

Provider Perceptions of the Effects of Current U.S. Immigration Enforcement Policies on Service Utilization in a Border Community

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Abstract : The rise of restrictive U.S. immigration policies and their strengthened enforcement has reportedly caused concerns among providers about their inadvertent effects on service utilization among Latinx and immigrant communities. This study presents perceptions on this issue from twenty service providers in health care, mental health, nutrition assistance, legal assistance, and immigrant advocacy in El Paso, Texas. All participants were experienced professionals, with fifteen in CEO, COO, executive director, or equivalent positions, and based at organizations that provide services for immigrant and/or low-income populations in a bi-national border community. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected by two primary investigators via semi-structured telephone interviews with an average length of 20 minutes. A survey script with closed and open-ended questions inquired about participants' demographic information and perceptions of impacts of immigration enforcement policies under the current federal administration on their work and patient or client populations. Quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed to produce descriptive statistics and identify salient themes, respectively. Nearly all respondents stated that their work has been negatively (N=13) or both positively and negatively (N=5) affected by current immigration enforcement policies. Negative effects were most commonly related to immigration enforcement-related fear and uncertainty among patient or client populations. Positive effects most frequently referred to a sense of increased community organizing and greater cooperation among organizations. Similarly, the majority of service providers either reported an increase (N=8) or decrease (N=6) in service utilization due to changes in immigration enforcement policies. Increased service needs were primarily related to a need for public education about immigration enforcement policy changes, information about how new policies impact individuals' service eligibility, legal status, and civil rights, as well as a need to correct misinformation. Decreased service utilization was primarily related to fear-related service avoidance. While providers observed changes in service utilization among undocumented immigrants and mixed-immigration status families, in particular, participants also noted 'spillover' effects on the larger Latinx community, including legal permanent and temporary residents, refugees or asylum seekers, and U.S. citizens. This study reveals preliminary insights into providers' widespread concerns about the effects of current immigration enforcement policies on health, social, and legal service utilization among Latinx individuals. Further research is necessary to comprehensively assess impacts of immigration enforcement policies on service utilization in Latinx and immigrant communities. This information is critical to address gaps in service utilization and prevent an exacerbation of health disparities among Latinx, immigrant, and border populations. In a global climate of rising nationalism and xenophobia, it is critical for policymakers to be aware of the consequences of immigration enforcement policies on the utilization of essential services to protect the well-being of minority and immigrant communities.

Keywords : immigration enforcement, immigration policy, provider perceptions, service utilization

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