

Immigrants living in US near California-Mexico border have history of trauma

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More than 80 percent of immigrants residing in the U.S. without authorization near the California-Mexico border have a lifetime history of traumatic events, according to a new study from a psychologist at Rice University. Nearly 50 percent of these immigrants suffer from clinically significant psychological distress.

"One Scar Too Many: The Associations Between Traumatic Events and Psychological Distress Among Undocumented Mexican Immigrants" will appear in an upcoming edition of the *Journal of Traumatic Stress*. This is the first study to provide population-based estimates for the prevalence of traumatic events and the association to clinically significant [psychological distress](#) among Mexican immigrants living in the U.S. without authorization.

Luz Garcini, a postdoctoral research fellow in the Department of Psychology at Rice and the study's lead author, sought to assess the prevalence of traumatic events among this population and to identify the prevalence of psychological [distress](#) associated with these events.

Overall, 82 percent of the participants interviewed reported a history of traumatic events, from being victims of or witnessing violence to living in poverty. About a third of the participants reported a history of at least six or more different types of traumatic events. Among those with a history of traumatic events, there was a high prevalence of clinically significant psychological distress—47 percent. Fifty-nine percent of participants with this psychological distress reported a history of domestic violence or bodily injury, 56 percent said they had witnessed violence toward others, 55 percent reported material deprivation—the inability of individuals or households to afford consumption of goods and activities that are typical in a society at a given point in time—and 53 percent said they had witnessed injury of their loved ones. Garcini said differences in psychological distress were not significant between males and females.

"Our findings are alarming," she said. "The prevalence of traumatic events among undocumented immigrants in our study is much higher compared with estimates for other U.S. populations. Of primary concern is that the current socio-political climate and punitive actions against the undocumented community, such as the termination of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, may increase risk of exposure to [traumatic events](#) among these immigrants without access to needed services or legal protection."

Garcini hopes the research will encourage the development and provision of culturally and contextually sensitive prevention and treatment interventions, as well as policy efforts to protect the [human rights](#) of this [immigrant population](#).

"Revisiting immigration policies to devise solutions grounded in evidence and advocating support mechanisms aimed at protecting the human rights of this [immigrant](#) population are essential to prevent the negative consequences of trauma for these immigrants and the broader communities in Mexico and the U.S.," Garcini said.

The study included 248 Mexican immigrants (172 women and 76 men) living in high-risk neighborhoods near the California-Mexico border. (The city where the study was conducted is listed among the most conservative U.S. cities with strong opposition and disciplinary actions against undocumented immigrants. Because of this, Garcini said, the area is considered high-risk for undocumented immigrants.) The majority of participants ranged between the ages of 18 and 45, and approximately 20 percent were older than 45 years of age. Participants had lived in the U.S. for more than 10 years.

The participants took part in clinical interviews conducted by psychology doctoral trainees under the supervision of mental health clinicians. The interviews were assessed using an adapted version

of the Traumatic Events Inventory of the Harvard Trauma Questionnaire, which is designed to assess [traumatic experiences](#) among at-risk immigrants.

"This information is only the tip of the iceberg," Garcini said. "Additional research and funding are needed to document the devastating effects of contextual stress and trauma on the health of [undocumented immigrants](#), which is key to inform advocacy, policy and intervention efforts."

Provided by Rice University

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