

Social work researchers examine the health impacts of US immigration policy

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Immigration is one of the most controversial social and political issues in American life. Yet little attention is given to the aftermath of U.S. immigration policies or the immigrant Americans who are deported back to their country of origin. What is the resulting impact on mental and physical health disparities, both individually and at the societal level?

This question is at the heart of research by scholars at the USC Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social Work.

Alice Cepeda, associate professor, and Avelardo Valdez, the Cleofas and Victor Ramirez Professor of Practice, Policy, Research and Advocacy for the Latino Population, have been studying disparities in [health](#) among deported Americans in Mexico City. They recently presented their important findings in a private audience with Ken Salazar, the United States Ambassador to Mexico, in hopes of expanding recognition for the impact current U.S. immigration policy is having on the lives of individuals and families.

"There are almost half a million deportees in Mexico City that are Americans," Valdez said. "If you talk to these people, it's like talking to any other U.S. citizen. Some of them have never even been to Mexico, have never even thought of going back, and suddenly find themselves in this strange country, separated and alienated from their families."

Valdez and Cepeda have been working together to illuminate social and public health issues around Mexican American immigration and other factors for over 20 years. Their latest study, "[Disparities in Health among Floating Immigrant Populations.](#)" examines the health impacts of the U.S. immigration system. This study interviews [recent immigrants](#) in Los Angeles and deported Americans in Mexico City in order to identify mechanisms by which immigration processes expose individuals to distinct environments, increase susceptibility to risk behaviors and contribute to mental and physical health disparities, infectious diseases and alcohol/drug dependence.

"Our goal with this research is to reframe immigration, not as a threat to public health, but instead recognizing immigrants' special vulnerabilities from a human rights perspective," Cepeda said. "The migration processes are something we really need to think about in terms of the

health of these deported Americans, including [mental health](#) and substance use."

Criminalizing the immigrant experience

When most people think of immigrants from Mexico to America they picture rural agricultural workers coming to work on farms in border states. However, many Mexican migrants to the United States today are from urban areas, and bound for major cities such as Los Angeles, Chicago or Atlanta to work in service sector jobs. Also in contrast to common wisdom, immigration from Mexico has actually decreased significantly in recent years, with 2 million fewer total unauthorized immigrants from Mexico living in the U.S. in 2017 than a decade earlier. This is attributable in part to a significant increase in deportations as a result of changes in immigration policy and the passage of laws specifically targeting immigrants.

In 1996, the passage of the U.S. Illegal Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act began the era of a deportation-carceral system that criminalizes immigrants, militarizes the border and removes long-term immigrants from the interior of the U.S. This law expanded the list of "deplorable" crimes that warranted deportation to include common misdemeanors such as identification or tax fraud, and making unauthorized re-entry into the U.S. a felony. In 2003, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) was created and expanded into the interior of the U.S., not just border areas, enlisting local law enforcement to apprehend unauthorized immigrants. Currently, immigration offenses are the most common federal crime, surpassing drug-related crime.

Many of these laws overwhelmingly target immigrants commonly known as "dreamers," who came to the U.S. as children and might otherwise qualify for the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program to stay in the U.S. Because any criminal history, even

misdemeanors, violates the DACA morality clause, these laws have the net effect of criminalizing immigration. For this reason, Cepeda and Valdez often refer to the deported Americans in Mexico City as the "other dreamers." These deportees also create a new form of family separation. Among the deported Americans Cepeda and Valdez have surveyed in their study, 45% report they left behind one or more children in the U.S., many of them U.S. citizens, disrupting the family's primary financial support and creating tremendous anxiety and stress across the family.

One of the men Cepeda and Valdez interviewed personifies this dynamic. A 36-year-old married man with several children, residing in Dallas and earning a living as a contractor with six employees, was pulled over for a minor traffic infraction. Due to this immigration status, he was deported to Mexico, a place he had not been for over twenty years. His wife and children were suddenly left with no financial support and his employees without jobs. In an effort to keep his family together, he tried moving his wife and children to Mexico, but they were unable to acclimate to the [social systems](#) and language, eventually returning to the U.S. Now, his wife visits him occasionally in Mexico, but the children, who feel uncomfortable in Mexico, only communicate with their father by phone.

'Like they deported us to a war zone'

Many of these deported Americans do not remember Mexico or even speak Spanish. Suddenly they find themselves in a country with an unfamiliar system, struggling to survive, and the physical and emotional stresses of this journey taking a significant toll.

"This is a population that is dealing with very high, severe mental health issues and anxiety, distress, ecological distress," Cepeda said. "We really wanted to look at how these distinct immigration experiences contribute

to these outcomes. It's not just the immigration itself, it's the transit to the destination, the interception, and then now coming back."

Valdez says that most of the people who are deported to Mexico City have no family ties at all in the area. They are just thrown into the city and then have to find a place to live and a job, with almost no support from the U.S. or Mexico.

"It's like they deported us to a war zone, one we don't know anything about," said one 25-year-old deported American interviewed for the study who came to the U.S. at three years old and lived in Indiana until being returned to Mexico in 2018. "I grew up in the States all my life and they deport me when I'm an adult to someplace where I don't know how to file my taxes, get a job or get my ID. The only option you're giving us is to commit more crimes, because we don't know what to do."

Valdez and Cepeda anticipate their study will stimulate discussion and lead to the implementation of policies and programs by both the U.S. and Mexico governments that address these inequities in mental and health conditions for this population.

Provided by University of Southern California

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