

Latino parents report high levels of psychological distress due to US immigration policies

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A new report published today in the *Journal of Adolescent Health* says that the recent changes in U.S. immigration policy have triggered serious psychological distress for many Latino parents, including those living in the United States legally.

The study, by researchers at Milken Institute School of Public Health (Milken Institute SPH) at the George Washington University (GW), is one of the first to look at how the 2017 U.S. immigration policies are affecting Latino parents—and by extension their teenage children.

"A substantial proportion of Latino parents reported that they are avoiding authorities, warning their children to change their routines and worrying about the future due to recent U.S. immigration policies and news," said lead author Kathleen Roche, MSW, PhD, an associate professor of prevention and community health at Milken Institute SPH. "Parents experiencing these kinds of immigration-related consequences also appear to be at a very high risk of anxiety, depression, and other forms of distress."

Roche and her colleagues studied 213 Latino, mostly Central American, parents of adolescent children recruited from a suburb of a large mid-Atlantic city. Although some parents in the study were undocumented, more than two-thirds were living in the US legally, whether as a citizen, permanent resident, or under temporary protected status.

The researchers asked the parents a series of questions to find out how U.S. immigration actions and news had affected them in recent months. Here are some key findings from the survey:

- A substantial proportion of US Latino parents reported adverse emotional and behavioral consequences from recent immigration actions and news. For example, 64 percent said that they very often or always worried about family members getting separated.
- Nearly 40 percent of parents said they frequently avoided getting medical care, help from police, or support from social services because of immigration actions and news;
- Almost half of the parents reported that recent immigration events had led them to very often or always warn their teenagers to stay away from authorities and to change their behaviors such as where the youth hang out.

In addition, the researchers used a standard questionnaire to assess symptoms of depression, anxiety and other mental health problems.

Parents who frequently experienced worries or changes in behavior due to immigration news and policies had at least a 300 percent increase in the odds of high [psychological distress](#), including symptoms of clinical anxiety and depression, Roche said. "Such high levels of distress among parents raise concerns about immigration impacts on the entire family, including among teenagers," Roche says. "Studies show that adolescents whose parents are anxious or depressed are at elevated risk of doing poorly in school, adopting risky behaviors, and developing lifelong health and [mental health problems](#)."

The findings, which come from a small survey, must be verified by other researchers, Roche adds. However, the association between U.S. immigration actions and psychological distress in this study held true after controlling for education, residency status, gender and other

factors.

Previous research suggests that a parent's fear, anxiety or depression can spill over to affect the entire family, and especially teenagers.

Virtually all of the Latino adolescents whose parents were in this study were either U.S. citizens or protected under Deferred Action Childhood Arrivals or DACA, points out study co-author Elizabeth Vaquera, PhD, Director of the Cisneros Hispanic Leadership Institute at GW. "Thus, even though Latino adolescents have grown up in the United States and are here legally they still face serious risks to their health and well-being," she said.

Provided by George Washington University

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