

# Immigration: A Critical Issue for Child Welfare



*Sonia C. Velazquez*

*American Humane Association*

# Two Issues to Examine



## Focus on Latino Families

- Realizing a vision of a Child Welfare System that serves all families regardless of their immigrant status
- Being Humane

# Finding Key Framing Issues

“It is important that agencies move beyond the traditional child welfare data and talk with frontline community-based agencies to find out the needs of their local community. Talk to the churches, food bank, free clinics to keep track of the language and country of origin of your client population”

*Rene Velasquez*

*AECF Consultant, CA*

# Processes of Acculturation

Most immigrant families bring a rich cultural heritage, honorable work ethic, and strong family values to this country.

These positive contributions are undermined when legal documentation acculturation and immigration issues impose deficits to their character and are demeaning to their dignity.

*Rene Velasquez*

The background of the slide is a solid blue color. In the lower right quadrant, there are several decorative elements consisting of concentric circles, resembling ripples in water. These circles are light blue and vary in size and opacity, creating a subtle pattern.

# Intra-Familial Issues

- “Children often acculturate faster than their parents, resulting in parents who feel they can no longer control their children and preserve the closeness they had previously established.”
- ---from article “The Impact of Migration and Acculturation on Latino Children and Families: Implications for Child Welfare Practice”
- *Alan Dettlaff, Univ of Illinois at Chicago and*
- *Joan Rycraft, Univ of Texas at Arlington*

# Vulnerabilities

*R. Capps, 2008*

- Poverty levels of immigrant families
- Poverty sustained in spite of 2 parent home
- Single parent home better in immigrant families
- Greater food and health problems

# Vulnerabilities

- Families experience significant challenges, often resulting in fear, stress, and isolation.
- Children are considered 'at risk' of maltreatment due to this stress.



# Observations: Protections

- Many crimes against undocumented immigrants go unreported, including robberies, burglaries, rape, violent crimes. They are often victims when trying to purchase cars or rent apartments from unscrupulous vendors.

*Rene Velasquez,  
AECF, California*



# Observations on Wellbeing


More Latino children are suffering from health problems, obesity, learning disorders, panic attacks and a series of other health issues related to stress (i.e. fear of deportation/separation, economic hardship of going “underground”).

*Rene Velasquez*

*AECF California*



# Vulnerabilities

- High rental and lack of documentation force families to share small spaces with other adults.
  - Limited access to kitchen force families to turn to fast-food and other unhealthy options.
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# Vulnerabilities

- Massive overcrowding with 2-3 families sharing small apartments undermine the stability and healthy development and well-being of children.
- The lack of private space exposes children to sexual activities, substance abuse, and domestic violence.

# System Intervention

- “The children are pulled out of the home because they want to err on the side of caution, which is fine where these are clearly cases of abuse and neglect. But most of these kids go home eventually and they aren’t the same kids anymore. They threatened their parents with 911 calls, some of the young ones forget their Spanish, and all of them have been traumatized.”

---interview quoted in the report “Undercounted, Underserved: Immigrants and Refugee Families in the Child Welfare System”  
Annie E. Casey Foundation


# A Vision for Children and Families at the Intersection of Child Welfare and Immigration



# Child Welfare Systems

- Immigrant children and families are one of the largest and fastest-growing populations in the U.S.
- When involved in the child welfare system their unique needs must be addressed
- Focus on achieving positive outcomes of safety, permanency, and well-being.


# Key Issues of the Intersection of Immigration and Child Welfare to be Advanced

- Services available to all Children (and their families) Regardless of their Immigration Status
  - Federal, State, and Local policies encouraging full integration of immigrant families into US Society through an expanded delivery of child welfare services
  - Professionals (social work, courts) becoming better informed about immigration laws and best practices
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# First Migration and Child Welfare Roundtable

## Issues that emerged

- Research
  - Workforce and Training
  - Collaboration and Best Practice
  - Policy and Advocacy
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# First Roundtable Synthesis and Report

Impact of Emerging Issues on:

- **Safety**
- **Permanency**
- **Child and Family Well-being**

# Implications of Lack of Research: Safety, Permanence, & Well-Being

- Due to the lack of data, it is difficult to demonstrate the need for funding, policy development, practice guidelines, and further research,
- This results in a lack of information necessary to focus on protective / risk factors and produce positive outcomes
- Positive outcomes of Safety and Permanency require information on interventions that effectively address the issues in immigrant families
- Positive outcomes of well-being require information on the unique health, mental health, and educational needs of immigrant children in the child welfare system

# Emerging Issues: Policy / Advocacy

- There is a lack of consistent policies in child welfare agencies addressing the needs of immigrant children and families.
- Existing state and federal policies create barriers to effective service delivery.
- State and federal policies, combined with anti-immigrant sentiment, have resulted in families who are fearful of accessing benefits.
- There is a need for policy development concerning child welfare systems' response to mixed status families and to separated and unaccompanied immigrant children.

# Implications of Unprepared Workforce for Safety, Permanency, and Well-Being

- Workforce unprepared to deliver array of services
- Filtering information and making decisions requires appropriate cultural lens
- Workforce needs to be trained to recognize underlying causes of concern within the family system
- Facilitating achievement of positive outcomes of well-being requires understanding of unique physical health, mental health, and educational needs of immigrant children

# Effective Collaboration and Transnational Resources

- Foreign Embassies and Consulates - MOU
- Agencies that can provide home studies in other countries
- Immigration legal services that can provide pro bono assistance for children
- Schools of Social Work
- Immigrant/refugee communities
- Agencies specializing in services to immigrants and refugees
- International Conventions

# New Americans and Child Protection Initiative

- Partnership between the Missouri Department of Social Services' Children's Division and the International Institute of St. Louis
- Collaboration began with informal meetings and partnership evolved
- Services now include:
  - **Interpretation**
  - **Joint hotline response**
  - **Cross-trainings**
  - **Job shadowing**
  - Cultural consultations
  - Boy Scout and Girl Scout troops
  - "Coffee klatches"
  - CPS workers based in the schools
- At no additional cost to the agencies



# Best Practice Models: ECBOs



Morland/BRYCS (2006)

