

Executive Summary

You never know when ICE is going to come and take people ... And even though we're protected, my brother and I with DACA, we know that even if we just ... do a 5-second stop [while driving] we're going to get deported. So we live in fear.

Aidee

Rio Grande Valley college student

The Rio Grande Valley sits on the southernmost tip of Texas, next to Mexico. The Valley is composed of several counties, towns, and *colonias* or neighborhoods that form part of a growing and robust economy. Families in the Valley are typically close knit, and most are composed of people of Mexican descent. Families may have roots in the Valley spanning months, years, or even generations.

Because of the Valley's proximity to the Mexico border, its location in the state of Texas, and the racial and ethnic makeup of its inhabitants, many Valley communities experience day-to-day impacts of anti-immigration policies and anti-Mexican rhetoric in the US.

In this report, we assess the health and equity impacts of how everyday activities, like driving, can result in severe consequences for children and families in the Valley. We used in-depth interviews, focus groups, and a survey of more than 200 Rio Grande Valley residents, along with a review of existing research and quantitative estimates of those affected in the Valley.

About 8 out of 10 people in the Valley are of Mexican descent.

ICE deported 2,800 Rio Grande Valley residents in 2017.*

Local law enforcement practices threaten family unity

Rio Grande Valley families may be composed of parents or kids with different documentation statuses. A **mixed-status family** includes at least one child who is a citizen — or has protected status as an immigrant — and at least one parent who is an undocumented immigrant. An estimated 75,000 children in the Rio Grande Valley live in mixed-status families.*

Approximately 1,800 US-born kids in the Rio Grande Valley had a parent deported by immigration officials in fiscal year 2017.* Local police played a role in many of these forced family separations through their collaboration with immigration officials.

* This is an approximate estimate. Read more about our methods in Appendix D of the full report, available on FamilyUnityFamilyHealth.org.

Many of the recent deportations in the Valley are occurring within the context of a contested state law known as Senate Bill 4 or SB4. In essence, SB4 forces local law enforcement officers to do the work federal immigration officials are tasked with. This, coupled with ICE's approach to deport everyone without documentation regardless of their standing in the community, is creating a harmful domino effect for families and communities across the Valley.

Fears of deportation and family separation harm child health

The incidence of childhood PTSD is potentially higher in the Valley. Our survey found nearly 1 in 5 children of all survey respondents (regardless of immigration status) experience symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), compared with 1 in 20 children in the US.

The threat of a parent's detention or deportation is a toxic stressor. Toxic stress changes the biology of a child's brain, including areas of the brain that deal with aspects like attachment or fear, and does so in ways that cannot necessarily be repaired. Our study found that within our survey respondents, 1 in 4 children of undocumented parents in the Valley experience stress because of a parent's immigration status, compared to 1 in 10 children of parents with a protected status.

Immigration stress impacts kids' school success. Our survey found that 40% of undocumented respondents have a child who shows symptoms of school avoidance anxiety, compared to less than one-third with protected status and one-fifth among people with citizen status. Almost one-fourth of undocumented parent respondents reported that their child had trouble keeping up grades, compared to 4% of protected status parents.

Fears of deportation and family separation harm adult health

Our research shows that adults in the Rio Grande Valley are also experiencing mental and physical health challenges, from anxiety to difficulty accessing medical care. Our survey findings show that the threat of detention and deportation harms the mental health of adults with undocumented status.

Recommendations to promote health and safety

We recommend a *public health approach* to local law enforcement and policymaking, to ensure both the safety and health of Rio Grande Valley residents.

1. **Prioritize local police resources toward local law enforcement issues instead of assisting immigration officials**
2. **Increase use of "cite and release" practices during standard traffic stops**
3. **Accept alternative forms of identification for traffic stop procedures**

Visit FamilyUnityFamilyHealth.org to read the full report and view references.

