

## Research Article

# The Psychological and Social Impact of Immigration Policies: A Minority Stress Perspective

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The incoming Trump administration has outlined plans to implement a series of immigration policies emphasizing stricter enforcement measures, prioritizing mass deportations, enhanced border security, and the rollback of humanitarian programs [1]. Key components are expected to include the reinstatement of the “Remain in Mexico” program, requiring asylum seekers to await their court proceedings outside the United States; rolling back Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for individuals from certain countries; targeting the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program; reducing pathways for family-based immigration; re-introducing the Social Security Administration (SSA) no-match letters program to identify employees who are unable to establish continued authorization to work in the U.S. [2]; and deploying the U.S. military to aid in deportation efforts [3]. While framed as mechanisms to enhance national security and uphold legal frameworks, these policies are likely to foster a hostile social environment that disproportionately affects immigrant populations in the country. When analyzed through the lens of social determinants of health and minority stress theories, the potentially far-reaching implications of these policies on mental health become evident.

## Social Determinants of Health and Hostile Environments

Dynamic systems theory asserts that humans are susceptible to their social environments, and challenging conditions can profoundly affect physical and mental well-being. Aligning with this perspective, the World Health Organization recognizes that social and community contexts- where individuals are born, grow, live, work, and age - significantly shape health outcomes [4]. Hostile social environments shaped by stigma, prejudice, and racism can act as substantial sources of chronic stress, with detrimental effects on targeted individuals' well-being [5].

The incoming administration's proposed policies will likely intensify these challenges by fostering environments steeped in fear and uncertainty. The plan for mass deportations with the potential use of the military would exacerbate the sense of insecurity among irregular immigrants, increasing their anxiety and stress levels. Programs like “Remain in Mexico” could disrupt the social and community contexts central to health, forcing asylum seekers into precarious living conditions that lack access to stable housing,

healthcare, and safety. These policies are likely to serve as structural mechanisms that amplify the chronic stressors already affecting marginalized populations.

## Minority Stress and Stigma Consciousness

The chronic stress experienced by individuals belonging to marginalized social groups is referred to as *minority stress*. The sources of minority stress are categorized into external (distal) and internal (proximal) stressors. External stressors include observable experiences such as rejection, discrimination, and acts of violence (Meyer, 1995) -all of which are likely to escalate under the incoming administration's stricter enforcement measures.

Internal stressors, on the other hand, involve internalized perceptions of stigma and societal prejudices, such as internalized racism or homophobia (Meyer, 1995). This process, also referred to as *stigma consciousness* [6], reflects an individual's heightened awareness of sociocultural stereotypes and biases targeting their group. For immigrants in the U.S., stigma consciousness is further intensified by public narratives that dehumanize them and portray them as “threats” to social order and public security (E.g., Haitian immigrants eating pets).

Political leaders and public figures significantly shape societal perceptions and influence inter-group dynamics [7]. Provocative rhetoric that labels irregular immigrants as “illegal,” “criminal,” or even “pet-eaters” harms both communities. It creates *immigrapobia*, an irrational fear of incoming migrants and immigration, by fostering perceptions of threat to national identity, public safety, or resource availability amongst the American public, creating divisions and mistrust. Also, it simultaneously fuels stigma consciousness, fear, and anxiety within immigrant populations. Furthermore, the psychological strain of concealing one's vulnerable identity, such as an immigrant with irregular status hiding their identity due to the fear of deportation, will add to the cumulative burden of minority stress (Meyer, 1995).

Research shows that stigma consciousness and vicarious experiences of racism - such as witnessing or hearing about discriminatory policies or deportations- foster pervasive fear and anxiety (Yip et al., 2022). Even in the absence of direct personal attacks, the anticipation of rejection, hostility, discrimination, or expulsion can place individuals in a chronic

state of stress and hyper-vigilance, with long-lasting consequences for their mental health and well-being. The psychological harm resulting from prolonged personal, collective, and vicarious experiences of racism and discrimination can culminate in *racial trauma* [8] with symptoms of hyper-vigilance to threats, flashbacks, avoidance of others, heightened suspiciousness, and somatic symptoms such as headaches, heart palpitations (Comas-Díaz et al., 2019). Furthermore, research has consistently correlated perceived racial discrimination with increased severity of anxiety, depression, and psychological distress [9-13]. These findings underscore the profound and multifaceted potential impacts of planned exclusionary policies on the mental health of immigrants, highlighting the urgent need for systemic changes to mitigate these stressors.

### Broader Impacts on Immigrant Communities

The ripple effects of the above-mentioned hostile migration policies may extend beyond individuals, disrupting the social fabric of immigrant communities. Deportations and fear-based environments can erode collective resilience, weaken informal support systems, and instill mistrust in institutions such as healthcare and education. This mistrust may discourage immigrants from accessing essential services, including mental health support, further compounding the psychological toll. Fear of exposure or legal repercussions can exacerbate this avoidance, leaving individuals without critical resources to mitigate the stressors they face.

### Conclusion

The incoming Trump administration's planned immigration policies are likely to contribute to a hostile sociopolitical environment, intensifying stigma consciousness and minority stress among immigrant populations. Based on research and theory, these policies are expected to exacerbate mental health disparities while undermining community cohesion and individual resilience. The resulting cycle of fear and exclusion could perpetuate systemic inequalities, highlighting the urgent need for more inclusive and equitable approaches to immigration and public health. By addressing the structural and systemic factors that contribute to chronic stress and trauma, policymakers can foster environments that promote mental health and well-being for all individuals, regardless of their immigration status.

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