

Enforced Separations: A Qualitative Examination of How Latinx Families Cope With Family Disruption Following the Deportation of a Parent

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Abstract

During the past two decades, U.S. immigration policies have been tightened resulting in increased deportations of unauthorized persons residing in the United States. This qualitative phenomenological study is theoretically grounded in family systems theory. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with Latinx youth ($n = 8$) and their remaining caregivers, specifically mothers ($n = 8$) who had recently experienced the deportation of the child's father. Findings from the analysis revealed that following the deportation of a parent, families (a) modified family structures and relied upon extended familial support, (b) experienced familial tensions, (c) experienced financial difficulties and housing instability, and (d) retreated from social life, including drastically shrinking social networks. Implications for practice include developing culturally based, trauma-informed interventions for Latinx families affected by deportation.

Keywords

immigration, deportation, family separation, Latinx families

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Since 2000, U.S. immigration policies at the U.S.–Mexico border have become more stringent, significantly altering the social, political, and legal landscape for undocumented immigrant families living in the United States (Brabeck & Xu, 2010; Kanstroom, 2007; Wessler, 2011; Zong et al., 2017). According to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS; 2018), 256,085 undocumented immigrants were deported in 2018, continuing a pattern of increased immigration enforcement resulting in more than 3 million deportations since 2008. Under the Obama administration, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) activities were tightly focused on detaining undocumented immigrants charged with criminal activity—and

currently, the Trump administration DHS policy deems every deportable noncitizen a candidate for arrest and removal. In light of the current political climate on immigration, undocumented immigrants and their families are more vulnerable to family separation than ever before. The executive order signed on

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January 25, 2018, dramatically expanded the categories of individuals classified as “priorities for removal” and made nonviolent infractions, including unlawful entry, a deportable offense. Another focus of this policy has been the tightening of the U.S.–Mexico border by enhancing surveillance, heightening the border wall, increasing the number of ICE agents and by forcibly separating newly arrived immigrant children from their parents (Vinick, 2017). Most recently, the DHS implemented the Public Charge Rule, and these changes have made it more difficult to apply for permanent residency or earn a visa if an applicant is dependent on government aid (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2020).

This study was conducted in California, a state that has fairly liberal policies concerning immigration. For example, Assembly Bill (AB) 699 (2017) requires all California public schools to provide protections for students, regardless of immigration status, and extend specific support to immigrant students and their families. Despite these statewide efforts, mixed-status families continue to experience deportations at a record pace (Whillon, 2019). Forced family separation has profound effects on family members who remain behind by increasing anxiety, stress, depression, and fear (Abrego & Menjivar, 2012; Allen et al., 2015; Chaudry et al., 2010; Dreby, 2012; Wessler, 2011). Barajas-Gonzalez et al. (2018) argue that this threat of familial separation and chronic uncertainty constitutes a distinct and damaging form of psychological violence.

The apprehension and removal of immigrants today will likely continue to have a profound impact on Latinx (Latin American origin or descent) families—the subpopulation most at risk of deportation (Pew Research Center, 2018). Previous research has examined the psychosocial effects of forced family separations among children; however, little is known about how remaining family members adjust and cope with a forced and sudden family separation following the deportation of a parent. Informed by family systems theory (Bowen, 1978), this study aims to understand the following question: “*How do Latinx youth and*

their remaining family members adjust to new family circumstances following the deportation of a parent?” This study contributes to the knowledge base on mixed-status families and deportations so that social service systems can better assist these families in coping with the changing and uncertain policy climate.

Literature Review

The literature on family separations has focused primarily on how young children experience forced family separations (Brabeck & Xu, 2010; Capps et al., 2007; Dreby, 2012, 2015). However, these studies have not explicitly considered how remaining family members cope with forced separations following the deportation of a parent.

Economic Strain

Prior research has examined the direct economic effects of deportation among mixed-status and undocumented families in the United States (Kandel & Massey, 2002). Parental deportation carries negative consequences for family economic stability particularly when the breadwinner is detained or deported. Capps et al.’s (2007) seminal study of three communities that experienced large-scale worksite raids in Colorado, Nebraska, and Massachusetts found that families who lost a breadwinner faced enormous economic challenges. The raids led to changes in family structure usually from two-parent, two-income households to single-parent, mostly female-headed households. Following deportation, existing family assets and resources diminished quickly, and consequently, extended family or kin networks often assumed significant financial and care-taking responsibilities (Capps et al., 2007).

Similarly, Dreby’s (2012) qualitative study of 110 Mexican families from New Jersey and Iowa found that for families who experienced a deportation, the remaining parent had difficulties paying bills, accrued increasing debts, faced housing instability, and experienced apprehension about applying for public assistance. Brabeck and Xu (2010) also reported

significant economic challenges for Salvadorian and Guatemalan families who experienced deportation-related family separations and found that families moved in with extended kin to pool resources. Overall, these economic challenges negatively impacted family well-being.

Psychosocial Effects of Parental Deportation on Youth

Deportation-related family separations may cause significant psychological and emotional consequences for deportees and their family members (Capps et al., 2007; Dreby, 2015; Hagan et al., 2011; Lovato, 2019). These consequences may involve multiple trauma-inducing experiences among youth who may witness the forcible removal of a parent resulting in the sudden loss of a caregiver and/or the abrupt loss of their family home environment (McLeigh, 2010; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2011). Research has shown that parental detention and deportation increases risk for mental health problems such as psychological distress, anxiety, depression, insomnia, fear, and worry (Allen et al., 2015; Eskenazi et al., 2019; L. H. Zayas et al., 2015).

Empirical studies have largely examined the impact of forced family separations due to deportation on younger children. Allen et al. (2015) found that children with a deported parent exhibited elevated symptoms, such as depression and anxiety, compared with children with undocumented parents who did not experience a parental deportation. Similarly, L. H. Zayas et al. (2015) compared the psychological well-being of two subgroups of citizen-children to a comparison group of citizen-children whose parents were not detained or deported. They found that children affected directly by parental deportation/detention were more likely to report emotional problems than their counterparts. Moreover, Rojas-Flores et al. (2017) drew upon interviews from teachers, clinicians, and children who had experienced the deportation of a parent. They also found that U.S. born citizen-children of detained and deported parents experienced more psychological distress and trauma

compared with those whose parents had not been detained or deported, including depressive symptoms, anxiety symptoms, and insecurity about the future. Taken together, the studies show that a forced family separation negatively impacts children's psychosocial well-being in the form of unanticipated and often concerning behavioral changes.

Social Service Needs Following a Forced Family Separation

The literature on family separations has also examined immigrant families' social service needs following a forced family separation. Immigrant families affected by deportation have unique needs due to the trauma of suddenly losing a parent and/or economic need. These service needs may include school-based mental health support and tangible items such as food, shelter, clothing, and legal services (Capps et al., 2007; Dreby, 2012). Chaudry et al. (2010) found that families who experienced a forced family separation due to mass raids in their communities needed items such as food, baby formula, diapers, and other necessities which churches and community centers provided via food drives. Ayón's (2018) study examined the impact of state-level legislation on immigrant Latino families impacted by the passage of strict anti-immigrant policies. She found that the passage of anti-immigrant policies prevented families from accessing driver's licenses, identification cards, health insurance, work papers, and basic civil liberties.

Research has also suggested that faith-based organizations have served as critical service points for the immigrant community and have played a critical role in the distribution of support and services (Capps et al., 2007). According to Dreby (2012), families who experienced immigration enforcement not only need tangible provisions but also need a place to receive counseling services and trauma-related support. Legal services are also critical to families who experience a forced family separation (Capps et al., 2007).

Overall, research has suggested that immigrant families are generally reluctant to seek

social services such as mental health counseling and/or therapy due to stigma, language barriers, and/or feelings of fear due to immigration enforcement (Ayón, 2014; Fortuny et al., 2009). Salas et al.'s (2013) qualitative study of 43 Latino immigrant adults at risk of immigration enforcement reported that immigrant families were fearful of accessing critical health services due to consistent worry about deportation. These findings illustrate some of the barriers and difficulties associated with responding to the needs of immigrant families in the aftermath of immigration enforcement activity.

Although we know that children and families are negatively affected by the deportation of parents and reluctant to seek help, there are key gaps in the literature related to how families cope once a parent has been deported and how social service systems respond to families' needs. Hence, this study poses the following question: *"How do Latinx youth and their remaining family members adjust to new family circumstances following the deportation of a parent?"*

Theoretical Framework

This study incorporates a theoretical framework that draws upon family systems theory (Bowen, 1978). Family systems theory posits that individuals and their behaviors cannot be understood in isolation from one another, but rather as a part of their family, which is the core emotional unit (Bowen, 1978). Cox and Paley (1997) argue that when a families' systems' balance is interrupted during separation or loss, members face a challenge in continuous growth. As a result, some families may take longer than others to return to their functioning mode. This process is particularly emphasized in family separation cases where children may experience trauma due to the unexpected loss of a parent. These experiences may make the system susceptible to psychological, emotional, and economic barriers. Family systems theory is relevant to this study because it highlights the ways in which reciprocal relationships both within the family system and beyond the system, such as immigration law enforcement, impacts the family. Dynamics between families

and their environment are reciprocal and constantly changing; and a resilient family adapts to changes within its environment (Bowen, 1978). Family systems theory suggests that family disruption can destabilize the family unit and negatively impact each of its members. Hence, events like deportation are a potential source of family dysfunction and personal distress, which are likely to have implications for the well-being and psychosocial adjustment of family members.

Methodology

This study utilized a phenomenological qualitative design. Phenomenology seeks to capture the essence of a phenomenon and to provide a deep understanding of a shared experience and is used to provide thick descriptions of the lived experiences of a small set of individuals in relation to a particular situation or phenomenon (Creswell, 2007).

Participants were recruited through a K-12 public school site in southern California. The student population was predominantly Latinx (80%) and Asian (14%). To address the study's research questions, a sample of Latinx youth who had experienced the deportation of a parent were purposively recruited at the school site along with their caregivers. Recruitment efforts began with the adolescents and then the caregivers. Flyers were posted around the school campus and in the counseling center. Classroom recruitment presentations were conducted and referrals were obtained from teachers, administrators, and counselors who worked directly with immigrant students. These staff served as key informants who were aware of students who had experienced a forced family separation due to deportation. Once a potential respondent was identified, a face-to-face screening interview was conducted by the researcher who is both bilingual and bicultural and served as a volunteer at the recruitment site for 6 months prior to recruitment. In this manner, the researcher was able to build rapport and trust with many immigrant families previously met through volunteer service. Participants were eligible for inclusion if the following criteria were met:

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Youth and Caregiver Living Arrangements Post Family Separation ($n = 8$).

Pseudonym/Age (years)	Age at separation (years)	Length of separation	Parent(s) deported	Current living arrangement
Marco, 14	12	2 years	Mother & father	Aunt/Uncle
Paulina, 14	12	2 years	Father	Mother & aunt
Maritza, 15	12	3 years	Father	Mother & aunts
Raul, 16	13	3 years	Father	Mother/aunt
Kevin, 16	14	2 years	Mother & father	Aunt/uncle
Ismael, 17	16	13 months	Father	Mother/ grandmother
Stephanie, 17	15	23 months	Father	Mother
Oscar, 18	16	2 years	Father	Mother & aunts

(a) Latinx descent, (b) between the ages of 14 and 18 years, (c) have experienced a forced family separation due to detention and/or deportation, and (d) have a caregiver willing to also participate in the study. Once youth participants were determined eligible, each respective caregiver was contacted and an in-person meeting was scheduled to obtain informed parental consent. As a recruitment incentive, all family units received a US\$20 gift card for their participation. Approval for the conduct of research with human subjects was obtained from all sponsoring institutions. As a part of the informed consent process, all participants were informed of their right to refuse to answer any question and reminded that participation in the study was entirely voluntary, and to protect the confidentiality of participants, the legal names of individuals were not used in notes and instead substituted by pseudonyms.

Sample

Table 1 lists the demographic information pertaining to the youth sample, including five males and three females. All youth participants were born in the United States, and had family members who were both documented and undocumented. The length of the forced parental separation varied, and the average length of separation between a youth and their caregiver at the time of the interview was 2 years. Participants were bilingual and fluent in both English and Spanish.

As presented in Table 2, the parents/caregivers in this study also shared a wide range of experiences. Six were biological mothers (who were not deported) and two caregivers were aunts of the youth participants. All parent/caregiver participants were foreign-born (four Mexican, three El Salvadorian, and one Honduran). The parent/caregivers had been consistently living in the United States since their families migrated to Los Angeles during the 1990s and early 2000s.

Data Collection

Data were collected from both youth and parents to gain an in-depth understanding of how family members coped with deportation-related family stressors. Both the youth and their caregivers were well positioned to describe how their families coped with forced family separations.

Youth. From January to April 2017, one in-depth individual interview was conducted with each youth participant ($n = 8$). All interviews were face-to-face, semi-structured, and lasted 60 to 90 min. Interviews were digitally recorded with the participants' permission and took place in a private space at the school. All interviews were conducted in English based upon participants' preferences. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight youth, ages 14 to 18 years, and their caregivers. The youth interview guide contained a range of open-ended and probing questions

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Mothers/Caregivers Interviewed Post Family Separation ($n = 8$).

Remaining caregiver pseudonym/Age (years)	Caregiver to child	Country of origin	Years spent in the United States
Nancy, 45	Ismael's mother	Mexico	24
Mariella, 48	Oscar's mother	El Salvador	22
Maria, 41	Raul's mother	Honduras	18
Gladys, 44	Stephanie's mother	Mexico	15
Lorena, 50	Marco's aunt	Mexico	20
Isabel, 49	Paulina's mother	El Salvador	20
Fabiola, 48	Maritza's mother	El Salvador	23
Maribella, 53	Kevin's aunt	Mexico	26

regarding youth's psychosocial well-being, family well-being, and social service needs. The interview guide was flexibly structured to permit interview adaptation for each respondent's unique story (Shenton, 2004). To learn more about how youth coped with new family circumstances, the researcher asked questions such as those listed in the Youth Interview Protocol in Appendix A: "How have you adjusted to new family arrangements following the deportation of your parent(s)?" "How do you feel you and your family members are getting along following the deportation of your parent? How have things changed at home?" The researcher also inquired about what helped them cope with the loss of a parent(s).

Caregivers. From January to April 2017, one in-depth individual interview was conducted with the youth participant's parent/caregivers ($n = 8$). All interviews were face-to-face, semi-structured, and lasted 60 to 90 min. Interviews took place in a private space at the school site. Based on participants' preferences, interviews were conducted in Spanish and digitally recorded with their consent. Interview questions were open-ended to introduce the research topics and to allow participants to share their experiences of coping with family separation. In this article, we focus on the series of questions that were informed by family systems theory and focused on how families adjusted to new circumstances following a deportation family separation.

For example, the researcher asked youth and caregivers questions listed in the interview guide, Appendix B, such as "What have been some of the challenges that your family has encountered following the deportation of your parent/spouse?" "How have you and your family coped following the deportation of your spouse/parent?" Additional follow up questions inquired about their needs following deportation and support systems.

Analysis Procedures

Colaizzi's (1978) phenomenological method was employed as a data analysis guide. Original transcriptions were divided into statements and converted into clusters of meanings that described concepts relevant to the phenomenon of forced family separation. Clusters were further grouped to create a general description of the essence of the phenomenon. From the structural and textural descriptions, a composite description was written that presented the "essence" of the phenomenon. Primarily, this passage focused on the commonalities of the families that experienced a deportation related separation (Creswell, 2007). Data were then manually open-coded. Codes were produced as similar words used across participant interviews emerged. Segments of coded data were then extracted into codebook matrices, which allowed for identification of themes and comparison across the dyads of participants (i.e., youth participants, parents/caregivers). Participants' descriptions and interpretations were used to identify similar and different views

Table 3. Themes and Core Concepts.

Theme	Core concepts
Modifying family structures	Familial tensions Experiencing financial difficulties and housing instability Retreating from social life: living under the radar

within and/or among participants' experiences of coping with a forced family separation. Meanings of experiences were thereafter formulated from these significant statements and reduced into meaningful segments. These segments were assigned names by combining codes into broader categories or themes such as "fear of family separation" and "family tension." Themes were reviewed and further grouped into categorical families to condense the essence of participants' experiences.

Dedoose, a qualitative analysis software program, was used to assist with data management given the large quantity of data (Kelle & Laurie, 1995) and to ensure a systematic approach to the coding of each interview (Lee & Fielding, 1996). Upon the completion of coding the data, multiple tables were created to facilitate data interpretation and gain visual overview of the data across cases, and across groups of participants (i.e., youth, caregivers, and social service providers). Participants' voices guided the data analysis narrative with multiple *in vivo* quotes from participants' interviews being used to supplement the narrative when reporting the results. From these statements, one core theme—Modifying Family Structures—and three core concepts emerged: (a) familial tensions, (b) experiencing financial difficulties and housing instability, (c) retreating from social life: living under the radar. Table 3 displays a visual representation of the core concepts that contributed to this theme. These themes and core constructs were connected to the theoretical framework of family systems theory, in an effort to make sense and give context to the study's findings. Openness was also maintained for flexibility in applying new theories or expanding existing ones based on the themes that emerged during analysis.

To support the trustworthiness of the study, methodological rigor was enhanced in the areas of credibility, dependability, and confirmability (Guba & Lincoln, 1982). In terms of credibility, this standard was fulfilled through methods triangulation and member checking. For example, various data sources were triangulated to ensure the consistency of findings. Member checking involved returning back to participants to solicit feedback surrounding the accuracy of thematic interpretations within 1 week of data collection (Creswell, 2007).

To support confirmability, the researcher provided an audit trail (Padgett, 1998) by documenting each step taken in data collection and analysis. The components of the audit trail consist of raw data field notes, interview transcripts, along with journal and memos noting decisions made during data collection, coding, and analysis. Although the audit trail is not intended for exact replication, it may enhance reproducibility. To strengthen dependability, the researcher participated in peer-debriefing group with colleagues to critique research findings and debrief field work and data analysis.

Findings

Data analysis revealed four main findings. In response to the forced separation following a parental deportation, families (a) modified family structures and relied upon extended familial support, (b) experienced familial tensions, (c) experienced financial difficulties and housing instability, and (d) retreated from social life by drastically shrinking social networks due to fear of further immigration enforcement. These main findings are explained below.

Modifying Family Structures

As shown in Table 1, prior to the arrest and deportation of a youth's parent(s), many of the participants' family structures were two-parent nuclear households consisting of the mother, father, and children. Following the separation of a parent(s), each of the eight families had to move in with extended family members to share rent and other living expenses due to the loss of a breadwinner. For the youth in this study, one of the most difficult changes that they experienced following the forced separation from their parent(s) was the abrupt shift in family structure from living with two parents to living with one (their mother) and extended family members. Most youth recalled missing their fathers yet having little contact with them because of challenges in communication across borders. For example, Raul, a 16-year-old male whose father was deported, shared as follows:

It's been years now since my father's been gone and I feel like I have a hole in my heart. We barely talk on the phone because he has a new life and family now in Mexico. I feel alone and like everything in our life is different now. We live with my aunt and her kids. I just want things to go back to normal, it's so unfair.

Other youth shared about the discomfort of experiencing dramatic changes in their family life. They recalled having to share tight living spaces with siblings and cousins, and spend less time with their remaining parent (their mother) who had to take on additional work to supplement the loss of their father's income. For some, the abrupt change in family structure led to postponing personal goals, such as going to college, because they needed to contribute financially to the household. For example, Stephanie, a 17-year-old junior in high school, discussed her frustrations with having to relocate frequently and deal with new house dynamics:

We've moved around so many times. Now we are living with my aunt in her tiny garage. I miss having my own room and I wish I saw my mom more. She started making and selling

tamales, and she is hardly ever home these days. All these changes are hard.

Mothers coped with new circumstances by modifying family arrangements and reaching out to family members for economic and informal support. While these mothers found that relocating to live with their extended family was an economic necessity, young people, on the other hand, felt an immense sense of loss due to the deportation of a parent(s) and because their mothers were less available due to work-related obligations.

Following the deportation, families had to branch out and rely upon extended family for daily basic needs support. These mothers coped with the shock of their sudden loss of their husband by seeking emotional and financial support from extended family. Relatives assisted mothers with child care, housing, and economic needs. Several families shared how especially crucial it was to pool their resources together for their stability and survival. Mothers relied heavily on extended family for financial and other assistance over the longer term, as they did immediately following the deportation. Isabel, 49 years, the mother of Paulina, 14 years, shared as follows:

I am so grateful for my family in Los Angeles. Some of them are U.S. citizens and have helped me learn the system. My sister invited me and my children to live with her after my husband was sent back to Mexico. Having her around has kept my depression away, because now, I am not going through this alone.

Nancy, 45 years, the mother of Ismael, similarly shared, "We moved around a lot, until finally my sister let us live in her garage. It's small and very cold, but at least we are together and not as worried about if we can pay next month's rent." Mothers also reported taking on the short- and long-term financial burdens.

Familial Tensions

Forced family separations increased family tensions and in some cases intensified existing family stressors between mothers and their

children. Sudden single motherhood resulted in numerous changes in the family's daily routines, especially child care. For example, after Gladys', 44 years, husband was deported, she entered the workforce as a seamstress for the first time in 10 years and as a result, her daughter Stephanie, 15 years, became the primary child care provider for her 4-year-old brother during after-school hours. Stephanie described the challenges she faced filling in for her mom at home:

My mom started working when I was in the 9th grade. So, I've been pretty much taking care of my brother and running the house since then. I have had less time to devote to school and my friends. In a way, I feel a little resentful because I have to miss out on fun things that my friends get to experience, like going out after school. But at the same time, who else would take care of my family? I am the only one.

Stephanie, 15 years, felt the strain of having to help out around the house and provide child care while her mom went to work.

Like their children, mothers were also very emotionally affected by the loss of their spouse. They were hyper-stressed and not their best selves because of experiencing loss, grief, and the shock of not having their spouse physically present. They described their own sadness, loss of energy, bouts of crying, anxiety, and uncertainty about the future due to their own undocumented status. For example, Fabiola, 48 years, mother of Maritza, described the precarious days following the arrest of her spouse:

I have been so nervous and upset about ever since my husband being taken away. I can't sleep and I constantly worry about our future and that fear doesn't go away. I know that my nervousness gets passed on to my kids, I can tell that they feel anxious too.

Similarly, Nancy, 45 years, the mother of Ismael, whose husband and sister were both deported in a large workplace raid, described how her own exacerbated sadness and anger affected her interactions with both Ismael and her daughter, Ana. As a newly undocumented single parent of U.S.-born children, the fear of

one day being forced to decide whether to leave her children or take them away from the only country they have ever known takes its toll, to the point that Nancy, 45 years, described as follows: "Sometimes I want to die so that I don't have to keep suffering." Nancy noted she sometimes scolds her children for "anything" without understanding why.

Both Nancy, 45 years, and Fabiola, 48 years, clearly expressed feelings of guilt and tension for being less emotionally available to their children due to their own grief over the loss of their spouse. Relative caregivers such as Maribella, 53 years, Kevin's aunt and Lorena, 50 years, and Marco's aunt experienced being overwhelmed from taking on the role of a mother to their nephews, while also responding to the needs of their own households and biological children. These abrupt changes led to difficulties in adjusting to new familial circumstances. For example, Maritza, a 17-year-old high school junior who was falling behind in her academics, described the ways in which tensions with her mother escalated after her father had been detained and deported. She explained that her father had always been the person whom she turned to for help with friends, relationships, and with her homework. Maritza recalled as follows:

My mom has always been busy taking care of my younger siblings so we never got that close. My father has always been there for me, like when I had, like, projects to turn in, or just needed some advice he helped me a lot. So my mom and I are trying to get along and sometimes it feels weird because I feel like we don't really know each other.

Following her father's deportation, Maritza stopped doing her homework, got sent home from school for fighting on two occasions, and no longer had a desire to participate in everyday activities such as household chores and homework. Without her father's supportive parenting style, Maritza experienced a great deal of sadness and longing for the daily support her father had provided, she also felt uncertain about how to connect with her mother.

Experiencing Financial Difficulties and Housing Instability

Forced family separations due to parental deportation negatively affected families' financial situations and their ability to thrive materially and economically. All mothers who remained behind experienced hardships related to the sudden loss of their spouse, including difficulty paying bills, increasing debts, housing instability, food insecurity, legal fees, the inability to send remittance money to the deported parent in their home country, and apprehension about applying for public assistance. Without the incomes of their household "breadwinners," particularly when families were still struggling to pay off migration debts, remaining family members struggled to make ends meet, which put further stress on the family.

Mothers felt guilty for having to work more hours to meet the material needs of their families because it resulted in spending less quality time at home with their children. They scrambled to find enough work and arrange for child care and navigated cleverly through tertiary economies. For example, reselling clothes, furniture, or appliances at roadside stands, making tamales or tortillas in garages, setting up hair salons in living rooms, and cleaning houses. Fabiola, 48 years, the mother of Maritza, noted her frustrations in having to take on additional work as a nanny while struggling to care for her own children, she shared, "Since my husband was deported, I've had to become a nanny, so I take care of other mother's kids—when I can't even spend time with my own." These economic crises were especially prevalent among several families who had not yet paid off the debt incurred in migration. During this time, mothers encountered significant difficulty coping with the economic and psychological stress caused by the arrest of their spouse or partner. They were often less integrated into U.S. society and less familiar with the means to cope with daily life than their spouse had been. This was especially true for Mariella, 48 years, mother of Oscar, who explained as follows:

I don't have a driver's license and have difficulty figuring out public transportation, so just getting around town is hard. My husband was in charge of the money for the house. At first, I didn't have access to the bank account either and couldn't leave the house. It was so horrible; I just cried all the time because I felt so alone and helpless.

Following deportation, in these extreme cases, some mothers were left isolated, afraid, and unable to make basic decisions about daily life that their husbands had often made before they were deported. Mothers were unaccustomed to making basic financial decisions and did not have access to husbands' bank accounts. For these women, the loss of their husbands represented not only the loss of a partner and breadwinner but also the loss of a clear direction for their families.

Retreating From Social Life: Living Under the Radar

Pervasive throughout mothers' narratives was the fear of being arrested and deported, which significantly changed how participants lived their public lives. Family routines also changed partly because of the fear of further family separation. Fear of law enforcement made families wary of leaving their homes and fearful of accessing formal social support. Oscar, a 16-year-old male, who lives with his extended family following the deportation of his father shared as follows:

I know my mom is scared that we'll be separated. She no longer hangs outside with her friends. She reminds us everyday to hurry home from school and we also stopped playing soccer in the park nearby because my mom is afraid that we will all be separated.

Mariella, 48 years, mother of Oscar, noted that she kept her children home from school at times to avoid ICE:

I used to pick them up from school, now since we have to hide from ICE, I worry that if my son goes to school, maybe they [ICE] will find us. Sometimes when we hear from our neighbors

that ICE is in our neighborhood, my son stays home from school.

Mothers also described how reports from their neighbors, gossip, and or social media caused them to fear for their safety. Nancy, 45 years, Ismael's mother, stated that she receives text messages and Facebook messages from her neighbors that warn as follows: "Stay at home tomorrow. Immigration and Customs Enforcement is conducting raids in the (restaurant) kitchens." She shared that this type of fear and worry not only cost her a decrease in her salary because she stayed home from work so often but also made her feel socially isolated.

Some mothers who lived with this looming fear of their own deportation described an acute feeling of being imprisoned in their own homes because of increased immigration enforcement activity in the neighborhood. For example, Maria, 41 years, mother of Raul, reflected upon feeling confined to her home following the arrest and detention of her husband. She explained as follows:

We used to go to the park, the mall and shopping. Now we stay inside the house and avoid certain areas because we are all aware of ICE, it's depressing. We can't go anywhere, then the kids fight often with each other, because there is so much they can't just outside and play. We are prisoners in our own home.

Ongoing fears about ICE operations and community tensions led to widespread social isolation, which led to a sense of protection through family seclusion. In the most extreme cases, Isabel, 49 years, mother of Paulina recalled that she and her daughter have at times stayed in the basement with their lights turned down so that no one would suspect that they were home. Isabel described the need to retreat indoors:

We don't pick up our kids anymore from school and can't even go to the doctor's office. I have spoken to a couple of my neighbors and they told me, "There's a checkpoint at the grocery store. They arrested fifty people last night. Don't open the door for anyone, it might be ICE!" The only place where it's safe to go is

church. People I know actually stay there for days/weeks at a time.

Mothers were concerned with further family separation and subsequently lived their lives under the radar. They avoided accessing support from formal institutions such as their child's school, hospitals, and other government agencies due to a fear of deportability. Stephanie, a 17-year-old, whose father was deported 2 years prior shared as follows:

I noticed that my mom stopped getting any kind support. She used to go to the clinic and talk to a counselor about her troubles. She doesn't do that anymore. We haven't gone to get our regular dental check-ups in awhile either. My mom just says we have to be invisible for awhile, until this all goes away.

Mothers sought support informally through other immigrant neighbors, families, and friends who informed them of potential ICE raids, police activity, and resources in the community. These families reported that they felt as though they were in the shadows of society. They were forced to develop tight informal networks among other immigrant families in which they sought support, resources, and guidance. The resource and social support sharing that these families engaged in helped maintain their sense of connectedness as they watched out for one another, redefined familial roles, and kept each other safe from additional forced family separations.

Discussion

This phenomenological study sought to understand how families experience and cope with the changes and challenges related to the deportation of an undocumented parent(s). Previous studies have demonstrated that forced family separations negatively influence the psychosocial well-being of young children (Capps et al., 2007; Chaudry et al., 2010; Dreby, 2012; Gulbas et al., 2015). This study builds on previous research by probing deeper into how families adjust to new circumstances following the deportation of a parent. Family systems theory (Bowen, 1978)

helps us understand how forced family separations contribute to a process of re-adjustment in roles and family structures. Overall, the findings from this study revealed that upon the arrest, detainment, and subsequent deportation of a parent, families coped with and confronted psychosocial and economic challenges to create a new homeostasis. Mothers/caregivers reached out to extended family, accessing aid through informal support networks, and internal support systems all while limiting their public interactions to prevent further family disruption. The experience was characterized by fear, loss, and the unknown.

For each of these families, the loss of one or both parents disrupted family members' sense of stability. Mothers experienced a profound sense of grief over the loss of their spouses and faced a tremendous amount of emotional stress in figuring out how to reunify and support the family financially during their spouses' absence. Like extant research, the loss of the father or breadwinner often resulted in economic hardship and related problems such as food insecurity and housing instability (Capps et al., 2007; Chaudry et al., 2010; Dreby, 2015). The mothers left behind were under constant emotional stress, which resulted in significant changes in family dynamics and all while they had to cope with their own grief due to the loss of their spouse, which rendered them emotionally unavailable for their children at times.

In addition, mothers and caregivers relied heavily on extended family for moral, emotional, and economic support. This is consistent with prior research that found that Latinx communities rely upon their family, friends, neighbors, and community-based organizations for various types of support (Ayón & Bou Ghosn Naddy, 2013). These suddenly single mothers scrambled to replace their husband's role in the family to become the sole providers. Because of the economic strain caused by the absence of one or both parents, remaining members of the family unit relocated to live with relatives, while mothers/caregivers took on additional employment and turned to their older children for assistance at home. Youth's roles at home also

shifted as they became a critical source of support to the household.

Similar to Dreby's (2015) findings, youth and their mothers adapted to new circumstances by taking on new roles, which assisted families in reestablishing a sense of equilibrium. Economic insecurity and hardship called for families to alter their daily routines and find means for survival while protecting against fear of immigration enforcement. For these families, this process of adjustment resulted in increasing tension among youth and parents. Not discussed widely in the literature is this study's finding that adolescents in these circumstances resented and felt burdened by what they perceived as their parents' over-reliance on them, which encroached upon their freedom. This finding highlights how the deportation of a parent can cause youth to relinquish part of their childhood. Although remaining mothers/caregivers were in need of this assistance, from their older children, they were aware that subjecting their children to additional obligations could blur the lines between parent and child.

In addition, unique to this study, family systems theory provides a lens for how families made meaning of family separation and adjusted to changes in their family system. From a family systems perspective (Bowen, 1978), the forced removal of one or both parents destabilized the family unit, impacting each of its members who experienced stressors such as trauma, anxiety, depression, and loss. Mothers and caregivers experienced both symptoms of loss and great stress as they became solely responsible for the economic, emotional, and logistical components of supporting their children/relatives. Mothers/caregivers relied on their supra systems, or extended family, which according to Bowen (1978) may play a part in how families self-stabilize. For each of these eight families, they relied upon their extended family members to share in housing, day-to-day expenses, caregiving duties, and for overall emotional support. While families were able to obtain a new level of homeostasis through their own resilience and by seeking informal support through their networks, they were still in the process

of adjusting to new familial roles and in coping with a pervasive fear of further family separation.

Findings showed that due to fears of additional family deportations, worry, secrecy, and keeping a low-profile became the norm in these families. The fear of deportation, mixed with gendered norms about women's safety, may account for why mothers and their children were forced to "live under the radar." Mothers and children became vigilant at all times, always on the lookout for situations that could expose their family to harm. Consequently, mothers drastically limited the family's social outings, were less engaged in children's school activities and, in some cases, prohibited their children from participating in extracurricular activities. Worry and secrecy became part of the survival strategies for families' daily life. This led to increased tension in the household and, as a result, families experienced greater social isolation and family conflict.

Limitations

Due to the retrospective nature of this study, youth and parents had to draw upon their recollections of how they coped with a forced family separation. Participants may have forgotten some details or might not have had an accurate recollection of the events and emotions in question. However, these forced separations all occurred within a relatively short period of time (1–3 years) of the interviews and were still undergoing their adjustment process. The recruitment process itself, from one school, also limits the transferability of the findings to other regions or schools as the experience of undocumented youth across different contexts may vary greatly.

Implications for Policy

In light of the current political climate on immigration, undocumented immigrants and their families are extremely vulnerable to deportation. Recent federal immigration laws have led to an increase in deportations: many of which are expedited. As demonstrated in this study's findings, mixed-status families

continue to live in a constant terror of losing a parent, due to ICE enforcement. In addition, these families underutilized much-needed social services which has implications for child and family well-being. This indicates that the policy environment matters. At the state level, states designated as "sanctuary states" should craft policy specifically tailored to protect undocumented immigrants and prevent family separation. At the local level, cities should promote "sensitive location" policies which prohibit ICE from targeting undocumented immigrants in hospitals, schools, churches, court offices, and/or public demonstrations. This might ensure that individuals seeking to participate in activities at any sensitive locations are free to do so without fear of apprehension. Furthermore, AB 699 in California requires that schools adopt supportive practices in response to heightened immigration enforcement, including updated staff training and curriculum development (Safe Havens Initiative, 2019). These state-wide policies should be evaluated to ensure effectiveness and ameliorate issues such as social isolation.

Implications for Social Work Practice

This study's findings contribute to several implications for social work practice. At the mezzo level, social service providers can play an important role in assisting these families both cope and adjust to new family circumstances. Social service agencies must make a considerable effort in engaging and informing immigrant families and individuals that their offices are safe for them to enter and interact. As we saw in this study, many undocumented immigrants are reluctant to enter these sites and access services for fear of apprehension. Given the importance of Latinx families' social networks, practitioners should recognize the strengths of this asset and incorporate family or other key members into treatment planning.

To support children in coping with feelings of loss and/or trauma, practitioners must be attuned to the phenomenon of forced family separation in their assessments and treatment

processes. For families who experience symptoms of trauma, loss, and/or fear of further family separation, it would be helpful for the practitioner to normalize and contextualize the distress that family members may be experiencing. This strategy might assist family members in enlarging their perspective to see their difficulties as understandable considering the adversities they face (Walsh, 2006). Social workers should help normalize clients' experience in so far as is possible, and/or role-play a conversation with their clients in which they help facilitate the shift of roles. In addition to these practice-based recommendations, evidence-based intervention studies should also be developed with the aim of understanding the effects of forced family separations to develop strategies to assist families manage the separation.

Directions for Future Research

This study contributes to the literature not only by examining how youth experience and cope with the forced family separation but also by showing how such an adverse event impacts the entire family unit. Overall, this study found that families experienced significant loss, grief, economic instability, social isolation, family conflict, and fear of further family separation. Families coped by seeking support from extended family and accessing aid through informal support networks, all while "living under the radar." This study also found evidence that even under extreme loss, fear, trauma, and economic stress, families displayed tremendous resilience in the face of forced family separations and adjusted to new family circumstances. Numerous questions on this topic remain, such as the following: "How does family separation and loss of parental income affect children's well-being and health and social service needs in the long term?" A multisite study where all individuals were involved in the deportation process—such as youth, a remaining parent or surrogate caregiver, a deported parent, and social workers—is needed to provide a comprehensive understanding of how anti-immigrant legislation impacts children and families over time.

Multidisciplinary, triangulated research is essential to continue to understand the lived experiences of this understudied population. Further study will continue to shed light on promising direct and indirect practice with these vulnerable families.

Appendix A

Youth Interview Protocol

Introduction

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself. What are some things that you are really interested in?

Family relations

1. Everyone has a story of migration to the United States; please tell me about you and/or your family's journey. (Probe for sequence of migration: who came first, who came next? Caretaking arrangements? Quality of caretaking arrangement?)
2. Can you tell me about the process of how you were separated from a [role of family member] how did it occur and who did you have to separate from (one parent, or both? siblings?)
3. Describe your relationship with your current caregiver (mother, grandmother, aunt, uncle, foster parent, etc.).
4. [If participant moved to a new household] what was your relationship like with your parents after you rejoined them? How has your relationship changed with your parents and or caregivers since that initial transition?
5. Do you ever talk with your [ROLE] about the time you were apart?
6. How would you describe your level of connection/closeness with your parent(s) these days?
7. What helped you get through the time you were separated from a parent? (Probe for friends, family support, school support, personal resources, etc.)
8. How did you and your family members cope with the loss of your parent(s)?

Social service involvement

1. What social support resources (counseling department on campus, neighborhood centers) are you aware of on campus or off campus?
2. After [xyz characterization of separation] did you ever talk to counselor or to anyone about the separation? (Probe church, coach, etc.).
3. Does your family receive any social support from agencies on campus or in the local community? If so, which agencies do they go to for support? How helpful do you think that has been?
4. What type of support has been most helpful to you?

Views of the future

1. Tell me about your plans for the next 2 to 3 years. Where do you see yourself?
2. What do you hope to be doing? How do you imagine that you will get there?

We have come to the end of our interview. Thank you for your time. Is there anything you would like to add or think I should have asked about? Do you have any questions of me?

Appendix B*Parent/Caregiver Interview Protocol**Introduction*

1. Cuéntame sobre su familia, con quien vive? (Tell me a little bit about your family.)
2. ¿Dónde viven Uds. y con quién viven? (Where do you live and with whom do you live?)
3. ¿Cuánto tiempo en total estaban/están separados? (How long has your child been separated from their other parent?)
4. ¿Me puede decir como su hijo se ha ajustado a la separación de los miembros de su familia? (Can you share how your child has adjusted to the separation they experienced from their parent?)

5. ¿Cómo fue la separación del mama/papa por su hijo y su familia?
6. ¿Cómo fue la despedida de su hijo con estas personas? ¿Han podido mantenerse en contacto con esta(s) personas? (Did your child have an opportunity to say goodbye to their parent(s), if so how was it? Has your child been able to maintain contact with the parent(s) who they were separated from?)

Family well-being

7. ¿Habla Ud. y su hijo acerca de la separación? (Do you speak about the process of separation with the child, if so, what is shared?)
8. ¿Cómo le lleva Ud. con su hijo después de la separación? Como su hijo lleva con los demás en la familia? (How do you and your child get along post-family separation?)
9. Describa algunos de los retos que han pasado a su familia después de la separación? (Describe a challenge that happened with your family following the family separation).
10. Cómo se las arregló su familia después de la deportación de los padres del niño? (How has your family coped following the deportation of your child's father?)

Social service support

11. ¿Desde la separación, hay algo que usted o su familia ha necesitado por ejemplo, algún tipo de actividades por su hijo, consejería, apoyo económicamente? (After the separation, are there any supportive services that you or your family have needed such as counseling, financial support?)
12. ¿Lo que ha ayudado a su familia la mayor parte durante este tiempo; La escuela, apoyo de la familia/amigos, la iglesia, algún agencia de servicios? (What support has helped you most during this time; support from school, friends, family, church, or a particular social service agency?)

13. ¿Participa Ud. o su familia en algún tipo de servicios de apoyo; por ejemplo ayuda de la comida, la renta, consejería, servicios de salud mental de algún agencia o, de la escuela? (Do you or your family participate in, or receive any kind of social or economic support?)
14. ¿Lo que ayudaría a su familia la mayor parte durante este tiempo? (What type of social service support would be most helpful to you and your family during this time?)

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