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# Service Utilization for Latino Children in Mixed-Status Families

*Qingwen Xu and Kalina Brabeck*

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In the aftermath of 1996 welfare and immigration reforms, service utilization is particularly challenging for mixed-status families in which U.S.-born children live with undocumented parents. This study used both qualitative interview data and quantitative survey data to document Latino immigrant parents' service utilization for their U.S.-born children and the perceived impact of the existence of detention and deportation on their service utilization. Results indicate that Latino families headed by undocumented parents accessed services for their citizen children at a level similar to that of Latino families headed by documented parents. Although undocumented participants reported that detention and deportation affected their service utilization, their social networks embodied in Latino/a relationships helped them to navigate systems, increased their efficacy, counteracted their fears, and contributed to their family resiliency. Hospitals and schools, in particular, served as the entry points for Latino immigrant families to access a broad range of services. Implications for research and practice are discussed.

**KEY WORDS:** *immigration and welfare systems; Latino; mixed-status immigrant family; service utilization; undocumented immigrant*

Scholars who explore immigrants' welfare participation and service use in Western countries frequently ask similar questions (Barrett & McCarthy, 2008): Are immigrants eligible to receive social services and welfare benefits? If they are eligible, what are the barriers that complicate immigrants' ability to participate in programs or access services? In this article, we address the question: How have recent changes in welfare and immigration policy—and the upsurge in raids, detentions, and deportations—affected undocumented Latino immigrants' parents' service utilization for their U.S.-born citizen children?

The literature on international migration has examined multiple factors to explain immigrants' behavior with regard to accessing welfare benefits and social services; scholars have underscored the importance of immigration-related factors in understanding service utilization among immigrant groups. Some have argued that service utilization may be shaped by cultural values that immigrants bring from their countries and cultures of origins. For example, Asian immigrants, in general, have demonstrated low rates of any type of mental health-related service use even after other individual and structural factors were controlled

(Abe-Kim et al., 2007; Leduc & Proulx, 2004); among Latino immigrants, Mexicans and Latino men were less likely to use mental health services, which may reflect culturally specific gender expectations (Fortuna, Porche, & Alegria, 2008). Scholars have also argued that immigrants face different economic and social opportunities and challenges because of level of education, English proficiency at the time of migration, areas of initial resettlement, family members' legal status, and available resources, all of which contribute to different access to service programs (Berk, Schur, Chavez, & Frankel, 2000; Bowden, Rhodes, Wilkin, & Jolly, 2006; Jacobs, Shepard, Suaya, & Stone, 2004).

Legal status is a key factor affecting immigrants' service use behavior; for example, Alegria et al. (2007) indicated that rates of mental health service use were higher among Puerto Ricans and U.S.-born Latinos than among foreign-born Latinos (non-Puerto Ricans). For mixed-status immigrant families in the United States—that is, families in which one or more parents is a noncitizen and one or more children is a citizen, members within the same family have differing eligibility for and access to social services. Scholars have indicated that both children's and parents'

legal status affect the service utilization for the child; U.S.-born children with noncitizen parents were at a disadvantage when compared with children with citizen parents (Huang, Yu, & Ledsky, 2006). Undocumented immigrant parents are ineligible to receive most government-sponsored social services and welfare benefits because of their unauthorized stay in the United States (Fix & Zimmermann, 2001). Moreover, they may refrain from seeking services for their U.S. citizen children due to fear of possible family separation if the undocumented parents are identified and deported by immigration enforcement authorities (Berk & Schur, 2001; Simich, Wu, & Nerad, 2007).

Changes in welfare and immigrant policies since 1996 substantially affect immigrant children's access to service, particularly children in families headed by undocumented parents. Changes in policies, practices, and climate for undocumented immigrants in the United States send a message to immigrant families that they should avoid using services even if they are eligible. However, the extent to which legal vulnerability affects undocumented parents' attempts to access services for their children in this new political and economic climate is by and large unknown. This study seeks to document the service utilization among Latino mixed-status immigrant families and discuss, from a resilience perspective, the relationships between undocumented status and service use behaviors.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Latino Immigrants in the United States

Latinos (referring to people of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, Dominican, South or Central American, or other Spanish-speaking countries regardless of race) represent the largest group of foreign-born migrants, both documented and undocumented, and the largest minority group in the United States. As of July 2006, the Latino population in the United States was 44.3 million, 14.8% of the U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). Among this population, about 40% were foreign-born and an additional 20% to 25% were their children (Mariscal, 2005; Pew Hispanic Center, 2005, 2008). Among noncitizen Latino adults, an estimated 55% were undocumented (Pew Hispanic Center, 2007); of these, an

approximately 80% come from Mexico or Central America (Passel, 2006).

In 2004, about 11 million families living in the United States were headed by foreign-born adults (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004) and about 6.6 million families were headed by undocumented adults (Passel, 2006). One in 10 U.S. families with children is considered a mixed-status immigrant family (Fix & Zimmermann, 2001). The vast majority of children in mixed-status families are citizens by birth (Capps, Fix, Ost, Reardon-Anderson, & Passel, 2004). The Pew Hispanic Center found that in 2005 there were about 3.1 million children who were U.S. citizens by birth living in families in which the head of the family or a spouse was unauthorized, accounting for nearly 66% of the children living in undocumented families (Passel, 2006).

### Policies that Disadvantage Undocumented Parents and Their Citizen Children

Policies that disadvantage undocumented immigrant parents are likely to have broad spillover effects on their citizen children. In the United States, welfare and immigration reforms enacted in 1996 created a series of legal, economic, and social challenges for immigrants, particularly those who are undocumented (Fix & Zimmermann, 2001). The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA) (P.L. 104-193) restricts the time period for receiving welfare benefits and forbids immigrants who entered the country after August 1996 from receiving services for five years. An examination of the post-1996 welfare reform trends indicated that welfare use by immigrant households has declined sharply relative to the decline experienced by native households (Borjas, 2002; Fix & Passel, 2002).

In addition to PRWORA, two laws passed in 1996 ushered in stricter U.S. immigration regulations and deportation practices: the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act of 1996 (P.L. 104-132) and the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996 (P.L. 104-208). These two laws radically changed many grounds for exclusion and deportation (Morawetz, 2004) and, in recent years, have led to aggressive deportation practices. Millions of immigrants—both undocumented immigrants and permanent legal residents—are prevented from remaining in

the United States. Deportations have risen steadily; in 2008 the number of immigrants deported reached an all-time record high in U.S. history; a total of 358,886 noncitizens (mainly Mexicans and Central Americans) were deported, an increase of 12% from the previous year (U.S. Department of Homeland Security [DHS], 2009). In addition, more than 811,000 noncitizens were allowed to return to their home countries in 2008 without an order of removal (that is, voluntary departure) (DHS, 2009).

In the wake of the aforementioned changes in welfare and immigration policies, service utilization is particularly challenging for mixed-status families. Mixed-status families are more likely to be disadvantaged in accessing public assistance and services, as noncitizen parents do not have full legal and social membership in the United States and thus cannot access many public resources. Recent legal arrivals are barred from receiving most public benefits because of PRWORA (1996) and, consequently, lack the ability to provide adequate resources for their citizen children (Borjas, 2002; Chow, Bester, & Shinn, 2001). Most undocumented parents do not and will not legalize their status (citizenship or permanent residency) unless current immigration laws change (Kremer, Moccio, & Hammell, 2009). Not only are they ineligible to receive most public benefits, but researchers have indicated that they also may be wary of asking for assistance for their eligible citizen children because of the fears of deportation (Capps et al., 2004; Huang et al., 2006).

### **Latino Immigrant Family Resiliency**

In spite of the many adversities and challenges undocumented Latino immigrant families face, research has documented the resiliency among Latino immigrant individuals, families, and communities. Undocumented immigrants have showed resilience in maintaining a work ethic and moral self-image and emotionally coping with their legally and economically insecure situations (Baker, 2004; Rasmussen, Rosenfeld, Reeves, & Keller, 2007; Simich et al., 2007; Zuniga, 2002). Most contribute in meaningful and diverse ways to their communities, schools, and families (Menjívar, 2006). Whereas any resilient family uses a combination of individual, family, and community strengths and resources in adapting and

adjusting to transitions and stressful events (Simon, Murphy, & Smith, 2005), the Latino immigrant family's resiliency has been closely related to family connectedness (Falicov, 2005), dedication, loyalty, and commitment to family (Suarez-Orozco, 1989). Carger (1996) reflected on the significance of family ties in understanding Latino immigrant families' resiliency:

They [Latino immigrants] help me to understand how she and her husband can do factory and restaurant work 10, 12, 16, even 18 hours a day, almost without stop, to ensure financial support for their children ... [they] speak to me of family ties so strong that they can withstand the guarantee of physical pain, the possibility of loss of life, as everything is risked to visit a dying parent [in Mexico]. (p. 20)

Hence, Latino immigrants demonstrate resiliency and strength in spite of the broad systems and policies that disadvantage them.

In the aftermath of welfare and immigration reforms, undocumented Latino immigrants face barriers to accessing services for their children and families. Research has not systematically explored the impact of the recent upsurge in workplace raids, "knock-and-talk" home raids, detentions, and deportations on immigrants' service utilization. To what extent mixed-status Latino immigrant families, particularly those headed by undocumented immigrants, can overcome the structural barriers and mobilize their resources for the well-being of their children and families deserves research and policymakers' attention.

### **METHOD**

Data used in this study were gathered in the context of a participatory action research (PAR) project of the Post-Deportation Human Rights Project (PDHRP), an initiative of the Center for Human Rights and International Justice at Boston College (for a description of the PDHRP's PAR project and previous qualitative research, see Brabeck, Lykes, & Hershberg, 2011). Qualitative data concerning the service use among Latino immigrants are derived from the PDHRP's in-depth interviews, conducted between February and July 2008, which explored Central American immigrants' experiences related to detention and

deportation. Quantitative data are part of the PDHRP's community survey, conducted between March and May 2009, which documented the impact of the policies of detention and deportation and the threat they pose on the entire Latino immigrant community (not solely undocumented immigrants) and compared the different impact for individuals with varying degrees of legal vulnerability (see Brabeck & Xu, 2010). Additional elements of the PAR process included ongoing reflection and dialogue with participants and action steps—for example, a series of Know Your Rights workshops—that were identified and enacted.

The three qualitative research questions posed in this study are (1) How do undocumented immigrants learn about services and navigate systems to access services for their citizen children? (2) What are undocumented immigrants' experiences of accessing service for their citizen children and what barriers do they face in their efforts? and (3) How do undocumented immigrant parents mobilize resources to meet the needs of their children and families? Two quantitative questions reported in this study are (1) Do rates of service utilization for one's child differ between undocumented and documented immigrant parents? (2) Does undocumented status and the perceived impact of detention/deportation affect one's ability to access services for one's child?

### **Qualitative Approach**

The qualitative approach adopted in-depth semi-structured interviews with 21 Latino parents from 18 families. Interviews focused on participants' experiences with detention and deportation, and service utilization was one of several foci for the interviews. Interview questions, designed to elicit participants' narratives in their own words, primarily focused on family composition and migration history, service utilization and barriers to access services, experiences with detention and deportation, and the impact of deportation experience on their families. Examples of service use-specific questions include the following: Are you able to access services for your child/children's benefit? Can you tell us a story about one of your experiences in accessing one of these services? Can you tell us a story about needing help for your child and not being able to find it? As an immigrant, have you ever been hesitant to use

any of these social services? Can you talk about any concerns you have had about accessing these services for your children? Interviews were conducted in Spanish by a two-person team of social science and legal researchers who are Spanish-English bilingual. All interviews were audiotape recorded; interviews were later transcribed by a Spanish-speaking professional. Qualitative data analysis was conducted in Spanish and selected coded sections were translated into English by a native English speaker for purposes of publication.

### **Quantitative Approach**

The questionnaire used for the community survey was developed on the basis of analyses of the earlier-mentioned qualitative interviews, review of the literature, and extensive consultation with community leaders. On the basis of the demographics of the collaborating organizations and previous qualitative research, survey participants were expected to have lower levels of education; hence, all attempts were made to ensure that the survey was as parsimonious and understandable as possible. The survey questionnaire included demographic information, service utilization, family plan to deal with possible deportation, and self-perceived impacts of deportation. The survey also collected information about participants' legal status and about their and their families' experiences with detention and deportation. As with the qualitative interviews, service utilization was one of several variables investigated by the survey. Service use was assessed by asking seven yes/no format questions that asked participants to consider the previous six months when responding: "I took my child to see a doctor or nurse for medical care"; "I met with a lawyer for legal assistance concerning my child"; "My child attended additional classes (at school or outside of school) to learn English"; "My child was in special program because of his/her disability"; "Our family received welfare checks from the government"; "Our family received food stamps from the government"; and "Our family received free milk/food for my baby from the government." Perceived impact of the threat of detention and deportation on service utilization was assessed with the following Likert-type scale item: "The experience of deportation affects my ability to access services (for example, medical care) for my child" on a three-point Likert-type scale where

1 = yes, 2 = maybe (in Spanish “*tal vez*”), and 3 = no. (Note that the decision to shorten the Likert-type scale was made to ensure that the survey was as comprehensible and straightforward as possible.) The questionnaire was translated into Spanish by a native Spanish-speaking individual, back-translated by a bilingual native English-speaking individual, and then reviewed by two additional native Spanish-speaking individuals of different nationalities to ensure that the language would be comprehensible across national origins. The survey was pilot tested with a sample of eight Latino immigrants before commencing the study. Staff members from Latino immigrant organizations reviewed the questionnaire to ensure its accessibility and usefulness for these populations in lieu of a more formal reliability and validity assessment that was not possible in these contexts. The survey was self-administered; for participants with limited literacy, native Spanish-speaking research assistants administered the survey orally.

### Data Analysis

The qualitative data from interviews were analyzed with an interpretive coding strategy to inductively identify the themes in the interviews. Using this strategy, a coding template was then developed. A bilingual four-person research team conducted the analysis. Once the coding template was developed through discussion and consensus, four research team members coded the interviews separately. Coders then engaged in “constant comparisons” within and across interviews and resolved disagreements through discussions to achieve credibility (Charmaz, 2006; Riessman, 2009). NVivo7 (Bryman, 2003) was used to organize the data and to enumerate and understand relationships among codes. Feedback meetings were held with community members to conduct member checks and explore alternative interpretations. Quantitative data analyses used the SPSS 16.0 software program. Descriptive statistics, *t* tests, chi-square analyses, and Fisher exact probability tests were adopted to identify the different patterns of service use between the family headed by undocumented immigrants and the family headed by documented Latino immigrants.

Qualitative data collection and analysis for this study were conducted first, and preliminary results informed the development of the survey. After the quantitative data analysis, researchers went

back and forth between qualitative and quantitative data analysis, so that preliminary results from one approach could improve the understanding/interpretation of the results of the other kind. Findings are reported in an intertwined manner to support the qualitative findings with the quantitative ones (or vice versa) and to establish convergence of findings (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2006; Morse, 2003).

### Participants

Participants for the interviews and the community survey were recruited through Latino immigrant community organizations in metropolitan areas in the northeast region of the United States. One of the two organizations that collaborated in the qualitative phase also participated in the quantitative phase. As noted, the previous and ongoing PAR work of the PDHRP facilitated the process of building relationships with these community organizations. The three criteria for participation were as follows: A person had to be (1) an immigrant from a Latin American country, (2) 18 years of age or older, and (3) a parent of at least one child under age 18 years living currently in the United States. As a result of the convenience sampling process, neither sample can be considered representative. Because participants were recruited through the same or similar community organizations in the same geographic neighborhoods, qualitative and quantitative data were considered as being gathered from the same Latino immigrant community.

Qualitative data included information from 21 Latino parents from 18 families, including 13 families headed by undocumented parents. Among the 21 parents, 12 (57%) were women; 67% were from Guatemala. The average number of children in each family was 2.53, with 43 children across families. Among participants’ children living in the United States, 40 (93%) were U.S.-born citizens and three (7%) were undocumented. The majority of parents (82.4%) at the time of interview were employed, and the average years they had been in the United States was 11.9 (*SD* = 6.0). Six families (33%) had experienced the detention of an immediate family member, and eight families (44%) had experienced the deportation of an immediate or extended family member.

The survey collected information from 132 Latino immigrant parents who, at the time of survey, had at least one child younger than

**Table 1: Demographic Information: Undocumented versus Documented Parents**

Demographic	Undocumented Parents (n = 38)			Documented Parents (n = 82)		
	M	SD	%	M	SD	%
Age*	34.5	7.7		38.2	7.6	
Gender (male)			27.8			26.2
No. of children	2.1	1.0		2.2	2.2	
Years in United States**	9.5	4.2		12.8	7.0	
Having a partner			86.8			78.3
Being employed			63.2			62.2

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

18 years old living in the United States. The average age was 36.7 ( $SD = 8.11$ ); 70.5% were women. The top three countries of origin were Guatemala (37.2%), Colombia (17.8%), and the Dominican Republic (14.0%). The majority of participants had a partner (80%) and worked part-time or full-time at the time of the survey (58.6%). Across participants, 21% were recent immigrants and had been in the United States less than five years; 48.8% were long-term residents and had lived in the United States for more than 10 years. Among the 132 survey participants, the vast majority (73.5%) had children who were born in the United States.

Fifty participants (37.9%) in the survey claimed to be undocumented. Among the 50 undocumented parents, 38 (76%) reported that they had U.S.-born children. Because this study sought to compare mixed-status families with families headed by documented parents, the 12 undocumented Latino parents who did not have a U.S.-born child at the time of survey were excluded from further analysis. Hence, 120 participants were included in the present analyses. Undocumented Latino immigrant parents and documented Latino immigrant parents shared a similar demographic profile, except that undocumented immigrants were significantly younger than documented immigrants and, on average, undocumented immigrants had lived in the United States for a significantly shorter time than documented immigrants (see Table 1).

## RESULTS

### Service Use and Undocumented Status

Service use data from the survey were analyzed to explore differences between undocumented and documented parents' service utilization for their

citizen children. Chi-square statistics and *t* test results indicate that service use for the children among families headed by undocumented parents did not differ significantly from that for the children in families headed by documented Latino immigrants (see Table 2). In fact, trends in the data indicate that the number of undocumented families who were able to access health care, legal, and English-as-a-second-language services for their children was slightly higher than the number of documented families, though the difference was not significant. A notable difference in service use between documented and undocumented immigrant families was found in their participation in the public welfare programs. Families headed by undocumented parents received welfare checks (that is, they participated in Temporary Assistance for Needy Families [TANF] or other cash benefit programs) at a notably, though not significantly, lower level than families headed by documented Latino immigrants. The odds ratio of participating in TANF was calculated by using the contingency table; the result is 0.328 for families headed by undocumented versus documented parents. However, families headed by undocumented parents received Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) benefits (such as "receiving free milk/food for my baby from the government") at a significantly higher level than did families headed by documented Latino immigrants; the odds ratio of using WIC for families headed by undocumented versus legal parents was 2.79. Both types of families accessed the Food Stamp program at a similar level.

The majority of undocumented parents in the survey said that the existence of detention and deportation affects their ability to access services for their children (44.4%), which was significantly higher than the percentage of documented

**Table 2: Service Use among Latino Families, by Service Type: Undocumented versus Documented Parents**

Service Use	Families Headed by Undocumented Parent (n = 38)			Families Headed by Documented Parent (n = 82)		
	M	SD	%	M	SD	%
For children	1.28	0.86		1.15	0.74	
Health care			81.6			76.8
ESL			23.7			15.9
Special ed. program			13.2			17.1
Legal services			7.9			6.1
For family	0.82	0.87		0.60	0.83	
Welfare check*			7.9			20.7
Food stamps			26.3			23.2
WIC**			47.4			24.4

Note: WIC = Women, Infants, and Children; ESL = English as a second language.

\* $\chi^2(1, N = 120) = 3.08, p = .079$ ; Fisher exact probability test,  $p = .11$ .

\*\* $\chi^2(1, N = 120) = 6.34, p = .01$ ; Fisher exact probability test,  $p = .02$ .

**Table 3: Perceived Negative Impact of Deportation on Service Use: Undocumented versus Documented Families (%)**

Service Use for My Child <sup>a</sup>	Yes	Maybe	No
Families headed by undocumented parents	44.4	22.2	33.3
Families headed by documented parents <sup>b</sup>	24.1	6.3	69.6
With family members detained, deported, or both	39.4	6.1	54.4
Without family members detained, deported, or both	13.0	6.5	80.4

<sup>a</sup> $\chi^2(2, N = 115) = 14.495, p = .001$ ; Fisher exact probability test,  $p = .00$ .

<sup>b</sup> $\chi^2(2, N = 79) = 7.404, p = .025$ ; Fisher exact probability test,  $p = .02$ .

parents (see Table 3). In addition, among families headed by documented parents, parents who had experienced the detention or deportation of a family member reported a greater impact of the existence of these policies on their ability to access services—39.4% claimed that the existence of detention and deportation would affect their service use for their children, which is significantly higher than the percentage of documented parents without a family member detained or deported (see Table 3).

### Service Use and Social Networks

The interview data, particularly data from 13 undocumented families, helped to explain the service utilization behaviors of Latino parents in

mixed-status families. One major theme that demonstrated family resiliency accounted for service use behaviors of undocumented parents: Social networks embodied in Latino/a relationships. Interview data suggested that undocumented parents learned about and navigated systems to access services for their children with the support of their social networks and through their community. Participants discussed several ways in which they learned about services that would be available to their families, particularly free services that did not check legal documentation. Family members, friends, neighbors, and coworkers, especially those who have been in the United States for a longer period of time, speak English, and “know the system,” have become crucial sources of information about how to enroll children in school, find clinics with Spanish-speaking staff, and access public programs.

One undocumented parent explained how he learned of a clinic with Spanish-speaking staff where documentation of legal status was not checked and how to fill out necessary paperwork to obtain insurance for his pregnant wife: “Many people have had children, including my brother. He advised us how to [obtain medical care].” Another parent said: “She [neighbor] always told me, ‘Go there; look I get this here; there they help you; they’re good people.’” When describing how she found out about food stamps, one participant explained, “The woman I lived with—I went with her, and she told me that they help

you there, and she brought me and I filled out the application, and they gave me the [food] stamps and everything.” A father shared his family’s experience of applying for health care and WIC:

The first time, a woman—she was born here but is Guatemalan—a very good friend of my wife. . . . When my wife was pregnant with the first baby, she said, ‘We’re going to the clinic.’ She brought her to the clinic and told her, ‘We’ll fill out an application; it’ll cover the labor and then when the baby is born, she or he will get insurance.’

Another participant said, “Because at my work there are people who tell you, ‘Why don’t you go there? They will take care of you there.’”

From their descriptions, the social networks were not only helpful in connecting undocumented parents with services, but also essential because networks supplied needed information, interpretation, and transportation. These resources have the potential to overcome major barriers to service use, such as lack of knowledge about U.S. care systems, limited English proficiency, no public transportation to access services, and lack of information that might ease anxiety related to their vulnerable legal status. In addition to immigrants’ personal social networks, immigrant community organizations and churches are additional sources of guidance, support, and counsel regarding how to navigate systems. Television, particularly Spanish-language stations, has become a source of information about, for example, health care. Hence, using their personal connections, and through the embedded knowledge in the extensive networks, undocumented immigrants became resourceful and were able to find ways to navigate the system; as one participant explained, “The resources are there by means of the social network.”

### **Service Use Experience and Parental Efficacy**

It was further evident from the qualitative data that participants’ positive experiences of help seeking contributed to a growing parental efficacy. Among our participants, scenarios of service use varied greatly. Fear was present, particularly when accessing public welfare benefits; fear of deportation precluded undocumented parents from

seeking services in specific places. For example, one parent said, “I wouldn’t go into a government building because I know that once I arrive, they will grab me and deport me.” Some participants described their attempts to access help in medical clinics and hospitals as relatively easy, particularly when they were seeking services for their U.S.-born children. Despite this, fear was still present. One participant, whose U.S.-born son has asthma, explained,

We tried to bring him to the clinic, but people told us Immigration was there. People told me that Immigration was there at the clinic. We didn’t know if it was rumors or not. I was scared to bring him there. Where could we bring him? We stayed here at home and gave him the oxygen for his asthma here.

Nevertheless, experiences of undocumented Latino parents showed that, once they approached service agencies, hospitals and schools in particular functioned as entry points into a wider array of services for undocumented families. Hospitals and medical clinics connected participants with economic assistance (for example, WIC, food stamps), psychosocial support (for example, social workers), additional health care referrals (for example, dentists), and early childhood programs (for example, Head Start). One undocumented parent explained that through the health clinic his wife also was connected with a social worker and helped to apply for WIC. Another mother was referred to an early intervention program for her son, who was exhibiting signs of developmental delays. Schools similarly are places in which participants’ children gained access to a wide array of psychosocial supports, including after-school programs, vaccines, speech and occupational therapy, counseling, and academic and behavioral interventions. A nine-year-old child whose mother was facing deportation received counseling service with school mental health personnel.

As a result of positive service use experience with hospitals and schools, parents described a sense of growing efficacy in their ability to access benefits and services on behalf of their children. For example, one participant, who has a nine-year-old child with a congenital hip defect, described relying on her husband, who speaks



English, to bring her and her daughter to the hospital. Forced to go alone one day, she realized that there was a bilingual staff in the hospital who could assist her: "It was a big change from when I had to wait until there was someone [from home] here who could help me." Whereas once she relied on her husband to navigate the health care services for her child, she could now act autonomously. Hence, despite the barriers, as parents increasingly successfully navigate the systems, they become more self-confident and self-reliant.

## DISCUSSION

Like many Latino immigrant families, families in this study face a unique set of challenges to accessing and using services, such as lack of English proficiency, legal status, and lack of adequate education to understand service information. This study considered the impact of 1996 welfare and immigration reforms on mixed-status Latino families' service use and explored to what extent parents' undocumented status has affected the service use for U.S.-born children. Both quantitative and qualitative data from this study indicate that mixed-status Latino families (undocumented parents with U.S.-born children) use a variety of services for their children. In theory, service utilization for U.S.-born children should not be affected by parents' undocumented status. Social services agencies and community organizations provide a variety of service programs for undocumented families; and accessing these services should cause only minimal worry among mixed-status families because of their legal vulnerability. From this perspective, our finding that families headed by undocumented immigrants used services at a level similar to that used by families headed by documented Latino immigrants is not surprising.

In this study, Latino families headed by undocumented parents had a significant different rate of participation in certain welfare programs. It is interesting that, although the cash benefits program TANF, food stamps, and WIC are public programs available to low-income families with children, Latino families headed by undocumented parents had lower levels of participating in TANF but higher levels of receiving WIC and were at a similar level of getting food stamps compared with families headed by documented parents. It is noted that these results mimic some previous

studies based on national statistics; for example, the Center for Immigration Studies estimated that households headed by undocumented parents on average received \$6 TANF, \$162 food stamps, and \$131 WIC, and households headed by documented parents received \$54, \$175, and \$32 for TANF, food stamps, and WIC, respectively (Camarota, 2004).

In general, undocumented immigrants are not eligible for federal public benefits, such as income supplements (for example, social security, Supplemental Security Income, and TANF), health care (Medicaid and Medicare), and food stamps; however, there are some public programs (for example, emergency health care services, WIC) available to immigrants regardless of their legal status. In practice, variations exist in local policies, procedures, program eligibility, and implementation; for example, states have "child-only" rules that allow needy eligible children to receive TANF benefits even if parents are ineligible; the Federal Citizenship and Identity Requirements has been applied differently in different states. As opposed to a program like WIC, which is more universally available to newborn children and nursing mothers, depending on need, the features of TANF require administration agencies to adopt a strict procedure and check every family member's legal status, which would have resulted in increased difficulties for families with undocumented members. These practice variations help explain the service utilization patterns among families headed by undocumented parents. Unfortunately, as TANF is often the gateway to federal and state child care subsidies, limited TANF use may further jeopardize the well-being of U.S. citizen children in families headed by undocumented parents.

Although undocumented parents accessed services for their citizen children, this study suggests that the fear to use services due to undocumented status is nonetheless deeply experienced. Undocumented immigrant parents reported a significantly higher level of fear of the negative impacts of deportation on their service use than did documented immigrant parents. For noncitizen families, previous studies have suggested that PRWORA and other immigration policies have exacerbated immigrants' fears that began after the publicity about the immigration authorities' (formerly Immigration and Naturalization Service and

now Citizenship and Immigration Services) efforts to apply “public charge” enforcement, asking immigrants to repay the value of benefits received or else jeopardize their U.S. citizen naturalization (Ku & Matani, 2001). This has been described as “chilling effect” (Fix & Passel, 2002). In this study, some interview data suggest that the fear and the threat of deportation and other legal actions affects some undocumented families who either limit or delay their service use for their children, or even withdraw from using services altogether.

In this study, the capacity of undocumented families to access a variety of services at a similar level as documented families is primarily due to their social networks and Latino community. That is, with the help and support from friends, coworkers, neighbors, family, churches, and community organizations, undocumented immigrants learn where and how to access services. Available literature does suggest that social networks contribute to and partially explain the service utilization among immigrant population. For example, Borjas and Hilton (1996) found that participation in a specific welfare program among newly arrived immigrants was correlated with mean participation in that program for the earlier immigrant wave, which hinted at ethnic networks transmitting information about welfare programs. Deri (2005) and Devillanova (2008) found strong evidence of network effects on the decision to use health care services among undocumented immigrants, in particular the initial contact with the system. Bertrand, Luttmner, and Mullainathan (2000) said that networks among immigrant groups can increase welfare program participation through multiplier effects. The present study confirmed these previous findings; furthermore, this study indicates that network effects apply to undocumented immigrants even in the current climate of fear and vulnerability. The fact that the participants in this study were recruited through and therefore were already connected to community organizations and linked into a social support network may enhance the possibility that they were able to access services for their children, in spite of their undocumented status, fears of deportation, and other barriers (for example, language, limited information, and cost).

From the individual perspective, the behavior of undocumented Latino parents—navigating

legal and social systems and using services regardless of their vulnerability to legal actions, such as deportation—implies a survivor capacity. The undocumented immigrants in this study have been working and living in the United States for a relatively long period of time (from both qualitative and quantitative data, the average years in the United States was around 10 years); the United States is not a temporary place for them, and many may aspire to obtain legal status. They may be victims of U.S. immigration and welfare policies and other forces of disenfranchisement, but they are also survivors who overcame numerous odds to travel to another country and make a life. Undocumented and documented parents’ service utilization is part of their effort to survive and ensure the survival of their children in the United States. From the resilience perspective, as migration changes life circumstances and brings new stressors, resilience emerges (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000; McCubbin, Balling, Possin, Friedrich, & Byrne, 2002; Walsh, 2002). Among many factors that contribute to resilience, social networks and support have been identified as key (Black & Lobo, 2008). Preliminary results from this study suggest links between broader social networks, resiliency, and service utilization. This is an area that future research might explore.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

One limitation of this study is the measure of service utilization. The dichotomous measure of using social services is an admittedly narrow operationalization, which lacks detailed information about service use frequency, whether services were provided with culture competency, and the gap between services needed and services received. Also, survey data are self-reported and cross-sectional, preventing this study from drawing any causal inferences. In addition, as participants were recruited from immigrant community organizations, the sample is likely to be only as representative as any sample of residents obtained in certain immigrant neighborhoods in the northeastern region of the United States. Also, overall interview and questions were not specially developed to study the service use behaviors among undocumented immigrants, precluding more detailed and nuanced information. Given the huge differences in each family’s situation in

terms of need and capacity of accessing services, this is unfortunate.

Despite these cautions, a strength of the study is that—as the undocumented Latino sample is difficult to access, questions about legal status are difficult to ask, and, consequently, research with this population is greatly restricted—access to such data has only become available through a large community-based project. Hence, these survey and interview data provide one of the first glimpses into the service use behaviors of undocumented Latino immigrants in the United States.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE AND CONCLUSION

Meeting the needs of mixed-status Latino immigrant families has become challenging, particularly in cities that have experienced rapid growth in Latino immigrant populations, as the needs outpace material resources as well as the number of bilingual and bicultural professionals. Given the socioeconomic-legal context in the United States, better assistance for this group of people effectively requires innovative strategies in program development, service delivery, and funding structures. Approaches such as interdisciplinary collaboration, interagency partnership, and community one-stop service delivery show promise to address service use barriers. Meanwhile, it is also crucial to understand that Latino immigrants (both documented and undocumented) are active survivors with resilient families. Their strengths, such as social networks, should be recognized and built into service delivery systems. Programs should facilitate information flow, foster psychosocial supports, and help immigrants connect with inside and outside Latino communities. Programs might also capitalize on the important role that the local Spanish media (for example, television, newspaper, Web sites) could play in the dissemination of information.

This study found that hospitals and schools often become the entry points for undocumented families; connecting with a broad array of services, these institutions are becoming important links in immigrants' support networks. The role of social workers, especially bilingual social workers, in these settings should not be underestimated. In an era of economic recession, continuingly providing adequate services to mixed-status Latino families is imperative. Historically, economic recession has

been accompanied by anti-immigration sentiment. For example, the Chinese Exclusion Act came at a time when the United States suffered several years of severe economic depression and unemployment in the 1870s (Choy, Dong, & Hom, 1994). Today, U.S. legislation toward immigrants and their access to public assistance remains generally unsympathetic; recent health care reforms left the whole undocumented immigrant group untouched. Policymakers need to be aware that services for undocumented immigrants benefit not only these "illegal aliens" but also undocumented parents' U.S. citizen children. Social work practice—focusing on the Latino immigrants' strengths and resources in the immigrant community—would not only help undocumented Latino immigrants to "get by" or cope with the demands of everyday life and other stressors, but also offer the leverage and help them to "get ahead," which would eventually change Latino immigrants' opportunity structure in U.S. society. **SWR**

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**Qingwen Xu, PhD**, is associate professor, School of Social Work, Tulane University, 6823 St. Charles Avenue, Building 9, New Orleans, LA 70118; e-mail: [qxu2@tulane.edu](mailto:qxu2@tulane.edu).

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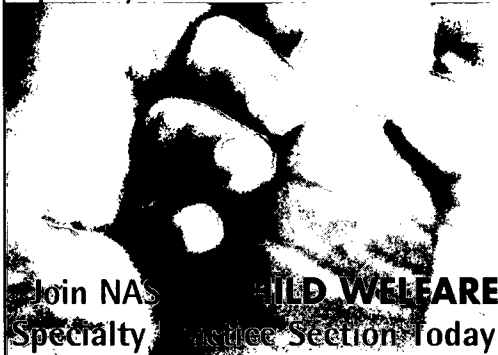
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