

APA Official Actions

Position Statement on Mental Health Needs of Undocumented Immigrants

Approved by the Board of Trustees, July 2020

Approved by the Assembly, April 2020

“Policy documents are approved by the APA Assembly and Board of Trustees. . . These are . . . position statements that define APA official policy on specific subjects. . .” – *APA Operations Manual*

Issue:

Thirteen percent of the United States population is foreign-born, and one-quarter of those are undocumented immigrants – populations of 43 million and 10.5 million, respectively (1, 2). Research shows that in addition to having psychological distress related to immigration, undocumented immigrants have limited access to health care and report negative health care experiences when receiving services in the US (3-9). Risk factors for post-traumatic stress disorder, suicidal behavior, and other psychiatric symptoms among undocumented immigrants include carrying a high burden of trauma from their country of origin, experiencing family separation or prolonged detention, and dealing with challenges related to navigating health and law enforcement systems (10-14). Undocumented immigrants are often faced with “dangerously inadequate” health care (11) that places them at risk of further trauma and worsening of mental illness (10).

APA Position Statement:

- 1. The APA urges policymakers to recognize the impact that practices and policies related to immigration have on the mental health of undocumented immigrants, asylum seekers, and detainees.**
- 2. The APA opposes any policy, law, or practice that for undocumented immigrants involves prolonged detention, inhumane treatment while detained, or obstructs access to timely healthcare and legal services.**
- 3. The APA opposes the forcible separation of children from their parents or caregivers as a consequence of immigration policies.**
- 4. The APA warns against use of derogatory language to describe immigrants and their countries of origin, and it urges government officials to use respectful, non-discriminatory language when referencing undocumented immigrants and their countries of origin.**
- 5. The APA recognizes the deleterious effects of detention centers on the mental health of immigrants detained for legal proceedings.**
- 6. The APA recognizes that trauma and the threat of trauma in one’s home country, combined with efforts to restrict immigration to the US, may negatively impact the mental health of asylum seekers.**

7. **The APA supports Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), acknowledges the benefits DACA has on the mental health of eligible persons and recommends that federal policymakers consider mental health consequences when debating DACA's continuation.**
8. **The APA advocates for improved access to timely, comprehensive care for mental and physical disorders for undocumented immigrants and detainees. Developing strategies to increase culturally competent and trauma-informed care which collaborates closely with legal and other professional groups are key to meeting the mental health needs of this diverse population.**

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