



How to Prepare Social Workers to Serve Families and Communities in an Era of Uncertainty and Injustice

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The policies and programs affecting U.S. immigrant and refugee communities have shifted drastically over the past eight years with presidential administration changes. During President Trump's first term, the *Los Angeles Times* published the September 2019 article: "Trump administration's 'public charge' rule has chilling effect on benefits for immigrants' children," and just three days later, *The New York Times* published the piece: "Trump Administration Considers a Drastic Cut in Refugees Allowed to Enter U.S." These headlines call attention to complex issues affecting families and communities across the U.S. In advance of his inauguration, *The New York Times* published in November 2024, "[Immigrants across the US prepare for Trump crackdown](#)" and in January 2025, "[What if ICE agents show up? Schools prepare teachers and parents.](#)"

In this memo, we emphasize the critical role of social workers in responding to the anti-immigration policies and programs. We provide insights into topics and strategies that could be incorporated into training for social work students, practitioners, and researchers in how to effectively support immigrant communities during this difficult time.

One of the major tenets of social work research and practice is a focus on understanding and addressing the various social and environmental factors that affect individuals' and families' behavior, as well as the value the profession places on social justice and the dignity of every person. The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics affirms these values and has released their [own publications](#) on immigration and racial justice.

In addition, many in the profession [have responded](#) to these dramatic policy shifts by speaking out against the Trump administration's actions. The NASW released a [social justice brief](#) in advance of the January 2025 inauguration stating, "In summary, the plan to impose a mass deportation on people who are undocumented, those with Temporary Protected Status, mixed-status families, and even those who have legal status to reside in the United States, is a threat to democracy, endangering the human and civil rights of millions of people—not to mention causing severe hardship on school-age children. Therefore, it is incumbent on the immigrant rights community and political leaders to—as we have done so often in the past—take actions to eliminate such a destructive plan."

Preparing Students to Work with Affected Communities

Moving forward, the profession must not only continue to speak out but also determine how to prepare social workers with the knowledge and skills required to work with those most affected by the past and upcoming policies targeting immigrant communities. Despite the urgency created by the political climate, previous

research suggests that social work students and practitioners do not always feel fully equipped to respond to these shifting needs. To prepare social workers for the workforce requires helping them understand the immigration process through both trauma-informed and strengths-based lenses. Immigrants may endure discrete forms of trauma during each stage (pre-migration, migration, and post-migration) of the migration process. During the pre-migration stage, exposure to [violence](#) and [poverty](#) can be extreme. After leaving the country of origin, immigrants often face a [perilous journey](#) with limited supplies. Many meet further violence when traveling to the U.S. border. Finally, after entering the United States, immigrants contend with language and cultural barriers, discrimination, and separation from their loved ones, among other stressors. While coping with such hardships, immigrants often demonstrate profound strength and resilience, leaving their known lives behind to seek safety and well-being. Immigrants also contribute considerably to the US in regard to culture and [economically](#).

[National data](#) suggest that the U.S. Latinx population is changing, in that there is an increasing diverse mix of countries represented, and the percentage of foreign-born people is declining within the Latinx population. Social workers need to be prepared to support this diversity. Yet, findings from a recent study by [Cook Heffron, Held, & Huslage \(2023\)](#) of MSW students found that students reported low knowledge of immigration issues (3.27 of a 5-point scale; 5 = greatest knowledge), low rates of feeling prepared to serve immigrants from their MSW training (2.85 of 5) or through non-MSW sources (2.88 of 5). Yet, motivation to learn about immigration issues was higher (3.89 of 5). We argue that incorporating information about current migration issues is critical for those who serve individuals and families affected, either directly or indirectly, by immigration policies and programs.

[Incorporating Current Political Events into Social Work Curricula](#)

Social work students should have opportunities to discuss the impact that changes in policy are having on immigrant families and communities. Social work educators are well positioned to provide opportunities to learn about federal and local policies that have acute and long-term impacts on health, well-being, and service utilization of immigrant clients (e.g., immigration and child welfare policies). Students should also learn about immigrant communities' cultural and social norms and learn to critically analyze policies with this knowledge. This content could be integrated into general education courses that discuss work with diverse populations, as well as specialized courses on practice with individuals and families and policy courses.

In addition to integrating content on policy trends into social work curricula, educators can provide students opportunities to delve more deeply into these issues via class assignments and student presentations. Group-based policy analysis can provide students an opportunity to assess current policy debates and their implications at multiple levels. In addition to group work, students also benefit from guest lectures by social workers, lawyers, advocates, and members of immigrant communities who can contextualize the immigration crisis and highlight the heterogeneity of our nation's immigrants.

Similar training should also be broadly available to current social work practitioners. As new policies shift accessibility to services, inflict trauma, pose threats to health, and create new needs among clients, practitioners might not feel fully prepared to respond. Social workers should be trained in how to effectively and appropriately respond to such situations, so that they are able to help clients find and obtain the legal, economic, and mental health support they may need. For example, social workers who work with undocumented clients can benefit from training in the importance of legal paperwork such as Power of

Attorney documentation, which can allow children to be placed with family friends if parents are deported or detained. Toolkits like [this one](#) offered by the National Association of Social Workers can help social workers identify critical resources for these families. In addition, resources such as [this toolkit](#) from the Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition provide direction on responding when a raid occurs. Social workers should also familiarize themselves with culturally responsive prevention and intervention programs, in addition to local services designed and tailored for immigrant clients.

Researchers can help unpack and address the effects of raids and other dramatic policy shifts. Social work researchers are uniquely positioned to examine how recent policy changes impact individuals, their families, and their communities. Researchers should aim to be prepared to respond quickly after raids happen and when new policies are announced. Insights from this type of research can help highlight both the detrimental impacts on – and the resilience of – immigrant communities. Social work research, such as the 2022 publication by [Held, First, Huslage, & Holzer](#), can also help document the trauma caused by discrimination and harmful policies, and examine the effectiveness of current strategies to address these issues.

Social workers are called by the National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics to challenge social injustice, and to continually develop and enhance their professional expertise. Urgent action is needed to ensure practitioners, advocates, and researchers can effectively and knowledgeably respond to the shifting needs of immigrant families and communities in such uncertain times.