



Immigrant Children and Families and the Public Child Welfare System: Considerations for Legal Systems

By Alan J. Dettlaff

ABSTRACT

Recent research findings have provided new information on children of immigrants who come to the attention of the child welfare system. This article reviews the current knowledge regarding the involvement of children of immigrants in this system, their exposure to risk factors, and their experience of maltreatment. The article also presents the challenges child welfare and legal systems face when children of immigrants enter the child welfare system that may impact their well-being, and concludes with recommendations for legal systems to work in collaboration with child welfare systems to facilitate positive outcomes for children in immigrant families.

Changes in immigration patterns and trends over the past two decades have considerably changed the demographic profile of the United States. Not only have the numbers of foreign-born immigrants living in the United States increased, but also a larger proportion of this population consists of children and families.

During the 1990s, more than 15 million immigrants entered the United States, an increase of 50% since the 1980s and over 100% since the 1970s (Capps & Fortuny, 2006). This trend slowed somewhat during the 2000s, but the foreign-born population in the United States continued to increase, growing from 31.1 million in 2000 to 38.5 million in 2009, an increase of 24% (Gryn & Larsen, 2010; Malone, Baluja, Costanzo, & Davis, 2003).

As of 2009, foreign-born immigrants represented 12.5% of the total U.S. population (Gryn & Larsen, 2010). Along with this growth, the number of children of immigrants (defined as children with at least one foreign-born parent) has more than doubled, from 8 million in 1990 to 16.4 million in 2007 (Fortuny, Capps, Simms, & Chaudry, 2009). Children of immigrants now represent nearly one-fourth (23%) of all children in the United States (Fortuny, Capps et al., 2009). More than half (56%) of children of immigrants are of Hispanic origin, followed by 18% non-Hispanic white, 18% non-Hispanic Asian, and 8% non-Hispanic black (Fortuny & Chaudry, 2009).

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Children of immigrants reside primarily in six states that have been traditional destination states for immigrants—California, Texas, New York, Florida, Illinois, and New Jersey. Together, these states account for 67% of all children of immigrants in the United States (Fortuny, Capps et al., 2009). Although the population of immigrants remains largely concentrated among these states, the number of children with immigrant parents has rapidly increased in many Western, Midwestern, and Southeastern states. The population of children of immigrants grew by 77% in the six destination states from 1990 to 2007, but new high-growth states—including North Carolina, Nevada, Georgia, Arkansas, Nebraska, Tennessee, and South Carolina—experienced increases of more than 300% in the population of children of immigrants (Fortuny & Chaudry, 2009).

Among the foreign-born population, most adult immigrants are not U.S. citizens, and many are undocumented. As of 2005, 11.1 million undocumented immigrants were living in the United States, representing 30% of the total foreign-born population. An additional 10.5 million immigrants were legal permanent residents, representing 28% of that total (Passel, 2006). Approximately 31% of all immigrants (11.5 million) were naturalized U.S. citizens. An additional 7% of the foreign-born population was composed of refugees, and 3% were legal temporary residents, which generally consist of students and temporary workers (Passel, 2006). Although a small number of children of immigrants are foreign-born, most (87%) are born in the United States and thus are U.S. citizens. Yet, 44% of children of immigrants live in families where neither parent is a citizen, and nearly one-third (32%) live in mixed-status families, where the children are citizens, but at least one parent is not (Fortuny & Chaudry, 2009).

IMMIGRANT CHILDREN AND FAMILIES' INVOLVEMENT WITH CHILD WELFARE SYSTEMS

Children in immigrant families have historically been considered at increased risk for maltreatment as a result of the challenges experienced by their families following immigration (Earner, 2007; Roer-Strier, 2001; Segal & Mayadas, 2005). Many of these challenges—financial distress, personal dissatisfaction, depression, social isolation, and stressful life events—are factors associated with child maltreatment (Cadzow, Armstrong, & Fraser, 1999; Miller, Fox, & Garcia-Beckwith, 1999). Additional pressures resulting from acculturation can lead to further strains and conflict within family systems, as parents and children experience changing cultural contexts along with the loss of previously established support systems (Finno, Vidal de Haymes, & Mindell, 2006; Rumbaut, 1999). Combined with possible cultural differences in parenting styles and expectations (Jambunathan, Burts, & Pierce, 2000; Mendez, 2006), as well as in child discipline (Fontes, 2002; Newell, 2002), these factors can affect the safety and well-being of children in immigrant families and lead to involvement with child welfare agencies.

Yet, although this speculation has existed for a number of years, very little empirical data have been available to determine the extent to which these perceptions of increased risk are accurate. This lack of data is largely due to the fact that information on the nativity and immigration status of children and families is not collected by state or federal child welfare

systems, resulting in limited ability to determine the extent to which immigrant children and families become involved in child welfare systems, as well as the extent of their risk exposure and experience of maltreatment.

To address this lack of data, researchers have recently begun using data from the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW), a federally funded and nationally representative study of children who come to the attention of child welfare agencies, to begin to shed light on these issues. In a seminal study, Dettlaff and Earner (2010) found that children living with a foreign-born parent comprised 8.6% of all children who come to the attention of the child welfare system in the United States. As the first available data of its kind, these data suggested that children of immigrants are considerably underrepresented among children who become involved with the child welfare system, given their proportion of the U.S. population (23%). This finding considerably contradicted the prevailing view that children in immigrant families were at increased risk of maltreatment and suggested that although immigrant families may indeed face a number of risks resulting from their immigration experience, the strengths embedded within many immigrant families may serve as buffers against some of these risks. Primary among these strengths may be immigrant families' reasons for migration and their goals for their children. For many immigrant families, the desire for a better life for their children that is often associated with their reasons for migration can be a strong motivating factor. Research also indicates that immigrant families' cultural values and connections to their countries of origin may serve as important strengths that may protect immigrant families from experiencing certain negative outcomes (De La Rosa, 2002; Holleran & Waller, 2003).

Yet, the researchers also suggested the need to consider other reasons that may lead to the observed underrepresentation. Although underrepresentation may indicate lower rates of maltreatment in immigrant families, it may also indicate that immigrant families in need of intervention are not being identified by child welfare systems due to social isolation, avoidance of social service systems due to concern over immigration status, lack of enrollment in school, or lack of access to service providers (Dettlaff & Earner, 2010).

Maltreatment Patterns Among Immigrant Families

No significant differences were identified in the overall rates of maltreatment between children with immigrant parents and children with U.S.-born parents (Dettlaff & Earner, 2010). However, significant differences were found in the types of maltreatment experienced, with children of immigrants significantly more likely than children of U.S.-born parents to experience emotional abuse. The authors state that interpretation of this finding is difficult because definitions of emotional abuse vary widely across states, but suggest that this may be the result of cultural differences in parenting styles or expectations among some immigrant groups that may be considered inappropriate by child welfare caseworkers unfamiliar with diverse cultures. For example, several studies indicate that children in Mexican immigrant families have significant responsibilities, including conducting basic household tasks (e.g., cleaning, cooking, running errands), caring for younger siblings, and providing financial support (Orellana, 2001; Orellana, Dorner, & Pulido, 2003). Some may view these practices as contributing to a "parentified child" and emotionally harmful. Supporting this view, Jambu-

nathan et al. (2000) found that immigrant mothers were significantly more likely than U.S.-born mothers to be identified as having “inappropriate developmental expectations” of their children when rated on a measure normed on U.S.-born adults to identify parents at risk for abuse or neglect.

Additional studies have identified that children of immigrants from certain racial/ethnic backgrounds may be vulnerable to specific forms of maltreatment. For example, Dettlaff, Earner, and Phillips (2009) found that Latino children of immigrants were more than five times as likely to experience sexual abuse than Latino children of U.S.-born parents. Chang, Rhee, and Weaver (2006) found that children in immigrant Korean families were more likely to come to the attention of the California child welfare system for physical abuse than children in other ethnic groups. Similarly, Rhee, Chang, Weaver, and Wong (2008) found that children in immigrant Chinese families were more likely to experience physical abuse compared to the general child welfare population. These studies have begun to shed light on the unique maltreatment patterns and experiences among children in immigrant families, but much additional research is needed to fully understand these patterns and draw accurate conclusions.

Risk Exposure Among Children in Immigrant Families

Most studies examining immigrant children’s involvement with child welfare systems have focused on identifying patterns of maltreatment, but a small number of studies have examined the risk factors associated with maltreatment among children in immigrant families. These studies have consistently found that risk factors are more likely to be present in families with U.S.-born parents than in those with immigrant parents. Using NSCAW data in which risk factors were assessed by families’ child welfare caseworkers, Dettlaff and Earner (2010) found that U.S.-born parents were three times more likely to be actively abusing alcohol or drugs than immigrant parents, and were significantly more likely to have a physical or cognitive impairment or recent histories of arrests. Notably, no significant differences were found in the prevalence of several risk factors often associated with immigrant families, including the use of excessive discipline, active domestic violence, low social support, and difficulty meeting their family’s basic needs. Similarly, among Latino families involved with child welfare, U.S.-born parents were more than five times as likely to be actively abusing drugs compared to immigrant Latino parents (Dettlaff et al., 2009). U.S.-born Latino parents were also significantly more likely to have a cognitive impairment, have recent histories of arrest, or be assessed as having poor parenting skills and high family stress. No significant differences were present in rates of domestic violence, social support, or excessive discipline. Again, these findings considerably contradicted prevailing views regarding the risk for maltreatment among immigrant families and provided the first available empirical evidence to support these differences in risk exposure.

Placement Experiences of Children in Immigrant Families

Due to very limited data, little information is known about the placement patterns of children in immigrant families and how they may differ from children in U.S.-born families. One study conducted in the Texas child welfare system regarding placement settings and

permanency planning among Latino children found that immigrant children and children of immigrants were significantly less likely to be placed with relatives than children of U.S.-born parents, and that immigrant children were more likely to be placed in group homes and institutions than other children. Additionally, immigrant children were less likely to have case goals of reunification or relative adoption than U.S.-born children, and were more likely to have goals of long-term foster care or independent living (Vericker, Kuehn, & Capps, 2007). These findings suggest concerns given the research findings identifying lower rates of risk exposure among immigrant families, and raise the possibility that issues such as immigration status or biases against immigrant families may be interfering with decisions made regarding children's best interests. Additional research is needed to identify the sources of these disparities and to determine whether these patterns hold true in other jurisdictions.

THE IMPACT OF IMMIGRATION ENFORCEMENT ON IMMIGRANT CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

This emerging body of research has begun to shed some light on the involvement of immigrant children and families in the public child welfare system, but what remains unknown is the extent to which immigration enforcement has affected this involvement. A recent study conducted by the Applied Research Center (2011) estimates that as many as 5,100 children currently in foster care have parents who have been either detained or deported. Although this study could not determine whether these children entered foster care as a direct result of their parents' detention or deportation, anecdotal information suggests that this is indeed a growing problem in many states. The growing evidence of this has concerned both child welfare and immigration reform advocates because these children are typically not maltreated and have entered foster care only because the apprehension of their parents left them without anyone responsible for their care. And while all courts handling child welfare cases operate under statutes requiring that children's best interests be considered in decisions regarding their custody and placement (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2010), immigration law does not recognize children's interests as a valid factor in the immigration decisions concerning their parents, which can lead to profound implications for families with mixed immigration statuses (Morrison & Thronson, 2010).

Enforcement activities conducted by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) have increased significantly over the past decade. In 2009, over 600,000 apprehensions were made, and ICE detained a record total of 383,524 immigrants. Additionally, more than 393,000 immigrants were removed from the United States in 2009, the seventh consecutive record yearly total (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Office of Immigration Statistics, 2010). The period between 2005 and 2008 saw a particularly large increase in enforcement efforts, most notably with several large, highly publicized worksite enforcement operations. Although worksite raids have been suspended under the Obama administration, the high levels of apprehensions and deportations have remained consistent (Cervantes & Lincroft, 2010).

In large part, these record numbers can be attributed to increased cooperation between local law enforcement and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). In addition, 1996 federal legislation created additional barriers for obtaining legal status and expanded the

grounds to deport immigrants charged with crimes to include a broader range of offenses, including non-violent offenses. Immigrants are also arrested during home raids, where ICE seeks a target individual with a criminal background but then encounters other unauthorized immigrants during the operation.

Although the exact number of children who become involved in the child welfare system as a result of immigration enforcement is unknown, it is clear that children have been impacted by these efforts. DHS reports that between 1998 and 2007, more than 108,000 immigrant parents of U.S.-citizen children were removed from the United States (U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Office of Inspector General, 2009). Additionally, a study of worksite raids found that for every two adults apprehended during a raid, at least one child was impacted (Capps, Castaneda, Chaudry, & Santos, 2007). This study suggests that children who were separated from their parents experienced not only emotional trauma, but also other threats to their safety and well-being. For example, the study reported that children separated from their parents experienced housing instability and food insecurity due to the loss of parental income. Children were also reported to have considerable behavioral changes, including more frequent crying and increased fear and anxiety. These behavioral changes were particularly present among children who witnessed a parent's arrest in their home (Capps et al., 2007).

Following the attention generated by these raids, ICE developed a set of humanitarian guidelines that applied to enforcement actions involving more than 150 arrests (this was later reduced to actions involving more than 25 arrests). These guidelines include developing a plan to identify individuals who are the sole caregivers of minor children or who have other humanitarian concerns, including individuals with serious medical conditions, nursing mothers, pregnant women, or caregivers of spouses or relatives with serious medical conditions. To implement this plan, ICE is charged with coordinating enforcement actions with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Service's Division of Immigration Health Services, or with an appropriate state or local social service agency such as the public child welfare system. Recent evidence suggests that when administered appropriately, these guidelines have been effective in preventing or minimizing parent-child separations (Chaudry et al., 2010). The guidelines do not, however, apply to enforcement actions targeting individuals or small groups, including home raids and other small criminal justice operations, leaving children vulnerable to experiencing not only separation from their parents, but also the possibility of child welfare intervention when relatives or other adult caregivers are not immediately available.

CHALLENGES FOR CHILD WELFARE AND LEGAL SYSTEMS

A growing body of evidence indicates that some children of immigrants are entering the public child welfare system as a result of immigration enforcement actions, but it is likely that most children of immigrants who become involved in this system do so through traditional means following the investigation of maltreatment reports. Yet, regardless of the means through which children of immigrants come to the attention of this system, once they become involved, they face unique challenges that threaten the system's ability to facilitate reunification with their parents, as well as positive outcomes related to their health and well-being (Dettlaff et al., 2009; Earner, 2007; Maiter, Stalker, & Alaggia, 2009). Many child welfare

systems do not understand the complexity of immigration law and policies and are ill-equipped to assist children or parents in addressing these issues. Beyond concerns directly associated with immigration status, many child welfare practitioners are unfamiliar with the unique challenges that immigrant families face resulting from their experiences with immigration and acculturation. Considerable efforts have been made over the past two decades to increase cultural competence within child welfare agencies and among child welfare staff, but these efforts have largely focused on U.S.-born racial and ethnic groups (Dettlaff & Lincroft, 2010). This lack of cultural awareness can lead to inaccurate assessments that fail to consider the underlying issues affecting immigrant families.

Of additional concern for immigrant children and families is access to services in their preferred language, which poses a challenge for many child welfare systems (Ayón, 2009; Barrios, Suleiman, & Vidal de Haymes, 2004). Language barriers can result in miscommunication and misunderstandings, which can considerably affect families' ability to respond to interventions. Language barriers can also result in delays in service delivery, which can affect parents' abilities to complete required services and place them at risk for termination of parental rights due to the timeframes mandated by the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) of 1997 (Ayón, 2009; Committee for Hispanic Children and Families, 2003). ASFA calls for permanency decisions to be made within 12 months, and requires the filing of petitions for termination of parental rights for children who have been in substitute care for 15 of the last 22 months. These mandates have resulted in more rapid proceedings of child welfare cases and increased terminations of parental rights.

Beyond language, immigration status can create additional delays or barriers to reunification, as parents may be unable to obtain employment or participate in certain mandated services. Undocumented parents may also be ineligible for certain supportive services that could facilitate reunification. Given these barriers, the expedited process required by ASFA may place immigrant families at a disadvantage in meeting case requirements, thus placing them at risk for termination of parental rights.

For immigrant children in foster care, a lack of culturally or linguistically appropriate services can also limit their ability to receive services needed to address both their physical and mental health needs (Dettlaff & Cardoso, 2010). Further, funding for services for immigrant children may be limited due to restrictions within Title IV-E of the Social Security Act, the primary source of federal child welfare funding to states. This funding source allows states to receive federal matching funds for the care of children in state custody, but receipt of Title IV-E funds is restricted to children who meet eligibility requirements, including U.S. citizenship. Undocumented immigrant children do not meet the eligibility requirement, so states must bear the total burden of the cost of substitute care. In times of shrinking resources for public child welfare systems, this burden may limit states' abilities to adequately care for ineligible immigrant children.

For children who enter the child welfare system due solely to an immigrant parent's arrest or apprehension during an enforcement action, the complexities of these cases can be enormous. Immigrant parents detained in immigration facilities face considerable challenges that may prevent them from meaningfully participating in a reunification plan. In some cases, child welfare staff cannot locate parents, making their participation in decisions concerning their children unlikely. Detained parents are also unlikely to be able to participate in court pro-

ceedings related to their children's care and custody (Cervantes & Lincroft, 2010). Deportation proceedings and decisions may last longer than the timeframes under which child welfare agencies must make decisions, further complicating the agencies' ability to act in children's best interests (Cervantes & Lincroft, 2010).

When children are U.S. citizens, the prospect of parental deportation poses a uniquely difficult situation for children, their parents, and for child welfare systems. Children may remain in the United States and be permanently separated from their parents—or they can leave their home and all they have known to move to an unfamiliar country to remain with their family. Although this has been described as a “choiceless choice” for immigrant parents (Thronson, 2006), their decisions should be honored in the absence of unfitness. Yet, the extent to which parents' and children's voices are meaningfully heard remains unknown.

For children who are undocumented, although there are options for immigration relief, some of these options only become available once a decision has been made that parental reunification is not in a child's best interests. For example, Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (SIJS) is a legal remedy for undocumented children in the United States who are juvenile court dependents due to abuse, abandonment, or neglect; however, this remedy can only be sought once a court has found that reunification with one or both parents is not possible.¹

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR LEGAL SYSTEMS

When children enter substitute care, family and/or juvenile court judges and attorneys have considerable influence and authority concerning the outcomes of these cases. Child welfare professionals make recommendations to the court, which must be approved by the presiding judge. Legal professionals also have considerable involvement and oversight in developing service plans that specify the steps necessary for reunification or for an alternative form of permanency. Thus, the legal system has considerable responsibility for helping to ensure positive outcomes for children in immigrant families who become involved with this system. This responsibility requires collaboration and coordination with child welfare agencies, but legal systems can take several steps to help facilitate positive outcomes.

First, courts should work with child welfare systems to ensure that all children, including those who are undocumented, receive appropriate and comprehensive child welfare services. The majority of children from immigrant families who enter the child welfare system are U.S. citizens, but a small number of children may be undocumented and particularly vulnerable to receiving inadequate services as a result of their immigration status. Courts can work with child welfare agencies to ensure that the immigration status of a child is not a barrier to receiving needed services.

Second, courts should work with child welfare agencies to ensure that children in substitute care are placed when possible with relatives or other kin caregivers to preserve

¹ For more information about Special Immigrant Juvenile Status, see pages 48-62 of this issue: “Special Immigrant Juvenile Status: Relief for Neglected, Abused, and Abandoned Undocumented Children” by Angie Junck. Further information can be found in Junck, A., Kinoshita, S., & Brady, K. (2010). *Special Immigrant Juvenile Status and other immigration options for children and youth*. San Francisco, CA: Immigrant Legal Resource Center.

cultural and familial ties and reduce trauma. This outcome has become particularly challenging for child welfare systems when those relatives or caregivers are undocumented due to policies requiring Social Security numbers or other licensing requirements that undocumented parents may not be able to meet. Undocumented relatives may also be particularly fearful of child welfare policies that require fingerprinting due to the potential immigration consequences. Yet, these barriers should not prevent relative or kinship placements from occurring when well-intended and appropriate relatives are available.

Third, courts should establish procedures to ensure that parents can meaningfully participate in all juvenile or family court cases related to their children's care and custody. This participation may require coordination and collaboration with federal immigration officials, but the serious and often permanent nature of these decisions requires this collaboration. Parents who have been deported can be awarded temporary visas to allow them to return to the United States to participate in these hearings. Parents may also participate via telephone, and attorneys can be appointed to represent parents who have been detained or deported. Most importantly, parents' wishes concerning their children's citizenship and country of residence must be heard and respected. If parents choose to have their children reunified with them in their country of origin, efforts should be made to assist parents in making necessary arrangements, regardless of the child's U.S. citizenship status.

Related to this, family and juvenile court systems should establish procedures to ensure that immigrant parents who have been separated from their children have access to immigration attorneys who can provide them with appropriate legal counsel related to their immigration case. Parents and children are provided with legal defense as part of their child welfare case, but if these attorneys are not experts in immigration law and policies, they cannot advise parents on these issues. Yet this counsel is essential for parents who must manage and understand not only the complexities of their child welfare legal case, but also the implications of their immigration case on the decisions concerning their children.

Additionally, courts should allow exceptions to ASEA timelines where parents are involved in complex immigration proceedings. In most cases, it is difficult to make decisions concerning the best interests of children when the status of their parents' immigration case is unknown. Parents involved in immigration proceedings face many challenges that warrant an extension of these timeframes to ensure that children's best interests are maintained. Where child welfare systems are not pursuing such an extension, the court should make appropriate inquiries to ensure that an extension was considered and that the decision to not pursue an extension is warranted.

Finally, courts should work with child welfare agencies to ensure that applications for Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (SIJS) are being considered only after all efforts for reunification have been made and both the court and the child welfare agency have determined that reunification is not possible or is not in the best interests of the children involved. SIJS was created largely to ensure that undocumented children who had been abused or neglected by their parents could remain in the United States. Children who have been separated from their parents solely due to immigration enforcement actions have not been abused or neglected. Thus, every effort to reunify them with their parents must take place. Even in cases involving abuse or neglect, reunification with one or both parents is often possible and appropriate. In these instances, U visas—which can offer a path to citizenship for victims of

certain serious crimes, including forms of child maltreatment—may be an appropriate option.²

In assessing the appropriateness of SIJS, courts should ensure that possible biases favoring legal permanent residency by child welfare professionals or immigration attorneys are not overriding or interfering with the wishes of immigrant parents or their children. SIJS can provide many undocumented children with a path toward citizenship, but the consequences of SIJS on the relationship between parents and children can be permanent. Careful consideration of these potential consequences needs to be made prior to proceeding with SIJS applications.

CONCLUSION

Children in immigrant families who enter the child welfare system, whether resulting from maltreatment or immigration enforcement, become involved in a system in which multiple individuals are involved in a decision-making process to determine what is in their best interests. Given their significant role in this process, courts and the legal professionals who work in this system bear a considerable responsibility for ensuring that these children receive appropriate treatment, and that decisions made regarding their needs and best interests, which can have lifelong consequences, are reached in the most cautious and thoughtful manner. The child welfare system holds much of the responsibility for decision making, but courts provide considerable influence and oversight of this process. Efforts should be made to facilitate cooperation and collaboration from all stakeholders, including parents, child welfare professionals, and federal immigration systems, to ensure that children's best interests remain at the forefront of decision making.

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² For more information about U visas, see pages 71-73 of this issue: "Domestic Violence and Immigrants in Family Court" by Veronica T. Thronson. Further information can be found in Junck, A., Kinoshita, S., & Brady, K. (2010). *Special Immigrant Juvenile Status and other immigration options for children and youth*. San Francisco, CA: Immigrant Legal Resource Center.

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