Protection for Undocumented Children: Sexual Abuse Among Latino Children Living in The Heartland
April Dirks-Bihun, PhD, MSW
Iowa State University

Abstract

This paper is an exploration on the topic of childhood sexual abuse among the Latino population and specifically of the undocumented Latino population living in the communities that we serve. The basic child protection needs of undocumented Latino children often go unnoticed and children and families in need experience multiple barriers. In a time when immigration is increasingly an issue, we are concerned about whether or not families and children should be crossing the border that we do not stop to think about the protection needs of the children who are already here in this country. These children often go unnoticed and do not receive the services that are their basic human right.

This guided review of the literature on the topic of Latino children living in the United States will explore what is known about the prevalence of sexual abuse in our communities and what is predicted to be the prevalence of sexual abuse among undocumented children. It will also identify obstacles that these children may face when accessing services. Finally, It will discuss potential concerns that practitioners may have when working with this population and some best practice suggestions for assisting an undocumented victim of sexual abuse. It is clear that we need to gain a better understanding of the relationship between ethnicity and the maltreatment of children, especially childhood sexual abuse.

Keywords: immigration services, sexual abuse, undocumented children
Sexual Abuse among Latino Children Living in the Midwest

Many challenges face Latino communities in the Midwest. Evidence of the sexual abuse of children in the Latino community shows little attention devoted to the concerns of abuse among the undocumented population. The prevalence of childhood sexual abuse can be particularly difficult to research, especially among undocumented Latino immigrants. The research on sexual abuse among Latinos and any research on the topic of sexual abuse among undocumented children is sparse. Undocumented people are very difficult to track and researching child maltreatment within this population is limited to small qualitative studies because children in this population are often “off the radar” of helping professionals. While childhood sexual abuse exists in all facets of society, there are undoubtedly some particular barriers to child protection services for undocumented children who are at risk or who have been abused. It is critical to raise awareness of sexual abuse among undocumented Latino children living in the United States in order to identify victims of abuse and the barriers to child protection services.

There is a large and growing Latino immigrant population living in the Midwest (Riffe, Turner, & Rojas-Guyler, 2008) there is a sizable undocumented child population in the region as well. In a recent article on population trends among aging Hispanics living in the Midwest, it determined that the Hispanic population tripled in the Midwest since 1980 and there has been a jump to 6.6% in the total Midwest population (Mendes de Leon, Eschbach, & Markides, 2011). There is also evidence that the Midwest is having a surge in Latino populations in rural communities and towns that are experiencing slow to no population growth due to migration in urban centers and an aging population. In this instance, it is possible that the primary population growth in some rural Midwest communities is due to the increase in Latino immigrants and their families. There are many reasons why new groups of Hispanic/Latino immigrants are locating to the rural, suburban and urban areas of the Midwest. It is thought that employment opportunities historically rooted in agricultural states in the Midwest, such as jobs in meat-packing of poultry, pork, and beef and the production of dairy products, may be a driving force behind the increase of the immigrant population (Flores et al., 2011).

Across the United States, Latinos are the fastest growing population and the rate of immigration and growth in the Latino population is more than three times the growth rate of the nation’s population as a whole (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Between 2000 and 2006, this group accounted for half of the nation’s growth and the trend is expected to continue. There is also a large population of undocumented immigrants living in the United States. According to the Pew Hispanic Center, in 2008, there were an estimated 11.9 million unauthorized immigrants living in the United States and an estimated 500,000 to 800,000 additional immigrants arriving each year (Passel & Cohn, 2008). The numbers generated for undocumented immigrants include children, however, it is not clear how many undocumented children are already living in the United States and how many are currently entering the country illegally. The number of children entering the country is unclear. More children are coming across the border with a parent or caregiver and many are traveling alone.

Professionals working in the area of child welfare will increasingly work with this group as the population numbers continue to multiply and Latino children. Latino children are also the fastest growing group in the child welfare system (Dettlaff & Cardoso, 2010; Rivera, 2002) and there is a disproportionate number of children who identify as “Latino” in the child welfare system compared to the number of Latino children living in the nation as whole (Zambrana & Capello, 2003). In fact, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2008), Latinos are over-represented in the child welfare system. In 2006, it was identified that 18% of the children who were reported as maltreated were Latino. This is disproportionate to the percentage of Latinos and Hispanics making up 14.8% of the U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). With this rapid growth, there is surprisingly little conclusive data on the prevalence of child sexual
abuse within this population and there is conflicting research about the rates of child and adolescent sexual abuse in Latino populations in comparison to other ethnic groups (Ulibarri, Ulloa, & Camacho, 2009). Multiple studies show that Latino children are more likely to experience childhood sexual abuse when compared with non-Latino children (Finkelhor, Ormrod, Turner, & Hamby, 2005; Newcomb, Munoz, & Carmona, 2009).

According to the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (2007), 29% of Latino children reported sexual abuse in a national sample of traumatized children, an alarming percentage indicating that children of Latino immigrants are five times more likely to be confirmed as victims of childhood sexual abuse than children who are not descendants of Latino immigrants (Dettlaff, Earner, & Phillips, 2009). Studies suggest that childhood sexual abuse among Latino males and females is more common than has been demonstrated by previous research and there is an opportunity for empirical data collection (Newcomb, Munoz, & Carmona, 2009). While some preliminary studies do evaluate sexual abuse among Latino children, it is very difficult to determine how many Latino children are victims of abuse because generally, only a small percentage of child sexual abuse instances are reported and because the samples of children in most studies have been predominantly White (Sledjeski, Dierker, Bird, & Canino, 2009). It is also very difficult to evaluate child maltreatment among undocumented immigrant children when there is little research on the topic of child welfare among foreign-born children in general, and certainly there is limited reliable data on the number of immigrant children, even in the child welfare system (Garcia, 2009).

There are a significant number of undocumented children living in the United States illegally who may be at risk for sexual abuse. Ethnographic studies in the form of documentary research done by Sonia Nazario (2006) in her book, Enrique’s Journey, and Rebecca Camissa (2010) in the HBO documentary, Which Way Home, demonstrate that children experience sexual assault while journeying to the border in crossing into the United States. Also, countless children experience traumatic events related to their border crossing experience, such as disabling injury, sexual assault, witnessing gang rapes, robbery, and death. According to Nazario (2006), over 48,000 children enter the United States from Mexico and Central America each year that are not accompanied by a parent or guardian, and they are exposed to the most extreme forms of sexual violence and trauma. A unknown number of undocumented Latino children arriving from Mexico, South, and Central America, are illegally smuggled into the United States and are victims of human trafficking. Children fall victim to human trafficking through child abduction, economic necessity and a history of childhood physical and sexual abuse.

There are studies stating that there is no significant difference in the rate of sexual abuse between Latino and non-Latino children (Katerndahl, Burge, Kellogg, & Parra, 2005; Sedlak & Broadhurst, 1996). It seems that we do not have a good understanding of the rate of sexual abuse among Latino children and adolescents, because only the most serious incidents of abuse are even reported, and most of the cases are managed within the Latino community and family system. This is because of the potential consequences of reporting abuse (Vericker, Kuehn & Capps, 2007). There are many barriers to reporting child sexual abuse and abuse recurrence. According to a recent study on child abuse using the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System data set from 2002-2004, the amount of reported child sexual abuse is less when the child is Hispanic.

Barriers to reporting child sexual abuse are incredibly important to take into consideration, specifically in communities with high percentages of undocumented families and children. Undocumented families run the risk of deportation and family disruption for getting involved in the child welfare system and any interaction with an authoritative figure may deter reporting even the most serious allegations of abuse. Language, cultural barriers, social barriers, and limited access to public facilities, where reporting may take place, are all things that may prevent a Latino family from accessing child protection services. The fear of deportation is a special issue that affects both undocumented children
who have been sexually abused and their families. According to Perez-Foster (2005), immigrants who enter the U.S. without proper documentation often live in constant fear of deportation and are at risk of having experienced traumatic events and victimization during their journey entering the country illegally. This fear of deportation can also put immigrant children at risk of exploitation, physical abuse, and sexual assault. This point is illustrated in a legal case discussed in a Sapelo Foundation White Paper that documented an incident of an underage undocumented immigrant who was subjected to repeated sexual abuse because of her immigration status (Shore, 2010). Undocumented immigrants may not disclose the abuse due to their illegal status and may be unwilling/unable to seek proper medical treatment or protective services.

**Protection for Undocumented Children**

In a time when immigration is increasingly an issue, we are so concerned about whether or not families and children should be crossing the border, that we do not often stop to think about the child protection needs of the Latino children who are currently crossing the border or are already here in the Midwest communities. These children often go unnoticed and do not get the services that are part of their basic human rights. In the United States, child welfare services, including foster care and protective services, are available to all children, regardless of their immigration status. However, there is a great amount of confusion on the part of practitioners in how exactly to treat undocumented immigrant children. Helping undocumented immigrants obtain child protection services is complicated, especially when families feel that the risks of accessing services, such as fear of deportation, may outweigh the benefits for some families in need. Also, there is no data on the numbers of undocumented children who are abused because these children often fall through the cracks of legal and child welfare services (Jean-Baptiste, 2009) and there is little research on the topic of practitioner responses to the unique circumstance of treating the undocumented victims of sexual abuse.

There are a number of best-practice behaviors, stemming from core values of cultural competence, trust, anonymity, and strengths perspectives, that one can implement while working with undocumented immigrants who may be at risk for childhood sexual abuse. Professionals in public agencies and private practice settings should strive for cultural competence when working with this population. The topic of childhood sexual abuse can be a sensitive area when a practitioner may also be struggling to grasp the unique cultural attributes of population they are serving. Becoming a culturally competent practitioner requires more than an understanding of the Latino culture, and culturally competent practice develops over time and is increased through experience with members of a cultural group (Dettlaff & Cardoso, 2010). It requires understanding a whole host of complex issues such as immigration law, deportation risk, cultural norms and values, family structure, language, history of violence, and experiences with acculturation within each family system.

Also, when working with Latino families, it is important to create a climate of trust where families and helping professionals can report suspected child abuse without fear of negative consequences or deportation. Not only should child protection workers and other helping professionals serve undocumented children, they should also routinely assess the risk of deportation of the immigrant families that they are working (Dettlaff, Earner & Phillips, 2009). Another strategy to gain trust of undocumented children and families would be to create a climate of anonymity and forego acquiring a detailed social history and citizenship information, such as social security numbers, at a first meeting. Also, using bilingual professionals and professional translators, with Spanish speaking families, is essential so that children can communicate their needs and professionals can gain the trust of Latino families. Finally, it is important to empower Latino families and use the strengths perspective when working with children who have been victims of sexual abuse. There are many strengths found in Latino families, and even the strength it takes to illegally cross the border into the United States is a motivating factor that can be
utilized and built on when working with the families and children involved in sexual abuse cases.

Latino children are not only among the fastest growing population groups in the Midwest, but they are the fastest growing group in the child welfare system. There are some studies that suggest that Latino children, specifically undocumented children, are at increased risk for child sexual abuse and do not have access to the child protection services that they need. It is crucial that Latino children and families are educated about their legal rights and child protection issues. There should be helping professionals, community agencies, and child protection services focused on the prevention and treatment of Latino families and children, who are culturally competent to assess the risk of childhood sexual abuse and all forms of child maltreatment among this growing population. We should look to our Latino and undocumented community members for the guidance we need to serve this growing population and address the issue of undocumented children at risk for sexual abuse.

References


