

Deportation Threatens the Psychological, Physical, and Socioeconomic Well-being of Children and Families

Expanded anti-immigration policies pose risk to children across legal statuses.

At-a-Glance

- Interacting with the immigration system, whether direct or indirect, proximal or distal, is an adverse childhood experience that poses developmental and socioeconomic harm to children and families.
- Roughly one-in-twelve U.S. children risk losing a loved one to deportation, leading to long-term trauma and adversity. Related economic, educational, and social disruptions pose further risk.
- Immigrant children face compounding developmental and personal threats, including deportation and detention in unsafe, unsanitary, and developmentally inappropriate conditions.
- Children with legal status still experience developmental harms. Immigration status is often precarious, sometimes changing day-by-day. This precarity is a source of confusion, anxiety, and harmful stress.

Policy Implications

- Policies that lead to family separation and detention are developmentally harmful and must be avoided.
- Systemic changes to immigration policy are necessary to stabilize otherwise precarious legal statuses.
- Immigration systems need resources to process cases quickly, mitigating the impact of precarious legal statuses.
- High quality and culturally- and linguistically-responsive mental health care is essential for supporting the well-being of impacted children and families.

Interaction with the Immigration System is an Adverse Childhood Experience

A robust literature on child development science demonstrates the association between adverse childhood experiences (ACEs)—such as a separation from a parent—and heightened lifetime risk of physical and psychiatric illnesses, behavior issues, and socioeconomic challenges.¹ Researchers are now identifying migrant-specific ACEs within the immigration system that can result in poor developmental outcomes for children of immigrant parents and migrant children.^{2,3} For example, chronic fear of their own or a loved one's imminent arrest, the separation of a parent, and detention in an immigration facility are all sources of toxic stress that can accumulate as families move deeper into the immigration system. This toxic stress can result in a myriad of poor outcomes, including disrupted brain development, behavior challenges, and post-traumatic stress disorder.⁴ As the developmental process is ongoing, children of all ages and immigration statuses are vulnerable to some level of risk.³

Deportation Causes Long-Term Trauma and Adversity for Children

Deportation efforts and restrictive border policies may yield an unprecedented expansion of child-caregiver separations. Over 4 million U.S.-born children have an undocumented immigrant parent. Millions more have a non-parental undocumented loved one.⁵ Parental separation both denies children critical relationships and essential developmental building blocks and is a source of toxic stress, putting children at risk of a host of psychological impairments.^{6,7,8} Such stresses are compounded by secondary effects of separation, including economic instability, social and educational disruptions, and strained relationships with remaining parents who are contending with their own stresses.^{6,9,10,11} For example, adolescents whose loved ones are detained or deported exhibit higher levels of suicidal ideation, substance use, and depression, indicating potential lifetime mental health challenges.¹²

Children in Immigration Proceedings Face Cumulative Risks

Shifts in migration patterns have resulted in a growing number of families and unaccompanied minors involved with the U.S. immigration system.⁶ During the deportation process, these children may be detained in government facilities or refugee camps that are both developmentally inappropriate and physically dangerous.² The spread of disease in close quarters and instances of abuse at the hands of facility staff and other residents pose imminent physical risk to detained children.^{13,14} Children swept up in immigration proceedings must contend with a loss of autonomy, developmentally inappropriate environments, inadequate or inconsistent services, family separation, and risk of being lost in a complex nationwide-system, among other adversities with developmental implications.^{2,6,15,16} The effects of these stresses are cumulative, so immigrant children who already faced adversity in their country of origin or in the migration process are more vulnerable to long-term consequences.¹⁷

Children with Legal Status Can Experience Developmental Harms

Children and families with protected legal status or citizenship are still subject to physical and psychological threats from expanded immigration and border policies. Legally, protected status may be precarious for those with temporary or discretionary status.^{3,6,18} U.S. citizens and other legal residents may be incorrectly arrested and detained—their lives disrupted until they can prove their identity and legal rights. Even if not directly targeted, children may still experience distress witnessing anti-immigration rhetoric or activities in their community. As these policies are primarily focused on migrants from Mexico and Central/South America, there is high-risk of racial profiling primarily impacting Latinx immigrants. Uncertainty and fear for their family's safety—as well as a sense of injustice from witnessing profiling—is a source of psychological violence and stress that can impede normative development, particularly for older children.^{3,4,11,19,20} Parents contending with similar fears are less likely to access medical and other social services to avoid drawing government attention on their families.^{4,21,22}

Immigration-Related Adverse Childhood Experiences Can Be Avoided or Mitigated

Expanded deportation efforts and detention pose significant threats to children's psychological, physical, and socioeconomic well-being.^{4,12} Detention, deportation, chronic fear, and anti-immigrant rhetoric are all childhood adversities with potentially devastating developmental disruption.¹¹ Immigration officials must prioritize keeping families together or maintaining parent-child contact if family separation does occur. More broadly, high quality and culturally- and linguistically-responsive mental health services must be offered to help impacted children cope with the stress, trauma, and uncertainty of a rapidly changing and expanding immigration system.⁶

For migrants of all legal status, the threat of deportation is ever present and constantly changing. Even once safe spaces, including churches, schools, and hospitals, are now subject to immigration activities.²³ Increasingly **precarious immigration status** is a threat to physical and mental wellbeing.

Migrants may experience this **precarity** through:

- Detainment and interrogation by border patrol agents.
- Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids and arrests.
- Detention in holding facilities.
- “Remain-in-Mexico” refugee camps.
- Rescission, nonrenewal, or denial of temporary legal status.
- Deportation from the United States.

-
- ¹ Felitti, V. J., Anda, R. F., Nordenberg, D., Williamson, D. F., Spitz, A. M., Edwards, V., & Marks, J. S. (1998). Relationship of childhood abuse and household dysfunction to many of the leading causes of death in adults: The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study. *American journal of preventive medicine*, 14(4), 245-258.
- ² Mares, S., & Ziersch, A. (2024). How immigration detention harms children: A conceptual framework to inform policy and practice. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*, 16(Suppl 2), S367–S378.
- ³ Barajas-Gonzalez, R. G., Ayón, C., Brabeck, K., Rojas-Flores, L., & Valdez, C. R. (2021). An ecological expansion of the adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) framework to include threat and deprivation associated with US immigration policies and enforcement practices: An examination of the Latinx immigrant experience. *Social Science & Medicine*, 282, 114126.
- ⁴ Persyn, M. K. (2024). *Brief for Amici Curiae American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children, the American Academy of Pediatrics, the Center for Law and Social Policy, and 14 child advocacy organizations, medical professionals, and child development experts in support of Defendants-Appellants and Intervenor Defendants-Appellants*. United States Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit (Case No. 23-40653).
- ⁵ American Immigration Council. (2018). US citizen children impacted by immigration enforcement. *Fact Sheet*. <https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/us-citizen-children-impacted-immigration-enforcement>
- ⁶ Edyburn, K. L., & Meek, S. (2021). Seeking safety and humanity in the harshest immigration climate in a generation: A review of the literature on the effects of separation and detention on migrant and asylum-seeking children and families in the United States during the Trump administration. *Social Policy Report*, 34(1), 1-46.
- ⁷ Bouza, J., Camacho-Thompson, D. E., Carlo, G., Franco, X., Coll, C. G., Halgunseth, L. C., & White, R. M. B. (2018). The science is clear: Separating families has long-term damaging psychological and health consequences for children, families, and communities. *Society for Research in Child Development*, 20.
- ⁸ Wood, L. C. N. (2018). Impact of punitive immigration policies, parent–child separation and child detention on the mental health and development of children. *BMJ Pediatrics' Open*, 2, e000338. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjpo-2018-000338>
- ⁹ Roche, K. M., White, R. M., Partovi, R., Vaquera, E., & Little, T. D. (2024). US Immigration Policy Stressors and Latinx Youth Mental Health. *JAMA Pediatrics*, 178(7), 669-677.
- ¹⁰ Capps, R., Koball, H., Campetella, A., Perreira, K., Hooker, S., & Pedroza, J. M. (2015). Implications of immigration enforcement activities for the well-being of children in immigrant families. *Washington, DC: Urban Institute and Migration Policy Institute*.
- ¹¹ Chaudry, A., Capps, R., Pedroza, J. M., Castaneda, R. M., Santos, R., & Scott, M. M. (2010). Facing our future: Children in the aftermath of immigration enforcement. *Washington, DC: Urban Institute*.
- ¹² Roche, K. M., White, R. M., Lambert, S. F., Schulenberg, J., Calzada, E. J., Kuperminc, G. P., & Little, T. D. (2020). Association of family member detention or deportation with Latino or Latina adolescents' later risks of suicidal ideation, alcohol use, and externalizing problems. *JAMA Pediatrics*, 174(5), 478-486.
- ¹³ University of Chicago Law School, International Human Rights Clinic. (2018). *Neglect and Abuse of Unaccompanied Immigrant Children by US Customs and Border Protection*. University of Chicago Law School, Mandel Legal Aid Clinic.

-
- ¹⁴ Lorek, A., Ehntholt, K., Nesbitt, A., Wey, E., Githinji, C., Rossor, E., & Wickramasinghe, R. (2009). The mental and physical health difficulties of children held within a British immigration detention center: a pilot study. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 33(9), 573-585.
- ¹⁵ Islam, M. Z., Johnston, J., & Sly, P. D. (2020). Green space and early childhood development: a systematic review. *Reviews on Environmental Health*, 35(2), 189-200.
- ¹⁶ Fink, S., & Dickerson, C. (2019). Border patrol facilities put detainees with medical conditions at risk. *The New York Times*.
- ¹⁷ Waddoups, A. B., Yoshikawa, H., & Strouf, K. (2019). Developmental effects of parent–child separation. *Annual Review of Developmental Psychology*, 1(1), 387-410.
- ¹⁸ Menjívar, C. (2006). Liminal legality: Salvadoran and Guatemalan immigrants' lives in the United States. *American Journal of Sociology*, 111(4), 999-1037.
- ¹⁹ Arsenio, W. F., & Gold, J. (2006). The effects of social injustice and inequality on children's moral judgments and behavior: Towards a theoretical model. *Cognitive Development*, 21(4), 388-400.
- ²⁰ Grace, B. L., Bais, R., & Roth, B. J. (2018). The violence of uncertainty—undermining immigrant and refugee health. *New England Journal of Medicine*, 379(10), 904-905.
- ²¹ Zayas, L. H. & Heffron, L. C. (2016). Disrupting young lives: How detention and deportation affect US-born children of immigrants. *American Psychological Association*.
- ²² Linton, J. M., Green, A., Chilton, L. A., Duffee, J. H., Dilley, K. J., Gutierrez, J. R., Keane, M.D., Krugman, S.D., McKelvey, C.D., & Nelson, J. L. (2019). Providing care for children in immigrant families. *Pediatrics*, 144(3).
- ²³ Golden, O. (2025). Missions of Children Threatened by Repeal of “Protected Area” Safeguards. Washington, DC: *Center on Law and Social Policy*.