



Trump's Immigration Policies Are Harming American Children

By Leila Schochet

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Daniel, a 6-year-old U.S. citizen, has been asking his parents more and more questions about Mexico since the 2016 election. “Mama says that we might move to Mexico,” Daniel said to his father. “Am I gonna go also?”

Daniel's parents are unauthorized immigrants who came to the United States as young children. For the past several years, Daniel has been living in Texas with his mother, Carmen, while his father, Miguel, has been working in California.¹ Both Miguel and Carmen are part of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program instituted by the Obama administration in 2012, which allowed them each to get a work permit and a temporary reprieve from deportation.² Since the election, President Donald Trump has indicated that the future of DACA is unclear, fueling heightened concern and fear among DACA recipients.³ That uncertainty has reached new heights in recent weeks, as attorneys general from several states have threatened to sue the administration to end DACA if the program is not terminated by September 5, 2017.⁴ While Miguel had initially planned to join his family in Texas this past January, after the election, he put his plan on hold as he faces greater uncertainty about whether he will remain protected under his DACA status.

Miguel's biggest concern is how living under an administration that is openly targeting the unauthorized immigrant community could affect his son.

“We've taken steps to talk to him, let him know that Mom and Dad are a little bit worried or stressed out,” Miguel said. “And we don't go too much into detail, being that he just turned 6, so we don't want to scare him too much.”

President Trump's anti-immigrant agenda has forced millions of immigrants such as Miguel and Carmen to face the threat and consequences of deportation. During Trump's first 100 days in office, immigration arrests rose by more than 37 percent.⁵ Despite his campaign promise to deport only those with criminal records, his administration has made all unauthorized immigrants a priority for deportation, with arrest rates more than doubling for hardworking immigrants without criminal records.⁶

On top of an increased threat of deportation, immigrants and their children are also becoming targets of heightened racism and discrimination. Teachers have reported cases of children adopting Trump’s rhetoric to bully their peers in school, telling Latino children that they will be deported and saying they should go back to where they came from.⁷

For the nearly 6 million U.S.-citizen children living with at least one unauthorized family member, life in Trump’s America is frightening.⁸ Since the election, adults across the country have reported spikes in fear and distress among young children from immigrant families.⁹ Now more than ever, citizen children are worried that they could be separated from their parents or forced to leave their communities.¹⁰

Trump’s harsh immigration policies create toxic stress for young children by breaking families apart, instilling fear in the immigrant community, and preventing families from accessing programs that meet children’s most basic needs. Policies that cause children emotional distress and economic insecurity in early childhood interfere with their healthy development and derail their future success. Children such as Daniel will be the backbone of the nation’s workforce in the coming years and could make critical contributions to the economy. But if the Trump administration continues to target immigrant families, it risks undermining the economic power of an entire generation.¹¹

Fear of deportation can be toxic

With the uptick in immigration arrests, immigrant parents must consider deportation as a serious possibility. Across the country, parents have been creating contingency plans that establish what will happen to their children if they are deported, granting power of attorney to a relative or trusted friend and telling children what may happen in the parent’s absence.¹² Even DACA recipients such as Miguel—who are work-authorized—are fearful enough to create these contingency plans.

Miguel and Carmen decided that in the case of their deportation, Daniel would stay in the United States with his grandparents, who are now U.S. citizens, to maintain stability in his life.

“It’s hard enough that [his] mom and dad would not be around to the degree that [Daniel’s] used to, and so it just made more sense,” Miguel said. “Daniel was born here, he’s a U.S. citizen, he goes to school here, [so] let’s keep him in a stable environment.”

Not all children are fortunate enough to have a family member with whom they could stay in the case of parental deportation. Some parents must bring their citizen children back to their home country, which can force children to make a challenging transition to an unfamiliar culture and system. U.S.-citizen children have difficulties adapting to a new

education system and often do not have adequate foreign language skills to reach their full potential in school; these children may also return to the United States at some point with limited English skills and interrupted schooling, leaving them perpetually behind.¹³

Being separated from a parent or caregiver—or even the idea of a separation—exposes young children to stress and trauma. In extreme cases, children may be present during immigration raids, where armed U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents may burst into a home and forcibly remove parents.¹⁴ Children who have been separated from their parents frequently show signs of trauma, including anxiety, depression, frequent crying, disrupted eating and sleeping, and difficulties in school.¹⁵ Many young children also have a misunderstanding of legal status in general, often equating being an immigrant with being unauthorized. These children may believe that they or their authorized relatives are also in danger of being deported, further escalating their fear.¹⁶

Regardless of whether they are separated from a parent or just facing the threat of parental deportation, young children are particularly vulnerable to the negative effects of heightened stress because they are in a critical developmental period.¹⁷ Children in the broader Latino community can experience distress even if everyone in their family is authorized. In fact, there is evidence that immigrants—whether they are citizens, legal residents, or unauthorized—experience fear of deportation and feelings of vulnerability at similar rates.¹⁸ Young children in the immigrant community can experience psychological distress after just seeing or hearing about their peers being separated from their families and friends.¹⁹

As children are exposed to increased stress within their households, schools, and communities, their own emotional well-being can be compromised. Enduring persistent levels of high stress can change a child's brain architecture and negatively influence their physical, cognitive, and emotional development.²⁰ As they grow up, many children who experience this toxic stress in early childhood are less equipped to cope with everyday instances of adversity, such as conflict with a friend or difficulties in the classroom.²¹ This means that these children are more likely to have challenges with behavior, learning, emotional regulation, and physical health in the future.²²

Parents' stress affects children too

Like many parents, Miguel says that Daniel can sense when there is a shift in Miguel's mood and emotions.

“I've been pretty stressed since the election,” Miguel said, “and [Daniel] does pick up on it. I'll read him a story and he'll interrupt and say, ‘Hey Papa you look really sad or worried, what's wrong?’ And I'll have to tell him, ‘Oh well it was a long day at work,’ but typically it's because I read something about some action that the [Trump] administration is taking.”

As the threat of deportation for immigrant parents intensifies, they must cope with their own fear and stress while supporting their children. In addition to financial and emotional burdens, constant worry about being arrested or deported weighs on parents.

Just as Daniel quickly picked up on Miguel's stress, children are incredibly attentive to how their parents and caregivers feel. Young children look to their parents for emotional cues to help them learn how they should interpret a given situation, so when children notice that their parent is upset or scared, they may receive the message that they should feel the same way.²³ Research shows that an immigrant parent's legal vulnerability and fear trickle down to affect their children. As a parent's risk of deportation heightens, a child's emotional well-being and academic outcomes tend to worsen.²⁴

The consequences of parental stress for young children can start even before birth. One well-documented instance of spillover from mother to child, and to the greater Latino community, was observed following one of the largest immigration raids in U.S. history. The 2008 immigration raid of a factory in Postville, Iowa, led to the detainment of 389 mostly Latino workers: Word of the raid spread quickly and triggered fear among Latino communities across the state.²⁵ In the nine months following the raid, babies born to Latina mothers in the state of Iowa—U.S. citizens and unauthorized immigrants alike—were 25 percent more likely to have low birth weight compared with the previous year, a result of maternal and fetal stress.²⁶ There was no change in birth outcomes for non-Latina white mothers.

Young children and adults alike are largely a product of their environment, and instilling a sense of fear and uncertainty into an entire community affects both citizens and immigrants.

Distrust of public systems can affect children's health, well-being, and access to early education

Early childhood is a critical stage in development when children need access to basic living standards—such as quality health care, nutritious food, and education—in order to thrive. Without these critical services, children can endure lifelong consequences. Specific programs target young children to help meet their needs, including Medicaid; the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC); and Head Start. As a country, investing in these programs makes sense to help mitigate hardship in the short term and because they have been shown to pay off in the long run.

Children in unauthorized communities are historically underenrolled in important public programs to begin with, due to language barriers, lack of information, and their parents' or guardians' fear of interacting with public systems.²⁷ On top of these barriers,

increased local immigration enforcement and a leaked draft executive order suggesting that immigrants could be deported for using public assistance has made immigrant parents even more afraid of getting their children the services they need.²⁸ While the services provided by these programs can help mitigate the detrimental effects of toxic stress on young children, not having healthy food or proper medical care can exacerbate the impact. Now more than ever, access to important programs is critical for keeping children's healthy development on track.

Harsh immigration policies undermine the future U.S. workforce

President Trump's policies and rhetoric contribute to a toxic environment of fear that may alter the developmental outcomes of millions of children. While this generation has the potential to grow up and help the economy thrive, Trump's immigration policies could leave that economic power untapped.

Children of immigrants drive the economy, and promoting their success is one of the most important investments we can make as a nation. Research shows that children of immigrants grow up to be among the strongest contributors to the United States' economy, paying more in taxes than children with native-born parents.²⁹ In 2012, children of immigrants contributed 12 percent more per person, on average, in federal taxes than the rest of the native-born population—and contributed \$30.5 billion at the state and local levels.³⁰ They are also slightly more likely to graduate from college and less likely to live in poverty than their native-born peers.³¹

Trump's anti-immigrant agenda compromises the economic security of immigrant families with children, which can negatively affect child outcomes. Separating families and deporting the primary breadwinner from a household can throw immigrant families into deep emotional and economic turmoil: Removing unauthorized residents from mixed-status households—those with both authorized and unauthorized members—could reduce the median annual household income by almost 75 percent, from \$33,000 to \$9,000.³² For many children, this could mean going without the nutritious food, consistent housing, or medical services that are critical for their healthy development.

While Trump argues that deporting unauthorized immigrants benefits the economy, research says otherwise. In states that ramped up their immigration enforcement efforts, low-income immigrant households with children experienced increased material hardship—such as difficulties paying for basic expenses, utilities, and medical care—while U.S.-citizen households saw no economic loss or gain.³³ When taken to scale, this could imply that Trump's mass deportation agenda will drive citizen children of immigrants into poverty—and increase stress and psychological trauma—without accomplishing his goal of improving conditions for nonimmigrant citizens.

Together, the consequences of toxic stress and economic insecurity on young children could severely affect the nation's future workforce. Children who face adversity during early childhood—such as trauma, separation from a parent, or deep poverty—are more likely to have poor health, drop out of high school, be unemployed, and live in poverty in adulthood.³⁴ These outcomes can lower job prospects and inhibit people's ability to reach their full potential in the workforce, representing a lost opportunity for the economy.

Conclusion

The fear and anxiety that children are feeling because of President Trump's immigration policies will not fade when a new administration takes over; the experiences that this generation of children has now will continue to affect them for the rest of their lives. It is critical for the administration to consider carefully the true expense of a mass deportation agenda. In the meantime, it is everyone's duty to foster an environment of support for all children, regardless of their family's immigration status. Children such as Daniel—and our economy—depend on it.

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Endnotes

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