

Low birth rates, high stress levels among immigrant population in the US

By Genevieve Leigh
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The anti-immigrant policies of the US government, vastly escalated by the Trump administration, have created widespread fear and panic in the thousands of immigrant communities throughout the country.

The scenes of Rómulo Avelica-González being apprehended with his 13-year-old daughter looking on, or Guadalupe García de Rayos behind the bars of an armored Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) vehicle with her family and friends trying to stop it from leaving, are no doubt seared in the minds of millions of immigrants as examples of what might happen if some unfortunate event lands them in the hands of their local ICE agents.

The effect on immigrants' health, as well as the health of their children and even their unborn children, is documented in several recent studies.

The first, released in January of this year, uses Postville, Iowa as a case study.

In 2008, under the Bush administration, the small Iowa town of Postville was the scene of the largest single workplace immigration raid in US history up to that point. Early one morning in May, ICE agents raided the town's slaughterhouse and meat packing plant, arresting close to 400 immigrants. The immigrants were charged with various "crimes" that come with having false identity papers: identity theft, document fraud, and the use of stolen social security numbers. Well over half of the workers were found guilty within just four days. They were tried in court hearings five at a time, served a five-month prison sentence, and were finally deported.

Researchers at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor compared birth certificates of 52,000 children born before and after the raid. The comparison revealed that "Latina mothers across the state were 24% more likely to give birth to undersized babies in the year

after the raid than in the year before ... The weight of non-Latino white babies stayed constant, suggesting that Latino populations were uniquely stressed by the incident."

The problems associated with babies with low birth weight include difficulty feeding and gaining weight, infection, breathing problems, neurologic problems, gastrointestinal problems, and sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS), among others. The study shows that the draconian immigration policies in the US are affecting far more than just the immigrants themselves. They also impact the lives of immigrant children, even before they begin life.

In another study, released last spring, researchers in Michigan published the results of a health survey that was interrupted by a major ICE raid in Washtenaw County. In November 2013, under the Obama administration, ICE conducted a high-profile, military-style raid on the local community. The study found that "the 151 people who answered the survey after the raids reported worse general health than the 325 who had already completed it. ... Many said that after the raids, they were too afraid to leave their homes for food or medical care, and displayed symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder."

Raids such as the one in Postville and Washtenaw were vastly expanded under Obama's "secure communities" program, (piloted under Bush, but developed under Obama) which focused on apprehending immigrants in communities rather than at the border. For public relations and economic considerations, the Obama administration generally carried out smaller raids than the one in Postville, but with much more frequency, resulting in the deportation of 2.7 million immigrants over its eight years in office.

Arrests of immigrants under the Trump

administration have jumped by nearly one-third since he took office, compared to the same period a year ago.

In the aftermath of the first executive order signed by President Trump, the American Academy of Pediatrics warned that, “the message these children received today from the highest levels of our federal government exacerbates that fear and anxiety. No child should ever live in fear... Indeed, fear and stress, particularly prolonged exposure to serious stress—known as toxic stress—can harm the developing brain and negatively impact short- and long-term health.”

The physical and emotional ailments suffered by immigrants that come from living in such a precarious situation are shared by the working class and poor. Enduring the trauma of living in poverty and economic insecurity have contributed to a decline in life expectancy for the first time since the height of the AIDS epidemic in the 1990s.

Parents in low-income households often must work two or three jobs to make ends meet. They do not have the adequate time to spend nurturing their children or participating in their lives. Millions lack access to proper health care and have children who suffer needlessly.

In a Stanford research study titled “Stressing out the Poor: Chronic Physiological Stress and the Income-Achievement Gap” the authors report that low-income children face a “bewildering array of psychosocial and physical demands that place much pressure on their adaptive capacities and appear to be toxic to the developing brain.”

“Children growing up in poverty demonstrate lower academic achievement because of their exposure to a wide variety of risks. These risks, in turn, build upon one another to elevate levels of chronic (and toxic) stress within the body. And this toxic stress directly hinders poor children’s academic performance by compromising their ability to develop the kinds of skills necessary to perform well in school.”

Similar problems, such as low child birth weight, have surfaced in places like Flint, Michigan, where residents experienced prolonged exposure to lead-poisoned water. The psychological toll that such social crimes have taken on the working class has yet to be fully uncovered.

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