

# Death of loved ones is hard on undocumented immigrants

March 14 2019, by Amy Mccaig

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The death of a loved one is never easy to endure, but for undocumented immigrants, the psychological toll is particularly rough, according to new research from Rice University.

"Miles over mind: Transnational [death](#) and its association with psychological distress among undocumented Mexican immigrants" appears in the journal *Death Studies*. It examines how the loss of a loved one who was living outside the U.S. impacts relatives living in the U.S. without documentation.

The study of 248 undocumented Mexican immigrants living in a medium-size city near the U.S.-Mexico border found that a high proportion of these individuals were experiencing stress associated with the death of a loved one living in a different country.

Eighty-five percent of [study participants](#) had experienced a transnational death in their families, and those individuals were more than twice as likely to meet the criteria for clinically significant [psychological distress](#) compared with individuals who had not.

"Death is always a stressful and sad time, but this is particularly true for individuals living in the U.S. without documentation," said Luz Garcini, a Rice Academy affiliate in the Department of Psychological Sciences and a scholar at Rice's Baker Institute for Public Policy whose research focuses on identification of the physical and mental health needs of the undocumented community. "Over the course of our studies with

[undocumented immigrants](#), we have noticed that a large number are experiencing stress associated with transnational death."

Garcini said multiple issues factor into why undocumented individuals have a harder time dealing with the death of loved ones. She said they are often blamed for being in the U.S. illegally and, because of their status, feel limited from traveling to visit loved ones who are near death. When their loved one dies, they often feel guilt for their inability to be with that person as they died, and they are often unable to express their grief in a typical way due to the lack of resources and support networks available to people who live in the country legally.

"Ultimately, they talk about it less and blame themselves more, which is associated with increased stress," she said.

Garcini said the experiences of undocumented immigrants ultimately impact their communities as a whole, so it is in the best interest of everyone to find ways to support them. She hopes her research will lead to the development of cost-effective and easily disseminated interventions to improve the health of these people.

The cross-sectional study used respondent-driven sampling (RDS), which is currently the most reliable method to study hard-to-reach populations and has been used previously in the study of undocumented immigrants. Participants were 18 years or older, of Mexican origin and undocumented. Data was collected between 2014 and 2015.

**More information:** Luz M. Garcini et al. Miles over mind: Transnational death and its association with psychological distress among undocumented Mexican immigrants, *Death Studies* (2019). [DOI: 10.1080/07481187.2019.1573862](https://doi.org/10.1080/07481187.2019.1573862)

Provided by Rice University

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