

Immigrants living in the country without authorization at risk for anxiety and depression

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Nearly a quarter of Mexican immigrants who live near the California-Mexico border without legal authorization have a mental disorder,

particularly depression or anxiety, according to a new study by Rice University.

"Mental Disorders Among Undocumented Mexican Immigrants in High-Risk Neighborhoods: Prevalence, Comorbidity and Vulnerabilities" will appear in an upcoming edition of the *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* and examines the prevalence of mental [disorders](#) and substance use among Mexican immigrants residing near the California-Mexico border without legal authorization. Given that the city where the study was conducted is listed among the most conservative U.S. cities with strong opposition and disciplinary actions against undocumented immigrants, lead author Luz Garcini, a postdoctoral research fellow in the Department of Psychology at Rice, said this area is considered a high-risk area for [undocumented immigrants](#).

Garcini and her fellow authors found that 23 percent of the study's nearly 250 adult participants met criteria for having a [mental disorder](#). Most prevalent were [major depressive disorder](#) (14 percent of study participants), panic disorder (8 percent) and [generalized anxiety disorder](#) (7 percent).

"The estimates obtained in this study for depression and anxiety disorders were considerably higher in this [population](#) when compared with estimates for the general U.S. population," Garcini said. The National Comorbidity Survey Replication reported that approximately 7 percent of the U.S. population suffers from major depressive disorder and 3 percent suffer from panic disorder and/or generalized anxiety disorder.

Findings from the study also showed that the prevalence for having a substance use disorder in this population (4 percent of [study participants](#)) was similar to that of the U.S. general household population.

"This finding defies existing stereotypes that contribute to stigmatization of and discrimination against Mexican immigrants living in the U.S. without documentation as a population with high prevalence of substance use," Garcini said. "These individuals are unlikely to engage in substance use because it increases their risk for deportation and it interferes with their productivity at work."

Garcini emphasized that the daily stressors of these individuals, including stigma, language barriers, fear of deportation, family separation and discrimination, are associated with the mental disorders. She said that the findings have important public health and clinical implications, including the need for the development and provision of contextually and culturally sensitive interventions.

"Unfortunately, there are many obstacles to mental health service use for immigrants living in the country without documentation," Garcini said. "Debates on programs and policies pertaining to these individuals are complicated, and disagreement on immigration and welfare reform in the U.S. is enduring. Rethinking procedures to create solutions based on data and creating new alternatives to facilitate access and provision of mental health services to this at-risk population is vital to protect their human rights and reduce mental health disparities in this community."

The study used respondent-driven sampling (a methodology based on a mathematical model of the social networks that connect individuals) to collect and analyze data from clinical interviews with 248 Mexican immigrants living in the country without legal authorization. The average age of the participants was 38 years; 69 percent were female and 31 percent were male. The majority of participants had been in the U.S. for more than 10 years. This study is one of the first to provide population-based estimates of the prevalence of current mental and substance-use disorders in this [immigrant](#) population.

"Additional research and funding are needed to document the devastating effects of the current socio-political context on the [mental health](#) of immigrants living in the U.S. without documentation, which is needed to inform advocacy, policy and intervention efforts," Garcini said.

More information: Luz M. Garcini et al, Mental disorders among undocumented Mexican immigrants in high-risk neighborhoods: Prevalence, comorbidity, and vulnerabilities., *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* (2017). [DOI: 10.1037/ccp0000237](https://doi.org/10.1037/ccp0000237)

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