

# Nearly 70 percent of undocumented Mexican immigrants report discrimination

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A new study from Rice University found that 69 percent of undocumented Mexicans living in high-risk neighborhoods near the California-Mexico border reported interpersonal discrimination due to being undocumented.

The study, which was led by Luz Garcini, a postdoctoral research fellow in psychology at Rice, will appear in a forthcoming edition of the American Psychological Association journal *Psychology of Violence*. The article, titled "Kicks Hurt Less: Discrimination Predicts Distress Beyond Trauma Among Undocumented Mexican Immigrants," will present findings from clinical interviews with 246 undocumented Mexican immigrants.

Researchers found that interpersonal discrimination—which refers to direct perceived discrimination from interactions between individuals, such as verbal or non-verbal communication behaviors from an employer to an employee or store employee to a shopper—was associated with clinical levels of [psychological distress](#) even more so than having a history of trauma.

Other findings:

- Among [undocumented immigrants](#) with a history of discrimination, 52 percent met criteria for clinically significant psychological [distress](#).
- Undocumented Mexican men reported greater interpersonal

discrimination for being undocumented when compared with women; however, women reported their experiences of interpersonal discrimination as more stressful.

- Undocumented Mexican immigrants with lower education and income were significantly more likely to experience greater interpersonal discrimination for being undocumented when compared with those with higher education and income.
- Undocumented Mexican immigrants who have experienced interpersonal discrimination and who have lived longer in the U.S. were more likely to experience psychological distress than more recently arrived immigrants, which suggests that over time, repeated experiences of discrimination may take a toll on the emotional well-being of these immigrants. The study also notes recent estimates that 78 percent of undocumented Mexican immigrants have lived in the U.S. for over a decade.
- Undocumented Mexican immigrants who reported having experienced interpersonal discrimination were also likely to have a history of trauma.

"Our study also found that undocumented Mexican immigrants between the ages of 18 to 25 who had a history of interpersonal discrimination for being undocumented were more likely to meet criteria for clinically significant psychological distress compared with their undocumented counterparts ages 26 to 45," Garcini said.

Garcini noted that "the higher prevalence of interpersonal discrimination may be associated to the sociopolitical context of the area where our study was conducted, which has been documented as being extremely conservative with prevalent punitive action and policies against undocumented immigrants."

"The findings have important policy, public health and clinical implications," she said. "The high prevalence of interpersonal

discrimination among undocumented Mexican immigrants due to their immigration legal status and its association to clinically significant psychological distress beyond trauma underscore the importance of immigration reform aimed to provide a path to legal residency and/or temporary migration programs that could protect these at-risk immigrants from the damaging effects of discrimination."

The study authors wrote that while "policy change is often a lengthy process, the prompt development of psychosocial interventions at different levels of influence, including the intrapersonal and the interpersonal level, is needed to build resilience in this population and protect against the negative effects of interpersonal discrimination. The use of strategies such as empowerment, care and support groups, assertiveness training and values-based interventions could be particularly effective in reducing the negative health effects of stigma and interpersonal [discrimination](#)."

The researchers noted that experiences of psychological distress may differ in undocumented Mexican immigrants in other parts of the U.S. or in immigrants from other countries, and follow-up studies with populations of undocumented immigrants living in other regions of the U.S. are needed.

Provided by Rice University

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