



# LATINO POLICY & ISSUES BRIEF

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## UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT RESPONSES TO ARIZONA'S "ANTI-ETHNIC STUDIES" BILL: IMPLICATIONS FOR MENTAL HEALTH

by

**Andrea J. Romero and Anna Ochoa O'Leary**

Over the past thirty years Mexican American adolescents have had the highest rates of depressive symptoms, suicide ideation, and suicide attempts when compared to other racial/ethnic groups (Zayas et al. 2005). This troubling statistic reveals a significant need to understand the broader ecological risks for the mental health of Mexican-descent youth. Discrimination—unfair treatment due to one's race/ethnicity—has been associated with higher levels of stress, more depressive symptoms, and lower self-esteem (Meyer 2003). In our study we examined the mental health of Mexican-descent students in relation to the anticipated passage of legislation designed to eliminate ethnic studies programs. Although these students experienced stress, we discovered that positive self-esteem and engaged coping strategies helped protect their mental health.

### BACKGROUND

In April 2008 an amendment was offered in the Arizona State Senate to a proposed homeland security bill, SB 1108, which would have prohibited public schools from offering “within the program of instruction” any courses, classes, or school-sponsored activities that “promote, assert as truth, or feature as an exclusive focus any political, religious, ideological, or cultural beliefs or values that denigrate, disparage, or overtly encourage dissent from the values of American democracy and western civilization” (Arizona State Legislature 2008). Although the bill's language was vague—American values were not defined and no examples illustrating how ethnic studies are anti-American were provided—the political climate was such that passage of the bill, with the amendment, seemed likely. Ironically, SB 1108, which was tagged as the “anti-ethnic studies bill,” was proposed the same year that Chicano/a studies departments in Arizona colleges and universities celebrated their fortieth anniversary.

### THE STUDY

Our study employed the Minority Stress Model (Meyer 2003), a framework useful for examining the effects of discrimination on members of minority groups. The model's author, Ilan Meyer, has argued that although policies designed to disenfranchise minority communities can increase an individual's level of stress, and thus negatively affect her or his

mental health, this can be buffered by a positive self-identity and engaged coping.

We examined undergraduates’ responses to the proposed passage of the bill in relation to their ethnic identity, civic engagement, engaged responses to the bill, depressive symptoms, and self-esteem. We hypothesized that students’ mental health would be protected when they were actively engaged in learning, talking, and praying about the legislation as well as protesting it. Undergraduate students (N=326) were recruited from social science classes to complete a one-time online survey. A subsample of ninety-nine undergraduate students who self-identified as Mexican, Mexican American, or Chicana/o was used in the analysis. Standardized measures with good reliability and validity were employed to measure depressive symptoms, self-esteem, civic engagement, and ethnic identity. We developed our own item to assess students’ level of stress associated with SB 1108 and their level of engagement and disengagement with the legislation (table 1).

**FINDINGS**

Pearson product-moment correlation was used to determine associations between two continuous variables. We found that higher levels of SB 1108 stress were significantly associated with lower self-esteem ( $r = -.25, p < .05$ ) and more depressive symptoms ( $r = .32, p < .01$ ) (table 2). We investigated self-esteem and depressive symptoms as markers of mental well-being, as predicted by stress associated with SB 1108, engaged and disengaged response, civic engagement, and ethnic identity (table 3).

Multiple linear regression results indicated that the overall model for

**Table 1. Variables Used to Determine Engaged and Disengaged Responses to SB 1108**

Engaged with SB 1108	Disengaged with SB 1108
I talk to friends and family about it.	I realize I have to live with how things are.
I learn all I can about it.	I try not to think about it.
I concentrate on positive things.	I don't know what I feel.
I pray or meditate to calm myself.	
I participate in activism (e.g. petitions, marches, rallies, etc.).	

**Table 2. Pearson Product-Moment Correlations to Determine Significant Associations between Two Variables**

Variable	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.
1. SB 1108 Engage	1.00						
2. SB 1108 Disengage	-.30**	1.00					
3. SB 1108 Stress	.36***	-.11	1.00				
4. Civic Engagement	.27**	-.19	.14	1.00			
5. Ethnic Identity	.14	-.38***	.04	.02	1.00		
6. Self-esteem	.04	-.07	-.25*	.07	.27**	1.00	
7. Depressive Symptoms	.09	-.05	.32**	.06	-.22*	-.55***	1.00

Note: Significant associations are indicated as follows based on p values: \*p < .05, \*\* p < .01, \*\*\* p < .001.

**Table 3. Multiple Linear Regression Analyses to Predict Self-esteem and Depressive Symptoms**

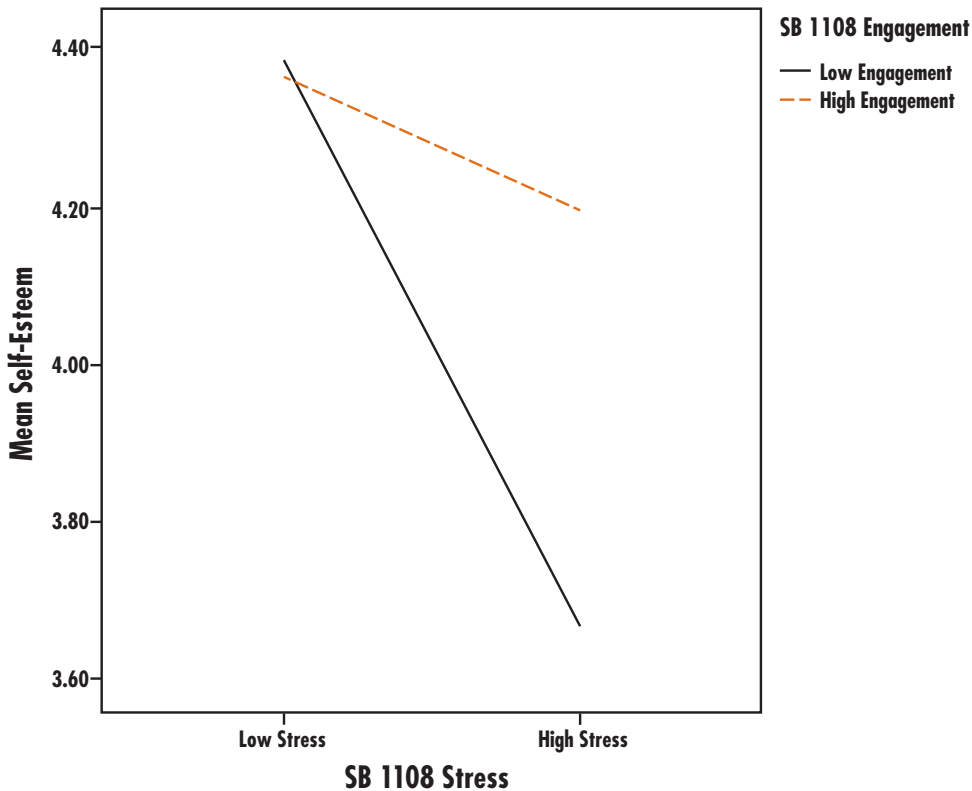
	R2	Adj. R2	Std. β	t value
<b>Self-esteem Final Model: F(6, 91) = 4.45, p = .001</b>				
1. SB 1108 Stress	.06	.05	-.33	-3.46**
2. SB 1108 Engage	.08	.05	.13	-2.11*
SB 1108 Disengage			.04	.33
3. Civic Engagement	.15	.11	.06	.61
Positive Ethnic Identity			.24	2.33*
4. Interaction Engaged and stress	.23	.18	.28	2.90**
<b>Depressive Symptoms Final Model: F(5,92)=3.67, p=.004</b>				
1. SB 1108 Stress	.09	.08	.31	2.97**
2. SB 1108 Engage	.10	.07	-.02	-.14
SB 1108 Disengage			-.14	-1.32
3. Civic engagement	.17	.12	-.01	-.04
Positive Ethnic Identity			-.29	-2.80**

Note: \*p < .05, \*\*p < .01, \*\*\*p < .001.

self-esteem ( $p = .001$ , see table 3) was significant. Higher self-esteem was significantly associated with less SB 1108 stress ( $\beta = -.33, p < .01$ ), a more engaged response ( $\beta = .13$ ), and a more positive ethnic identity ( $\beta = .24, p < .05$ ). Moreover, self-esteem was protected from high levels of SB 1108 stress when students reported an engaged response ( $\beta = .28, p < .01$ ) (fig. 1).

The overall model for the multiple linear regression for depressive symptoms was significant ( $p = .004$ , see table 3). Fewer depressive symptoms were significantly associated with less SB 1108 stress ( $\beta = .31, p < .01$ ) and a more positive ethnic identity ( $\beta = -.29, p < .01$ ); however, no variables moderated the relation between stress and depressive symptoms.

Figure 1. Significant Interaction between SB 1108 Stress and Engagement on Self-Esteem



#### CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

For Mexican-descent undergraduate students, our study shows that stress stemming from SB 1108 was significantly associated with lower self-esteem and more depressive symptoms, suggesting that statewide policy-level messages of exclusion and discrimination that target Mexican American culture may further

disenfranchise Latino children, who already face educational achievement gaps and mental health disparities.

The study also shows that engaged responses (talking about the bill, learning more about it, praying about it, and engaging in activism against it) can protect students' self-esteem from the negative effect of this type of policy. Results also indicated that a positive ethnic identity, based on knowledge

of cultural history and traditions, was a significant protective factor for both self-esteem and depressive symptoms.

While there are limitations, this cross-sectional study shows that positive ethnic identity and civic engagement help protect the mental health of youth from the effects of stress arising from the political climate. We encourage lawmakers to consider the multitude of potential negative consequences for students that can result from policies that try to remove access to ethnic studies classes.

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**AUTHORS** Andrea J. Romero is a professor of family studies and human development and Mexican American studies at the University of Arizona.  
Anna Ochoa O'Leary is a professor of Mexican American studies at the University of Arizona.

## UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT RESPONSES TO ARIZONA'S "ANTI-ETHNIC STUDIES" BILL

The authors' study shows that positive ethnic identity and civic engagement helped protect the mental health of youth from the effects of stress arising from the possible passage of anti-ethnic studies legislation in Arizona.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION, CONTACT:

UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center  
193 Haines Hall  
Los Angeles, CA 90095-1544  
Phone: 310-825-2642  
Fax: 310-206-1784  
E-Mail: [press@chicano.ucla.edu](mailto:press@chicano.ucla.edu)  
Web: [www.chicano.ucla.edu](http://www.chicano.ucla.edu)

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UCLA CHICANO STUDIES RESEARCH CENTER  
193 HAINES HALL  
LOS ANGELES, CA 90095-1544