

Researchers find worsening distress among Latinos in the United States

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Changes to the social and political landscape between 2011 and 2018, with dramatic events such as DACA rule changes, new presidential leadership, immigration bills and more, have left one major threat looming—deportation.

How this threat has impacted the mental health of some undocumented Latino immigrants in the United States has been previously studied, but new research has found it's not just undocumented immigrants who feel at risk.

Analyzing data from 2011–2018, Amy Johnson, assistant professor of sociology at Lehigh University, and a team of research collaborators have found an increase over time in psychological distress among Latinos, both citizens and noncitizens, in the U.S.

The study, "Deportation threat predicts Latino US citizens and noncitizens' psychological distress, 2011 to 2018," co-authored by Johnson, Christopher Levesque, assistant professor of law and society and sociology at Kenyon College, Neil A. Lewis, Jr., associate professor of communication and [social behavior](#) at Cornell University, and Asad L. Asad, assistant professor of sociology at Stanford University, is [published](#) in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*.

Looking at Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals ([DACA](#)), for example, the researchers found when President Obama announced temporary reprieve from deportation for some undocumented immigrants, it relieved distress for naturalized citizens.

This same pattern occurred following the announcement of Deferred Action for Parents of Americans ([DAPA](#)). Oppositely, the dramatic societal event of the Trump presidency triggered anxiety and depressive symptoms among Latino noncitizens, worsening well-being.

While there are direct impacts of changes to the federal administration and its policies, it's not just [presidential elections](#) that matter, the research determines.

Beyond the federal level, the researchers find that day-to-day

environments about immigration and immigration enforcement also impact [psychological distress](#). For example, ICE's detainer requests to local police, or even conversations online.

"How people are talking about immigration and how salient immigration and deportation are to day-to-day life is potentially equally as important to distress as these more dramatic changes and events, like the Trump election or DACA," Johnson explains.

It's important to note that U.S.-born Latinos are not susceptible to deportation, but these events still impact their psychological health as well. Using Google Trends, the researchers show that U.S.-born Latinos experienced higher distress in periods where there are spikes in Google searches to topics related to deportation and immigration.

Latinos across all citizenship statuses are responding to this feeling of deportation threat in a negative way, the researchers find. But the exact pathway through which that happens depends on citizenship status.

"The fact that racial and ethnic divisions are so prominent that even citizens feel the threat of deportation, and distress related to deportation threat, is really striking," says Johnson.

Although the impact of deportation threat could increase during the highly polarizing 2024 election year, it's not just federal policy to consider as a solution, the researchers emphasize. Creating a sense of cultural belonging is essential as well.

"We concretely show that the deportation-focused approach to immigration that the U.S. has been taking is psychologically damaging even to U.S. citizens," says Johnson. "Moving forward, we can make the argument for policy change around [deportation](#), but equally so, we can advocate for cultural practices of inclusion and belonging."

More information: Deportation threat predicts Latino US citizens and noncitizens' psychological distress, 2011 to 2018, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2024). [DOI: 10.1073/pnas.2306554121](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2306554121).
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