

Immigrants without documentation face mental health trauma even after arriving in US

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Immigrants migrating to the U.S. face all kinds of hurdles, but after

arriving stateside, the hardships continue, which can result in additional psychological distress, according to new research from Rice University.

"Cuento de nunca acabar (never-ending story): Compounding trauma and mental health among undocumented Latinx immigrants" appears in a recent edition of the *Journal of Traumatic Stress*. The study was conducted among 253 Latino immigrants living without documentation along the U.S.-Mexico border.

Luz Garcini, an assistant professor of psychological sciences at Rice, faculty at the Center for U.S. and Mexico at the Baker Institute and the study's lead author, said that research examining the effects of distressing events in the lives of these immigrants often focuses on assessing post-traumatic stress disorder or general psychological distress prior to living in the U.S. However, she said more attention must be paid to their post-migration lives, and that was the motivation for this work.

"Simply focusing on pre-migration trauma may cloud our understanding of how trauma impacts [mental health](#) across all stages of migration," she said. "In this particular study, we really tried to understand how the different individual traumatic events influenced symptoms of anxiety and depression among undocumented immigrants, and how the events and symptoms persisted after migration."

For the study, the researchers conducted in-depth clinical interviews with the participants. On average, the respondents had experienced four different types of traumatic events. Among the most frequent were crime, death of a loved one, and victimization due to their unauthorized status in the U.S. Garcini, and her fellow authors found that bodily abuse/beatings, poor health without access to medical care, sexual humiliation and/or lack of food or water were the most relevant experiences explaining severe anxiety and depression post-migration.

Garcini stated that many of the struggles these immigrants face after arriving in the U.S. stem from their lack of [documentation](#).

"In most situations, they are fearful of asking for help because it would mean being discovered and forced to leave the U.S.," Garcini said.

The researchers said that a variety of different approaches should be considered when assessing immigration-related trauma, including identifying barriers and facilitators to access to treatment for [immigrants](#) ' specific forms of anxiety and depression in a culturally informed manner. They also wrote that immigration reform that opens paths for authorized migration could decrease the risk of [trauma](#) exposure.

More information: Cynthia M Navarro Flores et al, Cuento de nunca acabar [never-ending story]: Compounding trauma and mental health among undocumented Latinx immigrants, *Journal of Traumatic Stress* (2023). [DOI: 10.1002/jts.22929](https://doi.org/10.1002/jts.22929)

Provided by Rice University

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