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.

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](http://FamilyUnityFamilyHealth.org) to read the full report and view references.