



“It felt like hitting rock bottom”: A qualitative exploration of the mental health impacts of immigration enforcement and discrimination on US-citizen, Mexican children

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Abstract

Latino immigrant families in the United States were disproportionately affected by intensified interior immigration enforcement under the Trump administration. US-citizen children are victimized by policies targeting their immigrant parents; research is sparse regarding how these policies affect children who experience parental deportation *and* children who are at risk for parental deportation. Additionally, anti-immigrant rhetoric can result in increased discrimination that also threatens children’s psychological health. This qualitative study (N=22) explores children’s lived experiences of discrimination, parental deportation or threat of parental deportation, and perceived impacts on mental health. Interviews conducted from 2019 to 2020 revealed that children who are directly affected by or at risk for parental deportation experience detrimental impacts to their psychological well-being. Children experience discrimination as Latinos and children of immigrants, which is also detrimental to their mental/emotional health. Incorporating children’s perspectives is critical to informing public health interventions. Findings demonstrate the need for family-friendly immigration reform.

Keywords Immigration enforcement · Latino · Children · Mental health · Discrimination

“Fue como tocar fondo”: Una exploración cualitativa del impacto de las acciones migratorias y la discriminación en la salud mental de niñas y niños mexicanos con ciudadanía estadounidense

Resumen

Las familias inmigrantes latinas en los Estados Unidos se vieron desproporcionadamente afectadas por las acciones del servicio de inmigración bajo la adminis-



tración de Trump. Los niños y niñas con ciudadanía estadounidense son víctimas de las políticas dirigidas a sus padres inmigrantes; las investigaciones son escasas con respecto a cómo estas políticas afectan a los menores afectados por la deportación de sus padres así como los que corren riesgo de que sus padres sean deportados. Además, la retórica antiinmigrante puede provocar un aumento en la discriminación, lo cual también representa una amenaza para la salud psicológica de estos niños y niñas. Este estudio cualitativo (N=22) explora las experiencias de discriminación y de deportación o amenaza de deportación de los padres vividas por los menores así como los impactos percibidos en su salud mental. Las entrevistas realizadas entre 2019 y 2020 revelan que las niñas y niños directamente afectados por la deportación o el riesgo de deportación de sus padres sufren un impacto perjudicial en su bienestar psicológico. Los menores experimentan discriminación como latinos e hijos de inmigrantes, lo cual también perjudica su salud mental y emocional. Es crucial que se incorporen las perspectivas de estos menores al informar las intervenciones de salud pública. Los hallazgos demuestran la necesidad de una reforma migratoria que sea solidaria con las familias.

Palabras clave Acciones del servicio migratorio · Latinos · Niños y niñas · Salud mental · Discriminación

Study background

Interior immigration enforcement in the United States

Although harsh immigration policy has targeted Latino communities in the United States for decades, Donald J. Trump's election to the US presidency in 2016 signaled an emboldening of punitive immigration policy in the United States. On 25 January 2017, Trump issued Executive Order 13768, which set the administration's interior immigration enforcement (i.e., enforcement that takes place inside the US, excluding the border regions and ports of entry) priorities (US ICE 2017). The new order expanded Immigration and Customs Enforcement's (ICE) focus to include any unauthorized individual in the country, regardless of their criminal history or lack thereof, who poses a "risk to public safety or national security" (US ICE 2017). It is important to note that Trump's stance on immigration was not new, and migration to the United States is not a recent phenomenon. However, the way Trump's administration directed immigration enforcement efforts at the US-Mexico border and nationally—and the scale of related impacts that are still unfolding—is staggering.

The US has the largest immigrant population in the world (Pew Research Center 2020). Mexico is the top country of origin, accounting for 25% of the US immigrant population, or about 11.2 million in 2018 (Pew Research Center 2020). Because of the complexities of the US immigration system, about 41% of the 19.6 million Latino immigrants are undocumented (Pew Research Center 2019). From 1965 to 2017, the largest group of undocumented immigrants in the United States were of Mexican origin (Ojeda et al 2020; Pew Research Center 2020). Mexican and Latin



American noncitizens experience deportation at rates higher than their share of the undocumented population at risk for deportation (Asad 2020). Deportation fears among Latino US citizens and noncitizens alike increased dramatically following the 2016 election and reflect a growing national awareness of immigration policy (Asad 2020).

Theoretical framework

We adopted a theoretical framework informed by Bronfenbrenner's social-ecological theory. The ecological systems model by Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998) posits that four environmental levels—the microsystem, the mesosystem, the ecosystem, and the macrosystem—each independently impact health and development. It is also important to consider the complex interplay between levels (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 1998; Onwuegbuzie et al. 2013). The microsystem (Level 1) comprises the immediate environment of the individual, such as the home, neighborhood, or community center; the mesosystem (Level 2) includes dynamics at home, school, or with the peer group where the individual interacts; in the exosystem (Level 3), events occur that affect the individual in one or more settings where the individual does not have an immediate active role; finally, on Level 4, the macrosystem comprises the ever-changing societal context, which includes policies, norms, and ideologies (Onwuegbuzie et al. 2013) that shape the individual's environment, events, and interactions (Onwuegbuzie et al. 2013). Bronfenbrenner's theory is often utilized to understand child development (Reifsnider et al. 2005) and has also been applied to immigrant children and their families (Barajas-Gonzalez et al. 2021; Yok-Fong 2013).

Children in vulnerable immigrant families

Approximately 17.8 million children under the age of eighteen lived with at least one immigrant parent in the United States in 2019 (Migration Policy Institute 2021). Many Latino US-citizen children live in mixed-status families in which individuals' immigration statuses vary (Dreby 2012). In total, four to six million Latino children live with at least one undocumented parent or caregiver (Asad 2020; Lovato and Abrams 2020). These children live with the daily risk of the apprehension/detainment and deportation of their parents (Kirksey and Sattin-Bajaj 2021). It is estimated that at least one-fifth of deportations from the United States involve a parent with an average of two US-born children (Perreira and Pedroza 2019; US ICE 2021). About half a million US-citizen children experienced the arrest, detainment, and deportation of at least one parent over two years, according to ICE data from 2011 to 2013 (American Immigration Council 2019).



Impacts of immigration enforcement and discrimination on child mental health

Family separation caused by immigration enforcement has persistent and profound psychological effects on mental health (Shadid and Sidhu 2021). Children who are separated from their parents or caregivers experience intense fear and helplessness (Shadid and Sidhu 2021). Research has shown that children may be traumatized by these separations, which manifests as psychological distress, internalizing problems such as anxiety/depression, post-traumatic stress, externalizing problems, and somatic issues such as changes to eating or sleep habits (Lovato and Abrams 2020; Perreira and Pedroza 2019; Ayón 2016; Dreby 2012; Barajas-Gonzalez et al. 2021). Ongoing national debate about immigration also legitimizes anti-immigrant rhetoric and fuels discrimination against Latino immigrants, especially Mexicans, who have been branded as criminals (Capps et al. 2020; Becerra et al. 2012; Ayón et al. 2010). These forces coalesce to create a dangerous sociopolitical environment that victimizes Latino immigrant families, especially children, who can experience psychological distress, anxiety, and internalized stigma as a result of discriminatory or racist experiences (Capps et al. 2020). Discrimination, which we define as perceived unfair treatment by others based on one's race/ethnicity, is a complex, multidimensional concept that can occur on the individual or interpersonal level, as well as on the structural or institutional level (Molina et al. 2019). Discrimination is associated with deleterious mental/emotional and physical health outcomes and constitutes a serious public health concern (Gurrola and Ayón 2018; Wallace and Young 2018).

Despite the scale of the consequences of immigration enforcement, the voices of children are largely missing from the broader political debate (Hermann 2017). Empirical research about immigration enforcement tends to focus on adults, because of the methodological, ethical, and logistical challenges associated with collecting data from children (Benavides et al. 2021). Further, attention largely focused on Trump's "zero tolerance" family separation policy at the US-Mexico border, thereby reducing scrutiny of ICE activity in the US interior that puts millions of US-citizen children at risk (Noroña et al. 2018). It is critical to examine the experiences of US-citizen children of Latino immigrants, given their special vulnerability and the potential severity of the consequences. Understanding how these policies affect the health and well-being of these young American citizens is the first step toward informing child-specific interventions, advocacy, and policies in the future, as well as establishing areas for further inquiry.

Purpose of study

The study objective is to understand the lived experiences of children directly or indirectly affected by immigration enforcement, operationalized as the arrest/detainment and deportation of a parent. We explore (a) how children experience and understand anticipated or direct parental deportation, (b) how their mental health and related behaviors are affected by parental deportation or the threat of, (c) how children experience and understand discrimination under an anti-immigrant/anti-Latino climate, and (d) how their mental health is affected by discrimination. We



use qualitative methods informed by a phenomenological approach to gain a deeper, subjective understanding of children's lived experiences of immigration enforcement and discrimination and how these phenomena negatively affect their psychological health by exploring their perspectives and description of these events (Bhatt et al. 2020). We organize our results based on the levels of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model and the aforementioned research questions. This study is unique as it examines data that describes experiences of children separated from their parents by deportation and those who are at risk for separation but had not yet experienced this, during the Trump administration's unprecedented expansion of immigration enforcement activity.

Study methods

The Between the Lines study

This study is part of the larger Between the Lines (BTL) study, a binational, mixed-methods study that collected quantitative and qualitative data from children in mixed-status households who have experienced, or were at risk for, parental deportation. BTL was a two-year collaborative project between researchers at Drexel University and the Mexico section of the US-Mexico Border Health Commission and included a cohort of Mexican immigrant families directly affected by parental deportation and a comparison cohort. The BTL team in Mexico recruited a sample of deported Mexican parents from three different deportation stations in three border towns in Mexico—Tijuana, Matamoros, and Nogales (N=67). Eligible deported parents served as recruitment brokers for their families in the United States. With their help, a sample of forty-nine US-based caregiver-child pairs was recruited (e.g., separated families, N=99) between February 2019 and March 2020. A non-separated comparison sample of fifty-one US caregiver-child pairs (N=102) in which a Mexican parent was at risk for deportation, but with no history of deportation, was also recruited, via referrals from separated families, community-based organizations, providers, and community health workers or *promotores*. Eligible separated (Sep.) children had to be 13–17 years old, US-born or naturalized citizens, fluent in English or Spanish, be able to complete surveys over the phone, and living in the US at the time of the deportation. Non-separated comparison (NS) children must also be 13–17 years old, US citizens or naturalized, able to complete the surveys over the phone, and living in the United States at the time of enrollment. Additionally, comparison children had to have a Mexican immigrant parent who was not a naturalized US citizen or green card holder and no history of parental deportation at the time of enrollment in BTL.

Study participants completed two surveys: a baseline survey at the time of the deportation (separated families) or enrollment (non-separated comparison families) and a follow-up survey six months later. Each family received a monthly check-in call between the baseline and follow-up surveys. After follow-up, a subsample of caregiver-child pairs (N=10 pairs) from the separated arm and a subsample of caregiver-child pairs (N=10 pairs) from the non-separated arm were



purposely selected to complete an in-depth, semi-structured qualitative interview. Families were selected based on demographic, geographic, and community factors. In situations where one participant of the invited pair did not complete an interview, we completed the interview with the consenting individual and selected a new pair to reach our desired sample size for complete pairs (at least ten). In total, we interviewed fourteen separated caregivers, eleven separated children, twelve comparison caregivers, and eleven comparison children (N=48). This article focuses on the qualitative data collected between October 2019 and August 2020 from separated and comparison children only (N=11 and N=11, respectively). See Table 1 for the sample characteristics.

Table 1 Demographic characteristics of qualitative sample (n = 22)

Characteristics	n	%
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	8	36.4
Female	14	63.6
<i>Age (years)</i>		
13–14	9	40.9
15–17	13	59.1
<i>Enrolled in school, job training, or vocational education program</i>		
Yes	21	95.5
No	1	4.5
<i>Education level^a</i>		
6th–8th grade	7	33.3
9th–12th grade	14	66.7
<i>Ethnic and racial identity^b</i>		
Hispanic/Latino	22	100
White	4	18.2
Other	14	63.6
<i>Geographic US region of residence^c</i>		
West	13	61.9
Midwest	3	14.3
South	3	14.3
Northeast	2	9.5
<i>Participant group</i>		
Separated	11	50
Not separated	11	50

^aPercentages were calculated excluding missing data, with the valid percentage (n = 21)

^bCategories not mutually exclusive. Percentages were calculated excluding missing data, with the valid percentage (n = 18 for race, n = 22 for ethnicity)

^cAccording to US Census regions. Percentages were calculated excluding missing data, with the valid percentage (n = 21)



Interview guide and procedures

After the six-month follow-up, children were invited to complete the interview. If they were interested, interviews by phone or Zoom were scheduled independently. Prior to the interview, participants provided informed assent. Interviews were conducted by a trained, bilingual interviewer, in English or Spanish per the child's preferences. The interviewer had experience working with traumatized children and was trained by BTL child psychologists to conduct the interviews. If children became distressed during the interview, the interviewer would pause and console the child, helping them to become calm before continuing. If necessary, interviewers stopped and resumed at another time. Children were also reminded they could choose not to answer questions. Throughout the interview and the larger study, we reminded children and their caregivers that they could request mental health services or counseling, whereupon we would connect them to appropriate and accessible services. Interviews ranged from forty-five minutes to one hour and were digitally recorded. Upon completion of the interview, children received a \$25 e-gift card as compensation. All materials, activities, and procedures for this study were approved by the Drexel University Internal Review Board.

The interview guide for separated and non-separated children contained a range of open-ended and probing questions that explored multiple health and well-being domains. The guides were informed by the social-ecological model and findings from previous studies on this topic. For this study, we focused on information collected from questions for separated children that covered the parental detainment/deportation event, impacts on mental/emotional health and related health behaviors, discriminatory experiences, and other immigration enforcement exposure. For non-separated comparison children, we focused on their responses to questions about the possibility of the deportation of their parent or caregiver, their fears about the deportation of a parent, impacts on their mental/emotional health or related health behaviors, their exposure to immigration enforcement, and discrimination. For sample questions from the interview guides that pertain to our research questions, see Table 2.

Analysis and interpretation

Audio recorded interviews with children were transcribed verbatim, translated to English as needed, and reviewed for quality purposes by bilingual BTL research team members. Transcripts were entered into Dedoose, a web-based qualitative software program that facilitates collaborative analysis of qualitative data. Our qualitative approach is phenomenological; our intent was to describe the lived experience of these children with regard to immigration enforcement and discrimination (Sundler et al. 2019). To describe these lived experiences, we utilized interpretive content analysis; the aim is to develop a condensed description of the phenomenon through the systematic categorization of data (Elo and Kyngäs 2008). The social-ecological model was also utilized to organize emerging themes (Hsieh and Shannon



Table 2 Sample domains explored in interviews with separated and comparison children and selected interview questions (n = 22)

Domains	Group	Sample interview guide questions
The removal story	Separated	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I know there have been a lot of changes in your life. I want to know more about that. Can you tell me about what happened when your [MOM/DAD] was sent back to Mexico? - Where were you? What happened during and after they were detained?
Learning about the Deportation	Separated	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How did you find out that your [MOM/DAD] was going to be sent back to Mexico? - How did this make you feel? Why?
The Deportation Aftermath	Separated	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What happened after your [MOM/DAD] was sent back to Mexico?
Fears about Deportation of Parent	Comparison	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Do you think there is a possibility that your [MOM/DAD] could be arrested and sent back to Mexico? How does that make you feel? - How have these fears changed how you feel or behave? Why or why not?
Potential Deportation Aftermath	Comparison	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What do you think would happen if your [MOM/DAD] was sent back to Mexico? - What conversations have you had with your family or others about this?
Child's Perceived Health/Behavior	Both	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Sometimes when people experience or think about stressful or upsetting things, it affects how they eat or sleep or feel. If you have thought about your [MOM/DAD] being sent back to Mexico, how has that made you feel? - Do you think these problems are related to what happened to your [MOM/DAD] or you're worrying about your [MOM/DAD] being sent back to Mexico? Why or why not?
Other Immigration Enforcement Exposure	Both	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Do you know or have heard of any families where a parent has been sent back to Mexico? - What about other people who have been arrested and/or sent back to their countries of origin? - What have you read or viewed about immigration on TV, online, or other places?
Discrimination/Anti-immigrant Climate	Both	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Have you ever felt like you have been treated differently than other children because of being Latino? Or because of having immigrant parents? - How does this make you feel? How does it make you feel about yourself? Why?



2005; Schreier 2014). Preliminary codebooks for separated and non-separated comparison child interviews were developed a priori with deductive codes, based on the study research questions and main domains of the interview guides, as well as our analytical team's reading of the interview transcripts. Using the Dedoose software, two transcripts were coded by the bilingual/bicultural analytical team together to promote inter-rater reliability of coding. Any coding discrepancies were resolved by consensus. The remaining interviews were coded independently, with regular check-in meetings with all coders to discuss coding and review analytic memos in Dedoose, where thoughts and questions were documented. During the coding process, codebooks were revised with inductive codes as needed. Finally, a random subsample of interviews was double coded by two coders to ensure uniform coding across the analytical team. These protocols contributed to this study's methodological rigor and helped to maintain internal reliability of coding.

Following the coding, we compiled interview excerpts and codes using analytic matrices to facilitate interpretation of the data. Working collaboratively, we identified patterns in the coded data for separated and nonseparated/comparison children, then applied themes and subthemes that summarized our assertions for each research question. We created analytic tables with preliminary findings for separated and comparison children independently, then integrated our findings from both data sets into one table to identify points of convergence and divergence, as well as finalize the themes and subthemes that emerged from both groups.

Study results

We organized our results based on our research domains and the theoretical framework, with major themes and subthemes. These domains include (1) lived experiences of parental deportation or the risk of parental deportation; (2) mental health and health-related consequences of enforcement experiences; (3) direct or indirect experiences of discrimination/anti-immigrant climate; and (4) mental health consequences of discriminatory experiences/anti-immigrant climate. For the purposes of this study and to ensure participants' confidentiality, we have assigned children pseudonyms. We also include children's ages and indicate what study group they belong to (Sep=separated; NS=non-separated), as needed.

Lived experiences of direct or anticipated parental deportation in the microsystem and mesosystem

Learning about the detainment and deportation

Separated children described the detainment and deportation of their parent as a shocking and traumatic event. Several children witnessed the detainment of their parent. According to these participants, parents were picked up by ICE or the police at a variety of locations including in front of the family home, at the courthouse, on the street in their neighborhood, even driving to school. Children who witnessed



the arrest remembered feeling confused and shocked about what was going on. Sixteen-year-old Jocelyn described how she, her sisters, and her parents went to a court date together for her father's immigration case, which was pending. Upon arriving, the children were asked by courtroom staff to wait in the hallway, while the mother and father went into a different room for the purported meeting. When the mother returned, the father was not with her as they had taken him into custody in the next room. The mother had to explain to their three daughters what happened. Jocelyn recalls,

She-she wasn't with my dad. And that's when we knew that they took him. [Starts to cry] They were fighting for him not getting deported. We thought that the meeting we were going to go to was the court hearing. So, we thought they were going to say, "Oh never mind, we're not going to get you deported." We just thought it was going to be like, "Oh, we made a mistake, you're not going to Mexico." We never knew he would get taken away from us. —Jocelyn, sixteen years

Andrea, a fifteen-year-old female, described how she, her siblings, and her parents were enjoying a community carnival when they spotted police and decided to leave. They were stopped at a nearby gas station, and she was forced to translate the conversation between her father and the female cop, while her mother and little siblings watched from the car. She remembered, "We didn't understand what was going on. It didn't make any sense." Even children who did not witness the detainment reported being shaken by the sudden disappearance of their parent from their lives. For example, seventeen-year-old Cecilia recalled how her father was arrested while on his way to work. She was not told about the detainment until she got home from school, but she assumed he would be let go, saying, "I didn't know that he was going to get deported, I thought we would get it fixed." The next day, Cecilia's father called her from Tijuana, Mexico, to inform her that he had been deported overnight and she just, "cried on the phone with him." Another child remembered,

[When] my dad got deported—that's the craziest thing ever. When they got him, I was going to school in the morning. So, it was just a normal day. Then my mom picked me up from school and she told me that my dad—that he got taken away by the I-C-E and ... Yeah, I was like in shock. I was speechless. I didn't know what to say. —Edgar, seventeen years

After the initial shock of the deportation, participants struggled to comprehend the detainment and deportation of their parent. Andrea told us, "I just couldn't believe it, because I never in my life thought that my entire family could be split up at all." Even though they were aware that parental deportation was a possibility, most of them assumed this would not happen to their family.

Hiding from deportation, avoidance, and silence

For non-separated comparison children—that is, children who did not experience parental deportation—the threat of a parental deportation was described as an



insidious and ever-present danger in terms of their lived experiences on the micro- and mesosystem levels. Comparison children described their or their family members' urge to avoid detection by ICE, or, as one child told us, "[my parents] have been laying low" (Juan, thirteen years). They described how this fear influenced daily activities in their households. Jessica described her own behavioral changes in responses to stepped-up immigration enforcement activity:

My mom—I don't really like want to like get involved in stuff because if I'm in a festival and I need to go to practice or something and then she needs to drive. If she drives, she might get stopped by the police and then, you know? And so that's why I don't want her to be taking so many trips. —Jessica, fourteen years

Comparison children also expressed the need to avoid the topic of deportation all together. It was a heavy topic; they tried not to think about or discuss enforcement to protect themselves and others from the mental/emotional toll. This appeared to make it easier to cope in their everyday lives:

I tell myself to not think about this type of stuff. Like if my mom is coming home late, I start overthinking, but I gotta calm down. Until she comes, I tell myself that she's going to be safe and nothing will happen to her. I don't think about it. ... I try to stay calm until she comes back home. And I try to distract myself. —Liliana, sixteen years

All of the participants described some level of self-silencing about immigration enforcement and deportation, though this was particularly evident for comparison children. In comparison households, children reported family members avoiding the topic of deportation because they believed that this somehow increased the possibility that a deportation could happen.

Mental health consequences of direct or anticipated parental deportation in the microsystem and mesosystem

The aftermath of deportation: Worry, anxiety, sadness, and disengagement

The trauma of the detainment/deportation of a parent experienced by separated children appeared to manifest as symptomologies of poor mental health on the microsystem. When asked how they had been feeling since the deportation about six months prior, many separated children reported feeling anxious, worried, extremely sad, or distracted or disengaged from their daily activities. After her father was arrested at the courthouse, Jocelyn told us, "When it happened, I felt really scared. I felt like am I ever going to see my dad again? And mentally, in my mind, it felt like I was hitting rock bottom." In the following days, their fear and panic was exacerbated by intense sadness that overwhelmed them. They reported constant crying and feeling "down," or "sad" and being unable to control their sadness. Similar to the self-silencing observed in the comparison children,



many separated children described having difficulty talking about the deportation or expressing how they feel. They explained attempts to hide their feelings as a response to their family members seemingly wanting to avoid the topic.

The deportation seemed to affect almost every aspect of children's daily life, especially their sense of security. In the aftermath, participants expressed constant worry about the well-being of their parent in Mexico, about economic struggle due to a sudden loss of family income, their own safety and security, and that of other undocumented family members. Separated children shared worries about their and their family's future without their parent. Rosalinda, sixteen years old, remarked, "I feel worried about not having enough money to pay the rent or the bills. ... I feel less confident in the future." This worry often manifests in symptoms of anxiety. Katharine, a thirteen-year-old female said, "I think I have anxiety now. Because I get panic attacks. I just kind of like freak out. ... I start crying. I just don't feel good. It's usually at night, so I'll just try to fall asleep." Another thirteen-year-old female, Sandra, described her recurring panic attacks at school since the deportation of her father as "something that sticks [with her], panic attacks and anxiety." Somatic symptoms including headaches, stomachaches, and anxiety attacks were reported by participants as a result of the trauma of the deportation event.

In addition to anxiety and worry, separated children seemed to mourn the loss of their parent, almost as if the parent has passed away. Multiple children expressed symptoms of grief and loss during the interviews. For example,

I mean there's times, like sometimes when I was getting close to something. It's like my graduation or my birthday, I start crying. I just feel like I'm growing up and my dad won't be there to experience that with me and that makes me feel sad. —Vania, seventeen years

Finally, separated children described feeling disengaged or distracted from their lives on the mesosystem. Symptoms of anxiety and depression, combined with worry, prevented children from engaging with others around them. For example, Sandra told us, "I felt really sad and tired, bored ... like I didn't want to do anything. I just wanted to stay home. Like before, my life was normal, but now it's sad." Other children described feeling like they could not be present at school or engage with their peers. Sixteen-year-old Rosalinda told us, "Sometimes I can't focus. ... Sometimes like when they teach, I get distracted like going to ... I'm going to say it's like going into my dream world." Separated children struggled to maintain a sense of normalcy immediately following the deportation; inevitably anxiety, worry and sadness interrupted the flow of their days.

The impending threat of a deportation: Hypervigilance, fear, and worry

Non-separated comparison children did not experience the trauma of the removal of their parent. However, on the micro- and mesosystem, they endured the prolonged threat that this could occur, which was stressful and toxic to their mental/



emotional health. Notably, comparison children shared their concern and worry about the safety of their parent(s):

I'm in like a very worried mode. My mind just like—what if something's happened to my parents and I didn't want nothing to happen to them because well, I'm still a kid. —Jeanette, fourteen years

Comparison children were well aware of heightened ICE activity on the macrosystem across the country and in their neighborhoods. The only respite was when their parents were at home—in some cases, because of isolation/shut-down orders as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The impending threat of separation resulted in anxiety and worry, especially when their parents left the house to run errands, go to work, pick up their siblings from school, and so on; "When they go somewhere, and they [take] too long to come back, the thought hits me. Worried" (Josue, fifteen years). Another child expressed this fear and worry when driving around their neighborhood. Liliana, sixteen years old, told the interviewer how her family avoided driving near a local bar because of their fear of cops: "I just felt like we were being followed." Comparison children and their families felt the need to stay vigilant when they ventured out and avoided any activities they perceived as risky. Additionally, comparison children believed that ICE and, indirectly, Donald Trump himself, were targeting their families personally. Jeanette told us, "I started to panic cause I'm like in my mind: my mom, my dad my sisters, my brother ... [Donald Trump] sending my parents to Mexico." Participants reported being fearful and hypervigilant. They experienced stress every time a family member at risk left the home or did not return when they were expected, exemplified by thirteen-year-old Juan: "All I feel is scared that they could be taken any moment from here."

Behavioral impacts

In addition to their mental/emotional health, we also asked participants about how their behavior had been affected by their parent's deportation or their thinking about that possibility. Separated and comparison children reported similar behavioral consequences on the microsystem that coincide with mental health issues associated with indirect or direct exposure to immigration enforcement. For example, children talked about how their sleep patterns were affected:

Sometimes, especially when I see things on the news that's happening near my area ... I'm anxious. [I] stop sleeping. Not sleeping anymore. Because I'm thinking, talking. I stay talking to my parents and keep the conversation on nothing like that, safer. And finally, maybe I'll sleep. —Carlos, seventeen years, NS

All of the separated children in our sample reported disrupted sleep, which they connected to the worry, stress, and fear that they experience. They had trouble falling asleep, or staying asleep, or experienced low quality of sleep caused by nightmares. In addition, some children in both groups described concerns related to eating:



First of all, it affected my eating because sometimes I would eat a little bit and then I would eat a lot. Because I used to you know eat normally. But now I just don't eat the right amount. I would either eat a little bit or I would eat like a lot. —Sandra, thirteen years, Sep.

Disrupted eating habits reported by participants included binge eating or prolonged periods of not feeling hungry, especially when they thought about the deportation of their parent or its possibility. These changes were not as common as problems with sleep and emerged only in interviews with female participants. Non-separated comparison children reported similar issues, especially issues with sleep, which they linked to the stress they experienced because of anticipated parental deportation.

Direct and indirect experiences of discrimination, racism, and anti-immigrant climate in the mesosystem and exosystem

Interpersonal discrimination

With respect to interpersonal experiences of discrimination in the mesosystem, non-separated comparison children had more to say than separated children. However, participants from both groups shared similar experiences, interpretations, and reactions. Participants felt that the broader white American society on the exosystem did not understand what they and their families go through, especially in terms of immigration enforcement and discrimination. Children described this divide in their own subjective experiences of interpersonal discrimination in the mesosystem. Seventeen-year-old Carla described how she noticed when she and her family navigated public spaces, they elicited stares from white Americans. When asked how she interpreted these stares, Carla told us,

They probably feel like we're going to steal. It makes me feel angry and full of hate. It's annoying how—how they can stare, and they can do things and get away with so much. And there's other people—somebody else who's white could commit the same crime and it'll be like a few years or they can get out with parole and like for us, a black prisoner or a person of color, they don't even have life with parole. [White Americans] have a lot of privileges where they're able to get away with a lot of things.

Children who experienced interpersonal discrimination or microaggressions connected those experiences to their identities as Mexicans and as children of immigrants. Children also reported institutional discrimination against their parents, many of whom were singled out because of their English proficiency.

Most of the participants who reported interpersonal discrimination were at school at the time of the encounter. Roman, a fourteen-year-old comparison child, recalled a disturbing event at school in which a student stood on a bench at lunchtime, yelling repeatedly that "Mexicans are pigs." Other locations on the mesosystem where participants encountered discrimination included parks, restaurants, grocery stores, gas stations, or the local mall. In addition to varied locations, discriminatory experiences focused on multiple identities, including language barriers (mostly aimed at



their parents), immigration status, socioeconomic status, and their skin color. The messaging that participants were exposed to with regard to being an immigrant or Mexican was overwhelmingly negative. This alienated children and shaped their interactions with peers. Thirteen-year-old Katharine told us that, "Sometimes I just feel like ... some people just don't want to be friends with me cause' I'm brown." Discrimination at the intersection of race and immigration reflected children's awareness of the broader anti-immigrant climate under the Trump administration and how this shaped immigration policy.

When I start to see things on the news that talk about deportations, it gets real. When I was little, I thought that that just happens in racist states. I really imagined there's a lot of racism out there against people of color and that's why it happens, but I'm watching and no, many of the deportations are in the states that you consider to be sanctuary states. Like here in California or other states, ... and you're wondering, "Wow." I'm glad it's not my parents, but I feel bad for other people because it can very easily be me in that place with my mom, my dad. —Carlos, 17 years, NS

Sanctuary policies did not necessarily protect Carlos's community, including his mom and his dad. His assessment demonstrates how participants interpreted immigration enforcement as a state-sanctioned expression of broader anti-Latino/anti-immigrant sentiment.

Immigration in the media: Anti-immigrant climate and rhetoric

Aside from interpersonal experiences, participants reported exposure to anti-immigrant and anti-Latino rhetoric on the exosystem via the media. Many separated and non-separated comparison children recalled specific phrases and words that they heard or saw on TV and social media. Several children cited former president Donald Trump's description of Mexicans as "rapists" or "criminals." Trump's words were salient to participants, who expressed frustration to see someone so powerful validating this kind of rhetoric. Juan, a thirteen-year-old comparison male, explained that, "Trump says that they won't go and we're rapists—Mexicans are rapists. I feel like they agree with what he says cause' he's a president. They feel like it's OK. They say what he says."

In our study, social media was participants' primary source for news, culture, socializing, and self-expression. Social media content mirrored broader debates about race and immigration enforcement on the exosystem, such as the former president's statements about Latino immigrants. Additionally, social media was used to warn the community about local ICE activity: "Somebody posted on their story saying, 'Be careful and everything, ICE is in center city'" (Josue, fifteen years, NS). Social media was also a witness to enforcement when arrests were broadcast live. When children viewed footage of detainments or deportations, and read disparaging comments about immigrants, they wondered about the criminal activities of the detainee or deportee. Some children explained their belief that only "bad" people were deported but also how this definition is fluid, since their parents were targeted for removal. Five separated children and three comparison children in our sample



did not report directly experiencing any discrimination on the mesosystem in terms of interpersonal interactions, but all participants discussed instances where they were exposed to discrimination/anti-immigrant rhetoric and immigration enforcement online.

Mental health impacts of discrimination, racism and anti-immigrant climate in the microsystem and mesosystem

Internalized stigma

Children who reported direct (e.g., interpersonal) as well as indirect (e.g., social media, TV, former president Trump) exposure to discrimination sometimes internalized the messaging. They described hiding their identities as Latinos or Mexicans or as children from immigrant families. Some participants even appeared to associate their being Mexican identity with immigration enforcement.

There was one time that they asked me in school. Nobody actually knew that I was Mexican. And like I told only four people. And they're like very close to me. Like one of them just said I was Mexican. Out of nowhere, everybody circled me asking me, "Are you Mexican?" I'm like, "yes, I am Mexican." And they're like "Oh, I thought you were Rican." "Oh, you thought wrong." Maybe because I haven't been deported. —Jeanette, fourteen years, NS

Jeanette's encounter with her peers at school highlights broader community and societal beliefs regarding who gets deported and why. Some children appeared to associate deportation with criminality and assumed that individuals who are deported must be lesser. They seemingly internalized anti-immigrant rhetoric that frames interior immigration enforcement as a matter of national security.

Psychosocial impacts of direct and vicarious discrimination experiences

Another mental/emotional consequence of discrimination on the microsystem voiced by some participants related to their sense of self and identity.

Latinos, they have experienced racial profiling just because they're not from here or they don't look like any average American or so-called American. It makes me upset because I feel like they don't have the amount of privilege that any other race does just—just because they're not from here or—or they don't they don't get to say how they feel. They don't have a voice. It's sad. —Vania, seventeen years, Sep.

Racial profiling and subsequent discrimination silenced the Latino community so, "they don't have a voice," according to Vania. In some ways, their identities as children of Mexican immigrant were erased. They also indicated feeling alienated by racist or discriminatory experiences. For example, seventeen-year-old Carla told us, "It made me feel like I didn't belong. Like there's something missing" (NS). In



response to stares and comments from white individuals in her community on the mesosystem, Carla avoided venturing outside her neighborhood because, as she told us, "I don't want to feel like I'm being stared at." Experiencing discrimination was described as a threat to participants' sense of self.

Discussion of study findings

In the present study, we explored lived experiences of the deportation of a parent or the threat of a parental deportation and discrimination on the microsystem, meso-system, and exosystem levels within the context of an anti-immigrant, anti-Latino climate on the macrosystem level of Bronfenbrenner's social-ecological model. This study is novel because it examined primary data collected during Trump's presidency from children separated from their parents by deportation and children who were at risk for separation but had not yet experienced this kind of separation. Our interviews with participants separated by deportation or at risk for parental deportation reveal the profound impacts of immigration enforcement and perceived discrimination, especially on mental health. Interviews with separated children suggest they experience intense emotional turmoil and psychological distress, much like victims of a violent event, as corroborated by others using social ecological frameworks (Barajas-Gonzalez et al. 2018, 2021). This manifests as anxiety, worry, depression or intense sadness and somatic symptoms. Children at risk for parental deportation endure prolonged stress in anticipation of a parental deportation, which makes them hypervigilant, worried, and fearful. Regardless of participants' experience with deportation, they report discrimination and racism that targets their identities as Latino youth and children of immigrants. These experiences also affect participants mentally, resulting in distress, helplessness, and alienation. Finally, children are attuned to today's anti-immigrant climate via their media exposure, especially social media. This shapes their interpretation of microaggressions from peers, teachers, and others in their community, as well as immigration enforcement happening in their backyards and nationally.

The acute and chronic mental health consequences of parental deportation described by our sample coincide with findings from other studies. Children and adolescents who are separated from their parents by deportation report depressive symptoms and sadness, emotional problems, anxiety, fear, clinginess, symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder and lower self-concept (Zayas et al. 2015; Rubio-Hernandez and Ayón 2016; Brabeck and Xu 2010; Rojas-Flores et al. 2017). We observed similar mental health issues in our interviews with separated children, especially with regard to depression/sadness and anxiety. Researchers working with Latino children in mixed-status families sometimes conceptualize the arrest, detention, and deportation of a parent as uniquely violent and traumatic given the mental health symptoms that arise in the aftermath (Lovato 2019; Caballero et al. 2017; Vargas and Ybarra 2017). Lovato cites ambiguous loss theory as a framework to describe how children experience the deportation of a family member (2019), which can be helpful for understanding migration-related trauma. Ambiguous loss refers to loss that occurs without proper closure, where the circumstances of the loss



are open-ended or incomplete, for example, when someone is physically gone but simultaneously psychologically present (Boss 1999). In Lovato's qualitative study with Latino youth, as in ours, adolescents and children sense the absence of their parent and use words like "gone" or "missing" (2019). Even though the parent remains psychologically present (Lovato 2019; Boss 1999), their grief is extended since there is uncertainty about the parent's presence in their lives and no finality for grieving (Lovato 2019). Children separated from a parent by deportation experience this same version of extended mourning because of their ambiguous loss.

Parent-child separation has profound long-term effects on child well-being through threat and deprivation (Barajas-Gonzalez et al. 2021). Parental separation exposes children to toxic stress for an extended period of time in response to a threat of losing a parent (Bouza et al. 2018). Even children in mixed-status families who have no direct exposure to parental deportation suffer chronic psychological distress. Although less is known about children who are at risk for family separation because of deportation compared to those who have experienced it (Zayas et al. 2015), studies we located support our results. A study by Zayas et al. quantitatively compared the psychological health of three groups of US-born Latino adolescents: (1) living in Mexico with their deported parent(s), or (2) living in the US with parents affected by detention/deportation, or (3) having parents who were undocumented but had not been affected by detention/deportation (2015). All three groups of children fell within the category of anxiety disorders and reported elevated levels of distress, although children affected directly were more likely to report higher levels of depressive symptoms or emotional problems (Zayas et al. 2015).

Latino immigrant families facing deportation proceedings describe a state of constant fear, worry, and hypervigilance (Rubio-Hernandez and Ayón 2016; Rayburn et al. 2021; Eskenazi et al. 2019), themes that also emerged in our interviews with comparison children. A study by Eskenazi et al. (2019) sampled US-born adolescents in California with at least one immigrant parent. Results show that following the 2016 presidential election of Donald Trump, almost half of youths worried at least sometimes about the personal consequences of US immigration policy (44.8%) and family separation due to deportation (44.6%) (Eskenazi et al. 2019). This fear and worry were associated with higher anxiety levels and sleep problems (Eskenazi et al. 2019), which we also documented in our interviews. The psychological and physiological toll of stress during childhood can change how the body responds to stress long term and can disrupt important cognitive and behavioral processes as children mature (Bouza et al. 2018). Toxic stress also puts children at greater risk for a multitude of health issues, including psychological disorders such as depression or anxiety, as well as lower IQ, obesity, cancer, heart and lung disease, and stroke (Bouza et al. 2018; Loria and Caughy 2018). The prolonged deprivation of the separated parent, and consequences to economic security and family stability, contribute to their lifelong mental health burden (Barajas-Gonzalez et al. 2021).

Our results highlight the complexity of discriminatory experiences. In the microsystem, all children conveyed experiences of interpersonal discrimination in the form of microaggressions or microinsults that target multiple identities. This includes their racial/ethnic identity as Mexican Americans and legal identity as children of immigrant parents (Sutter and Perrin 2016). Latino youth in other studies



report frequently experiencing discrimination due to their ethnicity, race, sexual/gender identity or culture. Latino children and adolescents express concern about their own experiences with discrimination or racism, as well as the impact of migration-related discrimination on their parents. Rayburn et al. conducted semi-structured interviews with families at risk for parental deportation (2021). Youth in their study described being stereotyped by individuals in their communities who assumed they were not citizens based on their racial/ethnic appearance (Rayburn et al. 2021). Children were aware of their own privilege as citizens and how this protects them from deportation, but not necessarily from discrimination. This tension is supported in similar studies with Latino children living in mixed-status families (Landale et al. 2017; Valdez et al. 2021). Some studies have found higher levels of discrimination among US-born Latinos compared to their undocumented counterparts (Landale et al. 2017). Additionally, some participants cited institutional discrimination at school, such as differential treatment by teachers and administrators, as distressing to them. This kind of discrimination, coupled with interpersonal discrimination, makes children hyperaware of biases in their interactions with others and has an emotional toll (Ayón and Philbin 2017). Studies with Latino children/adolescents and their parents have documented how children cried or were sad, angry, uncomfortable, or intimidated following discriminatory experiences (Ayón and Philbin 2017; Hunting et al. 2015).

Discrimination affects how Latino US-born children in particular understand their status as protected citizens of the United States, but also as victims of anti-immigrant or anti-Latino discrimination. This influences developmental processes of identity construction and social belonging (Zayas and Gulbas 2017; Córdova and Cervantes 2010). For example, participants in our sample reported feeling alienated and socially excluded following a discriminatory event. This internalized stigma is another important consequence of discrimination. Studies with Latino children and youth demonstrate how internalized oppression can result in negative self-concept and destructive behaviors, including lower self-esteem as well as increased aggression, hopelessness, anxiety, and distress (Ayón and Philbin 2017; Estrada and Hondagneu-Sotelo 2011; Huynh 2012; Zayas and Gulbas 2017). Children can even develop shame regarding their heritage because of discrimination (Ayón and Philbin 2017; Huynh 2012), though this theme did not emerge in our interviews.

All of our participants describe being victimized indirectly by the larger anti-immigrant/anti-Latino climate on the macrosystem level. Children in our study, as well as in other studies, are exposed to commentary about anti-immigrant policy, which increases their likelihood of reporting psychological distress, panic, and worry (Ayón 2018; Espinola et al. 2019; Philbin and Ayón 2016; Roche et al. 2018; Viruell-Fuentes et al. 2012). Our interviews speak to the broader everyday experiences of Mexican immigrant children, wherein comparison children provide insight into what their lives are like *before* a family member is deported and separated children in the aftermath of a deportation. Across the country, Latino citizen children are exposed to hateful and vitriolic messaging via social media and other platforms in the exosystem level that stem from a larger cultural debate in the macrosystem. Institutional and interpersonal discrimination on the micro- or mesosystem levels is shaped by this broader sociopolitical commentary. In turn, state- and federal-level



anti-immigration policies in the macrosystem determine ICE activity in communities where these children live and how they interpret immigration enforcement (Ayón and Philbin 2017; Bronfenbrenner and Morris 1998; Valdez et al. 2021). Exposure to discrimination and anti-immigrant messaging, coupled with the deportation and criminalization of their undocumented parents, is traumatic for Latino US-citizen children (Zayas and Gulbas 2017). If the effects of traumatic experiences and toxic stress are cumulative, then children and adolescents who have faced adversity in the past, such as the anticipated or actual deportation of a parent or discrimination, are more susceptible to negative outcomes across their lifespan (Bouza et al. 2018; Barajas-Gonzalez et al. 2021). We assert that anti-immigrant climate/rhetoric in the United States and associated discrimination are socio-ecologically linked to how Latino citizen children experience and interpret immigration enforcement, although, to our knowledge, the strength of these relationships has yet to be thoroughly and empirically tested.

Study limitations

Study findings should be considered in light of some limitations. Findings are based on a nonrandom, purposive sample of Mexican immigrant families, which limits the generalizability of findings, since the sample does not represent all Latino subgroups who are affected by forced family separation. Our findings are retrospective, therefore dependent on the ability of children to recollect their experiences in the previous six months, and it is possible that the effects of the deportation were stronger in the months immediately following the event. However, parental deportations occurred within a relatively short period of time (six months to one year). Additionally, differences in our samples (e.g., separated versus non-separated comparison children) due to different sampling procedures and selection bias may hamper the comparability of the two groups. It is also possible that families in the comparison group were more inclined to participate in general.

Implications for research, policy and practice

Our findings highlight how US immigration policy and sociopolitical climate on the exosystem and macrosystem levels spill over to affect Latino children's mental health and related behaviors on the mesosystem and microsystem levels, including their experiences of immigration-related discrimination. The present study has implications for public health practitioners and researchers, as well as clinical professionals, legislators, and advocates who work with Latino immigrant families. At the macrosystem level, immigration reform that decriminalizes immigration, keeps families together, and prioritizes the health of children of immigrants is critical. Given that policy reform is slow, intervention programs on the exosystem and microsystem levels for families affected by or at risk for parental deportation are important and should include mental health counseling for children, and family therapy, as well as linkage to health and social services for families (Walsdorf et al.



2019). For example, schools are a valuable community asset that can act as safe harbors for children (Amuedo-Dorantes et al. 2021), assist with linkage to services, and help to encourage ethnic/racial pride. Empowering Latino immigrant parents and communities to combat anti-immigrant climate/rhetoric, cultivating cultural and ethnic pride in children and supporting other coping mechanisms to promote positive mental health is also needed. Finally, future mixed-methods, longitudinal research with larger and more diverse samples of children of immigrants is necessary to understand the breadth and depth of immigration enforcement and discrimination experiences, as well as to inform community-based and policy interventions to mitigate the mental/emotional toll of these experiences.

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