

Psychological Distress Among Racial and Ethnic Minority Immigrants: The Role of Citizenship Status and Social Support Amidst a Global Pandemic

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BACKGROUND

- Foreign-born Americans with less stable immigration statuses can experience **poorer mental health outcomes** compared to those with U.S. citizenship or more stable statuses (Alif et al., 2020; Patler & Pirtle, 2018; Venkataramani et al., 2017).
- These pre-existing mental health disparities may have been exacerbated by the pandemic, especially for racial and ethnic minority immigrants, given their experiences with **higher COVID-19 disease and economic burden** compared to white and U.S.-born Americans (Clark et al., 2020; Podewils et al., 2020; Strully et al., 2021; Torres-Pinzon et al., 2020).
- Social support has been previously shown to be a protective factor against psychological distress (Heaney & Israel, 2008; Rio Casas et al., 2020).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- Does **citizenship status** predict levels of **psychological distress** among racial and ethnic minority immigrants?
- Does **social support** moderate the relationship between **citizenship status** and **psychological distress**?

METHOD

- Data were collected as part of a larger survey conducted in English on the mental and overall health of **racial and ethnic minority immigrants** between the **ages of 18-39**. In addition to demographic information, participants were asked to complete the *Kessler-6 Psychological Distress (K6)*, *The Oslo Social Support-3 (OSSS-3)*, and the *Coronavirus Impact* scales.
- A two-step hierarchical multivariate ordinary least squares (OLS) regression analysis was conducted. ($N=200$). Initially, citizenship status and the background variables were entered into the baseline model to estimate their main effects on psychological distress. In the second and final step, an **interaction term** (social support*citizenship status) was added to the baseline model to examine the role of social support as a moderator.

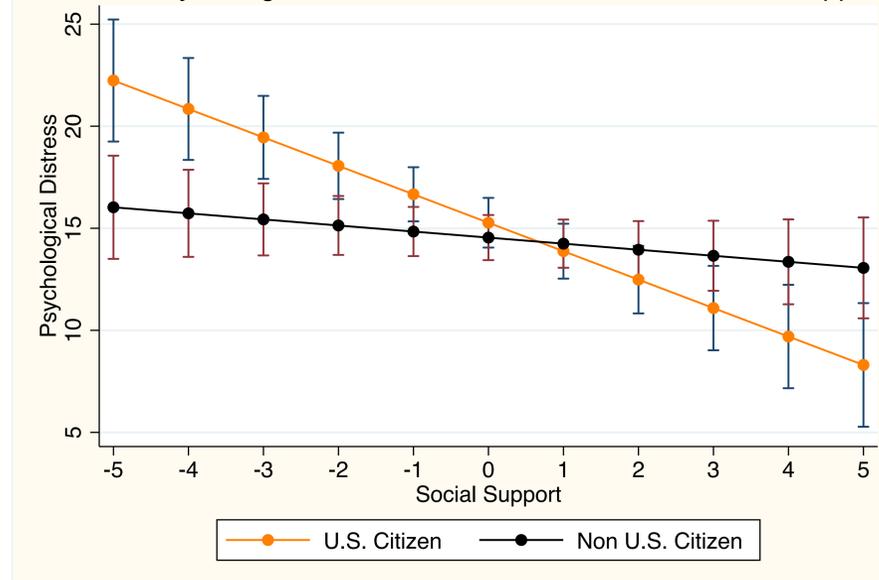
RESULTS

Main effect findings show that **citizenship status** is **not** a significant predictor of **psychological distress**. **Social support** is negatively associated with psychological distress. Further, **impact of COVID-19** positively predicts levels of psychological distress. Other background variables are **not** significant predictors of psychological distress.

Psychological Distress		
	Model 1 b (S.E.)	Model 2 b (S.E.)
Citizenship status	-0.70 (0.88)	-0.73 (0.86)
Social Support	-.73 (0.18) ***	-1.39 (0.28) ***
COVID-19 Impact	0.49 (0.08) ***	0.50 (0.08) ***
Age	-0.15 (0.08)	-0.15 (0.07)
Race	-1.03 (0.90)	-0.97 (0.88)
Gender	-0.05 (0.85)	-0.27 (0.84)
Income	0.56 (0.91)	0.21 (0.90)
Education	-0.67 (1.08)	-0.57 (1.05)
Cit. Stat. *Soc. Sup.	-	1.10 (0.35)**

Note: Reference categories for dichotomized variables: Citizenship status: U.S. Citizen. Race: Latinx, Black, or White. Gender : Woman. Income: Less than \$49,999. Education: High School or less. Coefs. are unstandardized. *p <0.025; **p <0.01, ***p <0.001.

Levels of Psychological Distress at Different Levels of Social Support



RESULTS

Interaction effect. When controlling for background variables, the relationship between **citizenship status** and **psychological distress** is **moderated** by **social support**. At **low levels of social support** (e.g., social support = -5), compared to U.S. citizens, **non-U.S. citizens** report significantly **lower** levels of **psychological distress**. However, when **social support = 0**, there are **no** significant differences between the groups. Finally, at **high levels of social support** (e.g., social support = 5), non-U.S. citizens report significantly **higher** levels of psychological distress.

	Psychological Distress b (S.E.)
Social support = -5	-6.21 (1.98) **
Social Support = -3	-4.02 (1.38) **
Social Support = -1	-1.82 (0.93)
Social Support = 1	0.37 (0.93)
Social Support = 3	2.56 (1.36)
Social Support = 5	4.76 (1.96) *

Note: Regression coefficients presented are unstandardized. Reference condition for citizenship status is U.S. Citizen. *p <0.025; **p <0.01, ***p <0.001.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSIONS

- Psychological distress levels of participants do not differ solely on citizenship status but are conditional upon their levels of social support, suggesting a nuanced relationship.
- Social support is a protective factor regardless of citizenship status; however, high social support was more protective against psychological distress for U.S. citizens than non-U.S. citizens.
- Future research should focus on the identification of protective factors in addition to social support that might moderate poor mental health outcomes among vulnerable immigrants.
- Given the mental health impact of COVID-19, policy initiatives reducing the economic and disease burden on racial and ethnic minority immigrants can be helpful. Particularly, extension of the federal financial benefits to those living without immigration documentation but have a Taxpayer Identification Number could help reduce the economic impact of the pandemic.