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SUFREN LOS NIÑOS¹: EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF UNAUTHORIZED IMMIGRATION STATUS ON CHILDREN'S WELL-BEING²

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Abstract

The present study examines the effect of unauthorized immigration status on child well-being at a time of elevated immigration rates, economic decline, and unprecedented local lawmaking related to immigration. Immigrant families today are likely to differ from those of the past in that they are more likely to be from Latin America or the Caribbean and include unprecedented numbers of unauthorized immigrants. In addition, they are settling in destinations that have not historically had immigrant populations. The present study draws on interviews with 40 families from an emerging immigrant destination in north central Indiana to help illuminate the ways in which unauthorized immigration status influences child well-being. Results illustrate that unauthorized status extends beyond the individual to families and that mixed-status family situations create unique challenges for these families. More specifically, these results show the ways in which unauthorized immigrant status may impact family stress and uncertainty, health outcomes, and educational attainment and may result in increased social isolation for children in immigrant families.

Keywords

Children; Immigration; Unauthorized Immigration; and Well-Being

INTRODUCTION

The United States is currently experiencing a vast demographic transition. Between the years 2000 and 2010, racial and ethnic minorities accounted for more than 90% of the nation's population growth, with Latinos alone comprising more than half of this increase (Passel, Cohn, & Lopez, 2011). In particular, immigration from Latin America and the Caribbean has raised immigration rates in the United States to levels not seen since the early 1900s (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2011). Due to this surge in immigration, Latinos have become the nation's largest ethnic minority, and immigrant Latinos the majority of the entire foreign-born population in the United States (Patten, 2012; U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2011). However, enormous backlogs and wait times for

¹ *Sufren Los Niños* translates to "The Children Suffer," which illustrates how unauthorized immigration status in families affects child well-being.

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permanent legal residence or citizenship have become the norm for federal immigration programs (Anderson, 2012). Thus, a significant portion of Latino immigrants come to the United States without legal status. National estimates suggest that unauthorized³ immigrants, primarily from Latin America, account for approximately 28% of the immigrant population in the United States (Passel & Cohn, 2011).

As a consequence, debate over unauthorized immigration has resulted in an unprecedented grassroots movement of state and local legislation on immigration (Chavez & Provine, 2009; Ramakrishnan & Wong, 2007). Moreover, this dramatic demographic shift and polarizing policy debate is occurring in the context of a vast economic downturn affecting every region of the United States (U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2010). These demographic changes and dispersion are occurring at a time of economic instability, heightened discrimination, and increasingly anti-immigrant sentiment and political rhetoric (Viramontez Anguiano, Salinas, & Garcia, 2010). At the federal level, penalties for unauthorized entry range from fines, to imprisonment, to voluntary departure and prohibition against future entry (U.S. Congressional Budget Office, 2006). While variation exists at the state level, when looking at immigration policies enacted in recent years, many state-level policies have focused on limiting resources and increasing penalties for unauthorized immigrants (Chavez & Provine, 2009).

Largely ignored within this debate and in immigration policy are the large numbers of children residing in immigrant families and the impact of these policies on children. In 2007, there were approximately 16 million children 17 years of age and younger living in immigrant families (Mather, 2009). Passel and Taylor (2010) estimate that, in 2009, 4 million of these children were U.S. born with unauthorized immigrant parents, while another 1.1 million children were themselves foreign born and unauthorized immigrants. Research has begun to document the distinct challenges that immigrant children face compared to children of U.S.-born parents (Shields & Behrman, 2004). Furthermore, it is likely that unauthorized status may create unique challenges for children in immigrant families. However, due to legal and ethical concerns in studying unauthorized populations, there is limited research in this area (Suarez-Orozco, Yoshikawa, Teranishi, & Suarez-Orozco, 2011).

The present study contributes to this limited body of literature through an examination of the impact of unauthorized status on the well-being of children in immigrant families. More specifically, this study makes a significant contribution to the body of knowledge of unauthorized status on child well-being by (a) examining unauthorized status among Latino immigrant families, the largest racial/ethnic immigrant population; (b) examining unauthorized immigrant status during a time of tremendous local (state-level) legislative activity; and (c) moving beyond traditional immigrant ports of entry to examine Latino immigrant families in an emerging immigrant destination. The present study draws on ethnographic methods, including interviews with families from one community in north central Indiana, to help illuminate the ways in which unauthorized immigration status influences child well-being.

PRIOR LITERATURE

EMERGING IMMIGRANT DESTINATIONS AND LOCAL CONTEXT

As the Latino and immigrant populations continue to grow, settlement patterns have shifted, with new immigrant destinations emerging and experiencing the largest population growth. According to the 2000 census, more immigrants were living outside of central cities in

³The term “unauthorized” is used here over “illegal” or “undocumented” following Passel (2007).

metropolitan areas, with immigrant growth rates in suburban, exurban, and rural areas far exceeding those of central cities (Singer, 2004). Moreover, states with few immigrants prior to 1990 were likely to experience the highest rates of growth in immigrant populations (Hernandez, 2004). Due to this diffusion of immigrant populations away from traditional immigrant destinations, 1 in 14 counties had a majority minority population under the age of 20 in 2007, and estimates suggest that this will increase to more than one in seven by 2050 (Mather, 2009).

Many states that have not traditionally had large immigrant populations lack the institutional infrastructure for addressing the needs of immigrant children and families (Hernandez, 2004). As a result, children in immigrant families, especially in these emerging immigrant destinations, may be particularly vulnerable, because research suggests that immigrant children living in rural areas, away from large metropolitan areas, are among those facing the greatest number of risk factors for child well-being (Mather, 2009). Particularly in the Midwest, immigration has grown in many areas that have not historically been immigrant ports of entry (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). And as European-American populations have declined, a broad demographic shift has occurred, which has been referred to as the “browning of the Midwest” (Aponte & Siles, 1997).

The current study focuses on one community in north central Indiana that has experienced tremendous growth in the Latino and immigrant population. For example, since 1990, the Latino population in Indiana has grown by more than 200%. In north central Indiana, the Latino population has grown even faster, by over 500%. As in much of the nation, this growth is largely due to immigrants from Mexico and Central America (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Economic opportunities available in the manufacturing industry, in particular the recreational vehicle industry, have been an attraction for many of the immigrant Latino families who have immigrated to north central Indiana (Guzman, Jara, & Armet, 2011).

However, economic patterns in north central Indiana have followed a similar trend as those in the rest of the nation. According to the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis (2010), real gross domestic product has declined in every region of the country, with the Great Lakes region of the Midwest facing the sharpest drop in the nation. Between 2007 and 2009, the economic conditions in north central Indiana declined dramatically across a number of indicators: unemployment more than doubled, while median household income dropped by nearly 20% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). Meanwhile, the rate of families living below poverty increased by 50%, with families with children particularly worse off, as nearly one in four families with children was living below poverty by 2009 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). To date, limited research has examined immigrant children and families, in particular those with unauthorized status, settling outside of traditional immigrant destinations.

Immigration Policy and Local Lawmaking—Concern over immigration has resulted in unprecedented local lawmaking, with state-level legislation increasing more than sevenfold between 2005 and 2011. For example, in 2005 state legislators introduced 300 laws or resolutions of which 39 were enacted. Six years later, in 2011, over 1600 laws or resolutions were introduced and over 300 laws were enacted (Meyer, Segreto, Carter, & Morse, 2012). There is substantial variation in the laws and resolutions within these numbers. While considerable pro-immigrant legislation has been enacted, the majority of this state activity takes the form of restrictive legislation, limiting access to a wide range of resources including education, housing, social programs, government services, and employment opportunities (Chavez & Provine, 2009; Hegen, 2008).

These immigration-focused laws pertain to a number of different groups including legal immigrants, migrant and seasonal workers, refugees, or unauthorized immigrants, and may

focus on a single issue (e.g., Alabama House Bill 19 eliminates certified naturalization documentation as an acceptable form of voter identification and instead requires government-issued photo identification from a state or territory) or takes the form of an omnibus or multi-issue measure, like Arizona's Senate Bill 1070 (Meyer et al., 2012). Passed in April 2010, Arizona Senate Bill 1070 addresses topics related to immigration, such as trespassing, harboring and transporting illegal immigrants, alien registration documents, employer sanctions, and human smuggling. Prior to going into effect, the U.S. Department of Justice filed a lawsuit requesting an injunction, arguing that the laws were unconstitutional. The injunction has since been upheld by the Ninth U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals (Morse, 2011). Nonetheless, in 2011, 31 states introduced legislation imitating all or part of Senate Bill 1070, and 5 states—Alabama, Georgia, Indiana, South Carolina, and Utah—passed Arizona-style omnibus laws (Meyer et al., 2012).

The current study focuses on one community in north central Indiana. Indiana Senate Bill 590, an example of omnibus legislation modeled after Arizona S.B. 1070, addresses a range of topics including law enforcement, E-Verify (an Internet-based system to determine work eligibility of employees), public benefits, and funding several studies relating to immigrants and immigration topics (Morse, Carter, Lawrence, & Segreto, 2012). In addition, more targeted legislation in Indiana has placed restrictions on in-state tuition, scholarships, grants, and financial aid for unauthorized immigrants (H.B. 1402). Other legislation created state penalties for immigration violations and made citizenship a requirement for renewal of a license (Meyer et al., 2012). Additionally, all 92 counties in Indiana participate in Secure Communities, a federal program which enables sharing of biometric data between federal and local entities, in order to identify and remove unauthorized individuals (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, 2012).

Research suggests that various social conditions and political and bureaucratic actors, at the local level and throughout the system, are likely to impact the implementation and enforcement of policy (Hagan, Rodriguez, & Castro, 2011). This means that, as local legislative activity targeting immigration becomes more common and local-level enforcement increases, immigrants are in an increasingly precarious position. Piecemeal legislation places immigrants, regardless of status, under more random and localized sources of social control, with ever more demanding constraints and harsher punishments (Hagan, Rodriguez, & Castro, 2011). Previous research has begun to identify the potential negative consequences of immigration policy and anti-immigrant sentiment (Betancur, 1996; Menjivar, 2006; Romero, 2006). Recent research is just beginning to examine the impact of local laws targeting immigrants and their families (Portes, Fernandez-Kelly, & Light, 2012). More research is needed to examine the impact of these policies on immigrant children and families and on unauthorized immigrants in particular.

THE PRESENT STUDY

In the present immigration wave, immigrant families are most likely to be Latino or Asian, rather than European (Rumbaut & Ewing, 2007). Current immigrant populations are also more likely to include unprecedented numbers of unauthorized immigrants (Mathers, 2009). Further, modern immigrant families are likely to settle in destinations which have not historically had immigrant populations (Hernandez, 2004; Singer, 2004) and are likely to face a particularly volatile social and political climate due to a nationwide economic decline (Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2010) and local political rhetoric and immigration policy which are increasingly punitive (Chavez & Provine, 2009). The present study uses interviews with families from an emerging immigrant destination in north central Indiana to help illuminate the ways in which unauthorized immigration status influences child well-being.

The data presented are part of a larger ethnographic study that began in the summer of 2010 and continued through the spring of 2012. The original purpose of the study was to examine social, cultural, and economic factors that may impact the educational pipeline experience of Latino immigrant families living in north central Indiana. The larger ethnography consisted of different components including participant observations, active participation depending on the context, in-depth interviews, and multiple interactions with the respondents. These data were combined to generate a more complete picture of the lives of the participants (Creswell, 2003; Spradley, 1979). A more detailed explanation of the methods is discussed in a forthcoming publication (Viramontez Anguiano & Lopez, 2012).

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with family members to better understand the experiences of Latino families. The interview protocol consisted of open-ended questions, which explored multiple domains, including the ecological factors that may impact the intersection between immigrant Latino families, schools, and communities. The protocol was based on previous literature that focused on immigrant Latino families (Delgado-Gaitan, 1992) and our combined 30 years of experience in researching and working with immigrant Latino families. We engaged in multiple follow-up interactions and interviews with families, which served to enhance data collection.

Initial interviews lasted approximately 1 hour and took place in the homes of the participants. At most interviews, multiple family members were present including parents, children, and other relatives. The primary respondents during interviews were parents, although other family members, including children, were encouraged to speak and share their stories. Consent forms were provided at the beginning of each interview. Respondents were informed that their participation was voluntary and at any time they could withdraw from the study. No material incentives were offered to the participants. The study received approval from the Goshen College Institutional Review Board and was approved by the Goshen Community School's Educational Board. Interviews were conducted primarily in Spanish and were recorded. Interviews were transcribed verbatim from the audio recording.

Potential participants for the study were identified through outreach work conducted by one of the study's authors and Latino community leaders. Using a snowball sampling technique, family members who agreed to participate in the study were then asked to identify other potential participants. A total of 40 families living in north central Indiana were recruited and participated in this study. In most families, at least one family member was an unauthorized immigrant. The majority of families consisted of two parents and had an average of three children. The average age of the parents was 41 for mothers and 42 for fathers. Level of education varied for sample participants. Half of the parent participants had not completed high school, and approximately one-third had some college experience. Most parent participants were employed in the manufacturing industry. The majority of the families were of Mexican descent, although families also were from various countries throughout Central and South America.

Data were analyzed using a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), and dominant themes from the data were identified (Creswell, 1998). The open-ended nature of the interviews allowed for unanticipated themes or topics to be explored. The present study focuses on one of those themes—the impact of unauthorized immigration status and local immigration policy on the well-being of children and families.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Using quotations from study participants, the present findings highlight the ways in which immigration policy and unauthorized immigrant status impact well-being for children in immigrant families. Results first illustrate the ways in which unauthorized status is manifest

in immigrant families. Next, the findings highlight the ways in which immigrant status influences the well-being of children. More specifically, the results show the ways in which unauthorized immigrant status may impact family stress and uncertainty, health outcomes, and educational attainment and may result in increased social isolation for children in immigrant families.

Suarez-Orozco and colleagues (2011) provide an ecological framework for considering the impact of unauthorized status on development for children in immigrant families. They describe the ways in which developmental outcomes are shaped by public policies, economic and societal factors, neighborhood and community contexts, family processes, and individual experiences and characteristics (Suarez-Orozco et al., 2011). The current study finds that the costs to immigrant families of restrictionist immigration policy at the state and federal levels extend far beyond the legal system into personal, social, and economic domains. Moreover, commonalities across families are identified, regardless of their immigration status. These common themes highlight the degree to which the political rhetoric, anti-immigrant sentiment, and restrictionist immigration policies impact the entire Latino community.

FAMILY STRESS AND UNCERTAINTY

The term “unauthorized” refers to a person who resides in the United States, but who is not a U.S. citizen, has not been admitted for permanent residence, and does not hold authorized temporary status permitting long-term residence and work (Passel, 2007). As such, immigration status is typically defined as an individual characteristic, which embodies a particular individual’s status at a specific place and time. This definition fits the 1.1 million unauthorized foreign-born children in the United States, but ignores the estimated 4 million children who are born to unauthorized immigrant parents while in the United States (Passel & Taylor, 2010). Although the large majority of children of immigrants are U.S. citizens, many reside in households where some family members are not citizens (Shields & Behrman, 2004). This “mixed-status” family situation creates unique challenges for families and children.

For example, Menjivar (2006) proposes the concept of “liminal legality” to describe the tension that exists within families from the constant possibility of deportation of friends and family members and the uncertainty inherent in this status for many immigrants, notwithstanding the hope that this uncertain status is temporary, given present immigration policy. Members of a family may have myriad statuses (citizen, naturalized, authorized, unauthorized), while individuals themselves may face uncertainty in their own status. Having one family member with an unauthorized status can generate fear and stress for an entire family, including the children.

Families participating in the current study spoke about the stress and uncertainty that comes with living in a mixed-status family. Many parents spoke of the importance of securing their children’s future during these uncertain times. One father with unauthorized status spoke of the mixed status of his family members. He stated,

[My oldest child] was born here. The two younger ones were born in Mexico. [My wife] has a brother who is a citizen and said that he could apply for our residency when he is old enough. So with time, maybe. But, we only care about the children. Whatever happens to us doesn’t matter.

His statement highlights the views of many parents in the current study. While unsure of their own future, their main concern was with providing a stable future for their children. For many mixed-status families, the future is unclear and uncertainty exists as to whether the family will all stay together. While there is potential for naturalization through federal

family-sponsored immigration programs, many families spoke of the uncertainty and sadness at the potential loss or deportation of a family member.

While many in mixed-status families remained hopeful, those whose entire family was unauthorized were less optimistic about their future prospects, including the future of their children. This situation can be even more devastating for children who have lived a significant portion of their lives in the United States, many having little to no memory of their native country. One mother with unauthorized status spoke of a discussion she had with her son about his future. She recalled,

Right now we are considering for him (my son) to return to our home country. He can study here, but he will not be able to work. He has practically lived here all of his life. He says, "Mom, I will go back," and then later he will say, "No never mind I will stay here...let's wait after the elections to see who wins the elections. Let's just wait until December." I understand. He does not want to go.

Like many young unauthorized immigrants, this boy had grown up in the United States, but may be forced to leave due to immigration policy. His story is not unique. Many children today are part of the growing number of 1.5 generation immigrants, who are foreign-born individuals who immigrated to the United States when they were young and consider it home (Rumbaut, 2008). In this case, this intergenerational tension is poignant and is a theme that permeates many of the respondents' stories. A child, hopeful that the politics will change for his benefit, while the parents, who have sacrificed so much through their own immigration, fear for their children's future in an increasingly hostile political climate.

Research indicates that the number of mixed-status families is expected to continue to grow. Immigrants to the United States—unauthorized immigrants in particular—are younger and have higher fertility rates than the native-born U.S. population (Passel & Taylor, 2010). According to the Pew Hispanic Center, between March 2009 and March 2010, approximately 350,000 newborns had at least one parent with unauthorized status.

HEALTH

Across a number of health indicators, children of immigrants are likely to fare better than those born to nonimmigrants (Hernandez, 2004). However, children of immigrants are more likely to live in poverty or in families with low income (Mather, 2009). As a result, research suggests that health outcomes for children in immigrant families will worsen over time and across generations (Hernandez, 2004). This negative health trajectory is likely to be exacerbated given the current trend in state-level legislation. For example, Indiana has recently passed legislation requiring e-verification of immigration status for all public agencies, including hospitals and clinics, and for renewal of a driving license.

For many families in the current study, these changes in legislation have had a negative impact on their ability to obtain medical services for their children. One mother described how her unauthorized status, combined with policy changes, impacted her decision to seek medical treatment for her children. She stated,

Honestly, because I don't have a license, getting medical care has been affected. When I take my kids to the emergency clinic they always ask for ID or a license and I don't have one to show them. It's very difficult and embarrassing. I will say I forgot it or I show my expired license, but from far away. It's cancelled, and maybe they can't see that, or maybe they just don't say anything then. Our family doctor doesn't ask for ID. Now when they get sick on a Friday I take them to the doctor right away. If it's a weekend, I try to wait until Monday. I'm afraid they will turn

us away or not treat my children. It's very frustrating and difficult emotionally. I pray to God it doesn't happen.

While families described the emotional stress of caring for a sick child, many were uncertain if and how their unauthorized status would impact their ability to provide their child with proper medical attention. Going to the doctor or an emergency room was another obstacle that could result in deportation for unauthorized family members.

Navigating the health care system was another difficulty for mixed-status families. Even parents who had children who were citizens of the United States spoke of the stress of managing care for their children while attempting to shield unauthorized members from discovery. In reference to insurance companies, one mother noted,

Now they require more. She always had Medicaid, we would just show our pay stubs, but now I have problems. They want much more documentation. My husband works under one last name; my daughter has a different one. They wanted a note from his work saying he was responsible for her. They want a Social Security Number from him as well. We can't do it.

While both parents worked and paid taxes, and their daughter was eligible for and received Medicaid, this family considered abandoning the safety net of medical insurance for their daughter due to their unauthorized status. Many in the current study described the struggle to protect their children and provide them with proper care, while also attempting to protect themselves from deportation.

In the United States, children in immigrant and Latino families are less likely to have access to health care compared to children in nonimmigrant families (Hernandez, 2004). Recent state-level policies restricting services for unauthorized individuals have created problems with getting access to medical care, even for those individuals who are eligible. Portes and colleagues (2012) suggest that this process of exclusion and fear, bred by local and federal policy, has excluded unauthorized families from formal health care, leaving them to turn instead to folk healers and other informal caretakers. This exclusion results in unprecedented levels of preventable diseases (e.g., hypertension, obesity, and diabetes) and increased difficulty in detecting infectious diseases (e.g., tuberculosis and HIV).

EDUCATION

Newly arrived immigrant youth are particularly vulnerable to failure in academic settings, with the majority of immigrant youth likely to face declines in academic performance and achievement over the long term (Suarez-Orozco et al., 2010). Furthermore, one in four Latino students does not graduate high school (Chapman, Laird, Ifill, & KewalRamani, 2011). Although the large majority of immigrant children and their parents hold high educational aspirations and expectations, children in immigrant families are particularly vulnerable to academic failure. Immigrant parents are likely to have lower levels of education and have difficulty speaking English, two factors associated with low educational attainment in immigrant children (Mather, 2009). Unauthorized immigrant children are likely to face additional barriers to educational achievement as state and federal laws increasingly restrict access to postsecondary education (Meyer et al., 2012).

Families in the current study described the importance of education for their children, as well as the struggles that many face in meeting their educational goals. In particular, families discussed proposed legislation that could provide their children, and those in their community, with opportunities to obtain a college degree. The DREAM Act was discussed as a symbol of hope for some students. Others, seeing this proposed legislation stalled and

ultimately rejected at the federal level, felt frustrated and discouraged at their options for future education.

One father, a naturalized citizen who works with the local high school, discussed the difficulties that many immigrant students face as they transition out of high school. With restrictions on funding for postsecondary education, students handled this barrier in different ways. He described this dichotomy:

We have two extremes. Many kids give up studying and going to school. Some of these students look for a job. They feel completely frustrated, and society has to deal with this type of behavior. On the other hand, we have students who continue persevering. They go to college, even though it's very expensive. They work very hard and they fight for the DREAM Act. They continue working and are very involved in activism. In reality, there are these two extremes. We do not have anything in the middle. They either work very hard or simply give up.

This father highlights the potential paths for students who face roadblocks in obtaining a college degree, a theme that emerged in other families' stories. Some children held onto their dream of going to college, becoming active in the fight to pass policies that create opportunities for immigrant children. This father noted that many unauthorized immigrant students continue to work hard and strive toward a better future by staying in school. Other children feel hopeless in their future prospects and leave school early, finding the barriers to higher education overwhelming. Despite having grown up in the United States, these students face a very uncertain future as they prepare to leave high school. Many students turn to low-paying jobs where unauthorized status is not an impediment.

Participants described the struggle of some children to see the benefits of education in light of an uncertain and tenuous future in the United States. One father with unauthorized status described a conversation he had with his son, who also has unauthorized status, who was not yet in high school. He recalled, "But, [he] says, 'Why study if I wasn't born here?' But, I tell him, 'you can study even if you don't have your residency, keep working hard, there are places here where you can still go to school.'" Some children believed the exercise of attending school was futile if deportation was possible. Parents in the current study expressed frustration at this view. These parents, who had sacrificed for their children's future, still believed in the importance of education and held out hope for their child's future, even when their child did not. However, this difference of opinion caused stress for many families.

SOCIAL ISOLATION

Research suggests that, over time, unauthorized immigrant families see decreases in familism, which relates to a strong sense of family orientation, obligation, and cohesion. Yet, despite these decreases, familism also helps to buffer immigrant families from the stress of getting ahead in their new environments (Bacallao & Smokowski, 2007). The stress of day-to-day life for many immigrant families puts added strain on the relationships between parents and children. Families spoke of this strain, many in the context of an uncertain future. For example, one boy with unauthorized immigrant status spoke of his frustration about trying to navigate his future, dreams, parents' dreams, and the reality of surviving in the United States. He stated,

I feel stuck, I don't know what to do—go to [another state] or back to [South America]? If I go out of state [to go to school] I am not doing right by my parents. They will have to sell the house to pay for school. But, it's also my future and I don't want to leave the country. It's given me so much with school, but now it's closed the doors on me. I think it may be time to go back.

Like other children of immigrants, this individual struggled with difficult choices about his future. The options available in the state where he lives are limited, but going out of state or going back to his native country would mean separation from his family. Furthermore, this boy felt that he would be letting his parents down if he did not stay in the United States and in his home state, even if his prospects for the future were restricted by this choice.

Potential loss and separation is a constant looming reality for unauthorized immigrants and their families and is a source of stress described by many. Furthermore, with current piecemeal legislation varying by state, some places within the United States provide more viable avenues for unauthorized immigrants. While some states, like Indiana, have increased restrictions and penalties for immigration violations, others do not and instead ensure the provision of services to immigrants (Chavez & Provine, 2009). Thus, certain states are now more attractive destinations for unauthorized immigrants already in the United States. While children and parents see these alternatives as a lifeline, this would mean the separation of families.

In a similar way, families spoke of becoming increasingly isolated in their day-to-day lives as they coped with additional restrictions and harsher penalties for immigration violations. A mother whose family members were all unauthorized immigrants reported,

I have always told my son, “We cannot do whatever we want here.” He says, “Mom, I am going to do this and that...” and I say, “no, no.” Partly, he has more fear than he should have, because I tell him that if goes out, the police is [sic] going to stop him. I am telling him that all the time. I make him feel more frustrated.

This mother, like many unauthorized immigrants, was fearful for her family’s future and therefore encouraged her children to stay close to home and also limited their activities. Her son also spoke of the limitations that he experienced. He said,

I don’t drive. For my age, I would be working and I would have a car. My friend, that’s what he wanted to do—to work, go to school, and buy himself a car. He did that. He bought himself a car and the police stopped him. Right now he is in jail. He did not have his documents/papers; neither did he have a license. This is a risk for everybody. They can do the same to my father because he is the one who takes me to school.

While most of his peers were obtaining employment and a driver’s license, this boy’s unauthorized status impacted his daily activities. His father, who was also unauthorized, drove him to school, taking a risk that he would be stopped, jailed, and deported.

Despite the dangers of their own unauthorized status, many parents try to shield their children from the negative effects of changing immigration enforcement, often at great toll to themselves. Yet, despite their efforts, the constant fear of being detained by the police and the associated threat of deportation is too great to allow their children to properly integrate in the community. As a result of recent legislative changes, many families reported that they had little involvement in their community, had lost social support and networks, and experienced an increased fear in their daily lives.

Betancur (1996) suggests that Latino immigrant settlement in the United States, especially for Mexican immigrants, has a long history of arranged status of temporary admissions or unauthorized migration. Over the long term this has produced a highly disadvantaged group of illegal, second-class, or transient workers. As the current piecemeal legislation increasingly creates more avenues for random local control and harsher punishment (Hagan, Rodriguez, & Castro, 2011), Latino immigrant families are increasingly likely to remain

disadvantaged in a permanent second-class status, isolated and fearful within their own communities.

CONCLUSION

The present study offers valuable insights into the ways immigrant and Latino children and families are impacted by current immigration legislation. Of particular note is the fact that unauthorized immigration status is not solely an individual concern, but rather it transcends entire families. Mixed-status families are very much the norm. Thus, for many children and families in the current study, fear, uncertainty, and isolation were common in their lives and had a direct impact on their day-to-day functioning. Furthermore, this research highlights the ways in which these families' lives have changed as a result of restrictive federal and state policies. Parents and children, regardless of individual immigration status, were concerned about maintaining intact families, accessing health and educational resources, and coping with increasing family isolation and stress. For example, although U.S. citizen children of unauthorized or mixed-status parents are eligible for Medicaid and public benefits, parents feared interacting with government agencies because of immigration-related consequences, limiting participation in public programs that may benefit their children's well-being. Finally, many families experienced isolation within their own community and family.

These findings show the need for targeted outreach to immigrant families, as well as for increased efforts to reduce access barriers to children, regardless of their parents' immigration status. Furthermore, because the stress and challenges suffered by unauthorized or mixed-status parents affect their children's well-being, providing a path to legalization and bringing these families out of the shadows may give their children a better chance to succeed. More specifically, these data highlight the ways in which children are often the unintended victims of political rhetoric and policy. While this study is limited in its ability to generalize to all Latino immigrants, the implications of this research are significant.

Based on the current trend, the large majority of locations that have seen, and will see, increases in immigrant populations are likely to have limited experience dealing with immigrant populations, unauthorized immigrant children, and families in particular. As a result, these localities have limited to no infrastructure or support for addressing the needs of growing immigrant populations. Moreover, based on the current findings, the recent upswing in local lawmaking targeting immigration has served to create new barriers and increase levels of fear, uncertainty, and isolation for many immigrant children and families.

Following the completion of data collection for the present study, two major immigration-related announcements changed the prospects of many unauthorized immigrants, children in particular. First, the Department of Homeland Security (2012) announced a proposal to allow younger unauthorized immigrants to apply for a deferred action, which eliminates the threat of deportation for a 2-year period. And second, the U.S. Supreme Court blocked many of the provisions of Arizona's S.B. 1070, but allowed for local law enforcement to check the immigration status of people they stop.⁴ While these changes may be viewed as a reprieve for many unauthorized immigrants, the uncertainty in their lives is likely to continue for the foreseeable future. Given the current state of flux of immigration law at both the state and federal level, additional research on the impact of changes in immigration law is needed.

⁴Arizona, Et Al., Petitioners v. United States, 567 U.S. (2012). Retrieved from <http://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/11pdf/11-182b5e1.pdf>.

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Key Points for the Family Court Community

- Unauthorized immigration status is typically defined as an individual characteristics, however there are likely to be large numbers of families with authorized and unauthorized status family members. These “mixed-status families” create unique challenges for families and children.
- This article informs practitioners about the ways in which recent state policies targeting unauthorized immigrants, in addition to existing federal policy, create barriers and negatively impact child and family well-being for Latino immigrants, regardless individual immigration status.
- Unauthorized immigration status may impact family stress and uncertainty, health outcomes, educational attainment, and may result in increased social isolation for children in immigrant families.