UCR study links mental health child crisis to increased immigration enforcement

KVCR | By Anthony Victoria

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Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Enforcement and Removal Operations (ERO) in Los Angeles, California, June 12, 2025

Aggressive immigration enforcement is harming the mental health of children in mixed-status families, according to a new report from psychologists at the University of California, Riverside.

The UCR-led study, published in *Psychiatric News*, links detention, deportation and workplace raids to anxiety, trauma and emotional distress in children whose parents are undocumented. Researchers say both pre- and post-migration family separations hurt children's emotional development and academic performance.

"Sometimes when kids are experiencing these things and they don't really know who to

The report includes clinical case studies and community-based data showing how trauma is passed down across generations and shaped by poverty, discrimination and fear of enforcement. It also outlines emerging models of care that researchers say are more effective and ethical than traditional mental-health interventions.

UC Riverside

Dr. Lisa Fortuna

The authors warn that the emotional strain on U.S.-born children of immigrants — particularly the constant fear of a parent being detained or deported — could lead to a public-health crisis in future generations.

Trauma also experienced by immigrant caregivers, especially mothers, can limit their

intense anxiety, stress and depression and some are even reporting suicidal thoughts because they are hopeless and helpless about their situation

“There’s a concern in our communities right now about whether it’s even safe to go to school,” said Fortuna. “Parents tell me their children don’t want to be apart from them, they don’t want them going to work, or even outside to get food because of the extreme stress and fear of being separated. Our concern is that these symptoms in kids are very detrimental.”

The researchers call on policymakers, clinicians and the media to confront the mental-health toll of immigration enforcement. They recommend partnering with schools to provide psychoeducation, support and consultation — similar to the response following any large-scale traumatic event that impacts an entire school community.

“Schools need to be especially trauma informed right now, especially with so many students impacted,” she said. “That means creating a safe, supportive environment, having counselors on site, addressing bullying and responding to stress or anger as possible trauma responses rather than misbehavior.”

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