

Heart health at risk for Latinas over worries about deportation

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A recent study conducted by researchers at UC San Francisco and UC Berkeley's Center for Environmental Research and Children's Health (CERCH) found that worry about deportations was associated with multiple cardiovascular health risk factors in Latinas from California's Salinas Valley, an area with a large immigrant community. The study was published in the journal, *Annals of Behavioral Medicine*, on January 9.

The current study is the first data-driven research into the connection between deportation fears and measured cardiovascular [risk factors](#). While past descriptive studies have documented the impact of [fear](#) of deportation on the mental [health](#) of immigrants, their families, and their communities, none have examined how this fear gets "under the skin" to affect [physical health](#).

Researchers gathered data between 2012 and 2014 from 545 women enrolled in the internationally recognized Center for the Health Assessment of Mothers and Children of Salinas (CHAMACOS) cohort, the longest-running study based in a U.S. farmworker community. They asked mothers in the cohort about how much worry deportation caused them and monitored vital signs and other health information. Using these data, the UCSF and CERCH team created statistical models to look at the relationship between deportation worry and health outcomes such as blood pressure, body mass index (BMI), and waist circumference, which have previously been linked to other structural and societal stressors like discrimination.

Almost half of the women expressed a lot of worry about deportation. Overall, those who were more concerned had significantly greater waist circumferences and odds of obesity as well as higher body mass indexes, all risk factors for cardiovascular disease and stroke. The researchers also found that greater worry about deportation was linked to higher systolic blood pressure (the pressure in blood vessels when a heart beats) and pulse pressure, an important indicator of heart health.

The findings held even when controlling for measures of socio-economic status, age, time spent in the United States and nativity. The researchers also explored how depression may affect worry about deportation and cardiovascular risk factors, since the disorder might drive them both.

"These results are not surprising, given what we know about the effects of other societal stressors on physical wellbeing, including [cardiovascular risk factors](#)," says Jacqueline Torres, first author of the study and assistant professor at UCSF. "They are nevertheless heartbreaking, because they suggest that individuals who are targeted by immigration enforcement practices - and live in fear of the effects on their family and community members - might bear a dual burden related to the adverse consequences of this immense stress on their physical health."

Dramatic increases in deportations over the last two decades, along with local police forces working more closely with federal immigration authorities, have fostered an environment of fear across many U.S. immigrant communities. According to a national survey fielded last year, almost half of Latinos living in the United States worry about deportation, either for themselves or someone close to them. The consequences of this fear and stress can extend beyond day-to-day life and impact overall health and wellbeing.

The broader literature on the health impacts of psychosocial stress points to several ways that deportation fears may affect heart health. Persistent

worry may chronically activate a person's stress response system or increase sensitivity to other factors, such as food insecurity, that increase stress. This fear could even affect sleep quality and duration, and chronic stress has been linked to inflammation, which can affect cardiovascular health.

Though no one study is sufficient to draw causal conclusions about the effects of fear of deportation on clinical risk factors, this study suggests there may be potential long-term health consequences of immigration policies on adult women.

These data were collected during the Obama administration, when deportations reached previous peak levels. Recent reports suggest that deportation rates are rising further under the Trump presidency. The researchers began this study because of concerns about the impacts of deportation on the community. Members of the CERCH team have been working with the same group of women for decades - some as early as 1999 - and heard firsthand about the impacts of these immigration enforcement activities on the lives of these women.

"Given the current immigration policies, I am especially concerned about the adverse effects of [deportation](#) fear on the mental and physical health of the children in these families, many of whom are United States citizens," says study co-author Brenda Eskenazi, director of CERCH, principal investigator of CHAMACOS, and professor at the UC Berkeley School of Public Health.

"These farmworker families are critical to the success of the agricultural economy in California and deserve our support," adds Torres.

More information: Jacqueline M Torres et al, Worry About Deportation and Cardiovascular Disease Risk Factors Among Adult Women: The Center for the Health Assessment of Mothers and Children

of Salinas Study, *Annals of Behavioral Medicine* (2018). DOI: [10.1093/abm/kax007](https://doi.org/10.1093/abm/kax007)

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