

Stress Related to Immigration Status in Students: A Brief Guide for Schools

This brief guide is designed to provide an overview of detention, deportation, and other immigration status-related stressors and their effects on children and families, as well as suggestions for how school personnel can support families in the context of this unique stressor. Please note that the information included in this document was obtained from published reports as well as suggestions from mental health professionals, teachers and other school staff. It is our hope that others might contribute to this guide; in this way it can be a dynamic compilation of practical ideas to support our community members. If you have additional comments or suggestions to add to this report, please email one of us at:

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THE CONTEXT OF IMMIGRATION STRESS

There are more than 11 million individuals residing in the U.S. without legal authorization from the federal government. While the total number of unauthorized or undocumented immigrants in the U.S. has remained stable since 2009, there has been a rise in K–12 students with at least one undocumented parent. In 2014 estimates suggested that 7.3% (or about 3.9 million) K–12th grade students in U.S. public and private schools were children of undocumented parents.¹ The vast majority of these children (3.2 million) were U.S.-born, and therefore are citizens. These children are members of “mixed-status families,” or households in which at least one member is a citizen or legal resident and at least one is not.

The context of having a parent, sibling or relative without documentation, or not being documented oneself, is a unique stressor that cannot solely be understood as generic stress or trauma. Families with members who are undocumented often “live in the shadows,” experiencing a lack of safety and fear of deportation. Because of their relationship with students and families, teachers, counselors, and other school personnel are often on the frontline of dealing with mental health concerns as they arise, and should be well-informed about the challenges that immigration status issues may present.

HOW DETENTION AND DEPORTATION AFFECTS CHILDREN

Between 2008–2016, 2.7 million unauthorized immigrants were deported, not including those who “self-deported.”² These deportations not only affect the individual, but can also have devastating consequences for families.

A growing body of research suggests that children who experience the detention and deportation of a parent suffer from many short and long-term mental health effects, including loss of appetite, changes in sleep (e.g., nightmares), crying, clinginess, and feelings of fear.

Additionally, these children can later exhibit PTSD-like symptoms, including anxiety, withdrawal, and anger/aggression, as well as academic declines at school (for a summary report about the psychosocial impact of detention and deportation see: Brabeck, Lykes, & Lustig, 2013).

In two reports about the direct effects of detention and deportation on families, researchers identified these key findings related to mental health:^{3,4}

- Children experienced “a pervasive sense of insecurity and anxiety,” which led to mental health concerns such as separation anxiety, attachment disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder.
- In some cases, children didn’t know their parents were being deported and therefore felt their parents had suddenly “disappeared.”
- Family members often had difficulties communicating with parents who were detained due to distance, rules and costs of communication, which exacerbated the emotional harm to children.
- Spouses and partners of detained parents reported struggling with social isolation and depression after the detention, which likely negatively affected their children.
- When parents, who are typically fathers, were detained, there was substantial financial hardship and stress on the family. This hardship often led to caregiving and housing instability for children.
- The negative emotional, financial and housing effects led to declines in school performance for many of these children.

TOXIC STRESS: HOW *THE THREAT* OF DETENTION AND DEPORTATION AFFECTS CHILDREN

The stress related to detention and deportation not only affects those who have experienced the detention of a parent or those who are undocumented. For example, research suggests that children who are aware of the threat of deportation or who have undocumented parents have higher levels of fear and anxiety, as well as disrupted sleeping and eating.⁵ Other studies have shown that the threat of deportation negatively affects children’s grades and leads to more students missing school and changing schools.^{5,6} Additionally, deportation-related stress may in fact spill over to legal residents who experience discrimination and may fear for the future of themselves or their children.^{7,8}

The notion of *toxic stress* provides a useful framework for understanding how *the threat* of detention or deportation can negatively affect the physical health, emotional well-being, and educational performance of youth. Toxic stress is the stress from prolonged exposure to serious stress that can harm developing brains and result in psychological, biological and neurological changes.⁹ In essence, this means that children with knowledge about the potential threat of deportation may be living in a constant, heightened state of anxiety which does not allow the body to return to baseline functioning. The American Academy of

Pediatrics issued a statement in support of protecting immigrant children against the negative effects of the toxic stress of living in fear of deportation since this type of stress can disrupt a child’s developmental processes and lead to long-term concerns.¹⁰

This toxic stress may be intensifying in the current political climate. Over fiscal year 2016, 92% of those deported from the interior of the U.S. had previously been convicted of a crime.² Following the new administration’s directive to define deportable offenses more broadly, however, many unauthorized immigrants who previously had not been considered high priority targets are now at greater risk for immigration enforcement action: while nearly three-quarters of the immigrants detained by ICE from Jan. 20 to March 13, 2017, had criminal convictions (up 15% from the same period last year), detentions of immigrants with no criminal records more than doubled.¹¹ On September 5, 2017, the president also started phasing out the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program — President Obama’s executive order providing temporary relief from deportation action for many undocumented youth — heightening the uncertainty and anxiety felt by these “DREAMers” and their families.

BEHAVIORAL/EMOTIONAL SIGNS OF IMMIGRATION STATUS-RELATED STRESS IN THE CLASSROOM:

Though every child is different, those who have directly experienced the loss of a parent to deportation or those who are coping with the threat related to documentation status may show some of the following signs in the classroom:

- Acting withdrawn — appearing disconnected from life; pulling away from activities and relationships
- Hyperarousal — nervousness, jumpiness, hypervigilance about surroundings
- Difficulties focusing in schools, learning or memory problems, and decreased school performance
- Externalizing symptoms — aggressive behaviors, temper tantrums, excessively seeking attention, etc.
- Somatic complaints (e.g., stomach aches, headaches, fatigue)
- Regressive behaviors in young children (e.g., accidental daytime wetting or reports of bedwetting)
- Crying, sadness
- Fears of being separated from caregivers or family (e.g., not wanting to come to school)
- Acting nervous, anxious or fearful, avoiding certain activities
- Poor appetite or digestive problems
- Poor or disrupted sleep

HOW SCHOOL PERSONNEL CAN SUPPORT STUDENTS IN THE CLASSROOM:

- **Be observant and establish trust.** If a student is exhibiting some of the aforementioned behavioral or emotional signs of distress, do not assume the cause, and do not put students on the spot by asking them directly. Rather, create an environment in which students feel safe, providing opportunities for them to disclose their stressors. Be an active listener to see what a child might need.
- **Be patient.** Some students may exhibit behaviors and emotions that you have not seen before. Consider this when enforcing rules and other disciplinary actions.
- **Be willing to talk.** When students reveal immigration status-related issues, don't be afraid to talk about them. Some students may talk openly about their fears and anger, and many may have questions. Don't hesitate to answer questions as honestly as you can, and let students know when you aren't sure. For younger children, be sure to use language that is understandable and that does not cause more fear; young children may not be able to fully comprehend what has been happening or why they feel anxious or stressed.
- **Recognize the importance of language.** Teachers and other school personnel should be sensitive in their use of language, favoring terminology such as "undocumented/unauthorized immigrants" and making known that use of the terms "illegals" or "illegal immigrants/aliens" will not be tolerated in their classrooms. "Illegal alien" is not a legal term and is not an accurate descriptor, as the status of being present in the U.S. without a visa is not actually a criminal violation. More importantly, these terms can have a dehumanizing impact by effectively rendering the individual and their entire existence as "illegal."
- **Show your support.** Teachers can demonstrate their support through images showing that they are allies. For example, this painting by Favianna Rodriguez has become symbolic of the DREAMers movement. By displaying this on a white board or desk, students are more likely to know that you are a "safe" person with whom they can discuss their immigration status-related stress.



- **Communicate with your colleagues.** Inform school staff (e.g., counselors, social workers, administration) regarding what you are seeing in the classroom so that appropriate services/programs can be developed and needs can be addressed.
- **Take care of yourself.** Seeing the stress that your students and their families are facing can be overwhelming. Find ways to manage stress and get the help that you need, too.

HOW SCHOOLS CAN SUPPORT STUDENTS AND FAMILIES:

Set a tone of safety and respect.

- Make your school a "safe space" through public statements of support such as [this one](#) from the Minneapolis school board that reaffirms every child's right to an education. These statements are most effective when grounded in the vision, mission, or stated strategic plan goals of the school or district, and should include language around creating a safe, welcoming environment for all students.
- Be aware of the peer dynamics in your school environment. Deal directly with any derogatory language or behaviors from peers that are rooted in condescending attitudes toward immigrants, and use these as teachable moments.

Share accurate and helpful information.

- Assure students that any information the school has about a student's immigration status is protected through FERPA; the only way the federal government can obtain immigration status information from school officials is through a warrant or subpoena signed by a federal magistrate.
- Inform students and their families of these [rights](#), resources, and recommendations from the National Immigration Law Center and/or distribute "[know your rights](#)" cards, which provide simple but important tips for how to respond to encounters with ICE agents.
- Be proactive and hold meetings for families who may have questions. Consider bringing legal experts and other social service programs to present about relevant topics.
- Remember that some parents may keep their children at home if there are threats of deportation raids in the community. Research also suggests that Latina/o children and families may have a distrust of authorities, sometimes conflating police with ICE officials.^{12,13} This may be especially true in localities that have engaged in 287(g) agreements with ICE, which deputize local law enforcement officers as arms of the federal government. As of the writing of this article, there are 38 such law enforcement agencies that have been delegated this authority,¹⁴

but new immigration directives from the Department of Homeland Security have called for the expansion of this program.¹⁵ Stay informed on the situation in your community and be sensitive to parents' fears.

Provide direct support and start a referral list.

- Arrange counseling for students, or if necessary, provide appropriate referrals. Learn about the trusted social service agencies, legal supports, churches or religious organizations and other resources in your area. Collaborate with these agencies so that you can feel confident in your referrals, especially given that some families will be hesitant to access services or may not be eligible.
- Adolescents may also appreciate the opportunity to discuss their stressors with peers in similar situations through discussion circles and support groups.
- Encourage advocacy.
- Adolescents and young adults may feel empowered and gain access to valuable support and resources by volunteering for advocacy organizations. Create space for students' civic engagement through supportive school policies.

Stay informed, and educate your faculty and staff.

- Administrators should take responsibility for staying informed about changes in policies and laws regarding immigration and deportation. For example, a policy memorandum by ICE in 2011 established that agents are to refrain from enforcement actions (e.g., raids) at certain "sensitive locations" such as schools and universities, hospitals, churches and other places of worship, funerals/weddings, and public demonstrations such as marches or rallies. It is possible that this policy memorandum may be reversed; therefore, school leaders should remain informed about possible changes.¹⁶
- Provide professional workshops for school personnel around the challenges that students who are undocumented or who have undocumented family members face, the protections around student information provided by FERPA, the legal limits of what ICE can and cannot do, and creating culturally competent and responsive classroom environments.

Schools may not be able to address the root causes of immigration status-related stress for the children they serve, but through increased awareness, proactive policies, displays of support, and providing access to information and resources, they can do their part to live their mission of supporting our community's students and families.

RESOURCE GUIDES FOR SCHOOLS

Immigrant and Refugee Children: A Guide for Educators and School Support Staff – American Federation of Teachers (2016)

https://firstfocus.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/ICE-Raids_Educators-Guide-20161.pdf

This comprehensive guide provides information for school personnel about the rights of undocumented children and parents and how to respond to ICE raids. Specific materials are provided to share with families regarding their rights in the context of detention or deportation.

Resource Guide: Supporting Undocumented Youth – U.S. Department of Education (2015)

<https://www2.ed.gov/about/overview/focus/supporting-undocumented-youth.pdf>

This guide offers legal guidelines, practical tips, and resources for secondary and postsecondary institutions in fostering supportive environments and success for undocumented students.

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GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program – an executive order signed by President Obama in 2012 which gives young unauthorized immigrants temporary relief from deportation and a two-year renewable work permit, provided they meet certain conditions such as being enrolled in high school or having a high school degree or GED equivalent, and not having a serious criminal conviction. Approximately 800,000 undocumented youth have benefited from this program. On September 5, 2017, the president started phasing out the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program.

Detention – the policy of holding individuals suspected of visa violations, illegal entry or unauthorized arrival, and those subject to deportation and removal in detention until a decision is made by immigration authorities to grant a visa and release them into the community, or to repatriate them to their country of departure. Conditions in detention centers are often similar to prisons, and many of these facilities are in fact managed by the private prison industry.

DREAMer – An undocumented immigrant who came or was brought to the U.S. at a young age. This moniker is based on the DREAM (Development Relief and Education of Alien Minors) Act, legislation first proposed in 2001 that recognizes that people brought to the U.S. by their families at a young age should not be penalized or relegated to a permanent underclass of American society without access to higher education. The bill would have given temporary legal status with a six-year pathway to permanent legal residency to young undocumented immigrants who met certain criteria, such as being enrolled in or graduated from high school, having a GED, and/or being in the military, and not being a danger to public safety. This proposed legislation has been re-introduced as the DREAM Act of 2017. It is estimated that about 2 million young people may be eligible for the DREAM Act.

Immigration Status – refers to whether or not an immigrant is recognized by the federal government to reside legally in the U.S. As opposed to being undocumented, Legal Permanent Residents (also referred to as green card holders and resident aliens) live legally and permanently in the U.S. Gaining legal immigrant status can be a lengthy and complex process that requires close consultation with an immigration attorney.

Mixed-status Families – A “mixed-status family” is a family whose members include at least one person who has legal residency or citizenship, and one person who does not. One example of a mixed-status family is one in which the parents are undocumented and the children are U.S.-born citizens.

Self-deportation – the act of voluntarily returning to one’s country of origin after living in the U.S. without the legal authorization, usually as a result of pressure applied through government policies or legislation that make it difficult to continue residing in the U.S.

Toxic Stress – stress that results from strong, frequent and/or prolonged adversity. Toxic stress can affect developmental processes and lead to long-term concerns.

Unauthorized or Undocumented Immigrant – a foreign-born person residing in the U.S. without legal permission from the federal government. Undocumented immigrants either enter the U.S. without legal inspection by bypassing border checkpoints, or — in the case of about 40% of undocumented immigrants — enter with a valid visa and continue to reside in the U.S. after their visa expires.

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) – the Department of Homeland Security agency that enforces federal laws governing border control, customs, trade and immigration.