

# An Examination of Latinx Immigrant Families' Social Service Needs Following a Deportation-related Family Separation

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Restrictive U.S. immigration policies have resulted in increased deportations of unauthorized individuals. This qualitative study examines social service utilization among Latinx immigrant families following the deportation of one or more parents.

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with Latinx mothers/caregivers ( $n = 8$ ) and school-based service providers ( $n = 11$ ). Findings revealed that (a) school-based service providers filled in gaps despite systemic barriers; (b) families experienced fear in accessing support; (c) families avoided social services and health care; and (d) families experienced newfound social support. Implications for culturally relevant practice are included.

According to the U.S. Customs and Border Protection (2020), a record high number of 850,000 undocumented immigrants were apprehended at the U.S. Southern border in 2019, continuing a pattern of more than 7 million deportations since 2010. One of the many unnoticed aspects of deportation is its impact on the family members who are left behind. Deportation-related family separations cause significant psychological and emotional consequences for deportees and their family members (Capps et al., 2007; Chaudry et al., 2010; Dreby, 2015; Hagan et al., 2011; Lovato & Abrams, 2021). These consequences may involve multiple trauma-inducing experiences among youth who may witness the forcible removal of a parent and/or the abrupt loss of their family home environment (McLeigh, 2010; Suarez-Orozco et al., 2011; Lovato, 2019).

Families who experience a forced family separation may need to access professional support, including mental health services due to trauma, or assistance with basic needs due to loss of income, housing, or food insecurity. However, little is known about how families of Latinx immigrants who have experienced forced separation navigate social service support following the deportation of a parent. This study is particularly timely as the apprehension and removal of immigrants today likely will 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). This study poses the following questions: (a) How do Latinx immigrant families experience social service utilization following the deportation of a parent?; and (b) How do services providers (particularly at a school site) respond to the needs of these families? This study contributes to the knowledge base on mixed-status families and social service use so that providers can better assist these families in accessing much-needed support.

## Literature Review

### *Immigration-related Political Climate*

The sociopolitical climate in the United States has played a major role in reducing immigrants' access to social services and systems of care

(Ayon, 2013). In 1996, Congress passed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), which specifically prohibited undocumented immigrants' access to public services at the federal, state, and/or local level (Kullgreen, 2003). (PRWORA; U.S. Public Law 104-193). The Trump Administration took a particularly aggressive stance to deterring and removing undocumented immigrants by ushering in a sea of policy changes that impacted immigrants' safety and well-being (Pierce et al., 2018). For example, Trump's executive orders reduced legal immigration, erected a border wall at the United States-Mexico border, ended temporary protections for undocumented immigrants, and engaged in extreme vetting of immigrant applicants. While supportive social service programs are critical for families in vulnerable circumstances, families who are undocumented fear disclosing their immigration status to service providers as this may lead to deportation and family separation (Ayon, 2014; Held & Nulu, 2020).

### *Service Access Needs*

Families of immigrants who are affected by the deportation of a parent have unique needs due to the trauma of suddenly losing a parent and/or experiencing socioeconomic need due to the loss of a breadwinner. Chaudry and colleagues (2010) examined the short- and long-term consequences of parental arrest, detention, and deportation on 190 children in 85 families in six locations across the country and 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 basic necessities. 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. These youth and families may need school-based mental health support, legal support, and basic needs items such as shelter, clothing, and legal services (Capps et al., 2007; Dreby, 2012).

### *Access to Care among Latinx Immigrant Families*

Immigrant families experience a wide range of access and utilization barriers to psychosocial and health services (Held et al., 2020; Jaquez, Vaughn et al., 2016); Latinx immigrant families may be unfamiliar with systems of care in the United States and may be confronted with challenging bureaucracies (Ayon, 2009). For example, there are a limited number of culturally and linguistically competent professionals in the health care system (Aguilar-Gaxiola et al., 2012; Ayon, 2013). According to Keller and colleagues (2010), immigrants report feeling discriminated in health care settings based on their race and ethnicity, insurance status, and inability to speak English. Further, they may not trust service providers when they fear detection by immigration enforcement.

In terms of school-based support, limited research has evaluated the role that schools can play in providing psychosocial and/or basic needs support to youth and families following a deportation-related family separation. In California, AB 699 was implemented in 2017, requiring schools to adopt supportive practices in response to heightened immigration enforcement, including updated staff training and curriculum development. This policy ensures that all students regardless of immigration status have the opportunity to pursue their education without fear or risk (Safe Havens Initiative, 2019). In Chaudry and colleagues' (2010) study, researchers found that schools provided stability and safety for many children assisting them adjust to life after their parents' arrests. Similarly, Capps and colleagues (2007) found that schools worked with parents and community leaders to prevent children from going to empty homes following a parental deportation, reflecting that schools located in diverse urban communities can be safe havens for immigrant families at risk of immigration enforcement.

Moreover, these aforementioned studies illustrate some of the barriers and difficulties associated with responding to the needs of families in the aftermath of immigration enforcement activity. Overall, research has found that immigrant families are fearful of seeking services such

as mental health counseling and/or therapy due to stigma, language barriers, and/or fear of immigration enforcement (Fortuny et al., 2009). While research has found that families are negatively affected by the deportation of a parent and reluctant to seek help, there are key gaps in the literature related to how families access support once a parent has been deported and how social service systems respond to meet these families' needs. Hence, this study poses the following core question: How do families who have experienced a forced family separation experience social service utilization?

## Method

This study utilized a phenomenological qualitative design. This design is geared to capture the essence of a phenomenon, cultivate an in-depth understanding of a shared experience, and provide thick description of a lived experiences based on a small set of individuals (Creswell, 2007). For this paper, the focal analysis was drawn from a larger study of adolescents who have experienced a parental deportation, their caregivers, and service provider stakeholders (Lovato, 2019). The participants in this study, mothers/caregivers ( $n = 8$ ) who experienced the deportation of a spouse and service providers ( $n = 11$ ) at a school who served these families, were recruited through snowball sampling efforts at a K-12 public school site, International Academy, located in Southern California. Purposive recruitment began with the adolescents and has been detailed in other published papers from this larger study (Lovato, 2019).

### *Parents/Caregivers*

Table 1 provides a description of the ( $n = 8$ ) mothers/caregivers who took part in this study. Six were biological mothers (who were not deported) and two caregivers were the aunts of youth whose parent or parents had been deported. All parent/caregiver participants were

foreign-born (four Mexican, three Salvadoran, and one Honduran). The parents/caregivers had been living in the United States since their families migrated to Los Angeles during the early 2000s.

**Table 1**

*Descriptive Statistics of Mothers/Caregivers Interviewed Post-family Separation (n = 8)*

<b>Remaining Caregiver Pseudonym/Age</b>	<b>Caregiver to Child</b>	<b>Country of Origin</b>	<b>Years Spent in the United States</b>
Nancy, 45	Ismael's Mother	Mexico	24 years
Mariella, 48	Oscar's Mother	El Salvador	22 years
Maria, 41	Raul's Mother	Honduras	18 years
Gladys, 44	Stephanie's Mother	Mexico	15 years
Lorena, 50	Marco's Aunt	Mexico	20 years
Isabel, 49	Paulina's Mother	El Salvador	20 years
Fabiola, 48	Maritza's Mother	El Salvador	23 years
Maribella, 53	Kevin's Aunt	Mexico	26 years

***Service Providers***

Table 2 provides a description of the service provider participants in this study (n = 11). Social service providers included schoolteachers, staff, administrators, mental health counselors, and social service agencies that operated at International Academy. The length of time of employment at International Academy ranged from one to five years. Once 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 and service providers received a \$20 gift card for their participation. Approval for the conduct of research with human subjects was obtained from all sponsoring institutions.

**Table 2***Descriptive Statistics for School-Based Service Providers (n = 11)*

<b>Pseudonym of Service Provider</b>	<b>Professional Role</b>
Ms. Martinez	Administrator
Ms. Washington	Administrator
Ms. G	Social Worker
Ms. Zelaya	Social Work Intern
Ms. Phillips	Counselor
Ms. Lozano	Teacher
Ms. Ramos	Teacher
Ms. Claudina	Teacher
Mr. Walsh	Teacher
Ms. Solano	Co-Coordinator, Parent Center
Ms. Barreras	Co-Coordinator, Parent Center

## Data Collection

Data collection consisted of one-time, in-depth interviews. All interviews were face-to-face, semi-structured, and lasted 60-90 minutes. Interviews took place in a private space at International Academy. Based on mothers' preferences, two 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 accessing support following a forced family separation. The researcher asked caregivers questions listed in the interview guide, Appendix A, such as: "What have been some of the challenges that your family has encountered following the deportation of your parent/spouse?" "Have you found any particular services or resources to be helpful during this time?" Additional follow-up questions inquired about their needs following deportation and the support systems that they accessed.

Interview questions for the service providers focused on four general categories: (a) how families coped in the school context following the deportation of a parent(s); (b) which school and community level resources were available to these families; (c) perceptions of family psychosocial well-being and belonging in school post-family separation; and (d) social support needs of families. Interview questions were designed to elicit feedback from service providers on their perspectives of how families experience service provision following the deportation of a parent. Appendix B contains the service providers' interview protocol.

## **Analysis**

All interviews were transcribed by the researcher, who is bilingual in Spanish and English. The total number of focal interviews for analysis was 19. Dedoose, a qualitative analysis software program, was used to assist with data management and coding (Kelle & Laurie, 1995). 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 service utilization. From the structural and textural descriptions, a composite description was written that presented the "essence" of the phenomenon.

Data were then open-coded in Dedoose. 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 participants (i.e., caregivers and service providers.) Participants' descriptions and interpretations were used to identify similar and different views 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 accessing services.” Themes were reviewed and further grouped into categorical families to condense the essence of participants’ experiences. 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, four core theme emerged. Table 3 displays a visual representation of the core concepts that contributed to these themes.

**Table 3**

*Themes and Core Concepts*

Theme	Core Concepts
Responding to the Social Service Needs of Immigrant Families	School providers filled in the gaps despite service barriers.
	Families experienced fear in accessing support.
	Families avoided government- based social services and health care.
	Families experienced newfound social support via faith-based support and mutual aid.

Methodological rigor was enhanced in the areas of credibility, dependability, and confirmability (Guba & Lincoln, 1982). In terms of credibility, methods triangulation and member checking were conducted. 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 one week of data collection (Creswell, 2007). To support confirmability, the researcher conducted an audit trail (Padget, 1998) by documenting each step taken in data collection and analysis.

## Results

### *Filling in the Gaps Despite Systemic Barriers*

At International Academy, most of the staff, faculty, and administrators are bilingual in English and Spanish and aim to create a welcoming environment for monolingual Spanish-speaking students and parents. Many of the teachers and service providers were familiar with students who had experienced forced family separation and took a very hands-on approach to caring for them. Teachers like Ms. Lozano, who taught English at the school for three years and was also raised in an immigrant family, provided emotional support to several of the young people in this study who had been affected by a forced family separation. She shared:

I play many roles to these youth throughout any single day. I am their teacher, psychologist, and sometimes I am their mother and their coach. Their emotions are constantly up and down, especially after experiencing the loss of a parent. I counsel them when they feel sad, motivate them when they feel they can't continue, and nurture them when they need that too.

Some service providers noticed that students who had experienced a forced separation were coming to school less prepared, without necessary school supplies and on occasion, students confided that they had missed several meals since they moved to Los Angeles to live with their extended relatives. Ms. Claudina, a teacher who was born in Honduras, discussed how she offers support:

I know what it's like to experience the ups and downs of being from an immigrant family. My parents were from Central America, so I can relate to their experiences. Financially, it is hard and some of these kids have to work to help pay for their household rent. There are times when I can see how

tired they are and yet they are still trying as best as they can to be here at school. I sometimes bring in cereal for them in the morning so at least they start the day with food in their stomachs.

In addition to motivating students to persist and do the best they can, teachers and staff were attuned to the differences in their students' behavior and emotions following the deportation event. After exhibiting depressive symptoms and anxiety, about half of the youth participants were referred by teachers to counseling services at the school. Some participants relied heavily upon the emotional support they received through the counseling center at school.

Parental involvement played a significant role in shaping the culture of the school. At this particular school, there is a dedicated parent center on campus that is led by a bilingual staff member and provides a welcoming environment for monolingual Spanish-speaking parents. The parent center offers bilingual workshops on parenting, literacy, and provides a space for parents to socialize with other families. In essence, parents are regarded as assets on campus. Despite this welcoming environment, school staff noted some of the challenges involved in meeting the unique needs of undocumented parents and youth who have experienced immigration enforcement. Ms. Phillips, a school counselor, highlighted some of the barriers that exist in providing service delivery at the school. She explained:

Schools are not designed to deal with this type of pervasive crisis in the community. We don't have the specific trauma-based resources or training. School staff need help in learning how to deal with the level of fear, PTSD, and anxiety that these kids and their moms are carrying around with them. It affects everything they do in school and in the community. The youth lose their focus and every little thing sets them off. The fear of deportation is real. It is always on their minds.

School service providers provided insightful reflections on their lack of preparation and training to assist immigrant families who experienced a deportation-related family separation. In addition, they identified the need for trauma-informed training and supports to assist children and families with their psychosocial needs. Teachers also described some of the limitations they experienced in serving youth and parents who are undocumented. Ms. Ramos, a teacher shared:

Teachers need specific training to be able to help students stay focused in the classroom and we also need help in learning how to be there for parents who have immigration issues. We don't really get that kind of support from our school district. We are too focused on meeting the testing standards.

These providers' remarks reflected the challenges they face in the day-to-day struggle of meeting academic benchmarks, engaging students and their parents academically, and also tending to their emotional needs.

### *Experiencing Fear in Accessing Support*

Service providers such as Ms. Barreras shared that while youth were for the most part open to reaching out to their teachers, school staff, and social workers for help, their parents/caregivers were far more reluctant and less likely. She shared that, "mothers are scared to take advantage of parent-oriented programs offered at school, such as short-term family therapy, parenting workshops and/or English-language skills classes." As Ms. Solano, Co-Coordinator of the Parent Center shared, "many of our families see providers as an extension of the government." Ms. Washington, school administrator, similarly discussed the fears that parents had engaging in school services:

Following a family-related deportation, some mothers have been afraid to access school resources as they believed that seeking services could result in being reported to immigration

officials or otherwise damaging their chances of remaining in the United States. We get how worried they are and are trying to show them that this school is safe space for all.

Parents were concerned with avoiding immigration enforcement. As a result, they stayed away from the school, which according to rumors among other undocumented neighbors, was a site for ICE enforcement. Maribella, who took custody of her nephew following the deportation of both his parents, shared, “What if ICE comes to the school? I’ve heard of that. They wait until 3 PM when parents pick up their kids. It’s risky. Kevin has been through enough already.” Gladys, a mother, agreed, “I used to be part of the parent group at school, but I haven’t gone in a while. I miss it because I used to get so much support there, but honestly I feel too scared.” For a few mothers, the school itself represented an extension of authority, which seemed too risky for mothers; for others, rumors about ICE enforcement fueled decisions to stay away from school grounds. As a result, school staff had much more difficulty engaging parents around their own needs and ways to support their children following the deportation of a parent. Ms. Zelaya, a social work intern, shared:

I’ve noticed a big change in the level of parental involvement among families who experience immigration issues. They used to come around more often. I’d see them at the parent-advisory meetings, now I rarely see some of them. It’s hard to reach them by phone too, they don’t call me back. I’m not sure if it’s because they have to work more since their husband is away or if they are scared of us? It can be frustrating, but I know it’s our school’s responsibility to do a better job of reaching out to them.

However, not all parents/caregivers felt apprehensive about accessing the school as a resource for support. Some mothers described feeling a sense of trust in the staff due to a shared cultural identity. One mother, Fabiola, explained:

I know the social worker at the school. She is Latina and speaks Spanish. I feel I can trust her. I talk to her about my problems and she watches out for me and my son. She says I should go to therapy but honestly, I feel better after just talking to her, here and there.

For Fabiola, being able to access a bilingual social worker informally through periodic “check-ins” and case management was instrumental in her feeling supported in the school setting. Similarly, Nancy spoke about the importance of being able to rely upon the school and administration for support. She shared, “The principal is there for us. She is an immigrant herself, so she probably knows what it is like for families who have to hustle all the time. I respect her and all that she does for parents.” For a few families, the school became the entry point for connecting families with services. These families trusted the school because of a shared sense of cultural identity and values with staff and the principal. For other caregivers, however, overwhelming fear and caution precluded them from relying upon the school for services because of misinformation and rumors about local ICE activity.

### *Avoiding Social Services and Health Care*

Following the deportation of a loved one, all the mothers and caregivers in this study self-terminated critical government-subsidized aid, such as WIC and SNAP benefits, for which they qualified via their U.S.-born children. Isabel, one of the mothers, shared, “We don’t use any services. It’s too much of a risk and we have too much to lose.” According to these mothers/caregivers, they feared that receiving government assistance might alert authorities to their presence and their undocumented status and lead to their own deportation. This anxiety led some parents to completely avoid institutions that they perceived as sites where ICE could potentially apprehend them. For example, Gladys said, “I wouldn’t go into a government building now, because I know that once I step foot inside, they will take me away.” Similarly, Lorena, a caregiver,

shared that she avoided the hospital, placing her nephew with asthma at risk. She recalled, “We tried to bring him to the medical clinic, but people told us Immigration [ICE] was there. We didn’t know if it was rumors or not. I was scared to bring him there.” These examples illustrate how rumors and misperceptions of different government agencies placed families at risk for food insecurity and health problems because of a lack of access to government aid and support.

### *Experiencing Newfound Social Support*

Given that the mothers experienced a profound fear of formal government social services, many had to find new and unique ways to meet their family’s basic support needs. Five out of six mothers in this study sought out new resources through personal contacts and other immigrant neighbors and friends who informed them of local non-profit Latinx and immigrant-based social service agencies that offered a range of support for newcomer immigrant clients in need of immigration legal services and advocacy. For example, a mother, Mariella, described how fortunate she felt to learn of a nonprofit Latino social service agency that is well-known for serving Central American populations. She commented:

I wish I had known about this Central American agency sooner. The staff and people there look, talk, and sound like me. I found out from my *comadre* [friend] about their legal workshops and I’ve been learning my rights. Together we are learning about how to start a small catering business, since I already make and sell *pupusas* to my friends. I feel powerful, I never knew I had these rights as an immigrant in the United States. I feel safer because of it.

Similarly, Gladys, one of the mothers, experienced a newfound sense of control over her life in learning about a Latinx-based non-profit agency that serves immigrants and families impacted by issues

of poverty, immigration issues, domestic violence, and mental health issues. She shared:

My daughter and I just started going to this group for Latina mothers and daughters who need support. My sister told me we needed to go because ever since Stephanie's father got deported, we have been arguing all the time at home and at school, and I noticed Stephanie seemed upset. They [the staff] are Latino and speak in Spanish. It's a place where feel safe, where we can go and talk; they understand us and our culture. We don't feel judged.

Through these personal connections, mothers experienced a sense of empowerment and control over their lives. Family members and neighbors, especially those who have been in the United States for a long time, who speak English, and "know the system," became crucial sources of information about how to enroll children in school and find health clinics in Southern California with Spanish-speaking staff. From caregivers' descriptions, these social networks were not only helpful in connecting parents with assistance for their basic needs, but also essential because networks supplied needed information, interpretation, and in some cases transportation to and from detention centers and/or the court office.

### *Faith-based Support*

The caregivers in this study frequently sought assistance from churches and faith-based organizations, which provided additional sources of guidance, support, and counsel regarding how to navigate systems and avoid deportation. In the mothers' view, churches and faith-based agencies played the most important roles in providing short-term humanitarian relief and longer-term social, emotional, and spiritual support. Organizations like Catholic Charities and the Immigrant Welcome Centers were conduits for food, clothing drives and cash-based fundraising efforts, and spiritual support.

While several caregivers relied on a combination of nonprofit organizational support and faith-based organizations, a few turned to their church as their sole source of support because of their faith. For them, the church was not only a place to receive valuable goods and services, it was also a place of refuge—both physical and spiritual. Mariella recalled:

Just like in my country, here, the church is the only place I can count on for support. There is a food pantry, support groups for mothers [in Spanish] and legal workshops. The church also provides beds for people who are in hiding from ICE. In fact, I've thought to myself, if it ever gets bad and we need to go, we could stay at the church for a while. They will give you a bed to sleep on and will help pay your bills.

Fabiola, who grew up in El Salvador, had experienced accessing the Catholic Church as a place of refuge during their civil war during the 1980s, so this option became a familiar and safe option to rely upon for various needs. Similarly, Isabel, Paulina's mother, discussed the critical role that the Catholic Church has played in connecting her to social support during the adjustment process following the deportation of her spouse. She shared:

I go to church and it's a place where I go for a sense of peace from all the discrimination and fear that I hold as an undocumented mother. When I am at church, I feel the strength of my community, my faith; this is what keeps me strong in the face of so much violence against my community. We learn about our rights, how to stay safe and how to not get deported. We are aware of one another's struggle. We protect one another and we remain hopeful about the future.

The key role that faith-based agencies and churches played in supporting families reflects the important function of religious institutions in Latinx communities—especially among immigrant populations. Because immigrant communities tend to trust and find comfort in

religious communities that embrace their culture, churches and other religious organizations played important roles as safe havens, central distribution points, and avenues for outreach.

## Discussion

This phenomenological study sought to understand how families experience service utilization following the deportation of a parent. This study builds on previous research (Ayon, 2014; Dreby, 2015; Lovato, 2019; Lovato & Abrams, 2021, Xu & Brabeck, 2013) by probing deeper into how families engage in social service support following the deportation of a parent and how school-based service providers responded to the needs of families who experienced a forced family separation. It is also unique in that these services were provided at a school, which may be a more welcoming space to seek such supports than governmental agencies.

Findings related to the theme of filling in the gaps despite systemic barriers and emphasized the public school as a potential resource for youth who have experienced the deportation of a parent. Unique to this study, teachers, staff, and administrators supported youths' socioemotional needs, provided basic needs donations to families, and despite a lack of trauma-focused services on campus, linked some youth to outside social services. This is likely due in part to the school's location in a densely populated immigrant community where school administrators were keenly aware of deportation risks and were committed to protecting youth and families. Further, through programming that reflects the cultural, ethnic, and language needs of the student population, some families may have felt safe at the school site itself during this stressful time.

The theme of experiencing fear in accessing support reflects how for some mothers/caregivers, the threat of deportation resulted in less school engagement. Some of these caregivers did not look to the school for support to begin with since they perceived the school to be

an extension of the government (Dryden-Peterson, 2015). The general reluctance of Latinx families to seek psychosocial support, combined with barriers to social services due to documentation status, meant that families' mental health needs following forced separations were seldom addressed from the school site array of services. Previous studies have found that Latinx communities are often reluctant to seek mental health help in agencies due to the stigma associated with mental health issues (Aguilar-Gaxiola, Loera, & Mendez, 2012). Unique to this study, the stigma was even greater since families were not only in need of mental health support but also were in need of basic provisions. Further, this finding points to the ways in which agencies and schools must ensure immigrant families' safety in accessing support and services.

Fear and anxiety led a majority of parents to completely avoid government institutions that they perceived as sites where ICE would engage in enforcement activities. All mothers and caregivers in the study terminated their critical government subsidized aid such as WIC and SNAP benefits. These findings echo prior research (Capps and Fortuny, 2006; Henderson et al., 2008; Holcomb et al., 2003), and if this pattern continues, may negatively impact families' health and well-being (Yoshikawa et al., 2016). Barriers to accessing public benefits led to delayed care, economic hardship, and stress for families. Consequently, mothers'/caregivers' social support networks were vital resources in providing information and assisting families in gaining stability (Ayon, 2013; Xu & Brabeck, 2012). These support networks tended to be other Latinx immigrants (neighbors, family, friends), who shared similar migration-related experiences. Personal networks were not only helpful in linking mothers to Latinx-based organizations but were also important because they provided crucial information and moral support, which enabled families to learn where and how to access assistance. These findings are consistent with previous research showing that immigrant families rely upon the strengths of their social networks to cope with economic difficulties and gain access to services that were previously unavailable to them due to their undocumented status; this

demonstrates significant resilience considering the challenges they face (Ayon, 2013; Ayon & Bou Ghosn Naddy, 2012; Xu & Brabeck, 2012).

Findings related to the theme of experiencing newfound social support are also consistent with the literature (e.g., Capps et al., 2007; Chaudry et al., 2010; Xu & Brabeck, 2007; Delgado, 2012), in that churches and faith-based organizations were a major source of support for mothers/caregivers. Religious institutions provided far more than spiritual support. These institutions offered psychological support, trust, and acceptance along with concrete needs such as short-term humanitarian relief, legal advocacy, social support, and in some cases, shelter. In particular, churches leveraged their relationships with local immigrant-based advocacy organizations to provide families dealing with hardships stemming from immigration enforcement with basic provisions such as food, clothing (via clothing drives), and cash aid (via fundraising). Because their faith is so deeply intertwined with their spiritual and emotional well-being, the mothers/caregivers in this study preferred reaching out to the church for mental and emotional support, turning to priests, pastors, and fellow parishioners for hope and healing.

Not all families identified as religious or spiritual, however, and therefore did not access the support of the church or faith-based agencies. As a result of positive service use with Latinx-based agencies and faith-based centers, some mothers described a growing sense of self-empowerment in their ability to access support. By using their personal contacts, and the knowledge embedded in their larger social networks, these mothers became extremely resourceful and were able to find ways to navigate the system. Overall, although participants reported that fears of immigration enforcement dissuaded them from using school-based services, their social networks embodied in community and cultural relationships helped them to navigate systems, increased their efficacy, counteracted their fears, and potentially contributed to family resiliency.

## **Limitations**

Due to the retrospective nature of this study, study participants had to draw upon their recollections, so they 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 (one to three years) of the interviews and families were still undergoing the process of seeking support and services. 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 Social Work Practice**

Given the increasing numbers of immigrant children and families at risk and/or involved in the public child welfare system due to immigration enforcement, it is critical that child welfare systems and community-based social service agencies develop culturally responsive strategies to meet the needs of this population. Practitioners need to understand the effects of immigration and on immigrant family systems in order to conduct ethical and effective culturally congruent assessments and interventions. At the most basic level, culturally responsive practice requires that services be provided in the native language of immigrant children and families. Practitioners need to be familiar with resources and programs available for immigrant families in order to provide comprehensive services. Practitioners must also become familiar with federal and state policies that affect immigrant families and to understand how those policies may affect service delivery. Structural supports must be put into place in child welfare settings to address barriers such as high caseloads, limited time with families, language barriers, and a lack of cultural responsiveness so that practitioners can tune into the special needs of immigrant families.

Social service providers can play an important role in assuring that families experience a sense of trust in accessing social services. Agencies must make a considerable effort in engaging and ethically informing immigrant families and individuals that their offices are safe for them to enter and interact with. As we saw in this study, many immigrants who are undocumented are reluctant to enter these sites and access services for fear of apprehension. Given the importance of Latinx families' social networks, practitioners should also recognize the strengths of this asset and incorporate family or other key members into treatment planning. When possible, agencies should promote service provision at a location that is in close proximity to ease in the comfort level of seeking services and mitigating fears of driving or taking public transportation. An important theme that providers reported was immigrant clients' fear of a raid at the school or agency. Schools and organizations should have clear policies printed and shared among clients that discuss procedures in the event that immigration enforcement arrives onsite.

## **Directions for Future Research**

This study found that families experienced significant loss, economic instability, social isolation, family conflict, and fear of further family separation. Families coped by seeking support from some bilingual service providers at the school and by accessing aid through personal support networks and faith-based supports. This study also found evidence that even under extreme loss, fear, trauma, and economic stress, families displayed tremendous resilience in relying on trusted, faith-based support, social networks, and immigrant-serving organizations. Numerous questions on this topic remain, such as: How do Latinx and immigrant-based agencies engage individuals and families around issues of organizing, movement-building, and leadership development to transform systems of power and advance movements for social justice among Latinx immigrant and refugee communities who have

experienced immigration enforcement? The service needs shared by participants in this study illustrate the range of challenges experienced by Latinx immigrants during a surge in anti-immigrant legislation and a pandemic that has greatly affected Latinx families and everyone in the United States. Providers, practitioners, and policy-makers must advocate for and partner with immigrant serving community-based agencies in the development of effective policies, practices, and partnerships to enhance trust among immigrant families (Lincroft et al., 2016). Providers and practitioners should use macro-level advocacy tools to promote systemic level change and to facilitate access to culturally congruent services for immigrant children and families.

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## Appendix A: 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 his/her 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 he/she experienced from his/her 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 his/her parent(s), if so how was it? Has your child been able to maintain contact with the parent(s) who she/he was 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?)

## **Appendix B: Service Provider Interview Protocol**

### ***Introduction & Social Service Provision***

1. Can you describe the types of services that you provide to Latinx youth and families who have experienced a forced family separation?
2. Can you describe any challenges that you have experienced serving Latinx youth and immigrant families who have experienced a forced family separation?
3. What do you see as limitations/needs in the current array of services that you provide to Latinx youth/families who have experienced a forced family separation?
4. How does your school/agency/program address the needs of Latinx youth/immigrant families who have experienced trauma due to a forced family separation?
5. How does your school/agency offer culturally congruent support to Latinx immigrant families who have experienced a forced family separation? Please provide examples.
6. What barriers exist in providing effective services to Latinx immigrant families who have experienced a forced family separation?
7. What services and/or additional supports do you feel would be beneficial to offer Latinx immigrant youth/families who have experienced a forced family separation?
8. What additional resources in the community have been helpful to refer families to that have experienced a forced family separation?