

Kelly Brownell:

Hello, and welcome to Policy360. I'm Kelly Brownell, Dean of the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University. Federal immigration officials have been conducting sweeping immigration raids in recent days, hundreds of people have been arrested in many states across the country. Immigrant advocates say the raids are setting off panic in some communities. My guest today is Anna Gassman-Pines. Anna is the co-author of a recent op-ed entitled Why It's Important to Welcome Immigrant Families. Anna is an associate professor in the Sanford School of Public Policy where she is also an affiliate with the center for child and family policy. She also holds appointments in the department of psychology and neuroscience. Welcome, Anna.

Anna Gassman-Pines:

Thank you so much.

Kelly Brownell:

[Gear up 00:00:47] it starts by discussing a study that you conducted with 300 children in North Carolina. Can you describe that project for us?

Anna Gassman-Pines:

Sure. So the 300 children in North Carolina are part of a broader study that's looking at families and children actually cross-nationally. And so those 300 children are part of the US sample and they include about a hundred African-American children, a hundred white children, and then a hundred Hispanic children. And so the children were asked about a lot of different feelings that they might have, but one of the feelings that they were asked about was fear and worry, how much do they worry? And what we found was that the Hispanic children worry a lot more than the black or white children.

Kelly Brownell:

Were you able to get what it is they worry about more?

Anna Gassman-Pines:

We don't really know what it is that they worry about more necessarily but we have some ideas that the heightened immigration enforcement that we've been seeing over the last several years is one of the factors that may be contributing to worry among that group.

Kelly Brownell:

So what kind of questions do you ask to get at that issue of worry?

Anna Gassman-Pines:

So it's actually a very straightforward question that just asks kids. How often do you worry? And they answer not very often, a little bit or a lot. And so on average, none of the children were worrying all that often, but the Hispanic children were reporting that they were worrying more often than white or black children.

Kelly Brownell:

Have such data been collected previously to know whether there's been a spike in worry among the Hispanic children or would that be more of a chronic kind of a finding you think?

Anna Gassman-Pines:

Well, I think really we need to do more research in this area, especially in light of the most recent immigration enforcement actions that have been taken to really know whether we'd see a spike at this time.

Kelly Brownell:

Okay. Was your study done before or after Donald Trump took office?

Anna Gassman-Pines:

The study was conducted before Donald Trump took office.

Kelly Brownell:

Okay. So what is the impact on children of having elevated fear and worry?

Anna Gassman-Pines:

We know that having chronic stress is harmful for children over time. And it's particularly a concern in this context because one in four children in the United States is born to immigrant parents. And so my coauthor, Ann Skinner and I really started thinking about immigrant children and what factors might help promote the development and the positive development of children in those families. What my colleague and I looked at in particular was how acculturated their parents are. And so when I say acculturation, I don't mean leaving behind your connection to Hispanic culture or culture of origin. What I mean is maintaining that connection to culture of origin but also becoming more comfortable and familiar with the context of the United States.

And so we have this hypothesis that as parents would become more comfortable interacting with feeling understood by and understanding what was expected in the United States that could be a factor that would promote positive outcomes for children. And so as a first step, what we did was looked at parenting behaviors, the kinds of interactions that parents have with kids that we know are connected to more positive outcomes for kids in the longer term.

Kelly Brownell:

So let's go back to your op-ed piece that you wrote, making a case for welcoming the immigrant families. What are some of the points you made in that op-ed?

Anna Gassman-Pines:

Well, so really the heart of what we found in our study and what we were discussing in the op-ed is that when parents feel isolated, don't understand what's happening in US, kind of mainstream US culture. Don't feel like they know what to do in different situations and are only connected to their culture of origin. They actually have worst parenting behaviors. So they are harsher with their children, more withdrawn, and less warm and positive. And what's particularly interesting is that most of our findings are really driven by fathers' levels of acculturation. But what we are arguing in the op-ed is that families are systems. Within families, everyone's interconnected.

So if dad becomes more comfortable in mainstream US culture understands what's expected, feel that people can understand him, that is connected to both better parenting outcomes for him, but also for the mom in that family. So, what we're saying when we say we should welcome immigrants is to say, when immigrants feel isolated, when the dad in that family feels isolated, both mom and dad are interacting with their children in ways that we think might not be as positive for their kids. If we can help immigrants to become more connected, feel like they're better understood and they also understand the culture that is probably better for families.

Kelly Brownell:

Well, what's most interesting to me about this is that no matter what political stance you take on immigration policy, it's good that the stances be informed by understanding the consequences of the impact of the policy. And I think what you pointed to in such a nice way and important way is that there are all these effects that are going to occur. If we have this stepped up immigration policy, and we ought to know what they are, and you're talking about profound effects that go through families and start with the parents and having that in the impact on children. And you could imagine the children that are worried or stress, wouldn't be able to thrive as well in school. And that hurts the acculturation process. You can see any number of effects I imagine.

Anna Gassman-Pines:

I think that's right. And I think it's really important to keep in mind that in our work, we have two different samples of a Mexican immigrant families. In nearly all of those families, the children were actually born in the United States. So these are citizen children. This is the next generation. These children are the future of our country. And what made us concerned when we were hearing about these immigration enforcement activities and relating them to our own work is that this kind of stepped up immigration enforcement might make it harder for these families to acculturate and might cause more fear both in parents and children to increase their levels of stress. And that may really have downstream consequences on these citizen children who are growing to grow up and be adults in the United States.

Kelly Brownell:

And I'm not making this argument myself, could you make the argument that these things could happen simultaneously that you could have stepped up enforcement of immigration laws while still trying to support the people who were here legally and providing the services that could lead to greater acculturation and things?

Anna Gassman-Pines:

Well, I think that's right. And so that's presumably what we all are going to have to really think about next and more work needs to be done in partnership between researchers and practitioners and policymakers to think about what are the ways that we can support citizen children of immigrant parents to help that family get acculturated. We know, again, that if we can get to one person in the family, everyone's interconnected. And so what are steps we can take to help that family's acculturation process and support those parents and children in light of the recent activities?

Kelly Brownell:

Well, thank you for doing this research. It's so important these immigration policies are so much in the news and what gets lost very often in this is the real impact it has on the humans that are affected by it. And you're talking about a profound set of effects that go through the families that may or may not

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actually be affected by the immigration policies, but might feel that they're vulnerable and that it has these big effects on children. So thank you very much for describing your work.

Anna Gassman-Pines:

Thank you so much.

Kelly Brownell:

Appreciate that. So my guest today has been Anna Gassman-Pines, who co-authored the op-ed, Why It's Important to Welcome Immigrant Families with Ann Skinner of the Duke Center for Child and Family Policy. We will have a link to that article on our website policy360.org. Until next time, I'm Kelly Brownell.