IMMIGRATION REFORM AND PSYCHOLOGY

This informational document was prepared by scientists from the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues (SPSSI). For further information, please contact SPSSI’s Policy Director, Dr. Gabriel Twose, at 202-675-6956 or gtwose@spssi.org.

The key social and psychological issues outlined below should be considered in debates on immigration reform. They have important implications for both US-born and immigrant populations.

Detention, Deportation, and Surveillance Have Significant Economic, Psychological, and Humanitarian Costs

Detention and Deportations
- Undocumented immigrant detainees are exposed to many abuses, including inadequate physical and mental health care, physical abuse, rape, and other sexual abuse (American Civil Liberties Union, 2012).

- These deportations separate families, take away jobs, and cost billions of taxpayer dollars (Massey, Durand, & Malone, 2002). Moreover, current enforcement policies are associated with distrust of law enforcement, which may harm public safety (Kirk, Papachristos, Fagan, & Tyler, 2012).

- Current immigration policies have negative effects on families, perpetuating economic insecurity and poorer health outcomes (Androff, et al., 2011). Sudden and unexpected family separation can cause emotional trauma in children (Brabeck & Xu, 2010; Dreby, 2012b), the effects of which can persist well into adulthood (Partida, 1996).

- Detentions and deportations inhibit our ability to build safe and healthy communities by creating fear in immigrant community members (Hagan, Rodriguez, & Castro, 2011) and reducing broader community cohesion (Dreby, 2012a).

Border Security, Surveillance, and Implicit Bias
- Legislative efforts that center on border security, surveillance, and security checkpoints are likely to legitimize and bolster implicit biases toward those suspected of being an illegal immigrant. Implicit biases are biased beliefs and feelings that are activated without conscious awareness, intent or control, which can influence people’s perceptions of and reactions to members of other groups (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995; Greenwald, Banaji, Rudman, Farnham, Nosek, & Mellott, 2002).

- When people feel threatened or under time pressure, these automatic, unintentional biases are even more influential and thus may lead to ethnically biased profiling (Dasgupta, 2009). As such, implicit biases can affect responses to immigrants in that they often underlie discriminatory behavior (Dovidio, 2010).

Isolation and Exclusion
- Undocumented immigrants and their children are marginalized from mainstream American society, leaving them economically vulnerable, politically disenfranchised, and afraid to contact social institutions that deliver services such as education and healthcare (Brabeck, Lykes, & Hershberg, 2011; Massey, 2005).

- Undocumented immigrants often perceive themselves as targets of discrimination, which can lead to disengagement from broader society (Wiley, Lawrence, Figueroa, & Percontino, 2013). These immigrants are also unlikely to file complaints with the police because of their constant fear of deportation (Fussell, 2011; Goff, Epstein, & Reddy, 2013), and do not receive the protections afforded by anti-discrimination laws (Hacker et al., 2011).

- Even US-born citizens may fear being deported as a result of immigration laws, and the stigma associated with immigrant status (Stevens, 2011); in fact, 3600 American citizens with legal documentation have been arrested by ICE through the Secure Communities program (Kohli, Markowitz, & Chavez, 2011).
• Harsh immigration enforcement policies heighten stress within immigrant communities (Arbona, et al., 2010), which can contribute to the negative physical and psychological health of many immigrant groups (Steel, et al., 2011).

• Undocumented immigrants’ fear and isolation is associated with a host of negative psychological outcomes such as poorer emotional well-being, deteriorating family relationships, poorer academic performance, and increased feelings of hostility (Brabeck & Xu, 2010; Yoshikawa & Khlopotseva, 2013).

Recommendations: Immigrant Inclusion and Social Cohesion Benefits American Society

The overwhelming majority of US policy and funding to date has focused on border control and deportations. Some of these funds, particularly new citizens’ back-taxes and fines, should be shifted to support constructive and effective alternatives to current immigration enforcement efforts. Although resources may be scarce, these programs should be treated as long-term investments in social and economic well-being for immigrants, and for the broader communities in which they live (Ray, 2004).

Pathway to Citizenship

• Any reform to immigration legislation should encompass a pathway to citizenship for undocumented immigrants currently living in the United States. Legal residency and citizenship would reduce the national deficit (Congressional Budget Office, 2013) and enable new generations of immigrants to make greater economic and social contributions to their communities (Pastor, Scoggins, Tran, & Ortiz, 2010). If allowed to do so, immigrants create new jobs, complementing the skills of the US native-born workforce (US Chamber of Commerce, 2011), while boosting the wages of US-born workers (Shierholz, 2010) and the US economy (Hinojosa-Ojeda, 2012).

• Americans perceive more threat and express more prejudice in relation to undocumented rather than legal immigrants (Murray & Marx, 2013). Gaining citizenship, therefore, would likely reduce stigmatization and discrimination, factors which are known to harm mental and physical health (Noh, Kaspar, & Wickrama, 2007; Pascoe & Richman, 2009).

Immigrant Integration

• The federal government should consider the creation of an Office of Immigrant Integration, which would coordinate government agencies in creating a strategic plan to aid immigrant integration (Meissner, Myers, Papademetrou, & Fix, 2006). Communities could create local offices for immigrant affairs, as already exist in many major cities like New York, Chicago, and San Francisco, to ease the transition for new arrivals.

• Using some of the additional revenue provided by immigration reform, federal and local government should increase funding for educational programs such as English language, civics, and job-seeking to aid immigrants in becoming full-fledged members of American society (Jones-Correa, 2011).

• Federal and local government should encourage programs that foster the ability of American communities to become more receptive to immigrants through engaged leaders, increased contact, and prosocial media campaigns. Such programs would reduce the conflicts that often occur between US-born citizens and immigrants, and enhance their opportunities to work together to build strong communities (Downs-Karkos, 2011).

• Communities should likewise expand support for non-governmental community-building efforts, such as Welcoming America. These efforts help to create a welcoming atmosphere in which immigrants are more likely to integrate into the social fabric of their new homes (Jones-Correa, 2011). In line with extensive social science research on the benefits of integration (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2011), such programs can provide opportunities for US-born and immigrant Americans to interact as equals in ways that would strengthen their communities as a whole, such as working on joint initiatives in places of worship, as parents of schoolchildren, or in other community programs (Translantic Trends, 2010).