



# Barriers to Support Service Use for Latino Immigrant Families Reported to Child Welfare: Implications for Policy and Practice

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## Introduction

The underutilization of concrete services, or basic safety net supports such as income assistance, employment, housing and legal services, and Medicaid, by immigrants is widely documented across several service sectors. Yet evidence is lacking on the use of such services among immigrants reported to child welfare for the purposes of preventing and reducing maltreatment. Experts speculate that Latino immigrants involved with the child welfare system may face steep challenges to receiving needed services due to issues surrounding legal status, language, and cultural barriers. This brief highlights the findings of a study that explores the extent to which immigration status impacts referral to, and receipt of, concrete services by Latino families reported for child maltreatment. Data were drawn from the *National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-being II* (NSCAW II), a federally funded and nationally representative sample of families investigated by child welfare agencies for maltreatment between April 2008 and September 2009. The brief concludes with recommendations for policy and practice.

## Background

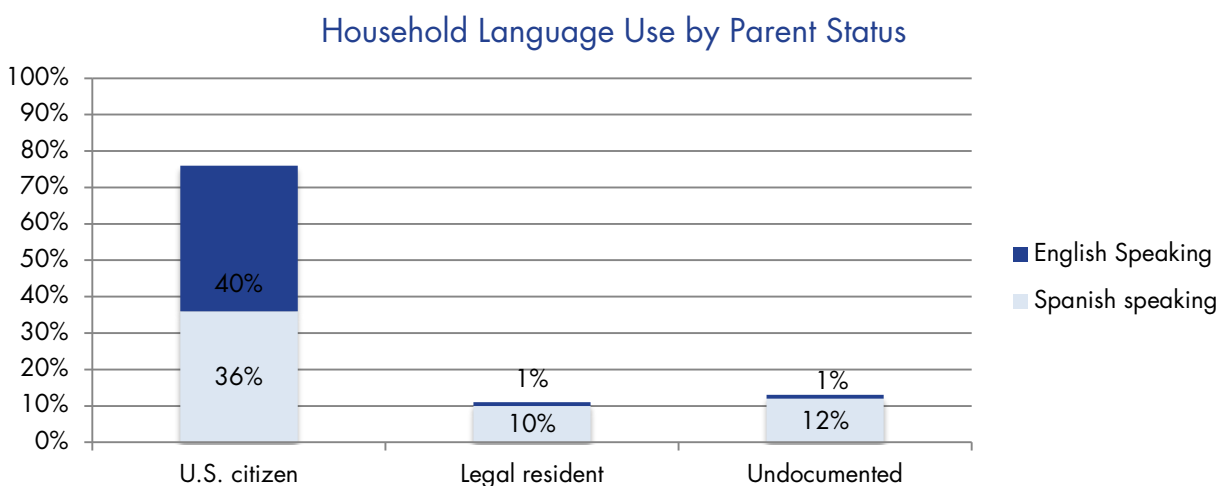
Parents who come to the attention of the child welfare system are likely to be economically distressed and often experience multidimensional service needs.<sup>1</sup> A key strategy for child welfare agencies to reduce maltreatment risk is to connect families with providers of concrete services that reduce stress caused by economic disadvantages and create more stable households for children. Child welfare caseworkers are in a

unique position to facilitate referral of disadvantaged families to an array of concrete support services that decrease stress, material hardship, and ultimately reduce risk of maltreatment.<sup>2</sup>

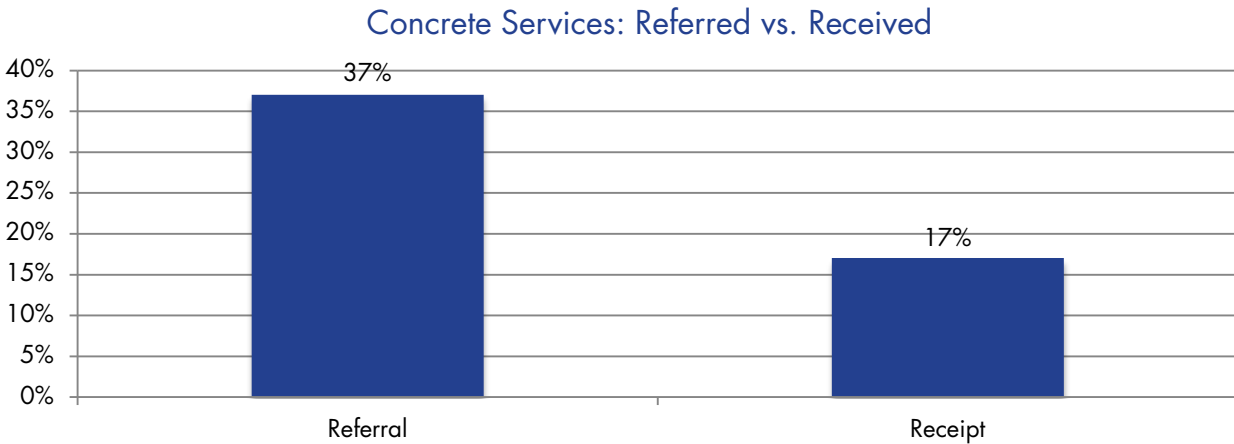
Latinos, who represent the fastest-growing population in the United States and the child welfare system,<sup>3</sup> tend to underutilize public and community services.<sup>4</sup> Those who are immigrants engage in services even less frequently than others. This may be reflective of some inherent strengths and resilience of newly arrived immigrants throughout the difficult process of immigration and acculturation in the United States. However, immigrants also face obstacles to receiving supports because of language barriers, cultural differences in help-seeking behaviors, and difficulty navigating unfamiliar service systems.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, the federal government prohibits access to publicly funded services for most non-citizens, such as Medicaid, income assistance, and housing. Both state and local governments vary in eligibility policies for such services.<sup>6</sup> Immigrants with an undocumented legal status are not only ineligible for most basic services, but may not seek out supports because of mistrust of government assistance and legitimate fear of exposure and deportation.<sup>7</sup> Recent government initiatives have increased deportation of undocumented immigrants to an all-time high in the United States,<sup>8</sup> discouraging many parents from obtaining public assistance even when their children are entitled to it.<sup>9</sup>

Some of the most fragile immigrant families end up coming into contact with the child welfare system. A report to child welfare presents a unique opportunity to connect immigrant families, who may not otherwise access the social safety net for support on their own, to a range of services to prevent re-referral and placement of children into foster care. However, our understanding of the service needs of immigrant families referred to child welfare has been very limited.<sup>10</sup> Given that more than one-third of all Latino children who are reported to child welfare agencies, the majority of whom are U.S. citizens, have at least one immigrant parent,<sup>11</sup> this is a critical area of research.

## Research Findings



More than three-fourths of Latino parents investigated by child welfare in the study (76 percent) were U.S. citizens. Approximately 11 percent of parents were legal residents and 13 percent were undocumented. Spanish was the primary language spoken in 59 percent of households. Yet—and this proportion was much higher for legal resident and undocumented caregivers—more than 90 percent of families preferred speaking Spanish at home. In 27 percent of cases, the family was assessed as having trouble paying for basic necessities, and 19 percent of cases involved active domestic violence in the home.



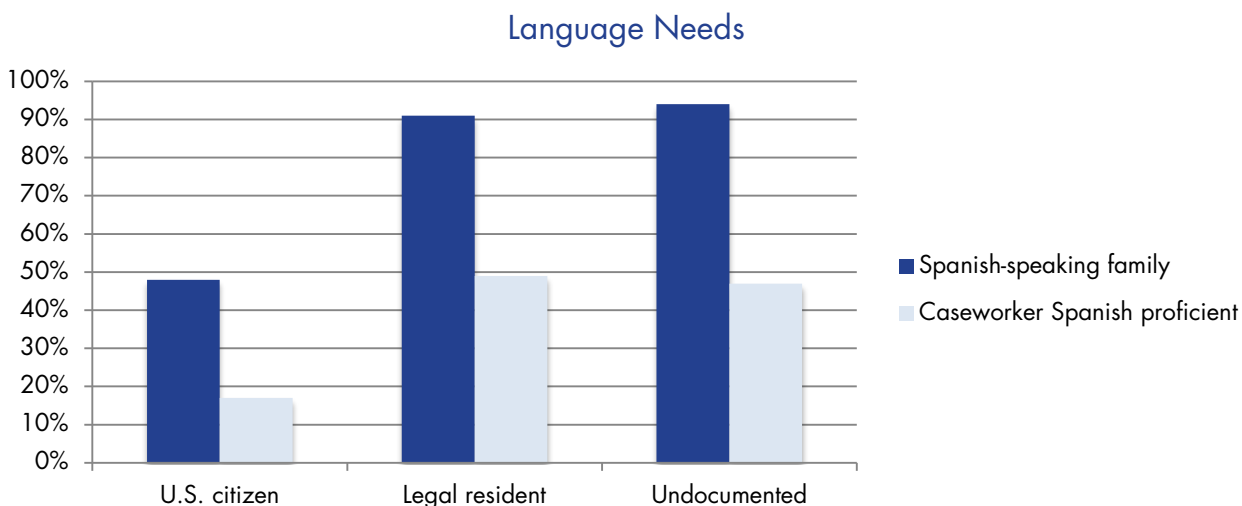
While 37 percent of families were referred by the child welfare caseworker for at least one concrete service, only 17 percent received service as a result of a referral, evidence of needs gone unmet despite exposure to the child welfare system. Referral to external concrete services was strongly correlated with the needs of low-income families who had trouble making ends meet, regardless of parental legal status. Families receiving ongoing child welfare services were more likely to receive services to meet basic needs as well. However, controlling for other relevant factors, families with an undocumented primary caregiver were much less likely than those with a U.S. citizen parent to obtain the concrete services they needed.

## Implications

Parents with an undocumented legal status face challenges to receiving basic services needed to support their child’s safety and well-being. Even when referred by a child welfare agency, undocumented parents may remain ineligible for some publicly funded services, depending on local policies. For example, eligibility criteria for employment or income assistance generally vary by state or county, and in some jurisdictions an undocumented legal status does not necessarily exclude an individual from accessing assistance. This is in contrast to the exclusionary criteria for public housing assistance, which is generally based on federally defined criteria regardless of local policies. Other reasons for lower service use by families with undocumented parents may include mistrust of government entities and fear of exposure to immigration authorities, language or cultural barriers, and lack of caseworker preparedness to work with immigrant populations.<sup>12</sup> This trend implies that some of our nation’s neediest children, those flagged by the child

welfare system, may not be receiving basic household supports that could prevent re-referral and entry into foster care as a result of the legal immigration status of their parents.

The study also demonstrates that there are indeed unmet language needs among Latinos involved with child welfare, most visibly for immigrant families. More than 90 percent of immigrant parents spoke Spanish at home, yet only half had a Spanish-speaking caseworker. This may be problematic because language barriers can inhibit communication between clients and workers, lead to inaccurate assessments of problems and needs, and can ultimately influence decision making.<sup>13</sup>



A child welfare investigation could serve as a relatively rare opportunity to assess and assist immigrant families who often remain under the radar and may be less likely to access support services in other circumstances. However, a majority of families reported to the child welfare system in this study did not receive any agency services beyond the investigation. This is not totally surprising because although some variation may exist across jurisdictions, the child welfare investigation process serves mainly to determine whether or not maltreatment has occurred. Only in cases in which the maltreatment risk rises to the level of requiring agency intervention, usually in the form of case planning and service provision, might increased need and agency investment in the family lead to opportunities for workers to adequately screen for expanded service eligibility, make referrals, and ensure that families receive needed concrete services.

Another noteworthy finding was that the presence of domestic violence appears to be a driving factor of concrete service referral and use for Latino families. Nearly 20 percent of Latino parents, mostly mothers, resided in households in which domestic violence was present. Although undocumented parents in the study did not differ from other parents in rates of domestic violence, they were less likely to receive concrete services such as legal services, housing services, job assistance, and income assistance that could support them in leaving abusive environments. This is cause for concern given existing evidence that immigrant women

encounter more social, legal, and financial barriers to leaving violent relationships than non-immigrant women.<sup>14</sup>

## Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, state advocates, policymakers, and child welfare administrators are encouraged to consider the following recommendations:

1. Federal and state social welfare policies should be reformed to consider provisions that allow for all families who come to the attention of child welfare to receive needed services, regardless of immigration status.
2. Child welfare agencies should:
  - Adopt training and practice reforms that focus on enhancing worker sensitivity to the fears of undocumented immigrants and how to help them navigate and understand the service process.
  - Train their workforce on policies related to immigrant eligibility for services to ensure that parents are referred for services for which they are eligible without inadvertently disclosing information to agencies that share data with immigration authorities, risking deportation.
  - Develop structures that seamlessly incorporate quality Spanish-language services into the delivery of services across systems.
  - Increase resource investment at the front end of an investigation to ensure that all families receive needed services regardless of outcome to prevent re-referral and later placement into foster care.
  - Increase training and outreach on available opportunities for immigration relief for victims of domestic violence under Violence Against Women Act.
3. Additional studies on immigrant family engagement in services should take into account both the state and local policies surrounding service eligibility and the availability of services of linguistic and cultural relevance in individual localities, if possible. Research should continue to clarify not only *why* undocumented immigrants involved with child welfare are less likely to receive services, but *how* access to needed services for these families can be increased as a strategy to prevent maltreatment.

## Methodology

All analyses were conducted using Stata 12 with analysis weights to adjust for the complex sampling design of the NSCAW II. Details on the study design and sample are available elsewhere.<sup>15</sup> The sample for the current study was restricted to cases in which the child remained in the home with a biological parent following the investigation (n=3517), and in which the primary caregiver was identified as Latino (n=839). Only those cases with corresponding caseworker interviews (n=728) and complete data for all measures were included in sample analyses (n=561).

## About the Author

Megan Finno-Velasquez, MSW, is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Southern California (USC) School of Social Work. She received a Doris Duke Fellowship for the Promotion of Child Well-being for her dissertation study on patterns of support service use among Latino immigrant families reported to child welfare. Her research interests center around improving the cultural and linguistic competence of services for Latino families at risk of child maltreatment. Megan served as the immigration liaison for the New Mexico Children, Youth and Families Department prior to entering the doctoral program at USC, and is a founding member of the Migration and Child Welfare National Network. She received her MSW from New Mexico Highlands University in 2007, and a BS in Psychology and Spanish at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign in 2002.



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