

RESEARCH BRIEF



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## Latino Children of Immigrants in the Child Welfare System: Findings From the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being

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The Latino population, particularly including those members who have migrated from other countries, represents the largest and fastest growing minority population in the United States. As of 2008, the Latino population, consisting of persons from Mexico, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Central America, South America, and other Latin countries, had increased by 32.8% since 2000, with Latinos representing 15.4% of the total U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). Among Latino adults, 55% are foreign-born immigrants who migrated to the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). Latino children represent 22% of all children under the age of 18 in the U.S. (Fry & Passel, 2009). While foreign-born Latino children represent only 11% of Latino children, more than half (52%) of Latino children are U.S.-born children of Latino immigrants (Fry & Passel, 2009). Combined, Latino children (both foreign-born and U.S.-born) living with at least one foreign-born parent make up approximately 13% of the total child population.

Within the child welfare system, the percentage of Latino children confirmed as victims of maltreatment has risen from 14.2% in 2000 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [USDHH], 2002) to 20.8% in 2007 (USDHH, 2009). While this increase represents a rising population of Latino children involved in this system, the portion of these children who are immigrants or children of immigrants is unknown, as these data are not collected uniformly at the state or national levels. As a result, little is known about the proportion of Latino children who are children of immigrants, their characteristics, or the risk factors associated with maltreatment that are present in their families. Additionally, little is known about how these factors differ from those in Latino families who are native to the United States.

As a result, Latino children and families are often treated as a homogenous group, with little understanding of the potential differences that may exist between immigrant and native-born families. This research brief provides findings from the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW) related to the involvement of Latino children of immigrants in the child welfare system. These findings represent the first national data concerning the characteristics, risk factors, and types of maltreatment experienced by this population.

## About This Series

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This series of research briefs provides national estimates related to the involvement of children of immigrants in the child welfare system. Children in immigrant families are often considered to be at increased risk of maltreatment due to the stress and pressure experienced by immigrant families as a result of their experiences with immigration and acculturation. Beginning with the immigration experience, families face considerable risks entering the United States, including violence, robbery, and sexual assault during the migration process (Solis, 2003). These risks are compounded for immigrants crossing multiple borders. Once in the new country, families continue to experience stress resulting from language barriers, unfamiliar customs, and isolation. Additional pressures resulting from acculturation can lead to a variety of strains and difficulties on family systems, as parents and children experience changing cultural contexts along with the loss of previously established support systems. Undocumented immigrants experience additional stress, as they live with ongoing fear of discovery and deportation. Combined with cultural differences in parenting styles (Jambunathan, Burts, & Pierce, 2000; Olayo Mendez, 2006) and child discipline (Fontes, 2002), these factors may affect the safety and well-being of children in immigrant families and lead to involvement with the child welfare system.

These research briefs use data from NSCAW to determine the proportion of children of immigrants among children who come to the attention of the child welfare system, and to identify the characteristics, risk factors, and types of maltreatment present within their families. NSCAW consists of a nationally representative sample of children who were subjects of reports of maltreatment to child protective services agencies between 1999 and 2000. NSCAW was collected under contract from the Administration on Children, Youth, and Families, and employed a two-stage stratified sampling design to produce national population estimates. In the first stage, the United States was divided into nine sampling strata. Eight of these corresponded to the eight states with the largest child welfare caseloads. The ninth consisted of the remaining 42 states and the District of Columbia. Primary sampling units (typically child protective services agencies) were selected from within these nine strata. In the second stage, 5,501 children ages 0 to 14 were selected from lists of closed investigations or assessments from the sampled agencies. Sampling within primary sampling units was stratified by age, type of maltreatment, and receipt of services. The analyses in these briefs are based solely on children who were living in in-home settings with a biological parent at the time of the baseline NSCAW interview ( $n = 3,717$ ), as information is not available on the nativity of parents whose children were in out-of-home care at baseline. Analyses of Latino children of immigrants are further restricted to children identified as having a Hispanic ethnicity ( $n = 636$ ).

The purpose of these analyses is to promote a better understanding of the characteristics and risk factors of immigrant children and families who come to the attention of the child welfare system. Findings are reported on the child and family characteristics, incidence of maltreatment, parent and family risk factors, and community and neighborhood characteristics of children of immigrants who were involved in child maltreatment investigations. In addition, these factors are compared to those in native-born families to examine how these characteristics may differ between immigrant and native-born families.

## Involvement in the Child Welfare System

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Among Latino children who come to the attention of the child welfare system, 64.0% have a parent who was born in the United States, while 36.0% have a parent who is foreign-born. In total, Latino children living with a foreign-born parent comprise 5.2% of all children involved with the child welfare system. Among Latino children of immigrants, nearly 4 out of 5 (79.6%) are U.S.-born.

## Child and Caregiver Characteristics

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Table 1 displays differences in child age, gender, and caregiver age. Overall, children of native-born Latino parents tend to be younger, with nearly half (46.6%) of these children ages 5 and under, compared to only 28.0% of children of Latino immigrants. No significant differences were present in child gender. Nearly all primary caregivers in both categories were children's mothers. Caregivers differed significantly by age, with native caregivers tending to be younger. Native-born caregivers were nearly twice as likely as immigrant caregivers to be under age 30, while nearly three fourths of all immigrant parents were over age 30. In other demographic categories, including marital status and education level, no significant differences were present between the two groups.

Table 1: Children and Caregiver Characteristics in Latino Families

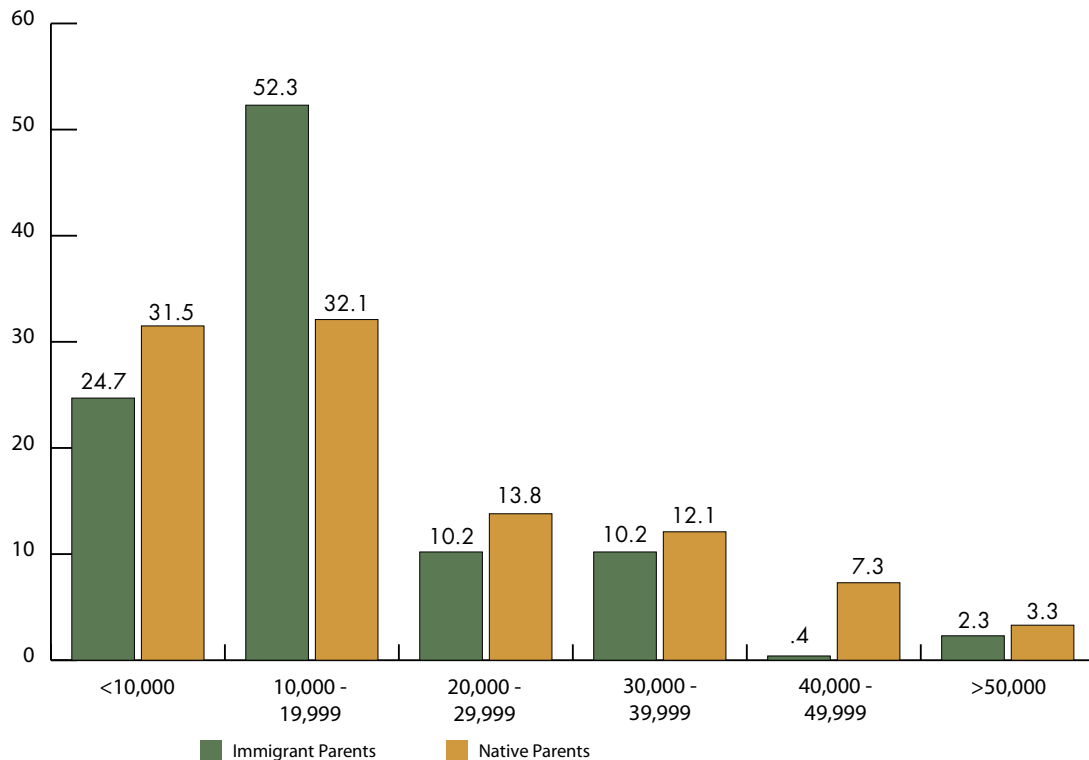
	Native Parent (n = 406)	Immigrant Parent (n = 230)
<b>Child Age*</b>		
0 to 2	21.0	10.6
3 to 5	25.6	17.4
6 to 10	37.1	41.8
11 and older	16.3	30.2
<b>Child Gender</b>		
Male	43.6	45.9
Female	56.5	54.2
<b>Caregiver Relationship to Child</b>		
Mother	99.99	99.93
Father	<0.01	0.07
<b>Caregiver Age*</b>		
15 to 19	5.6	1.6
20 to 29	53.5	24.9
30 to 39	34.7	49.4
40 and older	6.3	24.2

\* Significant difference at 95% confidence level

**Income**

Figure 1 displays statistically significant differences in income levels between Latino families with native-born parents and Latino families with immigrant parents. Immigrant Latino families tended to be poorer, with 77.0% of immigrant families reporting a household income of less than \$20,000, compared to 63.6% of native Latino families. However, a larger proportion of native families (31.5%) were in the lowest income category (less than \$10,000), compared to 24.7% of immigrant families. Native families were nearly 4 times as likely as immigrant families to report household incomes greater than \$40,000.

Figure 1. Income Level: Households With Immigrant Latino Parents and Households With Native Latino Parents



## Other Household Characteristics

Table 2 displays differences in several additional household characteristics between Latino children living with an immigrant parent and Latino children living with a native parent. Children living with an immigrant Latino parent were significantly more likely to be living in a two-parent home with their biological father present than children living with a native Latino parent. Biological fathers were present in 40.6% of homes with an immigrant parent, compared to only 18.6% of homes with a native parent. However, households with a native parent were significantly more likely to have a grandparent present in the home. Children with native-born parents were significantly more likely to experience a change in primary caregiver in the previous 12 months compared to children living with immigrant parents. The use of a language other than English in the home did not differ significantly between groups. However, a significantly greater proportion of immigrant parents reported being uncomfortable speaking English.

Table 2: Other Household Characteristics Among Latino Families

	Native Parent (n = 406)	Immigrant Parent (n = 230)
<b>Presence of adult relatives</b>		
Biological father present*	18.6	40.6
Grandparent present*	14.5	3.6
Other adult relative present	18.0	17.5
<b>Change of primary caregiver in past 12 months*</b>	12.9	2.3
<b>Language other than English spoken in home*</b>	37.5	48.7
<b>Comfortable speaking English*</b>	98.0	84.5

\* Significant difference at 95% confidence level

## Presence and Type of Maltreatment

Figures 2 and 3 present results concerning the outcomes of maltreatment investigations among children of Latino immigrants and children of native-born Latino parents. Results indicate no significant difference in the overall rate of maltreatment between children of immigrants and children of native parents. However, significant differences are present in the types of substantiated maltreatment (Figure 3). Children of immigrants are nearly 6 times more likely than children of natives to be sexually abused, while children of natives are more than 20 times more likely to be a victim of physical neglect (i.e., failure to provide).

Figure 2: Outcome of Child Maltreatment Investigations: Children of Latino Immigrants and Children of Native Latino Parents

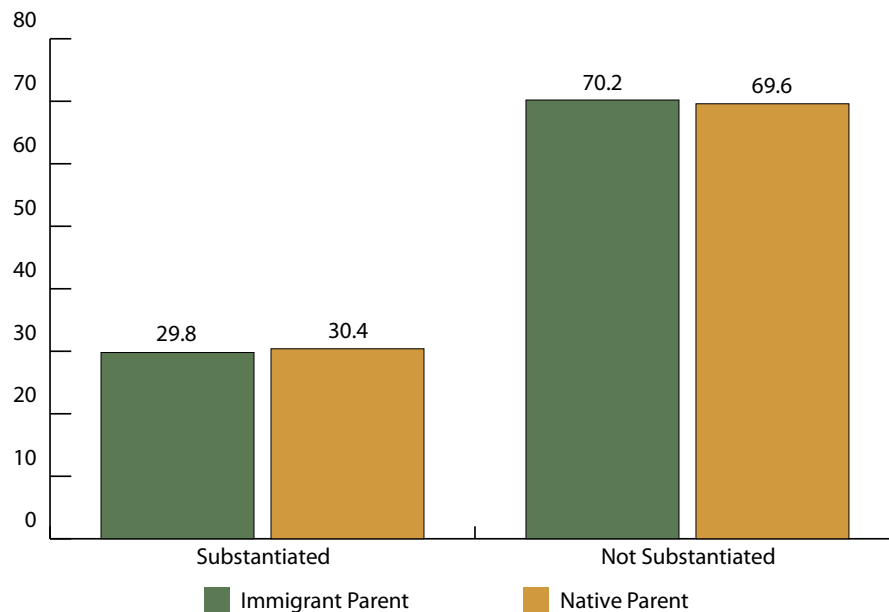
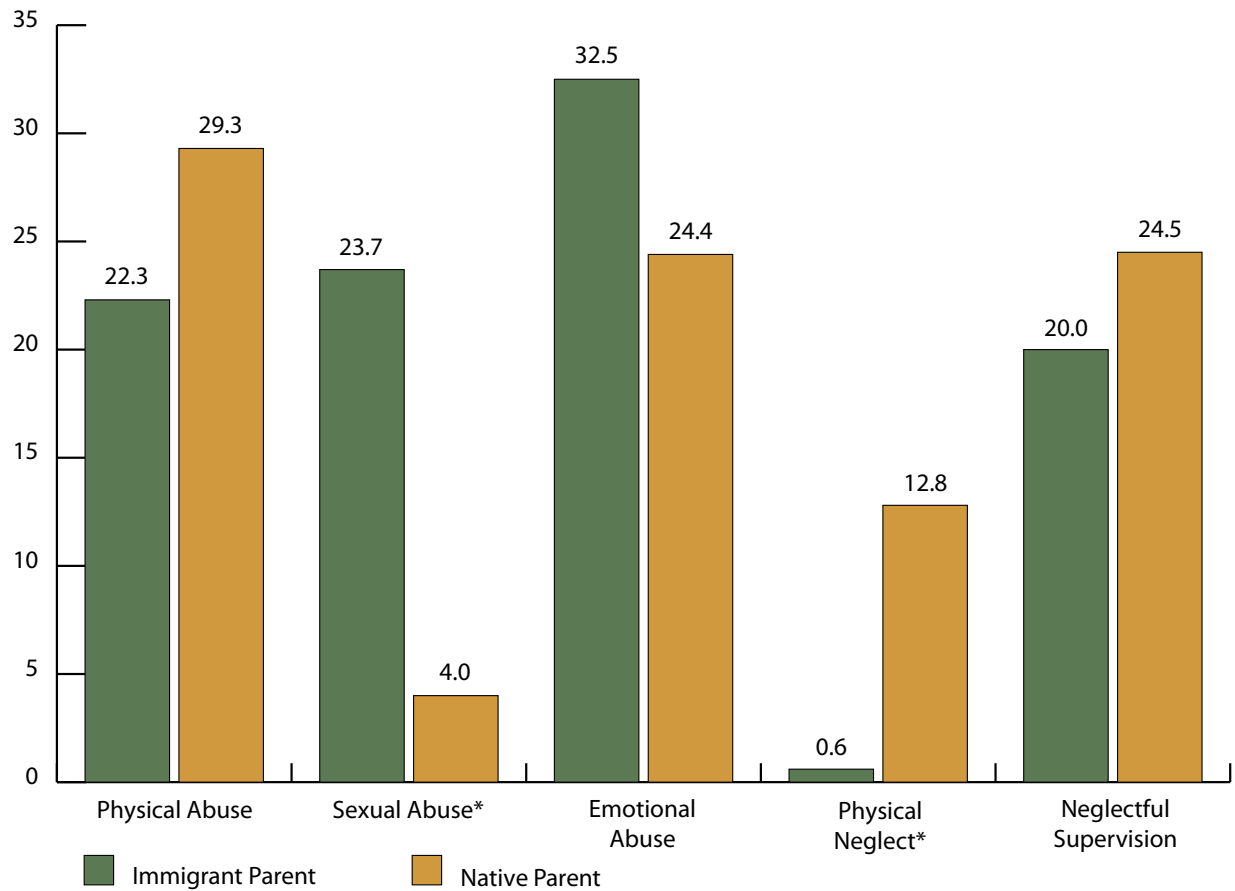


Figure 3: Types of Substantiated Maltreatment: Children of Latino Immigrants and Children of Native Latino Parents



\* Significant difference at 95% confidence level

### Risk Factors Associated With Maltreatment

Risk factors present at the time of the maltreatment investigation were identified by child protective services caseworkers based on information they obtained in their assessment of the family during the course of the investigation. Risk factors included active alcohol abuse, active drug abuse, serious mental health or emotional problems, intellectual or cognitive impairments, physical impairments, active domestic violence, use of excessive discipline, history of maltreatment, recent history of arrest, low social support, high family stress, and difficulty meeting basic needs.

The presence of risk factors and differences between immigrant Latino families and native Latino families are presented in Table 3. For all of the risk factors in which significant differences were found, those risk factors were more prevalent in homes with native parents than in homes with immigrant parents. Active drug abuse was more than 5 times more prevalent in households with native parents than in households with immigrant parents. Native parents were also significantly more likely to have an intellectual or cognitive impairment, poor parenting skills, or a recent history of arrest. Children of native parents were also significantly more likely to be living in homes experiencing high family stress. It is important to note the lack of significant differences in several risk factors often associated with immigrant families, particularly the use of excessive discipline, domestic violence, low social support, and difficulty meeting basic needs.

Table 3: Parent and Family Risk Factors in Latino Families

	Native Parent (n = 406)	Immigrant Parent (n = 230)
Active alcohol abuse	11.3	12.9
Active drug abuse*	12.7	2.3
Serious mental health or emotional problem	7.1	5.4
Intellectual or cognitive impairment*	2.6	0.1
Physical impairment	2.9	1.7
Poor parenting skills*	26.0	17.4
Active domestic violence	10.6	13.8
Use of excessive discipline	24.1	19.5
History of maltreatment	36.6	23.9
Recent history of arrest*	5.5	1.9
Low social support	25.3	26.6
High family stress*	58.0	42.9
Difficulty meeting basic needs	25.6	13.6

\* Significant difference at 95% confidence level

### Neighborhood and Community Risk Factors

Neighborhood and community risks were assessed through the Abridged Community Environment Scale from the National Evaluation of Family Support Programs (Furstenberg, 1993). Table 4 presents the presence of risk factors and differences between immigrant Latino families and native Latino families. Native parents were significantly more likely than immigrant parents to report problems in their neighborhoods with open drug use, unsupervised children, and teenagers making a nuisance. Immigrant parents were significantly more likely than native parents to report living in a safe neighborhood and in a community with helpful neighbors.

Table 4: Neighborhood and Community Risk Factors Among Latino Families

	Native Parent (n = 406)	Immigrant Parent (n = 230)
Assaults/muggings	21.5	17.3
Gang activity	34.9	32.7
Open drug use*	34.9	24.3
Unsupervised children*	42.8	27.8
Teenagers making a nuisance*	38.7	19.0
Safe neighborhood*	70.8	82.6
Helpful neighbors*	58.2	79.8
Involved parents	60.4	56.0

\* Significant difference at 95% confidence level

## **Discussion of Findings: Differences Between Immigrant and Native Latino Families**

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The findings presented here represent the first national data available concerning the presence of Latino children of immigrants in the child welfare system, their characteristics, family and neighborhood risk factors, and incidence of maltreatment. They show significant differences between immigrant Latino families and native Latino families. Surprisingly, these data show that although children of immigrants who come to the attention of child welfare systems have a number of risk factors, these risks are less prevalent than in families of children with native-born parents.

There are several potential reasons for these differences. First, although risks may be associated with the stress immigrant families experience from immigration and acculturation, immigrant families may possess a number of protective factors that are less present in native families. In this study, immigrant families were more likely to have a number of potential protective factors, including a two-parent household, a stable primary caregiver, helpful neighbors, and a safe community environment. Second, immigrant families may possess a number of protective factors that this study did not measure. Undertaking a long, expensive, and uncertain journey to a foreign country requires determination, strength, and dedication to improving the lives of one's children. Despite strong economic adversity, immigrant families in this study were significantly less likely to experience high family stress, actively use drugs, exhibit poor parenting skills, or have recent histories of arrest. This may be due to the strong sense of initiative and personal and family responsibility that many immigrant parents possess. Finally, immigration status may itself act as a social control agent, especially for the undocumented, as an arrest can result in deportation and separation from one's children. Even for those with legal status, an arrest or other antisocial behavior can result in losing legal permanent residency.

In addition to differences in risk and protective factors, significant differences were found in the types of maltreatment experienced by children of immigrants when compared to children of natives. Although children of immigrants are no more likely to be the subject of a substantiated maltreatment investigation than children of native parents, they are 5 times more likely to be confirmed as victims of sexual abuse. There are several potential reasons for this. First, victims of child sexual abuse are typically older than victims of other forms of maltreatment. Nationally, 46% of victims of sexual abuse are age 12 or older, while only 31% of victims of physical abuse and 20% of victims of neglect are age 12 or older (USDHHS, 2009). In this study, children of immigrants are nearly twice as likely as children of native parents to be age 11 or older (30.2% to 16.3%). It is also possible that only the most serious cases of abuse in immigrant communities are reported to CPS agencies due to fear of the potential consequences of reporting, particularly in communities with a large population of undocumented immigrants. In these communities it may take a very serious allegation of sexual abuse to compel members of the community to overcome their concerns and report the abuse. However, the surprising difference in incidence of sexual abuse suggests the need for additional research to further understand the reasons for this difference.

While children in immigrant families were more likely to experience sexual abuse, they were more than 20 times less likely to experience physical neglect. This may be partially explained by the lower percentage of immigrant families who live in extreme poverty (i.e., yearly incomes of less than \$10,000). However, it may also be explained by the previously mentioned strengths that are more likely to be present in immigrant families, including the greater likelihood of two-parent families and the lower rates of substance use, intellectual impairments, and arrest histories. This may also be explained by the higher percentage of immigrant families that reported living in safe communities with the support of helpful neighbors, as well as a combination of these factors. Further research may also provide additional information related to this finding.

## **Implications of Findings**

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These findings point to the need for child welfare agencies to conduct a thorough assessment of the strengths and protective factors that may be present in immigrant Latino families that come to the attention of the child welfare system. For many immigrant families, the desire for a better life for their children that is often associated with families' reasons for migration is a powerful strength and motivating factor that can be built upon during service delivery. Additionally, the strengths and social supports found in many immigrant communities is an important component that can be used by child welfare service providers to create networks of care to ensure the safety and well-being of children in immigrant families.

Although these strengths may mitigate risk in some cases, it is important that practitioners clearly assess the risk factors that are unique to immigrant families, particularly in families with undocumented members, as this may increase

the potential for risk. In order to do so, child welfare practitioners must understand the impact that immigration and acculturation may have on immigrant children and families, and how these experiences may have contributed to their involvement with the child welfare system. In addition to understanding the unique needs and strengths of immigrant families, child welfare practitioners need to understand how public policies affect immigrant families' abilities to function. Many of the problems affecting immigrant families originate outside of the family and instead are derived from federal policies that have decreased many of the supportive programs previously available to vulnerable immigrant families. This may also affect the services available to immigrant families upon contact with the child welfare system.

## Data and Methodology

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Data from NSCAW was obtained from the National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect. This study used the Restricted Release version of these data in order to accurately apply sampling weights. All prevalence rates and statistical tests were weighted to yield estimates for the national population of children who were subjects of reports of maltreatment to child protective services agencies. Analysis weights were constructed to adjust for the selection probability of primary sampling units and for the selection probability of individual children within primary sampling units. Weights were further adjusted to account for month-to-month variation in the size of the sampling frame, the exclusion of siblings of children selected in previous months, loss of coverage in certain states, and non-response. Full details of the NSCAW sample design and weight derivation are available from the National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect.<sup>1</sup>

The reported prevalence estimates of child and caregiver characteristics, family and household characteristics, maltreatment, parent and family risk factors, and neighborhood and community environment characteristics were estimated in Stata 10.0 using survey commands to adjust for the two-stage sampling employed in NSCAW. In addition to reporting population-based prevalence estimates, between-group differences were tested using tests of categorical independence. These tests are based on the Pearson chi-square statistic converted to an F-statistic with non-integer degrees of freedom using a second-order Rao and Scott correction (Rao & Scott, 1981).

## Acknowledgments

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## The MCWNN

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The MCWNN is a national coalition looking at the intersection between immigrant families and the public child welfare system. Leading organizations and individuals in the fields of immigration and child welfare have come together to increase the effectiveness of the child welfare system's and other corresponding systems' response to issues of migration. Members learn from the experience and expertise of others, they share knowledge and strategies, and they participate in collaborative efforts to improve services

for immigrant families in the child welfare system. The network was formed because members acknowledge that a single field or organization would not have the necessary knowledge or resources to adequately protect the millions of children from immigrant families with legal, human rights, and child well-being resources. For more information, additional resources, or to become a member please visit [www.americanhumane.org/migration](http://www.americanhumane.org/migration).

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<sup>1</sup> For example, see Dowd, K. et al. (2003). *National survey of child and adolescent well-being: Combined waves 1–3 data file user's manual*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect.



## About the Authors

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Alan J. Dettlaff, Ph.D., MSW, is assistant professor in the Jane Addams College of Social Work, University of Illinois at Chicago. His practice experience includes 6 years as a practitioner and administrator in public child welfare, where he specialized in investigations of physical and sexual abuse. Dr. Dettlaff's research interests focus on improving outcomes for children of color in the child welfare system through the elimination of disproportionality and disparities. Specifically, Dr. Dettlaff is actively involved in research addressing the disproportionate overrepresentation of African American children in the child welfare system and identifying and understanding the needs of immigrant Latino children who come to the attention of this system. In 2007, Dr. Dettlaff co-edited a special issue of the journal *Protecting Children* on emerging issues at the intersection of immigration and child welfare. Dr. Dettlaff is also principal investigator of the Jane Addams Child Welfare Traineeship Project, which provides advanced training and financial assistance to students pursuing careers in child welfare.

Ilze Earner, Ph.D., LCSW, is an assistant professor at Hunter College School of Social Work and specializes in the field of family and children's services. She is the founder and director of the Immigrants and Child Welfare Project, providing consulting, technical assistance, and training on issues related to foreign-born populations and child welfare. For over 10 years, Dr. Earner has been instrumental in raising awareness about the special needs of immigrant families, children, and youths involved in public child welfare systems, and has published numerous articles on the subject. She is a member of the National Child Welfare Advisory Board in Washington, D.C., and serves on the New York City Administration for Children's Services Subcommittee on Immigration and Language Issues. Her research interests include refugee children and youths, trafficking, and training social work students on immigrant issues.

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