



The Impact of Social Contexts on Latinx Students' Health and Education Outcomes: Immigrant-Specific Threats

Introduction

The Latinx proportion of the United States population has grown from 13% to 19% since 2000, reaching 62.5 million in 2021, and making up 54% of the overall population growth during that period (Zong, 2022). This underscores the requirement to better understand the unique needs and strengths associated with being an immigrant of Latin-American descent who may be facing divisive and stressful environments that undermine well-being. Environmental and acculturation stresses may negatively affect mental health, whereas positive ethnic identity and a strong value on family can be protective for Latinx youth (Robles-Ramamurthy, Sandoval, Londoño Tobón, & Fortuna, 2022).

The *Caminos* longitudinal study follows a school-based sample of Latin American-origin families in suburban Atlanta, GA during youth's transitions from early through late adolescence. In 2018, researchers began collecting survey data from 547 middle school youth and, for half of them, their mothers. Youth were selected at random from 2017-18 school enrollment lists. To date, nine time points of survey data have been collected since 2018. From 2018 – 2022, surveys were conducted with youth and mothers every six months; survey data will be collected annually through 2026 (for a total of 13 time points).

The *Caminos* project is examining how stressors and supports in youth's social environments shape family functioning and a range of indicators of adolescent health and well-being. Adolescents' mental health outcomes are measured by internalizing symptoms (e.g., depression, anxiety) and externalizing symptoms (e.g., conduct disorder, aggression, rule-breaking). Other adolescent outcomes include substance use, prosocial behaviors, and grade point average. Stressors examined include ethnic discrimination, COVID-19, and immigration threats. Supports examined include teacher, peer, and parent support. Additional factors assessed include traditional Latino cultural values as well as cultural gaps between parents and their children and between parents and the school.

The analytic approach utilized in the *Caminos* project primarily entails longitudinal, structural equation modeling techniques. These methods facilitate examining direct and indirect pathways linking extra-familial contexts with Latinx adolescent outcomes and offer a scientifically robust approach to analyzing constructs known to have measurement error. Future studies will examine chronic and acute stress measured by salivary and hair cortisol; findings from these studies will advance knowledge on biological stress processes experienced by today's U.S. Latinx adolescents. In addition, the research team is examining family, neighborhood, and youth protective factors that help mitigate risks. Findings will inform the development of preventive interventions and policies that can promote school success and healthy development for this population.

Immigrant-Specific Threats: *What We Know*

When Latinx youth and mothers modify their behaviors and experience increased worries as the result of anti-immigrant actions and stories in the news, adolescent's mental health suffers.

How this research measured responses to anti-immigrant actions and news. The researchers assessed mothers' and teenagers' perceptions that recent changes in immigration actions and news had caused them to worry about a number of things and to modify their behavior in a manner that may be protective. Examples of worries included greater difficulty in getting work, youth being unable to finish school, and the family being separated. Examples of behavior modifications included parents telling their children to be careful where they go after school and to avoid the police, as well as families avoiding seeking social services, help from the police, and medical care.

What the research findings showed. These immigrant-specific threats appear to increase Latinx adolescent risk for internalizing symptoms throughout the early into middle adolescent years (West et al., 2021). Further, when kids perceive these threats, they face greater risks of suicidal ideation, early alcohol use, e-cigarette use and of both internalizing (depression/anxiety) and externalizing (aggression, rule-breaking) (Calzada et al., 2020; Roche et al., 2021).

- Immigration-related worries and behavioral withdrawal from institutions and communities appear to be more elevated for Latinx adolescents whose parents are foreign born or occupy a noncitizen residency status than is the case for adolescents whose parents are, respectively, U.S.-born or U.S. citizens (Roche et al., 2021).
- Harm conferred by the threatening immigration environment may be exacerbated for:
 1. boys experiencing less closeness to, and support from, their mothers (Calzada et al., 2020),
 2. youth experiencing less parental supervision and limit setting (Calzada et al., 2020), and
 3. youth with less value on the Latino cultural value of “respeto” (Calzada et al., 2020)

In other words, the “stakes” of less engaged parenting, and of not having strong traditional cultural values, were raised for kids' engagement in problem behaviors when living in a threatening immigrant environment.

Family member deportation or detention by immigration authorities appears to increase risks for serious mental health issues among Latinx youth.

How this research measured family member deportation or detention. At the time of the initial survey, youth were provided with a list of relatives and asked to mark any of those who had been (a) deported out of the U.S. and/or (b) held in a U.S. detention center.

What the research findings showed. Restrictive immigration policies targeting Latinx families were associated with immediate and severe health risks for Latinx youth who are U.S. citizens during an especially sensitive period of development, raising concerns about potentially irreversible mental health effects of deportations and detentions on Latinx youth enduring into adulthood (Roche, White, Lambert, Calzada, Schulenberg, Kuperminc, & Little, 2020).

- In 2018, 25% of youth in middle school in this sample reported that a family member had been detained or deported by immigration authorities in the prior year (Roche, White, Lambert, Calzada, Schulenberg, Kuperminc, & Little, 2020).
- Family member detention or deportation was associated with youth having a 2 to 3 times greater risk of suicidal ideation, early alcohol use, and a clinical level of externalizing behaviors, even after adjusting for youth's baseline behavioral risks and mental health (Roche, White, Lambert, Calzada, Schulenberg, Kuperminc, & Little, 2020).