

# Deportation and family separation impact entire communities, researchers say

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The deportation and forced separation of immigrants has negative effects that extend beyond individuals and families to entire communities in the United States, according to a division of the American Psychological Association, which has issued a policy statement calling for changes to U.S. policy.

Based on a review of the effects of three decades of U.S. immigration [policy](#), the [policy statement](#) details the psychosocial and economic impacts of deportation on children and families, as well as broader community consequences that unfold as [immigrants](#) fearful of being targeted withdraw from civic engagement.

"This policy brief is a thorough examination of the research," said Regina Langhout, professor of psychology at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and lead author of the brief by the APA's Society for Community Research and Action; the policy statement will appear in the upcoming edition of the *American Journal of Community Psychology*.

"U.S. immigration and deportation policies have [negative effects](#) for everybody—not just in immigrant communities, but for everybody," said Langhout. "When families are torn apart without their consent, it has very negative outcomes for everyone."

Langhout and her coauthors underscore the psychological trauma and material hardship experienced by U.S.-born children of immigrants, and the number of people impacted by current deportation policies, before

recommending changes to federal and local policy. Among their conclusions:

- Studies reveal that children who lose a parent to sudden, forced deportation experience anxiety, anger, aggression, withdrawal, a heightened sense of fear, eating and sleeping disturbances, isolation, trauma, and depression.
- Children also experience housing instability, academic withdrawal, and [family](#) dissolution; older children often need to take on jobs to help support the family.
- Ten percent of U.S. families with children have at least one family member who lacks citizenship.
- 5.9 million children have at least one caregiver who lacks authorization to live in the country.

Changes to U.S. immigration policy over the last 30 years have resulted in a massive increase in deportations—and a marked shift away from post-World War II-era policies that focused on family reunification, the authors found.

- From 1900 to 1990, approximately 20,000 people were deported each year. In the mid-1990s, the rate increased by 800 percent to 180,000 a year—and has since more than doubled to 340,000 deportations in 2017.

Immigration raids and deportations generate fear and mistrust that have ripple effects, according to the authors. Fearful of being targeted, community members become less likely to participate in churches, schools, health clinics, cultural activities, and social services.

"As a scholar and social psychologist, my job is to figure out what creates healthy, strong, vibrant communities, and to share research findings in an attempt to influence public policy," said Langhout. "We

can be a barometer of this, because we know the research."

Deportations become a public health issue as feelings of belonging and connection are broken down, she said. "When a group feels terrorized, being able to connect breaks down," said Langhout. "Those targeted stop participating in public life, and that breaks down the entire community."

The effects are sufficiently widespread and dire that Langhout and her coauthors outline several national and local-level policy recommendations to alleviate suffering among U.S.-born children, beginning with comprehensive immigration reform that would end the threat of deportation by providing permanent protection for 11 million people who lack authorization to remain in the United States. Their "child-first" recommendations also include:

- No forcible separation of families
- Modify laws to allow extended family caregivers, such as grandparents, to qualify for exemption from deportation
- Take a public health perspective on deportation, recognizing the direct and indirect impacts on community members
- Create a human rights framework in U.S. immigration policy
- Local jurisdictions should declare themselves sanctuary cities to enhance the protection of unauthorized immigrants and their families, and they should not detain or deport people solely for immigration violations.
- Local school districts should communicate with their communities and prioritize safety and inclusion for all immigrant families, including building a protocol for responding to federal immigration activity near schools and educating school personnel on the effects of immigration enforcement.
- Schools, places of worship, and community organizations must build supportive social networks that create a sense of belonging among families that are coping with the effects of [deportation](#).

"If we're going to have neighborhoods and towns and schools and places where people of all different backgrounds interact, it's imperative for [public health](#) that everybody feels a sense of belonging and connection, a sense of attachment," said Langhout.

**More information:** Statement on the Effects of Deportation and Forced Separation on Immigrants, their Families, and Communities, *American Journal of Community Psychology* (2018). [DOI: 10.1002/ajcp.12256](#)

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