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Charting Directions for Research on Immigrant Children Affected by Undocumented Status

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Abstract

Three groups of children from Mexico and Central America are vulnerable to effects of US immigration policies: 1) foreign-born children who entered the US with undocumented immigrant parents; 2) unaccompanied children who entered the US alone; and 3) U.S.-born citizen children of undocumented immigrant parents. Despite the recent demographic growth of these youth, scholarship on their strengths and challenges is under-theorized and isolated within specific disciplines. Hence, service providers, researchers, and policymakers have insufficient research to inform their efforts to support the children's wellbeing. A group of scholars and service-providers with expertise in immigrant children convened to establish consensus areas and identify gaps in knowledge of undocumented, unaccompanied, and citizen children of undocumented immigrant

parents. The primary goal was to establish a research agenda that increases interdisciplinary collaborations, informs clinical practice, and influences policies. This report summarizes key issues and recommendations that emerged from the meeting.

Keywords

refugees; undocumented immigrants; unaccompanied children; citizen-children

The immigration debate of the past three decades in the United States (US) has focused on undocumented adult immigrants, primarily from Mexico and Central America. The abundant scientific literature on Latin American immigration to the US reflects the attention on adults, most of whom enter the US in search of economic opportunities (Connor, Cohn, & Gonzalez-Barrera, 2013). The children of immigration are typically insufficiently understood and tangential to the debate, and to a large extent in the scientific literature. Three groups of children, mostly from Mexico and Central America, are most vulnerable to the aggressive immigration enforcement practices undertaken by the U.S. government.

One group of children is those who are the *undocumented* children, often brought at very young ages into the US by unauthorized immigrant parents.¹ Another group is *unaccompanied* children who entered the US alone without a parent or legal guardian available at the moment of apprehension to provide care and custody. The third group includes the U.S.-born *citizen-children* of undocumented immigrants, who are affected by the deportability of their parents and sometimes siblings. Although each faces unique legal status challenges, they share vulnerability to the consequences of immigration enforcement. All three groups of children often live together in “mixed status families” wherein members hold different legal statuses. These three groups represent the nation’s future workers, voters, parents, and community members. As far back as 1982, the US Supreme Court recognized that the immigrant children of today “may well be the legal alien of tomorrow, and that without an education, these undocumented children, [already] disadvantaged as a result of poverty, lack of English-speaking ability, and undeniable racial prejudices...will become permanently locked into the lowest socio-economic class” (Plyler v. Doe, 1982).

There are an estimated one million undocumented and 5.1 million citizen-children, mostly of Mexican and Central American heritage (Capps, Fix, & Zong, 2016). According to the Migration Policy Institute (MPI), between fiscal 2009 and 2013, among the nearly 4 million noncitizens deported, approximately 500,000 were parents of a U.S.-citizen child (Migration Policy Institute, 2015). Between 2013 and 2016, the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) placed over 123,000 unaccompanied migrant youth (UMY), predominantly from Central America, with a parent or other adult sponsor residing in the US (Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2016). This large influx of unaccompanied children was augmented in 2014 by 68,445 refugee women and children (arriving in family units) and another 68,541 unaccompanied children apprehended while crossing the US’s southern border, creating the

¹In this paper, we used the term “undocumented immigrants” and “unauthorized immigrants” interchangeably to refer to individuals who have entered the country without visas or other documents, or have stayed in the United States beyond the expiration date of their visas.

largest observed concentration of land-based refugees in the country's history (Bipartisan Policy Center, 2014; U.S. Customs and Border Protection, 2016).

The aggressive immigration policies that the US has enacted over the past several decades affect all three groups of children (Lopez & Gonzalez-Barrera, 2013). These policies include the Illegal Immigrant Responsibility and Immigrant Reform Act (IIRIRA) and Anti-Terrorism Effective Death Penalty Act (AEDPA), both passed under the Clinton Administration in 1996. The USA PATRIOT Act was then passed in 2001 under the Bush Administration (Hagan, Castro, & Rodriguez, 2010); and more recently, the Secure Communities Strategy developed under the Obama Administration in 2009, which was replaced in 2014 by the Priorities Enforcement Program (Johnson, 2014). In the context of multiple failed efforts to pass Comprehensive Immigration Reform, President Obama issued Deferred Action for Parents of Americans and Lawful Permanent Residents (DAPA), an Executive Order that would stop deportations for unauthorized immigrant parents of U.S.-citizen children who meet certain requirements, and would expand the Deferred Action to Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program. However, this action was blocked by federal judicial decision and upheld by a federal appeals court. More recently, the Trump Administration has issued guidelines to the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) which call for the hiring of thousands of additional agents to enforce policies, expanding the groups of immigrants prioritized for removal, speeding up hearings, and enlisting local law enforcement to help make arrests. These guidelines have resulted in a dramatic increase in deportations, including of parents without criminal records (Nakamura, 2017). Under the Obama administration, the US undertook an aggressive immigration enforcement policy that, while focused on adults, ensnared children (Zayas, 2015). In 2014, for example, US Immigration and Customs Enforcement and Customs and Border Protection apprehended approximately 680,000 individuals (93% of those from Mexico, Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador), and removed (via deportation or return) over 575,000 individuals (Migration Policy Institute, 2016). Since 2009, approximately 500,000 parents of US-citizen children have been deported (MPI, 2016). Between 2010 and 2014, approximately 130,000 unaccompanied minors were apprehended, and more than 40,000 were deported to El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala (Rosenblum & Ball, 2015). In July 2016, more than 37,000 individuals were held in immigration detention facilities across the US (Kandil, 2016).

There are practical obstacles to research with children affected by immigration status. First, there is a lack of funding to support research on undocumented, unaccompanied, and citizen-children. Second, these three groups of children and their families are often inaccessible to researchers. Third, immigrant children and parents are linguistically and culturally diverse (e.g., they may be members of indigenous communities whose first language is not Spanish), calling into question the reliability and validity of our measurement instruments. Fourth, individuals who have not been apprehended or detained have valid concerns about discovery and therefore may decline to participate in research, limiting the generalizability of study findings (Brabeck, Lykes, Sibley, & Kene, 2016). Finally, access to children is dependent upon access to parents or the state for consent. When parents are unavailable, unable or reluctant to provide consent, researchers cannot access children. When children are not living with parents (e.g., for some unaccompanied children), the state acts in *loco parentis* and has the authority to grant or deny consent for children to participate in research. Often,

state authorities do not see research participation as in its interest. These and other conditions create barriers for studying the children's health, mental health, and developmental needs.

To address these issues, a group of researchers with diverse expertise on undocumented, unaccompanied, and citizen-children convened in Austin, Texas on February 25–26, 2016, under a grant from the US National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities. The Austin conference brought together experts working at the nexus of immigration and asylum-seeking, child development and family relations, health, mental health, and child welfare. They represented the behavioral and social sciences (e.g., anthropology; child development; demography; economics; epidemiology; psychology; public health; social work; sociology), communication, education, law, medicine, nursing, theology, and health and social service providers. The primary goal of the meeting was to discuss current and emerging knowledge, and to identify gaps in research with undocumented, unaccompanied, and citizen-children and youth. While uniqueness of experiences among these groups was explored, conferees' discussions focused on the shared experiences of migration that cut across these groups. Discussion centered on three themes: 1) existing and new theoretical and conceptual models that could frame research on the conditions, strengths, and needs of undocumented, unaccompanied, and citizen-children; 2) the current state of knowledge on the health, mental health, family relations, child welfare, and development of undocumented, unaccompanied, and citizen-children; and 3) challenges in and solutions to methodological and ethical issues in research with undocumented, unaccompanied, and citizen-children. This paper summarizes the key research issues and directions that emerged from the discussions.

Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

Existing research has generally focused on broad aspects of migration, such as the demographic characteristics of immigrants; migration decision-making; economic and social adaptation in receiving countries; the policies of sending and receiving countries; or global trends in population movement. Thus, theories of international migrants and refugees typically explain the scale, direction and composition of people that cross state boundaries; factors that provoke the decision to move and the choice of destination; and the social integration and trajectory in the receiving country, including remigration and return movements. Yet this body of research generally fails to consider the role of children in migration trends and their unique contribution to migratory flows. Conferees emphasized the need for well-articulated theoretical models to guide the research agenda on undocumented, unaccompanied and citizen-children. Such models should be able to capture children's transnational experiences and identities, as well as their individual and ecological resources (e.g., resiliency, aspirations and goals, coping skills, and social networks (both within the US and abroad)), in order to harness those assets to fully support children's development.

A number of developmental theories may be applicable to immigrant children and adolescents, such as self-efficacy theory, attachment theory, developmental systems theory, ambiguous loss, stress and coping theories, structuration theory, cumulative risk, positive youth development theory, and conservation of resources theory (Giddens, 1984; Hobfoll,

1998; Ryan, Dooley, & Benson, 2008). Yet, the unique experiences of immigrant and refugee children (e.g., exposure to trauma and stress, displacement, legal liminality, acculturative stress, educational gaps, complicated family reunifications) question the validity of extending traditional models of development to these unique groups. For example, social ecological models (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), which are often invoked to understand the development of immigrant children (Suárez-Orozco, C., Yoshikawa, Teranishi, & Suárez-Orozco, M. M., 2011) do not adequately account for the complexity of transnational family structures (Hershberg & Lykes, 2012). Additionally, not all children and families who have experienced migration display negative psychosocial outcomes. Thus, traditional developmental should be applied flexibly to accommodate the complexities of migration and deportation. Moreover, qualitative approaches, such as grounded theory, may help to articulate new developmental theories specific to the social and cultural contexts of these unique youth.

Future Directions

Intersectional theories—Conferees discussed several potentially useful theories for research with unaccompanied, undocumented, and citizen-children. For example, intersectional theories (Crenshaw, 1991) underscore the importance of considering the gendered and racialized aspects of undocumented status, and ways in which socioeconomic, religious, educational, indigenous, and other identities contribute to the lived experiences of migration, status, detention, and deportation (Suárez-Orozco, C., Yoshikawa, & Tseng, 2015; Viruell-Fuentes, Miranda, & Abdulrahim, 2015). Psycho-social-historical frameworks illuminate the ways in which current experiences of vulnerability, stigma, and marginalization invoke similar historical experiences during, for example, *la violencia* in Central America. These experiences can be transmitted inter-generationally and texture how individuals experience and make meaning of current stressors in the US (Brabeck, Lykes, & Hershberg, 2011). Intergenerational family frameworks highlight how experiences of loss and trauma, related to contextual adversity, may result in coping strategies (e.g., code of silence) by families that are detrimental to child well-being. Such legacies may be transmitted across generations if their origins are not identified and thoroughly understood (Dankoski & Deacon, 2000). For example, children exposed to harsh parenting approaches associated with parents' chronic exposure to adversity may lead to generations of parents who identify with this kind of punitive parenting as the only effective type of child rearing. Finally, transnational frameworks emphasize the role that transnational identities play in children's and families' social and emotional well-being. In addition, transnational perspectives may be useful in exploring and challenging traditional ways of thinking about family separation across transnational spaces and the life course (Carling, Menjivar, & Schmalzbauer, 2012; Clark, Glick, & Bures, 2009; Dreby, 2010).

Re-conceptualizing childhood and family—Conferees questioned the definition and scope of the populations under study. While a developmental lens is important, whose definition of developmental trajectories is valid? Researchers working cross-culturally may be required to re-think the constructs of "child" and "adolescent" within the cultural and social contexts of the sending countries and operationalize these new definitions within research (Heidbrink, 2014; Levenson, 2013). For example, in some of the contexts of

Mexico and Central America, children may assume “adult” roles (e.g., caretaking, employment responsibilities, sending of remittances) and take adult risks (e.g., traveling unaccompanied) that are judged differently in the US. Without a culturally responsive definition of “childhood” researchers risk misunderstanding or pathologizing these young people and their families (e.g., riding in the back of a pickup can be seen as reckless, rather than as resourceful). Similarly, intimate partner violence or increased risk for drug dependence may only be partially understood if individual behaviors are not understood within the context of oppression generated by the current immigration climate. Cultural differences in defining childhood also affect policies and social service programming, which risk being irrelevant and/or ineffective if they attempt to apply an ethnocentric definition of childhood and family functioning. At the same time, despite their family responsibilities and adult-like behaviors, those under 18 are children in terms of their psychological and physical development. Thus, they merit the protections typically afforded to children in the legal context.

Similarly, the conceptualization and study of family with undocumented, unaccompanied and citizen-children requires culturally responsive reconsideration. For example, which family compositions are recognized by researchers and by policies? How are extended family members included in or excluded from definitions? How do transnational structure and differing legal status affect family processes and relationships? How do families negotiate transnational family relationships, family separations and reunifications, the role of fathers and mothers, and undocumented disclosure? How can these families be supported when many interventions were conceptualized without the multiple stressors and challenges experienced by mixed-status families? In what ways might the family serve as both a risk factor (e.g., potentially a source of abandonment or abuse) and a protective factor (e.g., potentially a source of emotional and pragmatic support)? How can individuals be helped to both identify structural and systemic contributors to their behavior (e.g., violence, discrimination), and also take responsibility for their actions?

Children’s Development, Health, Mental Health and Family Processes

Abundant research indicates that trauma in childhood leads to poor health outcomes later in life, suggesting that research on and investment in prevention and early intervention are critical (Anda, Butchart, Felitti, & Brown, 2010; Layne, et. al., 2014; Morbidity and Mortality Weekly, 2010). The experiences of children and parents in their home countries, and the experiences of migration itself, affect children’s development, health and mental health (Perreira, 2013; Pumariega & Rothe, 2010). Many undocumented, unaccompanied, and citizen-children live within conditions of severe poverty, lack of access to healthcare, inadequate housing, and unsafe communities (Dettlaff & Rycraft, 2010). They also have elevated levels of externalizing and internalizing symptoms, notably anxiety (Brabeck & Sibley, 2016; Lansdale, Hardie, Oropesa, & Hillemeier, 2015; Potochnick & Perreira, 2010).

Despite legislative efforts to afford rights to undocumented youth, research has consistently supported the assertion that advocates and service providers have long claimed: current immigration policies and practices do not adequately meet the mental health needs nor protect the rights of these immigrant children. Citizen-children of undocumented parents

have lower levels of access to social services (including Head Start and Medicaid), which in turn contributes to lower academic achievement (Brabeck, Sibley, Taubin, & Murcia, 2015). Citizen-children in mixed-status families are more likely to experience internalizing and externalizing symptoms when compared with children of documented immigrant parents (Lansdale, et. al., 2015). Citizen-children whose parents have been deported demonstrate developmental and mental health symptoms, including post-traumatic stress symptoms, anxiety, depressive symptoms, behavioral problems, academic decline, and developmental delay (Allen, Cisneros, & Telles, 2015; Capps, Castañeda, Chaudry, & Santos, 2007; Chaudry, et. al., 2010; Zayas, Aguilar-Gaxiola, Yoon, & Natera Ray, 2015; Zayas & Bradlee, 2015).

Undocumented youths' development is fractured by the realities of their precarious or nonexistent legal status, particularly as they exit the K-12 educational system, with significant implications for their social relationships, mental health and wellbeing (Gonzales, 2015). Undocumented youth are susceptible to depression, anxiety, and even suicidality, particularly in adolescence when they fully "awaken" to the reality of their status and the limitations it places on their dreams and aspirations (Gonzales, 2013; Perreira & Spees, 2015). Unaccompanied minors, who experience the stress and potential traumas of migration in the absence of a stable caregiver, are at increased risk for internalizing symptoms (depression, anxiety, withdrawal, low self-esteem), externalizing symptoms (irritability, aggression), and PTSD symptoms (Carlson, Cacciatore, & Klimek, 2012; U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops: Migration & Refugee Services, 2012). Unaccompanied and undocumented children held in detention centers for extended periods endure adverse experiences in detention that are often as bad as or worse than conditions many of the children and parents fled (Moulton, 2015). Emerging research has documented that despite high levels of trauma and stress, large educational gaps, and complicated family reunifications, post-release services for these children are uneven and often inadequate, and many face deportation upon turning 18 (Roth & Grace, 2015). With few resources in place, they navigate complicated family separations and reunifications; acculturative stress; complex legal and social services; racism and discrimination; and the fear of deportation (Berger-Cardoso, et al., in press; Dreby, 2015; Pumariega & Rothe, 2010).

Future Directions

Resiliency and coping—Despite the significant stressors experienced by immigrant children, not all develop mental health symptoms or conditions and many thrive (Sotomayor-Peterson & Montiel-Carbajal, 2014; Zayas, 2015). However, most research focuses on deficits and symptoms rather than capacities and resources. Their unique individual-level resources (e.g., bilingualism, biculturalism, grit, hope and expectancy) must be better understood with consequences for services and interventions. Similarly, their ecological sources of strength (e.g., family ties, social networks, connection to culture and history, churches, community-based organizations and non-governmental organizations) should be better understood by empirical research to inform policies and practices. Research on strengths and resources has the potential, not only to inform practices, but also to shape public opinion away from seeing immigrant children as a societal drain and toward viewing them as a societal resource.

Health trajectories—Collecting data in immigrant children’s home countries prior to their migration and/or analyzing existing data from demographic health surveys and morbidity and mortality data has the advantage of providing substantial baselines for assessing the impact of migration and detention. Research might explore differences in health and mental health outcomes depending on children’s age at the time of migration, pre-migration family stressors and support, and migration-related fluidity of family composition (Perreira & Ornelas, 2011). Furthermore, data are needed on the health and mental health-related service needs of unaccompanied minors and undocumented children at the time of their arrival in the US. Conferees concluded that future research should employ methods that can systematically gather data on children’s health and mental health at all stages of migration. Research can also investigate children’s exposure to acute stress conditions before, during, and after migrating and its impact on cognitive, social, and emotional development and future assimilation and integration trajectories.

Detention, deportation, and family processes—Further research is needed on how the length of separation and children’s developmental age at time of separation impact children and family relations. Additionally research might explore how families communicate and plan for deportation or separation. Research should explore the differential impact of separation from mother and father, especially since men are primarily the targets of immigration enforcement actions. Future research may investigate how restrictive immigration enforcement resulting in family separation affects extended family relationships, siblings and peer group relations and others who do not directly experience a deportation (Dreby, 2012).

Life after detention—While we recognize refugees’ capacities to overcome traumatic events during their pre-migration flight, we know much less about their adaptation to life during the time of detention and subsequent release and settlement in the US (Hollifield, 2005). Future research might explore the conditions of detention centers and how those conditions affect child development and health, post-migration adjustment and integration, and family processes. Finally, future research should also address the extent to which detention and deportation of immigrant parents lead to children’s involvement in social service systems, including child welfare and juvenile justice, and the consequences for children and families.

Intervention and services research—Conferees identified the need for research around evidence-based, trauma-informed, and culturally responsive interventions and practices that best meet the needs of immigrant children, children of immigrants, and their families. Conferees discussed the needs of children and families in detention and after release from detention, in addition to short- and long-term outcomes of detention. For example, how do providers and families prepare for release from detention and what are best practices for post-release services? What services are available to young people who reside in new destinations (e.g., rural areas) that do not have well-established non-profit sector?

When faced with basic needs (e.g., for food and housing) and the high possibility of deportation, mental health is often a lower immediate priority to families and to children themselves. Understanding how children, families, and service providers think about,

prioritize, and gain access to mental health services will help providers deliver services that children and families see as relevant. Integrating mental health within other settings, for example, primary care clinics, community-based organizations, and schools, may more adequately meet children's and families' needs.² Finally, conferees noted the difficulties related to balancing resources and efforts in two directions: both to leverage research to challenge the structural factors that marginalize undocumented, unaccompanied, and citizen-children, and also to provide services that help individual children, youth, and families cope and adjust to the system as it is. Coordination of efforts across disciplines can help scholars and service providers achieve these goals more effectively.

There is a lack of impact and process evaluation research concerning effective and responsive approaches to serving families affected by immigration status and enforcements. Case study approaches have shown innovations in service delivery such as streamlining enrollment for parents of citizen children; greater coordination between immigrant-serving organizations and state and local providers; and the use of community networks and settings that are trusted rather than settings associated with government provision (Crosnoe, et. al., 2012; Brabeck & Xu, 2012; Yoshikawa, et. al., 2014). Such efforts should be supplemented by work on the impacts of policy and service delivery for children and families. Recent advances in quasi-experimental methods are beginning to be applied to causal effects of variation in immigration policies, including those affecting the unauthorized (Yoshikawa, Suarez-Orozco, & Gonzales, 2016).

Methodological and Ethical Challenges to Research

The conferees' discussion ranged from recruitment, measurement, sampling, and ethical challenges. These challenges complicate efforts to produce a cohesive body of research. Researchers, practitioners and policymakers would benefit from both methodological innovations and ethical guidelines to better inform future research on immigrant children and families.

Future Directions

Measurement and instrumentation—Conferees discussed the need to improve or adapt assessment instruments used to measure the unique experiences (e.g., trauma-related) of immigrant children, given that current measures are often insensitive at capturing the nature of their distress. This dearth of culturally validated instruments appropriate for assessing immigrant and refugee children creates problems for quantitative research (and mental health assessment). Even when used among U.S.-born children of deported Mexican immigrants, some measures of depression, trauma, self-image, and other psychological variables fail to adequately tap these constructs (Zayas, 2015). Birman and Chan (2008) note that “While many screening instruments and processes have been developed for school-aged children, the situation with immigrant and refugee children is more complex.... Importantly,

²Issues related to post-release services for unaccompanied child migrants can be found in a publication that also emerged from the Austin conference by Berger Cardoso, J., Brabeck, K., Stinchcomb, D., Heidbrink, L., Price, O., Gil-Garcia, O., Crea, T., Birman, D., & Zayas, L. (2016). *Challenges to integration for unaccompanied children in the post-release U.S. context: A call for research*. Manuscript submitted for publication.

when considering screening immigrants and refugees, the line between efficacy and effectiveness may be blurred, since it is unlikely that a screening instrument developed in one cultural context will be valid, reliable and accurate in another” (p. 8). Similarly, conferees averred that we must consider whether we should use screening tools that allow cross-cultural comparisons versus measures that are specific to one cultural group. Cross-disciplinary dialogue with researchers trained in qualitative and community-based participatory methodologies will be essential to the adaptation of existing or development of new measures that more reliably capture the experiences of undocumented, unaccompanied, and citizen-children. Since, psychological constructs often do not translate across cultures, a translated measure may lack cultural salience and relevance for the participants. Given the complexity of establishing equivalence of instruments in cross-cultural research, we need formative research that informs the development of new instruments, rather than simply adapting what we have (Kim, Han, & Phillips, 2003; van de Viiver & Tanzer, 1997).

Longitudinal research—One important limitation of current research is the cross-sectional nature of most existing studies. Longitudinal research with vulnerable populations is challenging because participants may be wary of disclosing personal information needed for follow-up. Moreover, the quickly evolving situations of participants’ lives, which are in flux as a result of migration, deportation, and housing instability, can result in high attrition for longitudinal studies. However, well-designed longitudinal studies are imperative to understand the long-term effects of unauthorized status, migration, detention, and deportation. Community-based and participatory methods offer paradigms for building trusting relationships with participants that might facilitate longitudinal research. Additional strategies include oversampling, obtaining Certificates of Confidentiality to protect research records, and offering meaningful incentives for participation. In addition, public health and epidemiological approaches are useful methodological approaches to carefully monitor the progression of exposure to stressors (e.g., time in detention) and the resulting health and mental health problems.

Sampling and recruitment—Another major methodological challenge involves recruitment and sampling. Some potential participants, or their parents, live “in the shadows” and, for valid reasons, fear discovery; their experiences are therefore often absent from the research knowledge. Institutional Research Boards (IRB) struggle to understand the complex institutional and legal landscapes that govern the lives of children affected by immigration policies. Working cross-culturally, IRBs must also consider a range of issues, such as varied cultural notions childhood and youth; reluctance of youth to sign official forms; and the risks that notes might be subpoenaed by immigration authorities. Restrictions created by institutions such as the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) make it nearly impossible for researchers to gain systematic access to unaccompanied minors post-release and children and families in detention centers. Conferees noted the need to address non-representativeness and bias related to over-reliance on convenience samples. Developing sustained relationships over time with governmental organizations, like DHS and ORR, and highlighting ways in which empirical research might benefit these institutions through policy and practice-relevant research may afford researchers the needed access to participants in governmental custody.

Ethical and moral challenges—An additional challenge to research—and perhaps a reason that there is not more scholarship—is the minefield of ethical challenges involved in working with undocumented and unaccompanied who are minors and may have no guardians or may have sponsors who may not hold legal status. Attention must go into assuring the security of the children and security of the data the children provide. Above all we must ensure that we “do no harm.” Many refugee and immigrant families have fled conditions of oppression, government corruption and surveillance, and restrictions on many of their liberties. They are, therefore, hesitant to reveal specifics about themselves and their children. This kind of mistrust is evident in research with traumatized groups and groups concerned about discovery, such as asylum-seeking women who are reluctant to disclose sexual violence even when it may help their legal cases. While entirely understandable and adaptive, it creates challenges for sampling, as researchers typically rely on convenience samples that are arguably not representative of the entire population.

Additionally, conferees questioned to what extent we need empirical evidence that the cumulative experience of country-of-origin violence, unaccompanied migration, detention within the US, complicated family reunifications, and social/linguistic/financial/racial marginalization within the US have detrimental effects on emotional and mental wellbeing. With the wealth of knowledge on developmental science, is this not self-evident? Is it ethical to concentrate efforts on studying that population, rather than contributing those resources to serving them?

Future research should be mindful of the tensions between identifying differences and highlighting shared experiences of migration. On the one hand, it is important to lend research attention towards the identification of factors that are unique to different groups of children and families. However, in contributing to the research on specialized groups (e.g., unaccompanied, citizen-children), in what ways might researchers be reinforcing problematic narratives about deserving versus un-deserving groups of immigrants, and marginalizing some groups while privileging others? For example, in emphasizing the “deserving-ness” of U.S.-citizen children in mixed-status families, researchers might inadvertently cast undocumented youth as “un-deserving.” Similarly, prioritizing the needs of asylum-seeking youth fleeing contexts of violence may pit *these* youths against *those* who are economic migrants.

Additional potential ethical conflicts with this population include: What happens if a researcher suspects neglect or abuse, and knows that the parents are undocumented; how should this information be reported so that the best interests of the child are represented? What if a researcher learns that a participant is at risk of harm to herself, and has no health insurance or means to access mental health treatment? How well do we articulate the actual risk involved in participating in our studies? How informed is the consent that participants give, particularly when they are limited with regards to language and education (Televera, et. al., 2016)? What is a researcher’s obligation to changing the structural factors that are at the root of individuals’ distress?

Some scholars (Brabeck, et. al., 2015) have argued that approaches such as participatory action research (PAR) offer strategies for both research and advocacy because they position

participants as co-researchers and agents in discovering the structural roots of the inequalities they experience, and lead to the identification of action steps to address those inequalities. Youth participatory action research (yPAR) employs creative methods, such as storytelling, photovoice, and participatory drama and helps youth to connect their individual realities to broader, systemic and historical factors, and to organize collective action toward change (Day, Charles, & Rose, 2013). Additionally, such approaches involve the establishment of trust and relationships over time, which may yield more valid data from participants who have reason to be wary of disclosure. However, approaches such as PAR have been criticized as being less objective and yielding less reliable and valid results (based on traditional definitions of those constructs), and PAR researchers continue to struggle for legitimacy and funding.

Discussion and Conclusions

At the Austin, Texas conference, a community of scholars working in overlapping areas of undocumented, unaccompanied and citizen-children met to exchange ideas, identify gaps in research knowledge, and propose conceptual, methodological and substantive issues to guide future research. The significance and innovation of the conference was in bringing together researchers studying undocumented, unaccompanied, and citizen-children from Mexico and Central America so that research efforts for this national issue may become better integrated. This issue is particularly worth exploring in this challenging funding climate and academic environment focused on generating multiple markers of productivity (e.g., indirect cost rates, publications with high impact factors).

Given the timeliness and constantly evolving landscape of immigration, conferees identified important directions and guidelines for future research. Conferees advocated for multidisciplinary and streamlined approaches that rely on culturally-informed theoretical frameworks that acknowledge the complexities of research with undocumented, unaccompanied children, and citizen-children. Conferees emphasized the need for scholars to confront the methodological and ethical challenges that we face, from participant recruitment and sampling barriers, to limited culturally appropriate instruments and human-subjects protection issues, to enhance the methodological rigor of our research. Conferees concluded that we need a sustained effort, one that includes longitudinal examination (e.g., long-term ethnography; better understanding of long-term outcomes) and requires research funding from public and private sources. Such efforts, from researchers alongside policymakers, providers and advocates, will expand and improve the empirical behavioral and social science knowledge base to ultimately better address immigrant children's health, mental health, and developmental needs and well-being.

Rigorous science must ultimately offer a meaningful contribution aimed at promoting effective social policy and structural changes in the US immigration system. Thus, close interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary collaborations are urgently needed to reach the goal of informing immigration reforms that respect the basic human rights of immigrants, while thoroughly recognizing the essential contributions of documented and undocumented immigrants throughout U.S. history.

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