

Study eyes deportation's mental-health effect on kids

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How the deportation of undocumented Mexican migrants affects their American-born children, who are faced with either going with their parents to Mexico or remaining in the land of their birth without them, is an issue of paramount importance as the nation engages in discussion of comprehensive immigration reform—and is the subject of groundbreaking new research by The University of Texas, Austin, UC Davis Health System and the National Institute of Psychiatry, Mexico.

The nation's immigration debate centers mostly on the nearly 12 million undocumented immigrants living in the United States, 59 percent of whom are from Mexico. The number of children living in mixed-status households—those with undocumented [immigrant parents](#) and U.S. citizen-children—grew from 2.7 million in 2003 to 4 million in 2008. From July 2010 to October 2012, nearly 205,000 people who said that their children were United States citizens were deported, according to U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement estimates.

"This is a timely and much-needed study that interfaces health, law and immigration," said Sergio Aguilar-Gaxiola, professor of clinical internal medicine and director of the Sacramento-based UC Davis Center for Reducing Health Disparities. "Given the scale of the numbers of U.S. citizen-children being separated from their parents during the past two years, embarking on this study is of great public-health importance and will help us understand what happens to the mental health of American children after their parents' deportation."

Aguilar-Gaxiola is collaborating on the unique, first-of-its kind study with lead researcher Luis Zayas, professor and dean of The University of Texas, Austin, School of Social Work.

"[We need to better understand] what happens to these kids," Zayas said. "What are the effects on them psychologically? We're hoping to find out under what circumstances kids do better and under what circumstances they do worse, psychologically."

Thus far, most of the reports regarding the fates of citizen-children have been anecdotal. However, research by the Texas-based Center for Public Policy Priorities found that a lack of clear policies and procedures to handle removal and repatriation has led to inconsistent practices and a lack of attention to child safety. It also has been reported that repatriation services typically lack guidelines to prevent abuse or ensure application of child-welfare standards.

To conduct the study, the researchers are interviewing a total of 80 children in and around Austin, Texas, Sacramento, St. Louis and Mexico. They will conduct one interview prior to a change in the children's circumstances and another six months after their circumstances change, and will measure such factors as depression, trauma and self-esteem and self-image, to assess their psychological well-being. In families with multiple children as many of the children as possible will be enrolled and interviewed for the research.

The participants will include four groups of children between the ages of 10 and 12, half male and half female.

- One group will be citizen-children who accompanied their deported parents to Mexico.
- Another will be children who remained in the United States in

the care of one parent after the other parent was deported.

- One will be children who remained in the U.S. in the care of extended family or friends
- And one will be children whose immigrant parents have not been deported and are not in removal proceedings.

To identify mixed-status households the researchers are working with agencies that serve immigrant communities in Texas, California, Missouri and Mexico to encourage them to participate in the research. The effort may be challenging, because families with members who are undocumented generally are reluctant to make themselves known. Zayas said that all interviews will be held in the strictest confidence to protect the participants' identities. The study is actively recruiting participants at all of the study sites.

Zayas said that what is learned about these children in this and subsequent research can help policy makers and judges in immigration court deal with U.S. citizen children and their families in ways that benefit all.

"We hope that the scientific evidence our study produces will be strongly considered by those who make immigration laws and those who implement them," he said.

Aguilar-Gaxiola said that in earlier research he found that childhood adversities may increase risks of early onset mental disorders, while both childhood adversities and early-onset mental disorder may increase risks of a broad spectrum of chronic physical diseases and chronic pain conditions in later life. Childhood adversities include: physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, parental death, parent divorce, other parental loss, parental mental disorder, parental substance use, parental criminal behavior, family violence and family economic adversity.

"We know that family separation can be catastrophic for [children](#) in critical stages of their development," Aguilar-Gaxiola said. "Childhood adversity is one of the strongest indicators for early-onset mental health disorders, as well as for the premature manifestation of chronic health conditions.

"This is certainly a childhood adversity of great consequence."

Provided by UC Davis

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