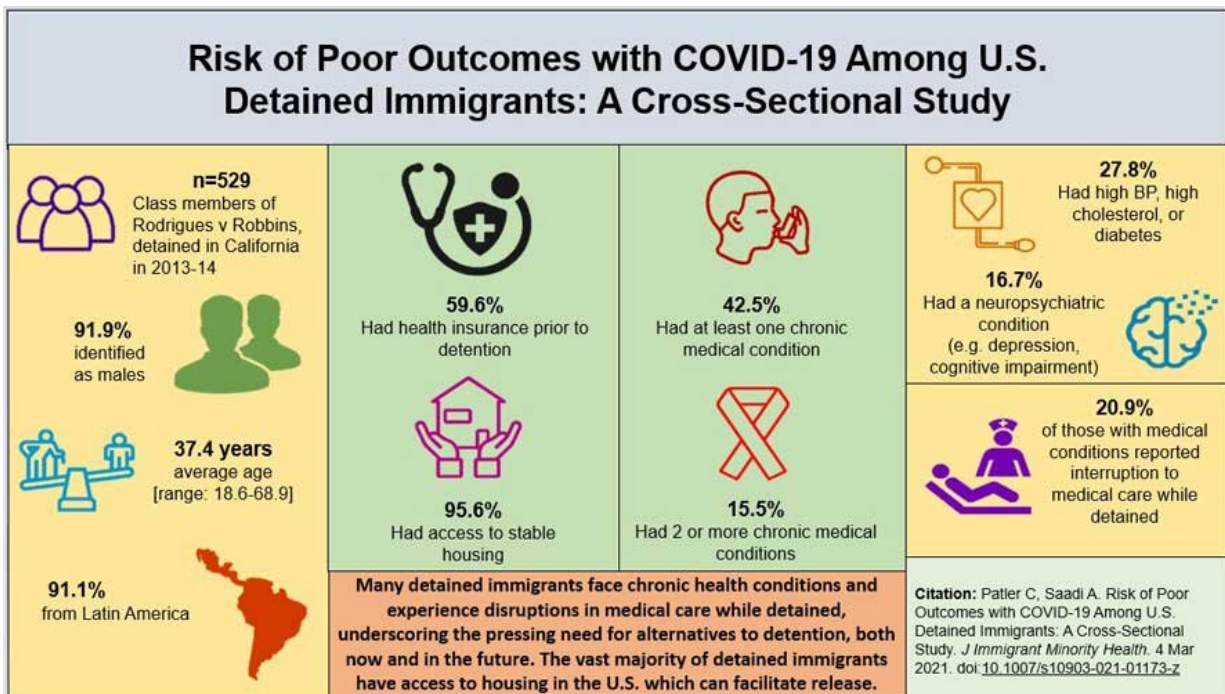


Immigrants in ICE detention face high risks in COVID-19 pandemic

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Immigrants imprisoned in immigration facilities across the country face health conditions and often have chronic illnesses that would expose them to greater risk with COVID-19. Credit: Caitlin Patler

Immigrants imprisoned in immigration facilities across the country face health conditions and often have chronic illnesses that would expose them to greater risk with COVID-19, a new University of California, Davis, study suggests.

"The research is clear: immigration detention is not only unnecessary for facilitating a just immigration system, but also causes extensive harm to detained people, perhaps especially to those facing [chronic health conditions](#)," said the study's lead author, Caitlin Patler, professor of sociology. "This is particularly alarming in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The government must act quickly to permanently reduce reliance on this overly punitive and systematically unjust practice."

The study was published earlier this month in the *Journal of Immigrant and Minority Health*.

"Even beyond the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, immigration detention harms people's [health](#) by disrupting the continuity of their medical care," added the study's co-author, Altaf Saadi, a neurologist at Massachusetts General Hospital and Harvard Medical School. "The vast majority of people have a stable place to stay and would be able to receive better health care if not detained."

The report cites the May 2020 death of Carlos Ernesto Escobar Mejia, the first person in ICE custody to die from COVID-19. "Health and legal professionals have raised alarm that many detainees may be similarly imperiled by COVID-19 infection [in detention]," authors wrote.

Researchers looked at [health data](#) of more than 500 people detained in 2013-14 by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, or ICE, at hundreds of facilities across California. This data is the only publicly available health information for ICE detainees. Researchers said the detainees' health conditions are likely similar to a current population.

Of the individuals detained in 2013-14, at least 42 percent had at least one chronic condition, combined with other health issues, and additionally face disruption in care upon entering the facility.

The vast majority, or 95.6 percent, reported having access to stable housing in the country.

"Even one chronic condition can increase risk for severe consequences from COVID-19," the authors said. One study of COVID-19 patients, they said, revealed that more than 80 percent had more than one underlying medical condition. These risks are heightened if health conditions are not adequately managed and there is disruption of pre-existing health care because they are incarcerated, researchers said.

"...Decision-makers must consider every available option to mandate release from the congregate setting of [detention](#) centers in which social distancing is almost impossible even under ideal conditions," researchers concluded in their study. "Release can be easily facilitated through existing Alternatives to Detention (ATD) programs in which individuals can be released to their families and communities as they continue with their immigration [legal proceedings](#)."

More information: Caitlin Patler et al, Risk of Poor Outcomes with COVID-19 Among U.S. Detained Immigrants: A Cross-Sectional Study, *Journal of Immigrant and Minority Health* (2021). [DOI: 10.1007/s10903-021-01173-z](#)

Provided by UC Davis

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