

Public Health Talking Points for Immigration Justice

Public health can play a role in resisting criminalization and promoting equity and justice — we must do it now by supporting immigrant communities

More than one in four people¹ in the US are immigrants or children of immigrants, and many more are the direct descendants of immigrants. The health of the nation cannot be upheld, promoted, or protected when our immigrant and refugee communities are in fear of being detained and deported. Below are evidence-based talking points public health leaders can use to shape the public health narrative on immigration.

Fear of immigration enforcement activities interrupts healthcare access and negatively impacts mental and physical health.

- The threat and fear of deportation is harmful to people's physical and mental health, shown to increase stress² and cardiovascular risk due to worry,³ impact emotional wellbeing,⁴ and contribute to negative health states⁵ and symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)⁶ in children.
- Immigrant families avoid accessing health care,⁷ getting vaccinated,⁸ and even grocery shopping⁹ out of fear. When ICE is present in or near clinics, immigrant community members may avoid care¹⁰ — even when it's urgent.¹¹
- Fear of landlords calling ICE prevents tenants from reporting unhealthy housing conditions,¹² requesting repairs, or organizing for their rights.¹³

Immigration detention tears people from their families and cages them in deadly conditions.

- People in immigration detention experience extreme medical neglect and inadequate care,¹⁴ mental health deterioration,¹⁵ and trauma from isolation, solitary confinement¹⁶ and blatant abuse.¹⁷
- Detention spreads infectious diseases¹⁸ and worsens chronic conditions due to poor living standards and overcrowding,¹⁹ neglecting medical care, inadequate sanitation,²⁰ and lack of preventive measures like providing soap to wash hands.²¹ There is also a history of reproductive abuse²² in detention settings, including forced sterilizations.

- Detention of children and separation from their caregivers²³ creates serious health harms²⁴ – particularly at a time that is crucial for children's physical, mental, and social development.²⁵
- The duration of time²⁶ an immigrant is detained matters: longer periods of time in immigration detention are associated with increased anxiety, depression, and PTSD.²⁷ However, even short periods of time in detention are associated with increased psychiatric symptoms.²⁸

The process of deportation harms immigrants and their families, especially children.

- Deportation and its threat cause chronic fear and trauma to children of immigrants. Children in mixed-status families suffer from anxiety,²⁹ PTSD symptoms,⁶ increased aggression,³⁰ and educational challenges.³¹
- Remaining family members face financial hardships³² with the loss of income,³³ including struggling to pay bills, affording housing, food, transportation, and providing care for their children.
- Studies show increased risk of worse birth outcomes such as reductions in prenatal care, low birth weight,³⁴ and preterm birth³⁵ among mothers after ICE activity, such as raids.
- Regardless of one's own immigration status, the deportation of a friend or relative is associated with increased odds of having to seek support for mental health.³⁶

Collaboration between ICE and governmental systems like prisons and jails harm health.

- Policies like 287(g) agreements directly impact communities³⁷ and undermine public health by deterring people from accessing care,³⁸ including medical care, dental care, prescriptions,³⁹ and preventive mental health services,⁴⁰ or causing them to delay necessary services.⁴¹
- Direct transfers to ICE – a system in which prisons and jails collaborate with ICE to transfer people directly upon release to immigration detention centers, whether or not a formal agreement between these systems exist – harm the mental and physical health⁴² of refugees, immigrants, and their families.
- Policies increasing cooperation between local and state government and immigration enforcement harm the health of immigrant populations, with one study⁴³ showing increased mental health distress and poorer self-reported health among Latino immigrants when such policies exist.

Decriminalization and harm reduction are part of public health prevention and require policies that unify families rather than separating them.

- One study⁴⁴ found that participants reported fewer physical, psychological, and overall symptoms of stress, as well greater likelihood of excellent overall general health after release from immigration detention, compared to while they were detained. Possible mechanisms included reunification with family, physical freedom, and autonomy to make their own choices.
- The social support attained by keeping immigrant families together⁴⁵ is important to alleviating the stress related to immigration, including by ensuring better access to housing, healthcare, transportation, employment opportunities, and school enrollment.
- Children are capable of overcoming the trauma and adversity brought on by immigration detention or family separation, if they are reunited with their caregivers²⁴ and provided with adequate support.

For actions that health agencies can take to promote public health for everyone in resistance to deportation efforts, see [HIP's Immigration Justice Action Guide](#).

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