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Undocumented Latino immigrant men in the United States: Policy and practice considerations

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Abstract

This article presents an exploration of undocumented, Latino male immigrants in the United States, and assesses the impact of new state policies and their implications for social work practice. To meet its aims, we describe the psychosocial risks that they face, and situated these risks within the context of new state policy realities. Implications for practice are presented.

Keywords

immigrants; Latinos; nativist immigration policies; social work with men at risk; transnational social work practice

Introduction

Two of the populations that social work has not fully explored in the practice literature are the needs of men at risk and undocumented immigrants; nearly nothing has been written about macro and micro policy concerns with undocumented immigrant men. In this brief note, we present an exploration of undocumented immigrant men in the United States, and briefly explore the impact of new state policies and their implications for social work practice.

Undocumented immigrant men

It is estimated that approximately 11.2 million undocumented immigrants are living in the United States today (Passel and Cohn, 2011). Approximately three-quarters of the day-laborers in the US are undocumented and 98 percent of them are men (Valenzuela et al., 2006). Often times, these men are employed in positions that most citizens will not take, in spite of the high rate of unemployment in the US economy. Undocumented immigrants come from various countries, but 58 percent of them, or 6.5 million people, come to the

United States from Mexico. Another 23 percent, or 2.3 million individuals, are from other Latin American countries (Passel and Cohn, 2011).

Risks for undocumented men

The lives of undocumented immigrant men are often full of chaos, stresses and difficulties. Poole and Salgado de Snyder (2002) suggest that, for many of these men, the reasons for leaving their home countries are often based in crisis, including the impact of extreme poverty and these men's sense of responsibility toward providing for their families. The psychosocial risks experienced by many of these men are often extreme and begin prior to their transmigratory journey. Some men have fled military dictatorships in South American nations, and others have been exposed to violence and gang activities in dangerous and overcrowded slums of countries such as Colombia and Brazil. Some transnational men from El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua have experienced significant violence and trauma from systematic governmental repression and violence and from years or decades of bloody civil wars (Gafner and Benson, 2001). After often arduous and dangerous travels overland, their vulnerability increases; the US/Mexico border has become increasingly dangerous, in large part due to the drug wars which have gripped northern Mexico. The killing of transmigrant, undocumented men, either intentionally or collaterally, has increased over the last several years (Van Norstrand, 2011).

In addition, these men often suffer from mental health and substance abuse issues and are likely to have physical health issues. Poole (1996) suggests that undocumented men are the least likely to utilize preventive medical care and to have access to non-emergency medical care. Research has demonstrated that a significant number of day-laborers, the vast majority of whom are undocumented migrants, are at significant risk of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases. One study found that nearly 40 percent of day-laborers have been solicited for sex by other men, and that those most likely to be at risk for engaging in unsafe sex are those with substance abuse problems (Galvan et al., 2008).

The risks for male undocumented migrants are not only isolated to themselves. While a stereotype of undocumented Latino men is often that of an individual separated from his family, this is often not the case. Research has shown that undocumented immigrants are more likely to be members of couples with children (47%) than are legal immigrants (35%) or the US-born resident population (21%) (Passel, 2008). Risk to these men can equate to significant risk for their children, over 75 percent of whom were born in the US and are US citizens. Approximately 6.8 percent of US school children have undocumented parents (Passel, 2008).

Many of the men that work as day-laborers identify that providing for their families is the number one reason for doing engaging in their work. Unfortunately, they are paid poorly and work in unsafe conditions. Valenzuela et al. (2006) estimate that even if day-laborers have many good months of pay, they are unlikely to exceed an annual income of \$15,000, keeping them at or below poverty. In addition to low wages, many of these men suffer workplace abuse. Approximately one half of day-laborers suffered wage theft by their employers in the two months preceding the survey conducted by Valenzuela et al. (2006) and 44 percent of

those surveyed had been denied a bathroom or water break while at work. One in five have suffered a work-related injury with half not receiving medical care for their injuries.

Policy and practice issues

In the US, the domain of immigration policy rests within the domain of the federal government. Yet, given the lack of agreement over the nature of the phenomenon of immigration (i.e. whether or not it is a ‘problem’) and the lack of political will to address it through national legislation, states have begun to enact laws designed to decrease undocumented immigration and combat what some perceive to be social problems caused by illegal immigration. These policies have numerous implications for the lives of immigrant men, and have significantly changed the risk of deportation and decreased access to needed services. While some of these laws have been challenged legally and may not be fully implemented in the near future, the outcomes of these challenges will remain unclear for some time. As such, it is important that social workers become prepared for the potential practice challenges and ethical dilemmas that are implicated in these policies.

The most restrictive of the anti-immigration laws is Alabama’s SB56, which was enacted in the fall of 2011. SB56 seems to criminalize key aspects of the lives of immigrants. Most significantly for immigrant men, actually seeking work is considered a felony. It is also a felony to for an undocumented ‘alien not lawfully present in the United States... [to] enter into or attempt to enter into a business transaction with the state’ (HB56, p. 56). While counties have begun to question the enforceability and the wisdom of this part of the law, the final result is still in question. Should this part of the law pass legal challenges, it will be a felony for immigrant men to attempt to register vehicles, seek government-supported health services, or even have water services for their homes.

There are several implications of this analysis for micro and macro practice. First, social workers must develop the knowledge and skills to work with undocumented Latino immigrants. This knowledge base consists of an understanding of social work practice with men, practice with Latinos, practice with immigrants, and an understanding of transnational and global issues. Each of these areas may not be fully part of the training of many social workers, as such, increased education and training in each of these areas is needed. This is particularly so, given that only about 40 percent of social work faculty members thought that social work students were prepared to work with Latino clients (Furman et al., 2006).

Additionally, undocumented workers play an important role in our economic health, supplying agricultural workers in areas heavily dependent on inexpensive, transient labor. Studies have shown that the anti-immigration law enacted in Alabama in 2011, the state with perhaps the most restrictive law criminalizing undocumented workers, has harmed the agricultural industry. However, according to Valenzuela et al. (2006), undocumented workers are employed in various fields, including construction, landscaping and gardening, painting, roofing, and installing drywalling. New state laws that criminalize day-laborers seeking employment may harm other industries as well.

While undocumented immigrant men may not typically voluntarily seek social work services, they may come into contact with social workers in several settings, including the criminal justice system, hospital emergency rooms, immigrant advocacy organizations and sometimes with the mental health or substance abuse treatment symptoms. Unfortunately, there are several key barriers in terms of training that inhibit the potential responses of social work: a lack of training working with Latinos, a lack of Spanish language proficiency and an unfamiliarity with Latino masculinity and its relationship to health seeking and providing (Furman, 2011). It is important for social workers to understand that for many undocumented Latino men, the actual immigration experience is an expression of the masculine values of responsibility toward family and the importance of work. In this sense, the performance of immigration is an actualization of strength – Latino men cross borders and face increasingly hostile sociocultural environments in order to send remittances to their families. Research has demonstrated that the sending of remittances is positively correlated with psychosocial health, while the inability to send remittances is correlated with depression (Negi, 2008).

Social workers who encounter undocumented immigrant men, or those who they suspect of being undocumented, face several challenges. First, they may face reporting requirements from these new state laws which create ethical dilemmas. Second, they must understand that their legal status, along with the previously discussed cultural differences (Latino culture and the culture of masculinities) may mean that their clients are less likely to open up to them. Approaching these men from a strengths-based perspective, and validating their life course as an expression of positive traits, is an invaluable means of establishing an effective healing relationship. In addition to the sense of personal responsibility toward one's family (*familismo*), these strengths include pride (*orgullo*), respect (*respeto*) and a sense of personal strength (*esfuerzo*). While stoicism is not typically viewed in the helping professions as a strength, respecting men's willingness to approach problems cognitively or behaviorally more than affectively is an important part of working with men (Furman, 2011).

It is also important for social workers who may encounter these men to have connections with community advocates and traditional healers and clergy who are from these communities. Utilizing these community members as allies and partners is an important aspect of gaining trust and providing culturally competent services. Lastly, social workers in the United States have an ethical obligation to learn about what policies are being advocated in their states, and to help policy-makers understand the potential unintended consequences of such policies, such as placing citizen children at risk.

In conclusion, undocumented men are a population with multiple risks, whose well-being is inhibited in the United States by nativist state laws and policy, a global recession that has impacting their ability to seek and procure employment, more intensive border security, and increasing violence along the US/Mexico border. This brief note was not intended to explore all the geopolitical or practice issues that impact this population, but to serve as a call to action for social work to engage more with this at-risk group of men.

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