

ACES AND THE MIGRANT POPULATION



A tough decision

After making the decision to migrate to the US, immigrant parents and their children must next decide how best to migrate.





Although approximately 80% of immigrants enter the US with legal authorization on family, work, refugee, student or tourist visas, many Mexicans and other Central Americans have limited access to these visas and may enter without authorization.

Sorry, we stayed too long

Even those who enter with legal authorization sometimes overstay their visas and join the ranks of the unauthorized population living in the US.

Approximately 70% of the unauthorized immigrant population is of Mexican or other Central American origin.





It's not easy

With limited education and income, these impoverished immigrants have few legal avenues for migrating to the US and often enter without authorization.

This can involve arduous clandestine journeys with exposure to extreme physical hardships as well as violence.

Consequently, those who enter without authorization, including young children, may be at substantial risk of trauma and the development of PTSD.





Why do they do it?

A variety of factors influence parent's decisions to migrate and to bring their children to the US. Among these, economic hardships in their home countries, years of chronic stress and poverty, exposure to war and political violence, and previous experiences with migration to the US can critically shape their migration and settlement experiences.



Learning to navigate

Previous visits to the US may facilitate migration and settlement.

Immigrants learn through experience how best to navigate the migration process, avoid problems, and find work and resources to assist with their settlement.





But, each additional migration can lead to new trauma exposures and increase the risk of developing PTSD, especially for those entering without authorization.

“Honey, Daddy has to go to work”

Historically, males have undertaken the risk of migration while leaving their wives and children behind. In recent decades though, women have increasingly migrated alone or with their spouses while leaving their children in the care of friends or relatives.



Many children are left behind



It's estimated almost one-third of foreign born children stay in their countries of origin with a relative before reuniting with their parents in the US.

This increases the stress of migration and the risk of developing PTSD after exposure to trauma; especially true in the absence of an alternative caregiver with whom the child can form an emotional bond.



It's not over on arrival

Upon entering the US, immigrants can be exposed to several additional hardships, including racial-ethnic and/or religious discrimination.





This increases the likelihood that they will experience trauma and that trauma will result in subclinical or clinical levels of PTSD symptoms as well as biochemical changes that increase the risk of poor physical and mental health outcomes.

As an economically disadvantaged group, Latino immigrants in the US find themselves often segregated into more impoverished and high-crime neighborhoods and schools where additional exposures to violence and discrimination can occur.



These exposures can directly increase the risk for PTSD, marginalize immigrants, and can keep them from accessing sources of institutional support in their communities which could alleviate the stresses of migration and settlement.





In contrast to discrimination and neighborhood disorder, the presence of strong family and social support systems typically protect parents and their children from exposure to trauma after migration and the development of PTSD, buffering them from stress, and promoting resiliency across the life course.

What about acculturation?

Acculturation has an ambiguous theoretical influence on mental and physical health. Acculturation cannot be expected to have a causal influence on exposure to trauma prior to or during migration.





What about after?

However, it may influence how immigrants deal with these stressful events and thus their risk for PTSD symptoms after migration.

Overall, too few studies with mixed results have considered the relationship between acculturation and PTSD to be conclusive

Trauma occurs frequently in the lives of immigrant youth and their parents and can result in the development of acute and chronic mental health problems including PTSD, generalized anxiety, and depression.





The consequences of poor mental health to parents and their children can be severe and include lower academic achievement among children, reduced employment opportunities and lost wages among parents, and stressful family relations.

What might help?

Immigration policy reforms promoting safe and legal migrations and efforts to reduce discrimination and improve the settlement experiences of immigrants can promote civic engagement in their local communities as well as the immigrant's short and long-term health and ability to contribute to the US economy.

