

## U.S. Immigration Law Enforcement Practices and Health Inequities



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### INTRODUCTION

Immigration policies and law enforcement practices in the U.S. have the power to create a climate of fear for undocumented individuals, their families, and their communities, which can impact health outcomes.<sup>1–3</sup> This paper examines how these policies and practices (henceforth referred to as “immigration enforcement”) affect health.

### WHO IS AFFECTED BY IMMIGRATION ENFORCEMENT?

Although any noncitizen may be subject to deportation under certain conditions, most immigration enforcement targets immigrants who lack legal authorization to reside in the U.S. (i.e., people who are undocumented). Undocumented immigrants either entered the U.S. without authorization or reside in the U.S. with an expired visa. There are an estimated 11.3 million people who are undocumented residing in the U.S., and two-thirds have been in the U.S. for more than a decade.<sup>4</sup> However, to understand how immigration enforcement exacerbates health inequities, it is essential to expand the focus beyond undocumented immigrants as individuals targeted for enforcement and focus additionally on the mixed-status families and communities to which they belong.

“Mixed-status families” describes families that contain individuals of different immigration statuses (e.g., citizens, visa holders, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals recipients, undocumented). An estimated 16.7 million people in the U.S. have at least one undocumented family member and 10% of all births in the U.S. occur to at least one undocumented parent.<sup>5</sup> Given that immigration enforcement often results in detention or deportation, the children, spouses, or parents of undocumented individuals also live with the fear and anxiety that their family member will be taken away.

Mixed-status communities are communities with close ties between members of different immigration statuses, including undocumented members.<sup>5</sup> Undocumented immigrants are not a community unto themselves, but

instead, they are integrated into communities of people with a range of immigration or citizenship statuses. Immigration enforcement does not just impact people who are undocumented and their family members, but also extends to impact the mixed-status communities of which they are a part.<sup>2,6</sup>

Furthermore, racialized dimensions of U.S. immigration enforcement, policy, and rhetoric mean that its impacts can spill over into the well-being of U.S.-born communities of color more broadly. Racial profiling is regularly used in local policing and immigration enforcement,<sup>7</sup> immigration policies are selectively restricted against countries sending majority immigrants of color, and rhetoric surrounding immigration policy constructs immigrants as belonging to specific racial/ethnic groups regularly.<sup>7</sup> These dynamics can exacerbate deeply entrenched racialization processes that construct multiple groups of color as less American, a powerful signal of exclusion that has been linked to health.<sup>2,7</sup>

### IMMIGRATION ENFORCEMENT AND THE HEALTH OF MIXED-STATUS COMMUNITIES

Immigration enforcement creates a climate of fear for mixed-status communities that leads to poor health through two major pathways: (1) Fear is a chronic stressor that gets “under the skin” and negatively affects health; (2) Fear causes families to change their health behaviors to limit exposure to deportation.

#### Creating a Climate of Fear

The 1996 Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act and reorganization of U.S. immigration

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