

Q&A: Expert discusses the well-being and mental health of immigrants in the US

April 16 2024, by Megan Schumann



Germán A. Cadenas. Credit: Rutgers University

Germán A. Cadenas, an expert in immigration and mental health, embarked on a journey to the Texas border earlier this year.

As a member of the American Psychological Association Presidential Task Force on Immigration and Health, he visited migrant camps on both sides, engaging in conversations with those directly affected by the complexities of immigration.

With the potential of immigration taking center stage as a critical issue in the [presidential election](#), Cadenas, an associate professor with the Graduate School of Applied and Professional Psychology and associate director of the Center for Youth Social Emotional Wellness, discussed mental health repercussions for immigrants. Cadenas also will speak to some of these issues during Psychology Day at the United Nations on April 25.

What types of stress and violence do immigrants commonly face on their journey to seek a better life?

Most immigrants are seeking to get to a place where they and their families can be safe and protected. Research shows the number of global migrants continues to grow due to many conditions that force people to leave their countries of origin. The stressors and trauma experienced along their journeys and after arriving in the U.S. complicates their mental health, immediately or long term.

However, immigrants hold many cultural strengths and resilience-building strategies that help them cope, heal and thrive. I've worked with immigrants after they arrive in the United States to discover how to navigate a new country that can be hostile and/or unwelcoming.

A particularly helpful strategy supporting mental health is the activism led by young [undocumented immigrants](#) seeking to improve the conditions and opportunities available to themselves and their families. [Activism](#) is linked to greater mental health, educational outcomes, career

aspirations and overall health.

How do initiatives by the Biden administration, such as the humanitarian parole program for certain Latin American countries, contribute to addressing the mental health needs of immigrants?

I believe most immigrants are people of good moral character who want to have the chance to be united with their family members and to live a peaceful and normal life. The Biden administration has put in place good programs that allow for some immigrants to come to the U.S. when petitioned by a family member who would sponsor them. Such programs include the humanitarian parole programs for Ukraine and for certain Latin American countries (Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua, and Venezuela).

These programs are helpful to immigrants who come from countries where there are humanitarian crises. Parole programs allow them to enter the U.S. and be united with their family, to contribute to the workforce and to live a more stable life compared with the crises in their countries of origin. The administration also has expanded Temporary Protected Status for certain groups of immigrants, which is positive, as it allows them to access to normalize their status.

But there is more that could be done to protect undocumented immigrants, including those who benefitted from the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program and whose future has been in limbo, as well as the 100,000 undocumented youth who graduate from [high school](#) every year and have limited pathways to work or higher education based on their statuses.

The administration also can do more to make the process of seeking asylum at the border more humane and expedited, to protect immigrants

who are escaping dire situations and who do not have family in the U.S. to sponsor and welcome them.

How do the societal attitudes—such as the rise of xenophobia and racism in the United States—impact the mental health of immigrants? Can we counteract them?

The rise of xenophobia and racism is the biggest challenge impacting the mental health of immigrants. My research shows most immigrant young adults experience high levels of everyday discrimination, and that this is linked to [greater anxiety and depression](#). It also is concerning that xenophobia and racism are reflected in federal policies, such as the ones that determine who is allowed to enter the U.S. and the types of legal statuses for which they may or may not qualify.

This is perhaps why we have an immigration system that is outdated and has not been reformed in a humane way, and that is keeping 11 million undocumented immigrants in vulnerable conditions. My team of collaborators and I have found that the mental health distress experienced by [college students](#) who have precarious statuses (undocumented) is far greater than the distress of students with protected statuses (permanent residents and U.S. citizens). We can counteract anti-immigrant attitudes to some extent by sharing the real-life stories of immigrants and information based on facts.

What long-term solutions or recommendations could help the mental health and well-being of undocumented immigrants?

My first recommendation would be to do our part to humanize the way

that we talk about immigration. To do this, learn about the real-life stories of immigrants in your community, connect with [sources of factual information](#) about immigration, and share what you know with other folks in your community.

There is a great amount of misinformation, disinformation and stereotypes that are being used against immigrants and to get voters to support anti-immigrant laws. We can counter this by sharing [positive stories](#) about immigrants with family members, friends, co-workers, or classmates.

A second recommendation is to advocate for more humane policies at the state and national levels. Lawmakers must keep hearing from folks in their own districts about wanting policies affirming of the humanity of immigrants and promote access to social services that address health and mental health needs.

It is especially important to [advocate](#) for laws that would provide a pathway to citizenship and protected statuses for undocumented immigrants. Without being able to access protected statuses, immigrants live in conditions that expose them to risks for developing mental health distress. Immigrants must be given the chance to access protected statuses to be able to change the conditions that impact their [mental health](#).

Provided by Rutgers University

Citation: Q&A: Expert discusses the well-being and mental health of immigrants in the US (2024, April 16) retrieved 2 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-04-qa-expert-discusses-mental-health.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.