

Increased Immigration Enforcement and Perceived Discrimination Among Latino Immigrants

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Source: (John Amis, n.d.)

An estimated 11.3 million undocumented immigrants reside in the United States (U.S.), representing about 3.5% of the total U.S. population (Krogstad & Passel, 2015; Passel, Cohn, Krogstad, & Gonzalez-Barrera, 2014). The number of undocumented immigrants has been stable over the past seven years (Becerra, Androff, Ayón, & Castillo, 2012; Chavez, 2013). Research has found that undocumented immigrants commit fewer crimes (Becerra, Androff, Ayón & Becerra, 2012) and actually help create jobs and stimulate the economy (U.S. Chamber of Commerce, n.d.). Nevertheless, both the media and politicians continue to decry that the U.S. is being overrun and overwhelmed by criminal, undocumented immigrants who burden the economy and steal jobs from American-born citizens (Becerra et al., 2012; Chavez, 2013). Immigrants come to the U.S. to make a better living for themselves and their families; seeking increased freedoms and economic opportunities (Raleigh & Kao, 2010). However, Latinos, especially undocumented Latinos, are commonly subjected to discrimination and marginalized from mainstream society due to their immigration status (Massey & Pren, 2012b). According to Sullivan and Rehm (2005), they often live in social environments where they are stigmatized as deviant and blamed for societal problems.

After the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, there was an increased fear and distrust of immigrants. The Great Recession which began in late 2007, resulted in immigrants being used as scapegoats, blamed for the economic hardships and the loss of traditional American culture (Chavez, 2013). As a result of this anti-immigrant rhetoric and fear of immigrants, an increase of repressive immigration policies and enforcement strategies— at the federal, state, and local level—have been enacted (Arbona et al., 2010; Capps, Castaneda, Chaudry, & Santos, 2007; Hacker et al., 2011). These immigration policies and enforcement strategies— which many perceive to discriminate against Latinos— significantly and negatively, affect Latinos' aspirations for upward mobility (Becerra, Androff, Cimino, Wagaman, & Blanchard, 2013).



Immigrants in the United States

Immigrants come to the U.S. to make a better living for themselves and their families; seeking increased freedoms and economic opportunities.



Immigration Status

Latinos, especially undocumented Latinos, are commonly subjected to discrimination and marginalized from mainstream society due to their immigration status.

Laws and Increased Immigration Enforcement

The cumulative effects of harsh immigration laws increased enforcement actions, and a negative stigmatization of immigrants build upon one another to harm immigrant and citizen alike.

The anti-immigrant sentiment has been pervasive in the U.S. throughout its history. More recently, various states in the U.S. have enacted strict anti-immigration policies. Arizona, in particular, has espoused a number of rigid immigration policies and enforcement strategies that specifically target Latinos. For example the implementation of Arizona Senate Bill 1070 (SB1070), which allowed law enforcement officers to consider race or nationality as a basis for requesting proof of immigration status and detain anyone they “reasonably suspected” to be undocumented. SB1070 became the model for other anti-immigrant policies throughout the country and exacerbated the issues caused by an enforcement-focused immigration agenda. Exclusionary immigration policies and the increase in immigration enforcement at the federal, state, and local levels, may contribute to increased fear and anxiety in Latino immigrant communities.

Perceived and experienced discrimination appear to negatively impact Latinos’ health. In a meta-analysis of research studies, perceived discrimination was associated with adverse physical and mental health outcomes among diverse ethnic groups (Pascoe & Smart Richman, 2009). Studies have found that perceived and experienced discrimination are associated with deleterious mental health consequences—including higher incidence of stress, anxiety and depression (Edwards & Romero, 2008; Schmitt, Branscombe, Postmes, & Garcia, 2014).



Source: (Uri Lerner, n.d.)

“Perceived and experienced discrimination appear to negatively impact Latinos’ health.”

Other studies, with nationally representative samples of Latino adults, suggest that higher levels of perceived are related to higher incidence of substance abuse (Otiniano Verissimo, Gee, Ford, & Iguchi, 2014); PTSD (Pole, Best, Metsler, & Marmar, 2005); and suicidal ideation and suicide attempts (Perez-Rodriguez et al., 2014).

Anti-immigrant rhetoric inevitably affects the socio-political climate in the communities where undocumented families reside (Trujillo & Paluck, 2012), exacerbating the stigmatization and discrimination that affect the lives of not just undocumented immigrants, but immigrants with legal status as well (Ayón & Becerra, 2013; Capps et al., 2007). The increase in restrictive immigration policies and enforcement strategies at both the state and federal level, make it necessary to further examine the impact of perceived discrimination among Latinos in the context of the current anti-immigrant climate. This study¹ contributes to the existing literature and knowledge base to better understand the impacts these policies and enforcement strategies have on Latinos’ lives and their confidence in a better future.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study uses the legal violence theoretical framework (Menjivar & Abrego, 2012). Violence, physical or non-physical, is motivated by the intent to cause harm (Jackman, 2002). Loss of earnings, imprisonment, stigmatization, and exclusion, as well as negative psychological outcomes such as fear, anxiety, shame, and low self-esteem are examples of non-physical violence (Jackman, 2002). Structural violence, on the other hand, examines how social structures can cause harm and result in negative outcomes to certain populations (Farmer, 2003).

Legal violence builds up on the definitions of violence and structural violence. It is used to refer to the various forms of structural injustices that harm individuals through the implementation of restrictive immigration laws and policies (Menjivar & Abrego, 2012). Becerra and colleagues use the legal violence framework to analyze the impacts of these restrictive immigration policies and enforcement strategies on Latino immigrants.



Source: (Irin Carmon, 2010)

¹ Becerra, D. Castillo, J., Silva Aciniega, M.R., Ghosn Nanny, M.B., & Nguyen, V. (2018). Increased immigration Enforcement and Perceived Discrimination among Latino Immigrants. *J. Soc. & Soc. Welfare*, 45, 39.

FINDINGS

Greater perceived discrimination was significantly related to participants':

- I. Avoidance of immigration officials
 - II. Family suffering
 - III. Friends suffering
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Greater perceived discrimination was significantly related to lower confidence in a better future for:

- I. The individual
 - II. Their families
 - III. Their children
 - IV. The children of today.
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Source: (Society of Clinical Psychology, n.d.)

Methods

Sample

The data for this study were collected in the summer and fall of 2014. The sample consisted of 213 Latino immigrants, ages 18 and older, residing in Arizona. Of those participants, 72 (33.8%) were males and 141 (66.2%) females. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 56 and older; the mean age was 38. A total of 124 (58%) participants reported having less than a high school diploma; and 113 (53.1%) reported their current financial situation as "average."

Measures

Participants self-reported their gender, age, socioeconomic status, highest level of education, and years living in the U.S. Further, perceived discrimination was measured using the Perceived Discrimination in the U.S. (PDIUS) scale²; scores range from 6 to 24 and higher scores indicate higher levels of perceived discrimination. To measure the impact of immigration policies on participants' lives, they were asked to respond to four statements³.

Analysis

This study examined the relationship between participants' perceptions of discrimination in the context of recent immigrant policies and: (1) participants avoiding immigration officials; (2) suffering of the family; (3) suffering of friends; (4) confidence in a better future for themselves, their families, and the children of today.

Results

Becerra and colleagues (2014) found that greater perceived discrimination was significantly related to participants' (1) avoidance of immigration officials; (2) family suffering; and (3) friends suffering. In particular, there is a significant and negative relationship between higher socioeconomic status (SES) and reporting avoiding immigration officials—as SES increases participants' avoidance of immigration officials decreases. Further, results indicate a positive and significant relationship between greater perceived discrimination and participants reporting that their friends and family had suffered. Particularly, results indicate that there is a positive and significant relationship between being female, having a higher SES, and greater number of years in the U.S. were significantly more likely to express confidence in a better future for themselves, their family, their children, and the children of today. Contrastingly, greater perceived discrimination was significantly related to lower confidence in a better future for the individual, their families, their children, and the children of today.

² The scale is composed of questions such as: "Mexican immigrants are treated badly by people in the U.S."; "Laws in the U.S. discriminate against Mexican immigrants"; and "Businesses in the U.S. discriminate against Mexican immigrants." The response options include (1=Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree).

³ The questionnaire asked, "As a result of the current immigration policies: (1) I avoid immigration officials; (2) My family has suffered; and (3) My friends have suffered." The response options were 1= strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. The participants were also asked "As a result of the current immigration policies how much confidence do you have in: (1) better future for yourself?; (better future for your family?; (3) better future for your children?; and (4) better future for the children of today?" The response options were 1= very little to 4 = a great deal.

Discussion

The results of this study contribute to the understanding of the relationship between recent immigration policies and perceptions of discrimination among Latino immigrants. Furthermore, the results may be more relevant in this current political and social environment with the increase in repressive immigration policies and enforcement strategies.



Source: (David J. Phillip, n.d.)

The results of this study are consistent with the legal violence framework (Menjívar & Abrego, 2012). Legal violence is used to refer to the various forms of structural injustices in society, which harm individuals through the rule of law (Menjívar & Abrego, 2012). The effects of restrictive immigration laws and policies—with seemingly positive intentions—are violent in that they intentionally inflict legal harm. Thus, legal harm results in an array of immediate and long-term consequences. Unfortunately, the ramifications of these laws and policies are acceptable to most of society because they are framed in the name of national and economic security.

Consistent with previous research, this study indicates that the effects of discrimination have negative effects on Latino communities. According to previous research findings, some of the harmful effects of discrimination include, (1) a weakened sense of identity, (2) increased stress levels, (3) worsened physical and mental health, (4) socioeconomic difficulties, (5) isolation from law enforcement and (6) withdrawal from communities as a result of recent immigration policies (Capps et al., 2007; Chaudry et al., 2010; Hacker et al., 2011; Roehling, Hernandez Jarvis, Sprik & Campbell, 2010; Santos, Menjívar, & Godfrey, 2013; Theodore & Habans, 2016).

The results indicate that higher levels of perceived discrimination were significantly related with avoidance of immigration officials. This avoidance and decreased sense of trust can result in a diminished sense of safety by Latinos, as well as increased fear and unwillingness to report crimes and share information civic institutions (Barreto & Segura, 2011; Becerra, Wagaman, Androff, Messing & Castillo, 2017; Theodore & Habans, 2016). For example, female victims of domestic abuse have dropped their cases or have been deterred from appearing in court for fear of detention and deportation (Glenn, 2017). Instead of the desired effect of feeling safer with increased law enforcement involvement in communities, individuals feel less safe (Hardy et al., 2012; Theodore & Habans, 2016), which diminishes law enforcements capacity to fulfill its public safety mandate.

HARMFUL EFFECTS OF DISCRIMINATION

1. A weakened sense of identity
2. Increased stress levels
3. Worsened physical and mental health
4. Socioeconomic difficulties
5. Isolation from law enforcement
6. Withdrawal from communities as a result of recent immigration policies

The results found a significant relationship between participants with higher levels of perceived discrimination and lower confidence in better future for the individual participants, for their families, for their children, and for the children of the future. As previously mentioned, immigrants come to the U.S. with optimism to improve the quality of life for themselves and their families, but losing hope and optimism for the future can have negative implications. Previous studies have found that diminished levels of hope and optimism have negative health implications (Bryant & Cvengros 2004; Yarcheski, Scoloveno, & Mahon, 1994). These negative health outcomes are exacerbated when a loss of hope and optimism are combined with higher levels of perceived discrimination and a fear of deportation due to immigration status (Finch & Vega, 2003).



Source: (Jonathan McIntosh, 2006)

IMPLICATIONS TO SOCIAL WORK

1. Collaborate with multiple stakeholders, including, advocacy groups, think tanks, healthcare professionals, law enforcement, politicians to create immigration policy solutions that are grounded in social justice and human rights values
2. Conduct outreach and focus on educating both documented and undocumented immigrants on how to protect their rights

Social Work Implications

Discriminatory immigration policies perpetuate institutional systems of oppression and work against the core values of social work.

The negative effects of discrimination on the Latino community in particular, makes it necessary for social workers and policy makers to stand against discriminatory legislation. Discriminatory immigration policies perpetuate institutional systems of oppression and work against the core values of social work. Instead of promoting politically violent legislation that negatively affect the Latino community, social workers should collaborate with multiple stakeholders, including, advocacy groups, think tanks, healthcare professionals, law enforcement, politicians, and other stakeholders, to create immigration policy solutions that are grounded in social justice and human rights values. For example, social workers can conduct outreach and focus on educating both documented and undocumented immigrants on how to protect their rights, especially in encounters with law enforcement and the criminal justice system. Researchers hope that the study findings can serve as a foundation for future studies, and serve as a call to action for social workers, policymakers, health and human service personnel, and law enforcement personnel to stand against discriminatory immigration policies.

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