

Working With Undocumented Latino Youth Who Have Been Sexually Abused

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Introduction

Anna is a young Latina female whose parents entered the United States illegally from Northern Mexico when she was 3 years old. She is now 11 and in sixth grade at a rural school in the Midwest. She lives with her father, her brother (age 7), and her maternal uncle in a house owned by the uncle. Anna's mother left Anna and her younger brother several times during their childhood, and Anna has not seen her mother for 3 years. Anna's father parents the two children while working double shifts at the local meat processing plant.

One month ago, Anna disclosed to her father that her uncle was touching her sexually in the evenings when the father was at work. Anna was told not to lie about such serious things and that if she told anyone about her lie, they would all be deported back to Mexico. Anna was devastated that her father did not believe her, and she made plans to run away from home. In the meantime, her father requested a shift change at the packing plant so he could be home in the evenings, but he was denied this request. He also began to look for other housing arrangements and even considered sending Anna back to Mexico to live with relatives. The county Department of Human Services became aware of the sexual abuse situation when Anna's younger brother told his teacher that he had to sleep on the living room floor because his uncle was in bed with his sister at night. There has been an extensive investigation, and the uncle has been found guilty of sexual abuse, which had continued over the course of 4 years.

In my days as a school social worker, I encountered many situations that required the intervention of the local child welfare agency. Anna's case is a composite of cases that required the attention of helping professionals working with Latino children who have experienced sexual abuse. Located in the rural Midwest, the school district in which I worked was over 70% Latino, and it was estimated that half of the families were undocumented immigrants. As a professional working with this diverse population, I constantly struggled to find ways to identify the needs of undocumented children such as Anna. I was also concerned about the children who were not attending the local schools, who were essentially "off the radar," and whose condition was unknown.

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 in identifying and serving these children. A review of the literature will offer insight into the topic of sexual abuse among Latino children and will increase knowledge for practitioners working with an at-risk population that, until now, has been virtually invisible.

Sexual Abuse Among Latino Children Living in the U.S.

The Latino immigrant population is the fastest growing in the United States, and it is growing at an astounding rate. Latinos now represent over 15% of the population and are projected to increase to 24.4% by the year 2050 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). The rate of immigration and growth in the Latino population is more than 3 times the growth rate of the nation's population as a whole. Between 2000 and 2006, this group alone accounted for one half of the nation's growth, and the trend is expected to continue. Professionals working in the area of child welfare will increasingly work with this group as the population numbers continue to multiply.

Latino children are also the fastest growing group in the child welfare system (Dettlaff & Cardoso, 2010; Rivera, 2002). Even with this rapid growth, there is surprisingly little conclusive data on the prevalence of child sexual abuse within this population. There is conflicting data in the literature 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), and some data indicate that children of Latino immigrants are 5 times more likely to be confirmed as victims of childhood sexual abuse (Dettlaff, Earner, & Phillips, 2009). Other sources state 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 is possible that social scientists 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 because of the potential consequences of reporting abuse



Sexual Abuse Among Undocumented Latino Children Living in the U.S.

Very little is known about the need for child protection services for undocumented Latino children and how this need differs from Latino children who are citizens of the United States. The research on child sexual abuse among Latinos is scarce and contradictory, but research on sexual abuse among undocumented children is virtually nonexistent. 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). These undocumented immigrants include children coming across the border either with or without

(Vericker, Kuehn, & Capps, 2007). Especially in communities with a high percentage of undocumented families and children, the risk of deportation due to an interaction with authority figures may deter reporting even the most serious allegations of abuse.

According to the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (2007), 29% of Latino children reported sexual abuse in a national sample of traumatized children. However, it is ultimately difficult to determine how many Latino children are victims of abuse both because only a small percentage of abuse instances are reported and because the samples of children in most studies have been predominantly Caucasian (Sledjeski, Dierker, Bird, & Canino, 2009). In a recent study, Newcomb, Munoz, and Carmona (2009) sampled a group of 223 Latino and European American students between the ages of 16 and 19 in Southern California to examine the impact of child sexual abuse among ethnically diverse high school students. The researchers found that the prevalence of child sexual abuse among Latinas, in particular, was much higher than the existing research would suggest. Latinas in the study were much more likely to report being a child abuse victim than their male Latino or European American classmates, and over half of the Latinas in the study reported childhood sexual abuse. The study also determined that female perpetrators and male victims were more prevalent than research would indicate. In general, these findings suggest that childhood sexual abuse among Latino males and females is more common than has been demonstrated by previous research on the topic.

parents. The Pew Hispanic Center has not determined exactly how many of the undocumented immigrants are children. However, they have determined that approximately 1.5 million children were undocumented in 2008 and made up about 6.8% of the students enrolled in the nation's elementary and secondary schools. In other words, there are a significant number of children living in the United States illegally who may be at risk for sexual abuse.

Many children experience some form of sexual assault when they immigrate to the United States. According to Pulitzer Prize-winning author Sonia Nazario (2006), over 48,000 children enter the United States from Mexico and Central America each year. These children are not accompanied by a parent or guardian, and they are exposed to the most extreme forms of sexual violence and trauma. In her book *Enrique's Journey*, Nazario provides accounts of children who experience sexual assault while journeying to the border to cross into the United States. As well, countless children experience traumatic events related to adult sexual assault, such as witnessing gang rapes of women while riding in train cars on their journey toward the U.S.-Mexico border. Violence against children is also addressed in the HBO documentary *Which Way Home*. Filmmaker Rebecca Camissa portrays the risks that children endure as they leave their homes in Central America to travel by train in an attempt to enter the United States illegally. Like Nazario's work, this documentary also explores the dangers that children face, including disabling injury, sexual assault, robbery, and death. Ethnographic studies in the form of documentary seem to be the only data available to study the prevalence of sexual assault experienced by children who enter the United States illegally.

Undocumented Latino children also fall victim to human trafficking. Arriving in Mexico from South and Central America, an untold number of children are then illegally smuggled into the United States. Fueled by a Western demand for prostitution and pornography, many of these children fall victim to human traffickers for factors such as economic necessity. However, children and adolescents can also fall victim to human traffickers due to a history of physical and sexual abuse, or they may actually be abducted and placed into the trade. According to Langberg (2005), who researches data on human trafficking across borders, governments are very reluctant to address this issue, and the Latin American and Caribbean regions are two of the most under-researched and underfunded regions when it comes to resources to counteract trafficking. Trafficking remains a daily occurrence. As of today, no adequate intervention exists from government on either side of the border to protect against this practice (Langberg, 2005).

Even undocumented children living in the United States who are not victims of human trafficking, or who have not crossed the border alone, are at risk of sexual abuse. Significantly, there are 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). I estimate that the percentage of undocumented children who are sexually abused is at the same rate or higher than documented Latino children living in the States. Due to the difficult nature of acquiring quantitative data on a large number of undocumented children living in the U.S. combined with the barriers of collecting accurate data to address risk of childhood sexual abuse, it is extremely difficult to find empirical research on this topic. Research is needed to quantify the risk of sexual abuse of undocumented children and to address this issue in the human rights and child maltreatment literature.

Barriers to Child Protective Services for Latino Children

The invisible issue of sexual abuse among the undocumented population is of particular concern. Considered invisible because it often goes unreported and unseen, sexual abuse also can be considered invisible because it is a taboo topic within many traditional Latino families and is, therefore, not openly discussed. Unlike physical abuse, which may be identified by marks such as bruises or burns, sexual abuse of children is difficult to identify unless children disclose the abuse to another person who is in a position to help them. Children face many barriers when reporting sexual abuse, but there are also unique barriers that affect the ability of children in undocumented populations to report the abuse. Language may be the first and most critical barrier for those in need of child protection services. Additional obstacles to reporting abuse include social and cultural barriers, a limited understanding of the legal system, and limited access to public facilities where reporting may take place, such as medical facilities and schools.

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. I have worked with children who had been told that their parents, siblings, aunts, and uncles would all be deported if the child told anyone about the abuse. Many parents are terrified about deportation if their children become involved in the child protection system, and this fear deters them from taking appropriate action to protect their children and to prosecute the offenders. Unfortunately, the fear of deportation and insecurity regarding involvement in the child welfare process prevent many children and families from getting appropriate child sexual abuse services.

Based on my own work with undocumented child victims of abuse, it is not uncommon for an abuser to threaten a child with deportation if the child discloses the abuse. These threats were very effective in protecting the abuser because the children feared serious, negative consequences for the entire family if they reported the abuse. I frequently needed to reassure families that deportation was not standard protocol for the department of human services. However, families had learned from experience that any involvement in government services, and especially police matters, was surely a potential threat to the family's remaining in the United States. 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). She was the sister-in-law of a U.S. citizen businessman and was threatened with deportation if she disclosed the abuse. In addition, these immigrants are at constant risk for exploitation and physical and sexual assault due to their illegal status, and they may be unable or unwilling to seek proper protection from local officials.

Individuals who live in constant anxiety related to immigration status may also be less likely to report suspected child sexual abuse in any circumstances, because any interaction with legal authorities or child protection services may seem extremely risky to a person who has worked hard to go unnoticed. Abused children often come to the attention of service providers at medical facilities and public schools, but children of Latino immigrants are more likely to be uninsured when compared with documented children and may not come to the attention of medical professionals (Capps, Ost, Reardon-Anderson, & Passel, 2004). Further, undocumented children may or may not attend school. The dropout rate for Latino teens in middle and high school is alarming (Brammer, 2004). The high rate of school dropout may be related to low academic achievement and lower school engagement than adolescents of other ethnic groups. In many Latino families, children are considered important economic contributors, and they are often given responsibility for childcare, or they find employment to supplement the family income. Due to the reliance on Latino teens for economic support, a child or adolescent may drop out of school to acquire the low-

paying and nontechnical jobs that are offered to them (Locke & Newcomb, 2005). Because they do not attend school, these children are less likely to come to the attention of service providers.

There may be other factors within undocumented Latino communities that limit the reporting of sexual abuse to authorities. Cultural values of shame, *familismo*, and *respeto* may affect the reporting of abuse. According to Fontes (2007), shame is a prevalent concept in Latino cultures, and members of a child's family who were not responsible for the sexual abuse may still feel a deep sense of guilt and shame for not having protected the child. The family may feel that it is in the child's and family's best interest to keep the assault a secret and to pretend as if it did not happen.

Familismo is a term widely used in the Spanish language to describe the importance of the extended family. According to Coohy (2001), "Familism, or *familismo*, refers to attitudes, behaviors, and family structures operating within an extended family system and is believed to be the most important factor influencing the lives of Latinos" (p. 130). *Familismo* is thought to promote healthy emotional and psychological growth in children, and Latino families often have strong family networks to protect their children from external physical and emotional stressors (Sabogal, Marin, & Otero-Sabogal, 1987). In general, interpersonal closeness and support within Latino families may be very helpful to survivors of sexual assault, and the family support and closeness that result from *familismo* can be a positive factor in a child's life. However, when the abuse is perpetrated by a hierarchical member from within the close-knit family structure, the family may not be a safe place for the victim to reside. Therefore, *familismo* can influence a victim's experience of childhood sexual abuse either positively or negatively.

Some children may not be willing to seek help for abuse because they understand the concept of *familismo* and the value of placing the needs of the family above their own need to be safe. Further, children may be unwilling to expose a respected member of the family, such as a father or an uncle, because of *respeto*, the internalized value of respect. To disrespect the authority of a family member may be seen as damaging to the entire family system. While this dynamic is not unique to Latino families, the strong adherence to *familismo* and *respeto* might further reinforce the disincentives to disclose and report the abuse.

Finally, the concept of female virginity before marriage is also very important among some Latino families. At times, the importance of maintaining a child's virginity can be a deterrent to contacting police authorities and getting the proper care for a victim of sexual assault. It is not uncommon for families to demand to know whether there was penetration from sexual assault because the family may be concerned by the implications of loss of virginity. Of course, all children who have been sexually assaulted may be in need of help to recover from the assault, regardless of whether penetration occurred.

How Can We Help?

In the United States, child welfare services, including foster care and protective services, are available to all children regardless of their immigration status (Jean-Baptiste, 2009). However, a great deal of confusion exists on the part of practitioners about how exactly to treat undocumented immigrant children. There is no known research on the topic of practitioner responses to serving undocumented children who are victims of child sexual abuse. As the undocumented immigrant population and the Latino population in general continue to increase, there will inevitably be an increased demand for competent helping professionals to work with children and adolescents who have experienced sexual abuse. Helping undocumented immigrants obtain child protection services is complicated, especially when the risks of accessing services (such as shame and a fear of deportation) may outweigh the benefits for some families of seeking services. There is a significant gap in the literature on the topic of sexual abuse among undocumented children and, therefore, we know little about how to best serve this population.

There are a number of best practice behaviors stemming from core values of cultural competence, trust, confidentiality, and a strengths perspective that practitioners can implement while working with undocumented immigrants who may be at risk for childhood sexual abuse. First, practitioners in both public agencies and private practice settings should strive for cultural competence when working with this population. The topic of childhood sexual abuse can be an especially sensitive area when a practitioner may also be struggling to grasp the unique cultural attributes of population they are serving. According to Dettlaff and Cardoso (2010), becoming a culturally competent practitioner requires more than understanding the basics of Latino culture. Culturally competent practice develops over time and is increased through experience with members of a cultural group. 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. In particular, understanding acculturation is essential when working with undocumented immigrant families, because high levels of acculturation stress have been related to increased child maltreatment (Hovey & King, 1996). Cultural competence can be demonstrated for Latino families by showing respect to family members, and by placing bilingual helping professionals in diverse population centers where children and their families can feel more comfortable communicating their needs.

Second, when working with Latino families, it is important to create a climate of trust, in which families and helping professionals can report suspected child abuse without fear of negative consequences or deportation. It is important to keep in mind that "child welfare systems have a responsibility to address the well-being of children who come to the attention of their system, without regard to citizenship status" (Dettlaff & Cardoso, 2009, p. 6). 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 with whom they are working (Dettlaff, Earner, & Phillips, 2009). Helping professionals could work with undocumented Latino families to see if they are eligible for services and also help the families make guardianship plans in the event that the parents would come to the attention of immigration officials. If child protection services could work with families to create safety nets for children, it is possible that more families would turn to child protection services if their children were in danger.

Undocumented individuals will be more likely to seek out services if they are allowed a degree of anonymity at the onset of services. A third strategy is to create a climate of anonymity and forego acquiring a detailed social history and citizenship information, such as social security number, at a first meeting. However, even if detailed citizenship information is not collected, it is essential for a culturally competent practitioner to assess risks associated with immigrant families at all times. Latino families should also be educated about their legal rights and child protection issues. Community agencies and child protection services should inform Latino community members about child sexual abuse and methods of prevention (Dettlaff et al., 2009). Even with a climate of anonymity, it is essential that practitioners work diligently to create a climate of trust when working with undocumented Latino families so that individuals feel comfortable protecting their children and reporting suspected abuse without fear of deportation. Additionally, it is essential in this process that practitioners be sensitive to the importance of *familismo* and respect the family system when attempting to break through the fear of reporting and using services.

Finally, it is important to use a strengths perspective when working with undocumented immigrants and to build on the strengths found in immigrant families. For example, 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 family and child involved in a sexual abuse case (Dettlaff et al., 2009). However, it may be challenging to utilize the strengths perspective when there are so many problems affecting Latino families that originate from outside the family unit that may affect service provision (Dettlaff & Cardoso, 2010). Problems occur at the social and economic levels in the community, which can present huge obstacles



to families in need of services. For example, some of the anti-immigration policies generated at the state and federal levels targeting undocumented Latino immigrants have actually resulted in a decrease of supportive programs for the children of Latino immigrant families. With anti-immigration politics and prejudice, it is no wonder that families and practitioners are unsure of how to proceed when a child victim has disclosed abuse.

Identifying barriers to child protection services for undocumented Latino children is an important area for future research. Despite the overwhelming challenges facing the Latino community and the evidence of sexual abuse in the Latino community, little attention has been devoted to researching abuse among the undocumented population. Research is needed on the effects of growing anti-immigration policies on children and adolescents in need of services. At a time when immigration is increasingly becoming an issue, policy makers may be so concerned about whether or not families and children should be crossing the border that they fail to consider the child protection needs of the children who are already residing in the United States. These children often go unnoticed and do not get the services that are their basic human right.

This article raises several issues that are clearly on the radar screen but are not often discussed. How do we serve sexual assault victims who are undocumented immigrants and are not even supposed to be living in the United States? Whose responsibility is it to serve these children, and how do we most effectively serve them? What kind of legal, ethical, and moral responsibility do we have to serve undocumented children? We need a better understanding of the relationship between ethnicity and child maltreatment, especially

childhood sexual abuse, in order to identify children at risk and understand the needs of undocumented children. While this article does not offer solutions to these impending questions involving responsibility and human rights, it hopefully will open the door to a discussion of the issue and create an environment for scientific inquiry on the very important topic of sexual abuse among children who are at risk of falling through the cracks of the child welfare system.

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