

Researcher: deportation affects children

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UAlbany researcher Joanna Dreby published findings this month on effects of immigration enforcement.

(Phys.org) -- Children suffer the most serious emotional and physical consequences from U.S. deportation policies, a University at Albany researcher finds.

[Sociologist](#) Joanna Dreby, in a report published this month in *The Journal of [Marriage and Family](#)*, finds that children in Mexican families, whether or not they have had a family member deported, were prone to [emotional distress](#), fears of separation and associating immigration with [illegal activity](#).

“An act of [deportation](#) splits up families, separating U.S. citizen children from their parents. But the threat of deportation has an equally

devastating impact on children,” said Dreby.

In 2011, some 400,000 foreign-born individuals, a record number, were detained and removed from the United States. Mexican families are the most likely in the U.S. to be affected by deportation policies. While Mexicans constitute approximately 30 percent of the foreign-born residents in the United States and 58 percent of the unauthorized, in 2010 they represented 83 percent of those detained, 73 percent of those forcibly removed, and 77 percent of voluntary departures.

Drawing on interviews with parents and children in 80 Mexican households, including parents’ stories about the impact deportations have had on their families as well as the often overlooked accounts from children, Dreby documented how an emphasis on enforcement that targets Mexicans at the level of public policy has had disturbing consequences for young children who have Mexican immigrant parents, many of whom are U.S. citizens.

The ethnographic study completed between 2009 and 2012 included interviews with 91 parents and 110 children, ages 5-15, in northeast Ohio, where the Mexican community is relatively small and dispersed, as well as in central New Jersey, where the Mexican community is concentrated. Dreby also did home and school visits with a smaller group of 12 children in the 1st-3rd grades.

A common fear parents expressed in interviews is that they could lose custody of U.S. born children if detained or deported. A recent study found cause for [parents’](#) concerns; in 2011 more than 5,100 U.S. children were living in foster care after a parent's detention or deportation. However, Dreby cautioned, although these extreme cases exist, focusing on these outcomes obscures the more insidious ways deportation policies impact a greater number of children.

Dreby suggests that, similar to the injury pyramid used by public health professionals, a deportation pyramid best depicts the burden of deportation on children (see illustration). At the top of the pyramid are instances that have had the most severe consequences on children's daily lives: families in which a deportation has led to permanent family dissolution. Next is the harsh consequence that many U.S.-born children -- citizens of the U.S. -- are unable to live in the country. But enforcement policies have had the greatest impact on children at the bottom of the pyramid: regardless of true legal status or their [family members](#)' involvement with immigration authorities, children in Mexican immigrant households describe [fear](#) about their family stability, association of immigration with illegality, and a predisposition to denying their immigrant heritage.

"Children are aware of social status differences at very young ages," Dreby said. "They may not understand immigration, but they understand that U.S. policies today target immigrants, people who are their friends, neighbors and members of their families. U.S. citizen children today are growing up afraid of the authorities, who can potentially tear their families apart. They are associating a stigma with immigration, even though they are the [children](#) of immigrants. This is a very sad direction for a country that prides itself on being a nation of [immigrants](#)."

More information: Read Dreby's full published report in the *Journal of Marriage and Family*. onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2012.00989.x/abstract

Provided by University at Albany

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