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**Health of children of undocumented immigrants suffers from failed immigration policies**  
*Findings support reform that prioritizes family unity*

**WASHINGTON** – Reform of U.S. immigration policy will not only decide the future of 11 million undocumented immigrants but also profoundly affect the health and well-being of their children, many of whom are citizens by birth. A new study released today finds strong evidence that the children of undocumented immigrants are harmed by current detention and deportation policies, and that immigration reform that prioritizes keeping families together will have far-reaching benefits for these children and our society.

The study is a health impact assessment of the consequences of continuing current federal immigration policies. It finds that without reforms that create a clear path to citizenship, each year hundreds of thousands of children of undocumented immigrants will suffer poorer physical and mental health, lower educational achievement, and increased poverty and hunger.

An estimated 4.5 million children of undocumented immigrants are U.S. citizens but live in families where one or more of their parents or guardians are not.

“For too long, our immigration policies have forced children to live daily with anxiety about the future – fearful that arrest, detention or deportation will tear their families apart,” said Wendy Cervantes, vice president for immigration and child rights at [First Focus](#), a national bipartisan children’s advocacy organization. “This study shows how a parents’ precarious legal status directly influences an array of factors that research tells us are fundamental determinants of a child’s health and well-being. Any common sense immigration reform must protect and promote the safety, the health and the future of children and families.”

The study – [Family Unity, Family Health: How Family-Focused Immigration Reform Will Mean Better Health for Children and Families](#) – was conducted by [Human Impact Partners](#) of Oakland, Calif., a nonprofit public health research organization, who were advised by a nationwide group of health and immigrant rights organizations and researchers.<sup>1</sup> It pulls together data from a wide range of sources on the consequences of the threat of deportation and detention on the physical and mental health of children and families.

“Immigration reform is not just a political and economic issue, but a public health imperative,” said Angelica Salas, executive director of the [Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles](#). “To protect the health and secure the future of millions of children, family unity must be the cornerstone of America’s immigration policy.”

The study found that this year, if detention and deportation of undocumented immigrants continue at the same rate as in 2012:

- More than 43,000 children will suffer a decline in physical health.

- An estimated 100,000 children will show signs of withdrawal or detachment, a behavioral problem that like aggression and anxiety leads to poor school performance.
- Median household income for undocumented immigrant households nationwide will fall below the poverty line. More than 83,000 households will be at risk of poverty.

The research was supplemented with focus group discussions and a survey of people in mixed-status families. Results showed a marked disparity in indicators of both physical and mental health between children of undocumented immigrants and those whose parents' legal status was secure.

Lili Farhang, co-director of Human Impact Partners, said that survey findings illustrated that almost a third of undocumented parents reported that their children were afraid either all or most of the time, and almost three-fourths reported that a child had shown symptoms known to be consistent with post-traumatic stress disorder.

“Fear of deportation has a negative effect on health at both the individual and community level,” said Dr. Karen Hacker, an associate professor at Harvard Medical School and executive director of the Institute for Community Health. “It exacerbates chronic diseases such as depression, high blood pressure, and anxiety while also producing a range of stress-related physical symptoms such as weight loss and headaches. If immigrants avoid health care for communicable diseases because of fear of being deported, it becomes difficult to maintain the health of the larger community.”

To reduce the harms to health that result from the threat of detention and deportation, the report makes five priority recommendations. They include:

- Congress should ensure that immigration reform includes a direct, clear, expedient and affordable path to citizenship, ending undocumented immigrants' risk of detention or deportation and fostering long-term stability associated with health benefits for families. This includes health insurance coverage and other means-tested public benefits after a designated time for immigrants obtaining legal status.
- The Department of Homeland Security should end the 287(g) program and the Secure Communities program, reducing the government's reliance on programs that needlessly target immigrant families.
- The Department of Homeland Security and other federal agencies should put into place programs and policies that protect the health and well-being of children whose parents or primary caregivers are undergoing detention and deportation proceedings, including mechanisms to preserve the parent-child relationship and that preserve family unity.

Access the full report at: [www.familyunityfamilyhealth.org](http://www.familyunityfamilyhealth.org)

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<sup>1</sup> Advisory Committee members: Emily Butera, Women's Refugee Commission; M. Andrea Competella, School of Social Work, University of Texas; Randy Capps, Migration Policy Institute; Wendy Cervantes, First Focus; Joanna Dreby, University of Albany, State University of New York; Mary Giovagnoli, Immigration Policy Center; Karen Hacker, Institute for Community Health & Harvard Medical School; Lisa J. Hardy, Northern Arizona University; Kate Kahan, Center for Community Change; Gerald Lenoir, Black Alliance for Just Immigration; Eva Millona, MA Immigrant and Refugee Advocacy Coalition; Lisa Moore, National Domestic Workers Alliance; Manuel Pastor, Center for the Study of Immigrant Integration, University of Southern California; Abraham Paulos, Families for Freedom; Rich Stolz, OneAmerica; Lynn Todman, Institute on Social Exclusion, Adler School of Professional Psychology; Darcy Tromanhauser, Nebraska Appleseed Center for Law in the Public Interest; Joseph Villela, Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles; Luis Zayas, School of Social Work, University of Texas