AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

APA Policy Statement on Immigrant Health

AUGUST 2024

Background

Consistent with the American Psychological Association's mission to promote the advancement, communication, and application of psychological science and knowledge to benefit society and improve lives, this policy statement affirms APA's support to promote the health of immigrant families and children. For this statement, an "immigrant" is a person who moves to a country other than that of their "nationality or usual residence, so that the country of destination effectively becomes his or her new country of usual residence" (International Organization for Migration, nd). APA bases its immigration policies on psychological research and supports practical and humane immigration policies that focus on the health and well-being of immigrants. APA also recognizes that immigrants may be disproportionately likely to experience stress and other behavioral health concerns (Cohodes et al., 2021; Doctors without Borders, 2020), which can be made worse with harmful public policies and lack of access to appropriate supports and services (Garcini et al., 2022; Samari, et al., 2021).

With a growing number of immigrants entering the United States (Batalova, 2024), there is a need for psychologists to become more knowledgeable about how to address the behavioral health needs of immigrants appropriately. Likewise, policymakers, educators, researchers, and health care providers should become better versed in the psychological impacts of trauma associated with immigration as well as anti-immigrant actions and sentiments on behavioral health and unite in their support for access to psychological and physical health care as well as educational services for immigrants and their families.

Resolution

WHEREAS over the past decade, there have been significant changes in the U.S. immigration landscape, and the contributions of immigrants to the U.S. workforce, to our vast diverse culture, and to our nation as a whole are recognized (Bansak et al., 2021; Krol, 2021); and

WHEREAS a population health approach addresses health for the larger population and addresses the cultural, economic, systemic, historical, environmental, relational, and occupational contexts that influence health status, well-being, and functioning across an individual's lifespan, unlike our current behavioral health treatment system, which is structured to primarily focus on those experiencing severe symptoms or an active behavioral health care crisis; and

WHEREAS considering that social determinants of health have improved outcomes on immigrant health, and ,that the environment where people are born, live, learn, work, play, worship, and age affect a wide range of health and quality of life outcomes and risks (Castañeda et al., 2015; Figueroa et al., 2020); and

WHEREAS a trauma-informed approach recognizes trauma symptoms in a patient and acknowledges the role trauma may play in an individual's life; and

WHEREAS psychological science shows that immigrants can experience unique stressors, including traumas such as violence, persecution, poverty, and natural disasters in their home countries as well as a difficult journey to the United States; ongoing stress of starting a new life away from their family and culture; and prejudice and discrimination once they reach the United States; (Garcia & Birman, 2022; Venta & Mercado, 2019; Ferguson, et. Al., 2023; Garcini, Domenech et al., 2023; Mercado et al., 2022; Torres et al., 2018; Venta et al., 2022); and

WHEREAS psychological science informs contextual approaches to better understand trauma and trauma recovery through the socioecological model that recognizes that human behavior is influenced by the contexts within which people are living as they try to adapt to the pressures of these contexts, which include nations and communities as well as schools, peers, and families, which have profound effects on child development; and

WHEREAS at least 5,500 immigrant children were separated from their families in 2018 and many have still not been reunited (Frye, 2020, New York Times, 2020); and

WHEREAS research suggests that immigration policies that include family separation can be harmful to children and the longer parents and children are separated, the greater the reported symptoms of anxiety and depression are for children (Brumariu et al., 2020; Lu, He, & Brooks-Gunn, 2020; Patel et al., 2016; Venta, et al., 2021; Venta et al., 2020; Wang & Lui, 2019); and

WHEREAS many immigrants can face barriers to accessing health care, including fear of deportation, lack of comfort with the language of the host country; behavioral health stigma; mistrust of service systems; lack of access to culturally competent care; and a lack of financial resources; (Garcini et al., 2022a; Garcini et al., 2022b; Guadamuz, et al., 2022; Torres et al., 2018; Vargas et al., 2017; Vernice et al., 2020); and

WHEREAS the APA Race and Ethnicity Guidelines indicate the need for culturally responsive interventions when working with diverse populations including immigrant groups and proponents of evidence-based interventions have argued for the importance of adapting interventions to better fit the cultural needs of diverse groups, including immigrants; and

WHEREAS the APA Race and Ethnicity Guidelines and the APA Multicultural Guidelines prompt psychologists to understand the diverse backgrounds, experiences, and challenges within immigrant communities, including their unique cultural values, norms, and historical contexts shaping their lives; and

WHEREAS there is research on immigrant health, but additional research is still needed, as there is much research still lacking on understanding immigrant behavioral health and health outcomes; and

WHEREAS many state and federal legislative efforts to restrict immigrants' access to health care, to deport immigrants, or to separate families are detrimental not only to the immigrants themselves but to the United States' health care system generally;

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED THAT the American Psychological Association supports initiatives that provide access to health care to immigrant families; and

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED THAT immigrant communities and individuals should be treated as just that, individuals. Not all immigrants and not all immigrant communities are the same and therefore a one-size fits all approach should not be applied when considering immigrants' health needs; and

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED THAT the American Psychological Association supports a population health-based approach to working with immigrants, which aims to address the cultural, economic, systemic, historical, environmental, relational, and occupational contexts that influence health status, well-being, and functioning across the patient's lifespan (APA, 2022); and

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED THAT psychologists can play a vital role in helping address the behavioral health needs of immigrants and their families. Psychologists possess foundational knowledge about theories in psychological science that offer key insights into working with immigrants, including the socioecological model and its recognition of the pivotal function role of families and schools in child development. Psychologists should gain knowledge about the cultural, economic, systemic, historical, and environmental contexts in which immigrants live and manage their health; and

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED THAT the American Psychological Association condemns policies that harm immigrants and their families, including forced family separation; and

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED THAT the American Psychological Association supports and encourages the use of the APA Race and Ethnicity Guidelines, which serve as a framework for psychologists to provide culturally competent services, encompassing practice, research, consultation, and education; and

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED THAT the American Psychological Association advocates for federal and state funding for research to understand better immigrants' health needs, including research on topics such as the evaluation of training, curricula, and community-based immigration initiatives that strive to improve immigrants' health and wellness and better understand the effects of trauma; and

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED THAT since immigrant communities have a wide range of resources and assets, psychological research should better focus on studying how to leverage these assets to support immigrant health;

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED THAT the American Psychological Association encourages graduate psychology programs and continuing education programs to rigorously train psychology students, psychologists, and other public health providers in evidence-based programs that address immigrant health; and

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED THAT the American Psychological Association advocates for state and federal funding to promote immigrant behavioral health such as immigrants' health screenings, treatment for trauma, and immigrants' access to health care and strengths-based approaches to immigrant wellness.

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