

# Immigration/Documentation

## Background

Hispanics represent the largest ethnic group in the U.S. and the number of Latino/Hispanic immigrants is steadily increasing (Passel, 2006). Immigration and documentation issues may increase stress among Latino/Hispanic families as they struggle to meet their basic needs and can put children at greater risk of maltreatment. As of March 2005, the Pew Hispanic Center estimated that of the 11 million undocumented immigrants living in the U.S., six million came from Mexico (Passel, 2006).

Immigration is a process that includes the initial decision to migrate, the process of migration, and acclimatization to the new country (Pérez-Foster, 2005). Families may experience perimigration trauma (Pérez-Foster, 2005), which is psychological distress occurring at four points of the migration process: events before migration (e.g., extreme poverty, war exposure, torture); events during migration (e.g., parental separation, physical and sexual assault, theft of the money they saved to immigrate with, exploitation at the hands of a human smuggler, hunger, and death of traveling companions); continued rejection and suffering while seeking asylum (e.g., chronic deprivation of basic needs); and survival as an immigrant (e.g., substandard living conditions, lack of sufficient income, racism).

The immigration process often occurs in increments, leading to separation of the family. Many times one parent immigrates first with plans to work and send money home so that the rest of the family can later immigrate. In other cases, both parents may immigrate and leave children with relatives while they work and save money. These separations can last for months or even years, causing strain on the relationship between parents and children. After arriving in the U.S., many immigrants isolate themselves for fear of being discovered and deported. This lack of a support system is very difficult. In addition, many immigrants are treated poorly due to racism (Pérez-Foster, 2005).

Recent immigration raids have also had an effect on families who are undocumented and living in fear that they will be discovered. A child may be separated from one or both of his/her parents as a result of immigration enforcement. While their parents may be undocumented, as many as two-thirds of these children may be U.S. citizens, suggesting that the future costs to our

country and the long-term impact of this separation on the children are significant (Capps, Castañeda, Chaudry & Santos, 2007).



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There is also a growing problem of human trafficking, in which Latino/Hispanic women and children are brought into the United States and forced into prostitution (U.S. Department of State, 2008). After they arrive in the United States, many immigrants are exploited by being forced to work for below minimum wage under abusive conditions. Immigrants live with these conditions for fear of being deported if they complain.

In addition, learning a new language and way of life can also be stressful. Immigrants are struggling to

acculturate while still maintaining their cultural heritage. The acculturative process within the same family may also be diverse, with younger children acculturating more quickly than their parents. Although trauma services may be available in the community, immigrant families are likely unaware of the services available and if they are aware, may be reluctant to access services for fear of deportation.



Service providers need to understand that immigrant families face unique challenges that may affect their ability and willingness to seek trauma treatment services. They may not qualify for certain services if they are undocumented. Also, they may also be unable to access services due to language barriers and poverty. They may not understand the process of mental health treatment, which may also prevent immigrant families from seeking trauma treatment services. Many immigrants live in rural, impoverished areas where transportation is a problem. Instability in the lives of immigrant families may also prevent them from seeking or following through with services. For those families, facing homelessness, hunger and violence takes priority over receiving mental health services, despite the effects of trauma. A greater understanding of the unique challenges that many immigrant families experience plays a crucial role in improving service provision for these families.

## Statement of the Issue

Immigration and documentation issues are a problem for families in need of trauma treatment for several reasons. First, the immigration process itself often entails traumatic experiences and separation of families. Recent immigrants may be unaware of available resources or how to access resources to help them cope with trauma and separation. Agencies may not provide services to undocumented families, or families may be reluctant to seek services if they are undocumented for fear of deportation. Not speaking or understanding English may prevent families from seeking services. For families wishing to access services, a lack of transportation may also pose a barrier. Finally, stigma associated with mental health treatment may prevent recent immigrants or those less acculturated from seeking services for lack of understanding what counseling is or a fear of being labeled.



## Recommendations from the Field



- **Provide assurance that undocumented families need not fear being reported to immigration authorities (i.e., ICE) by staff or deported if they receive mental health services at our agencies.** This can be achieved through community outreach and public service campaigns.
- **Conduct a thorough intake, including asking questions about immigration and documentation status,** as these issues may prevent families from accessing or continuing with services. If a family is undocumented, the providers are in a unique position of being able to help them connect with other available services.
- During the assessment, **ask specific questions about their immigration experiences,** including trauma experienced during the immigration process, trauma related to discrimination, and trauma experienced in their country of origin. Often, families choose to migrate to the United States because of potentially traumatic events that occurred in their country of origin. It is important to assess for their experiences prior to migration, as well as throughout the migration process (see the “Assessment” priority area for more information).
- **Assess for acculturation differences within the same family.** Children may acculturate to the new culture faster than their parents, which could lead to further problems and distress. Scales such as the Acculturation Rating Scale for Mexican-Americans, second edition (ARSMA-II; Cuéllar, Arnold, & Maldonado, 1995) can aid in this assessment (see the “Assessment” priority area for more information).
- **Assess for acculturative stress** and any crisis issues related to basic needs, family functioning, and trauma symptoms. Acculturative stress refers to the psychological, somatic, and social difficulties that may accompany acculturation processes (Chavez, Moran, Reid, & Lopez, 1997). This acculturative stress may lead to anxiety, depression, and substance abuse (Dettlaff & Rycraft, 2006). Children and families undergoing the process of acculturation may or may not be experiencing acculturative stress. Therefore, it is important to assess for this specific construct during the interview and through objective measures (i.e., SAFE Scale; Chavez et al., 1997; see the “Assessment priority area for more information).

*Poco a poco  
se anda  
lejos.\**

- **Hire bilingual staff and if possible, bicultural staff** (Santiago-Rivera, Arredondo & Gallardo-Cooper, 2002; see the “Therapist Training and Support” and “Communication/Linguistic Competence” priority areas for more information).
- **Familiarize yourself with immigration laws, policies, and resources** (i.e., Violence Against Women Act, U-Visas). Children and families may be eligible to receive various services if they have been the victim of a crime, whether or not they are undocumented (see the “Policy” priority area for more information).

### Resilience

- Help children and families identify strengths and resources within themselves and their environment. For example, spirituality may be a strength for many immigrant families, and religious institutions may provide support and a sense of community to reduce isolation.
- Make sure to engage the family (immediate as well as extended) throughout the therapeutic process, being respectful of the importance of *familismo* (please refer to the “Cultural Values” priority area for more information on this and other cultural values). The family can be a strong support system for the client.



### Family/Youth Engagement

- Stress integration of the immediate and extended family in treatment by encouraging their participation in sessions and seeking feedback from family members about their treatment experience and ways to improve services.
- If transportation is a problem, conduct sessions in the home or at locations more accessible within the community (i.e., churches). This will also allow for extended family members who also live in the home or community to participate in the therapeutic process (see the “Service Utilization/Case Management” priority area for more information).
- Learn as much as possible about the family’s culture, including cultural values and traditions, and be respectful of their cultural beliefs. It is also important to realize that not all members of a culture have similar beliefs. Be careful to be individually sensitive and not stereotype the family.
- When working with families that may have immigrated illegally, reassure them that they will not be reported to immigration authorities (i.e., ICE) by your agency. This will ease their apprehension about seeking services.
- Explain the therapeutic process and the relationship between the clinician and the family. Giving the family a clear sense of what they can expect as well as what is expected of them and help them to understand the importance of mental health services. This is a step in challenging the stigma associated with mental health services in the Latino/Hispanic culture.

## Community Examples/Best Practices



- **Border Traumatic Stress Response (Border TSR), Serving Children and Adolescents in Need (S.C.A.N.)** - Works to improve and expand the service delivery system in Webb County, Texas, for children and adolescents aged 2 to 18 who have experienced any type of traumatic event. S.C.A.N. is a community-based, nonprofit organization with more than twenty years of experience providing services to children and adolescents and their families. S.C.A.N.'s trauma-informed system allows children and adolescents to have immediate access to a wide array of trauma-informed services and treatment, tailored to their individual needs. Webb County is located along the Texas-Mexico border, and most of the children served are first-generation Mexican Americans or Mexican immigrants who are bilingual or primarily Spanish-speaking.  
⇒ Website: [www.scan-inc.org](http://www.scan-inc.org)  
⇒ Address: 2387 E. Saunders St., Laredo, TX 78041
- **The Chadwick Center's Family Violence Program (FVP)** - Located at the San Diego Family Justice Center in downtown San Diego, the Family Violence Program pairs each family with an advocate and a therapist. Advocates assist with: Developing safety plans; Accessing restraining orders; Accompanying clients to court and mediation; Accessing emergency and long-term housing; Accessing financial and medical resources; Planning for long-term goals; and Coordinating with other providers (CPS, schools, attorneys, etc.). Therapists specialized in trauma counseling facilitate individual, group, and family therapy, and, advocates are on-site to help families navigate the legal system related to documentation issues. The goal of treatment is to heal from the abuse and to transition to a safe future.  
⇒ Website: [www.chadwickcenter.org/FV.htm](http://www.chadwickcenter.org/FV.htm)  
⇒ Address: San Diego Family Justice Center, 707 Broadway, 2nd Floor, San Diego, CA 92101
- **Latin American Health Institute** - Provides treatment and intervention services for Latino/Hispanic children and their families living in the Greater Boston area who have been impacted by traumatic events. The program is also focused on working with mental health providers that serve Latinos/Hispanics in Greater Boston and in other areas of Massachusetts to increase their knowledge of evidence-based interventions. The intended population has experienced losses, domestic and community violence, disasters, severe and chronic neglect, physical and sexual abuse, and chronic trauma.  
⇒ Website: [www.lhi.org](http://www.lhi.org)  
⇒ Address: 95 Berkeley St Ste 600, Boston, MA 02116-6246

## Resources



About.com: Immigration Issues - Information regarding immigration laws and citizenship as well as links to additional resources. Retrieved November 8, 2008, from <http://immigration.about.com>

Academy for Educational Development: [humantrafficking.org](http://humantrafficking.org) - A web resource for combating human trafficking. Retrieved November 8, 2008, from [www.humantrafficking.org](http://www.humantrafficking.org)

ACTION Network - A comprehensive community response to ending the prostitution of children in San Diego. Retrieved November 8, 2008, from [www.humantrafficking.org/organizations/395](http://www.humantrafficking.org/organizations/395)

Immigration Legal Resource Center - A resource dedicated to promoting, educating, and empowering immigrants and their advocates. Retrieved November 17, 2008 from [www.ilrc.org](http://www.ilrc.org)

LegalAid.com - Assistance with findings attorneys that address immigration issues. Retrieved November 8, 2008, from [www.legalaid.com](http://www.legalaid.com)

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National Conference of State Legislatures - Provides updated information on immigration policies, including an overview on immigrant policies. [www.ncsl.org/programs/immig/](http://www.ncsl.org/programs/immig/)

Paniagua, F. A. (2005). *Assessing and treating culturally diverse clients: A practical guide* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Pew Hispanic Center: Chronicling Latinos' diverse experiences in a changing America - [www.pewhispanic.org](http://www.pewhispanic.org)

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U.S. Department of State's Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons. (2008). *Trafficking in persons report*. Washington D.C.: Author. Retrieved November 8, 2008, from [www.state.gov/documents/organization/105501.pdf](http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/105501.pdf)

*\*Dichos translation: Little by little you will go far/ If you persevere, you will go far.*

### *Immigration/Documentation Subcommittee*

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