

HIGHLIGHTS FROM FORUM PROCEEDINGS

Forum on Rural Counties and Child Welfare
*Responding to Immigrant Families and Children:
Rising to the Challenge*
Willmar, Minnesota

June 28, 2007

This forum was developed under the auspices of the Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare at the School of Social Work in the College of Human Ecology, and the Center for Urban and Regional Affairs, University of Minnesota, Twin Cities.

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INTRODUCTION

We open this forum under the auspices of the Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare (CASCW) in the School of Social Work and the Center for Urban and Regional Affairs (CURA) at the University of Minnesota. The topic arises from a grant provided by the Minnesota Department of Human Services that is supporting a study of new populations in rural counties focused on the implications for child welfare.

It is important to note the context of our meeting today. The national debate on immigration has revealed a deeply divided country that, as of yet, has been unable to arrive at a political response to the complex problems of immigrants and refugees. In Minnesota we have had a record number of immigrants, more than 15,000 arriving in 2005 (Office of State Demographer), with a pronounced increase in refugees from African and Southeast Asian countries.

In our local rural communities, the shock of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids continues to reverberate. Here in Willmar, according to the local newspaper, the debate on immigration was sharpened by a recent raid. Concern for the impact on children of parents caught up in immigration enforcement activities was shared widely by all community institutions: schools, churches, and community groups.

In sum, we open this forum in a time of a perceived sense of anxiety that many challenges have to be met to assure the safety and well-being of children in immigrant families.

Presentation by Ilze Earner, Ph.D., LCSW, Faculty, Hunter College School of Social Work- “Immigrant Families and Child Welfare: Barriers to Services and Approaches to Change”

*PowerPoint slides available at <http://ssw.che.umn.edu/CASCW/ImmigrantFamilies.html>

- National data illustrate the growth in immigrant populations and, in particular, the unprecedented growth in families in which at least one parent is a non-citizen and at least one child is a citizen (known as mixed-status families).|
- In 2002-2003, 9.1 million children lived in mixed status families, representing 13% of all children. Even in undocumented families, 2 out of 3 children are citizens (March 2002-2003 Current Population Survey).
- Children of immigrants have a high level of economic hardship. This is especially the case for younger children. The poverty rate for children of immigrants under 5 years old is 27%, compared to 16% for children of parents born in the U.S.
- National data also illustrate a shift in the destination of immigrant populations. Minnesota is one of twenty-two states in which immigrant populations grew faster than in the six traditional destination states from 1990 to 2000.

- States have had differing responses to immigrant populations. For example: Georgia attempts to align with federal laws in restricting services based on citizenship status whereas New Jersey allows for greater access to a broad range of human services.
- Workers/agencies/communities need to develop response strategies and become knowledgeable about immigration issues and the key players in order to be prepared to work with immigrant families.
- For child welfare, the key challenge is acquiring a measure of cultural competence to understand the stages of migration and to understand the impact on family dynamics derived from culture and ethnicity and the immigration experience.
- Four factors in developing differential responses to a report of maltreatment are required: first, a knowledge of how immigration status will affect the case plan; second, developing a referral base for a broad variety of social services from community agencies; thirdly, if court involvement is required, consultation on local, national and international relative support systems will be necessary; and, a fourth factor, continue collaboration with court, legal services, and child welfare programs to assure that every child in placement will age out with a relationship sustained by guardianship, adoption, or a secure plan for independent living.
- Promising practices include: staff training; the development of handbooks and protocols; gaining an understanding of organizations with which to collaborate; the integration of immigration legal services into the child welfare system; and the creation of liaison positions for linking the child welfare system to the culture of the family and the child.
- The presence of a Consulate of Mexico is very helpful. (One was recently opened in St. Paul.)

Presentation by Susan Schmidt, MSW, Consultant with Bridging Refugee Youth and Children's Services (BRYCS)- "Separated and Unaccompanied Children"

*PowerPoint slides available at <http://ssw.che.umn.edu/CASCW/ImmigrantFamilies.html>

- BRYCS (initiated by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops/Migration and Refugee Services and Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service) is authorized to provide consultation and technical assistance.
- Various resources are offered by BRYCS and can be accessed at www.brycs.org.
- It is useful to understand the various terms and legal statuses related to immigration. (A handout on definitions is available with the PowerPoint slides listed above.)
- Unaccompanied and Separated Children are specific populations of concern.
- Various similarities in terms of cultural adjustment, family separation, possible trauma, educational needs, and the need for legal assistance exist among refugee and

immigrant children. Differences exist in regards to legal status, benefits eligibility, and a sense of permanence.

- Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (SIJS) and Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) are two legal paths that may provide assistance for immigrant children. Please refer to handouts available with the PowerPoint slides listed above.
- Guardianship would be recommended when refugee children are resettled with someone other than a parent. This usually happens if the parents have died or their whereabouts unknown. Guardianship can also be relevant for undocumented children who are in legal guardianship arrangements here with non-parental relatives, since the guardianship order can, in some cases, be the basis for an application for Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (SIJS), through which a child can obtain legal permanent residence.

Roundtable Discussion—“Life Circumstances of Children in Rural Minnesota’s Immigrant and Refugee Families”

Summary of Panel Member Presentations

Panel Participants:

Hassan Ugas, Director, Center for Somali Family Children Service, Minneapolis

Abdul Mohamed, Social Worker, Center for Somali Family and Children Service, Minneapolis

Jaime Ramirez, Assistant to Clinical Director, STARS (System Transformation of Area Resources and Services) for Children’s Mental Health

Kathy Rusch, School Liaison, Le Sueur County Human Services, Mental Health Center

Serena Robak, Probation Officer, Kandiyohi County Community Corrections

Panel members offered the observations noted below, in response to the following questions:

1. What do you see as the most significant problems for children in the families with whom you work?
2. Do you see any program innovations that you would recommend, insofar as child welfare is concerned?

Observations from members of the Somali community included these remarks:

- A dimension of child-rearing in Somali culture is rooted in the concept that children are the “property” of their parents. The idea of a public or government intervention in the intimate exchanges of a parent and a child is unheard of. In that connection, what may be construed by a mandatory reporter as physical abuse may be seen by the parent or caregiver as necessary discipline- “protecting the child for their own good.” The intrusion of a governmental role in safeguarding the safety of the child is unknown.

- The observation was made that while information is provided on “cars and credit cards” during the orientation period for refugees coming to the United States, there is no inclusion of a child welfare element.

Observations by a member of the Latino community included these remarks:

- Youth are subjected to humiliation resulting from the expression of racist comments. “A feeling of being victimized again and again,” is somewhat pervasive in the Latino community. Latinos are made to feel they are “outsiders,” being asked to “go back where you came from . . .,” despite the fact that many of the children are born here. And the question was posed, “How do you measure citizenship?” The huge contribution of Latino workers has not yet been acknowledged.
- For many youngsters, e.g., harassed in school, the response is to fight (“using the fist first”).
- Youth suffer a persistent fear of the threat of deportation of parents, resulting in anxiety, depression, and trauma. The mental health community considers the trauma as equivalent to that suffered by war vets.
- Following the ICE raids, youngsters displayed “hypervigilance.” Professionals should be aware of this intense level of anxiety.

Observations by a school liaison included these remarks:

- The position of a school liaison has been funded through a grant and is valued by the community. Despite the loss of grant money, other sources of funding were found, reflecting the importance of a school liaison person and the desire of the community to have someone who moves informally from the school to the parents and the child, linking their interests and offering solutions to problems.
- Through this position, the school liaison worker can also participate in advocacy to ensure all parties concerned understand the necessary steps to solve school absences.
- The rural communities in which the school liaison works do a good job of identifying needs and trying to find solutions, but stable funding is uncertain. Although the counties are small/poor, they are culturally alert.

The following observations were contributed by a member of the Probation system:

- The current court and probation systems are usually the agencies that expose the undocumented status of parents. They usually come to the attention of law enforcement because of a minor traffic violation, such as driving without a license or no insurance. On occasion, the violation may include wrongfully obtaining assistance.
- Most families with undocumented parents, necessarily, lead a life in “survival mode; live day to day; and under the radar.”

- There is an overarching fear of deportation, exacerbated by a lack of good information, which limits how they are able to participate in the community. Operating in survival mode means there is little opportunity to plan for the future.
- Accessing services is seen as a problem. Informal networks of family and friends provide the information for referrals. This information may be incorrect, partial, or unavailable.

Further Observations

Because of the fear and anxiety following the raids:

- Rumors are prevalent;
- Messages are distorted;
- Myths are perpetuated;
- Prejudice snowballs.

Some Concluding Observations

- There should be some acknowledgment of the role of faith-based agencies. (Catholic Charities and Lutheran Social Services provided sanctuary during the time of the raids.)
- Social workers and non-profits have to assume a vigorous role in combating misinformation.
- Referrals to such resources as “free clinics” and legal assistance are fragmented and confusing.
- The resource question was raised with this reminder: there is a paucity of services in rural counties for all families in need.

A Cautionary Note

Many children of immigrant and refugee parents are born in this country. They are citizens. We must be on guard not to make them feel like “outsiders.” Grievances and resentment from insulting behaviors toward the children may have long-lasting consequences.

Recommendations

- A model of providing legal services as part of social services should be initiated. Legal clinics should be available on the site of social services, on a regular basis.
- A handbook for accessing services, listing service providers should be developed.

Wrap-up by Esther Wattenberg

While we have only interviewed a few of the rural counties identified in our study, there are some positive developments to report:

The profile of rural counties is appearing more multi-cultural in several aspects: schools, community agencies, and business sectors. Several community organizations have developed and more are emerging that are working with immigrants and refugees from Mexico, Central America, Africa, and Southeast Asian countries.

Community organizations include:

- Integration Collaboratives:
 - Funded by the Department of Education and local school districts to assist schools and communities in “racially isolated school districts” to work together to promote multi-cultural programming.
 - Family Services and Children’s Mental Health Collaboratives with multi-cultural staff.
 - Regional cultural health centers
 - Regional cultural diversity coalitions

Among the excellent programs we note the following:

- Universal home visiting: Watonwan County has developed a program that is provided for all newborns- “Welcome Baby.”
- Consequential Camp for diverting youngsters in probation
- School related programs around language development; integrated sports teams; after school activities
- Building capacity in rural Latino communities- The Poverty Reduction Initiative of the Southwest Area Foundation for building capacity- “The Raices Project”
- Various liaison positions are being created such as: family advocates, family liaisons, cultural liaisons

However, we have a serious challenge ahead of us.

For unaccompanied children, separated from parents and relatives and not being cared for by any adult who is responsible for them by custom or law and without documentation of age and background, child welfare response must rely on “best practices” of the foster care system guided by legal consultation.

For children trapped in a complex and inconsistent system in which they observe their parents subjected to terrifying procedures and legal processes that appear to them to be senseless and

sinister, skilled child welfare responses are required. Perhaps training in trauma therapy might be useful.

Important studies are underway such as those by the Urban Institute. Their study with the National Council of La Raza on children with parents detained and deported in worksite raids is awaited with interest (Study of Children with Parents Detained and Deported in Worksite Enforcement Raids, Urban Institute, a work in progress).

In sum, there are serious efforts to respond to child welfare concerns among the new populations despite the understaffed and under-funded conditions of rural agencies.

While the major issues of a lack of interpreters and cultural liaisons are generally recognized, we note that family and children services are beginning to invent a new staff person, which may be a new career in child welfare: the “cultural expert,” the “family advocate,” the “cultural liaison.”

The unprecedented size and complexity of the experiences of children living in immigrant and refugee families in the last decade, places immigration at the very center of the crowded intersection of child welfare and the law.

Handouts from the forum are available at:

<http://ssw.che.umn.edu/CASCW/ImmigrantFamilies.html>

Submitted by:

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