

Anti-immigrant political rhetoric and action threaten Latino/a youth mental health: Study

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Harsh political rhetoric about immigrants and anti-immigrant actions can damage parent-child relationships in Latino families and in turn lead to a significant increase in mental health problems for the kids in those

families, according to a study, titled "US Immigration Policy Stressors and Latinx Youth Mental Health: A 4-Year Prospective Study," published in *JAMA Pediatrics*.

"Our research suggests that restrictive immigration policies and harsh rhetoric about immigrants can harm Latino and Latina adolescents," said Kathleen Roche, lead author of the study and professor of prevention and [community health](#) at the George Washington University Milken Institute School of Public Health. "Such harm during adolescence can lead to enduring difficulties with depression, anxiety, and unhealthy behaviors into adulthood."

The findings suggest that the current political landscape which includes anti-immigrant rhetoric and actions threatens a critical segment of the US youth population. Roche points out that one out of every four kids in US high schools are of Latin American origin. Kids with increased stress, [family conflict](#) and [mental health problems](#) can do poorly in school and are less prepared to enter adulthood.

Roche and her colleagues studied 547 teenagers and their parents over a four year period from 2018 to 2022. The families all lived in Suburban Atlanta and more than 90% of the children were US citizens. The researchers asked teenagers about deportations or detentions occurring in the family. They then asked mothers about impacts of anti-immigrant threats and rhetoric on their families' fears and behaviors. The researchers then examined changes in teenagers' reports of [parental support](#) and parent-child conflict and teenagers' mental health symptoms.

Key findings from the study:

- Teenagers experienced increased conflict with parents when their mothers responded to anti-immigrant news and actions by worrying about family separations, job possibilities and

educational prospects and by changing behaviors such as avoiding the police and medical care out of fears of deportation.

- These arguments and disagreements between teenagers and their parents were related to youth in the study developing increased problems with aggressive, impulsive, and delinquent kinds of behaviors.
- When family members were deported or detained, the quality of the parent-child relationship suffered and for girls that led to an increased risk of depression, anxiety and other serious mental health issues.

The findings raise the concern that a large part of the US population growing up in today's political landscape may be exposed to harsh anti-immigration talk on the news or threatening actions such as the deportation of a family member. Such an environment may be damaging to [parent-child relationships](#) at a critical developmental time of life.

The study points to the value of supporting Latino families, providing increased support for parents and children to reduce the risk of mental health issues later on. Roche says school and [health care professionals](#) should be aware of the risk and step in to offer support if needed.

The study authors also say Congress and lawmakers have a role to play in reducing the threats to immigrants, especially for families. The overwhelming majority of children in Latino families are US citizens.

More information: US Immigration Policy Stressors and Latinx Youth Mental Health: A 4-Year Prospective Study, *JAMA Pediatrics* (2024). doi:10.1001/jamapediatrics.2024.1153 , jamanetwork.com/journals/jamap.../fullarticle/2818679

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