

# Middle-school Latino children report more depressive symptoms after family member arrested

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Latino children who experience the immigration-related arrest of a family member report more severe levels of depression than those who don't have such an experience, especially if one or both parents are undocumented, according to new research published by the American Psychological Association.

For the study, a team of researchers from Oklahoma State University surveyed 611 Latino seventh graders from a public [school](#) district in Oklahoma. The research was published online in the journal *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*.

"We were shocked that 29% of the students reported an immigration-related arrest of a family member," said lead researcher Zachary Giano, Ph.D., a post-doctoral fellow at Oklahoma State University. "These arrests often are a distant abstract fear or urban legend for many Latino kids, but it becomes very real and frightening when it happens to their family, which can have serious repercussions for their mental health."

The level of depressive symptoms for all of the Latino students in the study already was higher than average, possibly because of discrimination against the Latino community, Giano said. Those symptoms increased to clinical levels of depression for students who experienced the immigration-related arrest of a family member. The reported depressive symptoms increased further when a student had one

undocumented parent and kept rising if both parents were undocumented.

While 85% of the students in the study were U.S. citizens because they were born here, one-fifth of them stated they had one undocumented parent, while almost one-third reported that both of their parents were undocumented. Giano said those numbers are probably higher because some children wouldn't want to reveal that information. Levels of depression also were higher for girls and students who were older than the mean age of 13 among the participants.

"Middle school is already a tumultuous time, and kids in the seventh grade aren't supposed to experience these high levels of stress and trauma," Giano said. "It makes school a lower priority, which is really detrimental at this age. Studies have shown that if you fall behind academically in middle school, it's really hard to catch up later."

That stress can lead to Latino children acting out or becoming withdrawn at school since depression manifests in different ways. School counselors, teachers and administrators need to be aware of these issues instead of suspending or expelling Latino students for behavioral problems, Giano said.

Oklahoma has a large immigrant population, but it isn't a typical entry point like southern Texas, Florida or California, so it has fewer school resources and support services for the Latino community, Giano said. Since the study was conducted in one city in Oklahoma, the findings might vary in other parts of the country based on available resources, state immigration policies or other factors.

Due to the wording of the survey, the researchers did not know which family members were arrested or whether they were released, jailed or deported. The study also couldn't determine if children had witnessed

the arrest or just heard about it. The survey was conducted in 2009 as part of a larger study, but researchers analyzed the arrest data more recently because of the growing crisis facing immigrants who have been jailed, separated from their children or deported.

Giano said rates of depression among Latino children may be even higher now as administration officials and others make xenophobic comments indicating that Latino immigrants aren't welcome in the United States and need to be kept out with a border wall.

"This discriminatory rhetoric has really evolved in a more sinister way, and it's impacting the Latino community," Giano said. "I think kids in middle school usually aren't interested in politics, but there is this cascading effect of dangerous rhetoric that's coming down from the top and reaching all the way down to [middle school](#)."

Recent studies have shown that even second graders are now using more racial slurs, Giano said. "They don't come up with that by themselves," he said. "They hear it from adults and repeat it."

Other studies also have found negative effects when children experience immigration-related arrests of family members, including eating and sleeping disturbances, distrust of law enforcement, and increased levels of fear, anxiety and aggression. Those [children](#) also are more likely to suffer long-term emotional and behavioral consequences extending into adulthood, including substance abuse and unemployment.

**More information:** "Immigration-Related Arrest, Parental Documentation Status, and Depressive Symptoms Among Early Adolescent Latinos," by Zachary Giano, PhD, Machele Anderson, PhD, Karina M. Shreffler, PhD, Ronald B. Cox Jr., PhD, Michael J. Merten, PhD, and Kami L. Gallus, PhD; Oklahoma State University; *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, published online Aug. 1, 2019.

Provided by American Psychological Association

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