

Our Children's Fear

Immigration Policy's Effects on Young Children

As Congress has failed to address immigration and the president continues to make disparaging remarks about immigrants, immigrant communities are facing increasing harm. Undocumented immigrants are being detained during traffic stops and in or near their homes. And even lawful permanent residents are feeling vulnerable about their safety and security in the country they call home.

More than 9 million children under age 8 belong to an immigrant family, comprising 26 percent of young children in the United States. The vast majority of them are U.S. citizens. While children may not be the targets of immigration policy changes, a new study from the Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP) underscores that they too are experiencing the harmful consequences.

In 2017, CLASP conducted a six-month study to better understand how young children, ages eight and under, are affected by immigration policy changes. This first-of-its kind research included interviews and focus group sessions with more than 150 early care and education providers and parents in six states.

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**In 17 years, I've never seen this before.
The stress is so high, they're biting their fingers.**
– Preschool director in Georgia
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What We Learned

Young children fear their parents will be taken away. We heard consistently from parents and providers that children in immigrant families, as young as three years old, are expressing fears of being separated from their parents. They worry about their parents' safety, but also wonder who will take care of them if their parent is deported.

Providers told us they are seeing changes in children's behaviors, such as self-harm, increased aggression, and greater social withdrawal. While they could not always directly link these behavior changes to the stresses immigrant families are experiencing, early care and education providers consistently observed such behaviors—and not just among children with undocumented parents. Experienced educators caring for children in immigrant families said the behavior they're seeing is markedly different from previous years.

Children are losing access to needed services. Families are dramatically changing their daily routines and limiting how often they leave their homes. This increased social isolation has affected children's participation in early care and education programs. Providers reported lower attendance after the election, major policy announcements, and real or rumored raids in the community. Many also reported difficulty enrolling new families in their programs.

Some children are also being withdrawn from other public programs that support their healthy development, such as federal nutrition assistance and Medicaid. Immigrant parents fear that enrolling in these programs, even for their citizen children, could have immigration consequences and that their information could be shared with immigration agents.

We don't feel safe even taking the kids to child care.
– Parent in California

Young children and their caregivers are experiencing increased stress and instability. Parents are experiencing sudden job loss and are struggling to find work in the new climate. Some children are facing increased housing instability as their families move frequently to avoid immigration agents or move in with extended family or friends to save money. Providers and parents also reported an increase in exploitation by landlords and employers.

Immigrant parents are struggling with difficult decisions around preparing for deportation, and some are experiencing their own mental health issues. Parents are approaching early childhood providers with new concerns and requests for information often outside of the providers' expertise. Many providers say they feel worried, overwhelmed, and unprepared to meet families' needs.

You feel like you don't know what's going to happen. That feeling of stability... is what most of our families have lost.
– ECE provider in Illinois

Why It Matters

Stability is critical in their early lives, as young children need positive, supportive relationships with trusted adults and consistent access to safe housing, nutritious foods, adequate clothing and diapers, and medical care to support their healthy development. Harsh immigration policies that threaten to separate families and undermine children's access to services are causing prolonged stress, instability, and uncertainty. All of this can be harmful to children's mental and physical health and cognitive development, with long-term consequences into adulthood.

What We Can Do

Immigration policy is a children's issue. Our report demonstrates the immediate consequences to children and families when immigration policies fail to address their needs. Advocates and policymakers must act to safeguard the health and wellbeing of **all** our nation's children.

Recommendations for a Better Path Forward

Congress should take legislative action to:

- Provide a pathway to citizenship for undocumented immigrants, including parents and Dreamers.
- Pass legislation that will mitigate the harm of immigration decisions and enforcement actions on children.

The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) should:

- Use discretion when making decisions to arrest, detain, and deport parents of minor children in the U.S.
- Expand and consistently enforce the sensitive locations policy.
- Strengthen protocols to minimize harm to children present during enforcement actions, including ensuring that detained and deported parents can make decisions about their children's care.

State and local policymakers should:

- Oppose laws that promote more immigration enforcement and create barriers to health, nutrition, or educational services for children in immigrant families.
- Support policies that encourage the health, safety, and wellbeing of immigrant families, such as expanded access to health care coverage for immigrant children.
- Dedicate or increase funding for free or low-cost legal services; coordination and collaboration between early childhood and immigrant-serving organizations; and training, education, and support for the early childhood workforce.

State agencies administering public benefits should:

- Ensure immigrant families and their children are not deterred from enrolling in critical programs.
- Issue guidance to programs on protecting data and personal confidentiality.

We as a nation cannot afford to ignore the long-term harm that immigration policies are inflicting on our youngest citizens. Children in immigrant families are our future students, doctors, lawyers, teachers, and policymakers. Their health and wellbeing today is central to our nation's prosperity tomorrow.

Read the full report at www.clasp.org/ourchildrensfear.