, and sleep disturbances.¹¹

As witnessed especially during family separations in 2019 and 2020, this practice is unhealthy for those separated and for those witnessing the trauma of separation.¹² Decades of psychological research show that children separated from their parents can suffer severe psychological distress, resulting in anxiety, loss of appetite, sleep disturbances, withdrawal, aggressive behavior, and decline in educational achievement. The longer the parent and child are separated, the greater the child's symptoms of anxiety and depression can become.

Furthermore, evidence of "spillover" mental health impacts indicates that anti-immigrant policies are also detrimental to people who are not immigrants. This includes witnesses of anti-immigrant actions and law enforcement on the frontlines, both on the border and inland.

APA RECOMMENDATIONS

APA Services, Inc. supports:

- Immigration policies and legislation that consider the well-being and mental health of immigrants and law enforcement.
- Immigration policy that keeps families together.
- Policymakers who recognize the vital role psychologists and psychology plays in helping address the behavioral health needs of immigrants and families.
- Immigration policy that considers mental health and trauma which can hinder growth, development and secure attachment.
- State and federal funding to promote immigrant behavioral health, including health screenings, trauma treatment, access to health care, and strengths-based approaches to immigrant wellness.

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ADDITIONAL REFERENCES

[2024 APA Policy Statement on Immigrant Health](#)

[2024 Presidential Task Force Report on Immigrant Health](#)

[APA/APASI Update on Federal Immigration EO's](#)