



Mexican Immigrant Family Life in a Pre-Emerging Southern Gateway Community

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Why research on low-income Hispanic children and families matters

Hispanic children currently make up roughly one in four of all children in the United States,^a and by 2050 are projected to make up one in three,^b similar to the number of non-Hispanic, white children. Given this, how Hispanic children fare will have a profound and increasing impact on the social and economic well-being of the country as a whole. Notably, though, two-thirds of Hispanic children live in poverty or near poverty,^c defined as less than two times the federal poverty level.^d Despite their high levels of economic need, Hispanics, particularly those in immigrant families, have lower rates of participation in many government support programs when compared with other racial/ethnic minority groups.^e High-quality, research-based information on the characteristics, experiences, and diversity of Hispanic children and families is needed to inform programs and policies supporting the sizable population of low-income Hispanic children and families.

- a. U.S. Census Bureau. (2014). State and County QuickFacts. Data derived from Population Estimates, American Community Survey, Census of Population and Housing, State and County Housing Unit Estimates, County Business Patterns, Nonemployer Statistics, Economic Census, Survey of Business Owners, Building Permit Retrieved from <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/00000.html>
- b. Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics. (2012). America's Children: Key National Indicators of Well-Being, 2012, Tables POP1 and POP3. from <http://www.childstats.gov/americaschildren/tables.asp>
- c. Hernandez, D., & Napierala, J. (2013). Diverse Children: Race, Ethnicity, and Immigration in America's New Non-Majority Generation New York Foundation for Child Development from <http://fcd-us.org/sites/default/files/DiverseChildren%20-%20Full%20Report.pdf>
- d. The Kaiser Commission on Medicaid and the Uninsured. (2013). Health Coverage for the Hispanic Population Today and Under the Affordable Care Act. Washington, D.C.: The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation. <https://kaiserfamilyfoundation.files.wordpress.com/2013/04/84321.pdf>
- e. Chau, M., Thampi, K., & Wight, V. (2010). Basic facts about low-income children, 2009: Children under age 6. New York, NY: National Center for Children in Poverty.

Overview

Mexican immigrant parents often find themselves raising their children under conditions of poverty, marginalization, and stress. These are conditions related to adapting to life in a new country as well as to the normal stressors and changes associated with the early years of parenting.¹ Of particular concern, given the recent economic downturns of the Great Recession (2007-2009), is the economic pressure that results from limited employment opportunities available to Mexican immigrants in relatively new settlement locations across the United States. This pressure may have implications for family well-being.

Although they are likely to endorse cultural values that promote marriage and family solidarity, Mexican immigrants face challenges to marital stability during the childrearing years that differ from their counterparts in Mexico and in the United States.² Parents' personal, cultural, marital, and social resources may be taxed when economic and structural supports are weak or chronically deficient. Difficulties that parents encounter during the early childrearing years have the capacity to pose a risk for children who are in a period of critical cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development, which in turn has implications for school readiness and later success in adulthood. Indeed, an underlying premise of Healthy People's 2020 new emphasis on the social determinants of health in early childhood is that important "milestones can be significantly delayed when young children experience environmental stressors and other negative risk factors."^{3,a}

Researchers and practitioners have developed intervention programs targeting "high-risk"^b mothers of young children and low-income couples. And, the federal government has designed initiatives—including the

^a See for more info: <http://www.healthypeople.gov/2020/topics-objectives/topic/social-determinants-health>

^b The literature we reviewed often refers to low-income, unmarried mothers of young children as "high-risk."

Hispanic Healthy Marriage Initiative—to strengthen marriage in low-income populations.⁴ Yet the basic science that informs these programs for Hispanic populations is limited; few researchers have specifically examined marital quality in Latino or other immigrant populations. This is no less true for Mexican Americans, who are the largest subgroup of Hispanics and make up the largest group of immigrants in the United States.⁵ These programs also do not address the larger contexts in which parents' marriages and children's development are embedded.

The purpose of this report is to provide a rich picture of the lives of Mexican-American couples as they navigate parenting and family life in pre-emerging immigrant communities. Specifically, we share insights gleaned from the UNIDOS study of 120 couples with young children living in newly-formed immigrant communities across the state of North Carolina at the start of the Great Recession (see "UNIDOS Study Families" databox). Findings are consistent with other known challenges facing immigrants to the United States. However, this research sheds additional light on the pressures that may impact Latino families in pre-emerging communities, why families raising children in these contexts may be facing risks associated with their environments, and how policies and programs might capitalize on families' strengths.

Key findings and implications

Here are some of the key findings and implications you will see in this report. More detail is found at the end.

Daily family life: strengths, challenges and resilience. Hispanic mothers and fathers in this sample expressed strong commitment to family and children's education. Additionally, employment rates were high. However, although many parents cited family bonds, church involvement, and relationships with non-kin friends as important sources of support, parents reported experiencing unsupportive work environments and considerable stress in their daily lives.

Parenting in the context of marital relationships. Mothers and fathers were highly satisfied with their marriages and tended to report high levels of warmth, closeness, and love. However, the transition to parenthood increased tension. Despite this, couples reported satisfying co-parenting relationships and often prioritized co-parenting above their marital relationship and personal interests. Additionally, in contrast to stereotypic assumptions about Mexican-origin parents, most mothers and fathers endorsed flexible gender roles for children.

Diversity of experiences between and within couples. Men and women appeared to have experiences of marriage, parenting, and family life that fall along gender lines. Husbands tended to be more satisfied with their marital and co-parenting relationship, and perceive less marital negativity, than wives. Additionally, couples in consensual unions (as opposed to being legally married) reported more negative experiences.^c

Future research and practice efforts should consider the needs of adults within Hispanic households, given the tremendous impact that family context can have on the development of young children. This includes:

- understanding cultural adaptation;
- paying more attention to the workplace and family functioning, and fostering family resiliency in Latino-focused marriage programs;
- understanding the nuance of families' use of social assistance and building community strengths to supplement governmental assistance; and
- investing in community coalitions or research-to-practice networks.

^c In this report, we generally refer to both marriages and consensual unions using terminology like "husband," "wife," and "spouse." The couples in this study viewed themselves as married whether legally married or not; moreover, it is culturally appropriate to treat consensual unions as marriage as this is a common practice in Latin America. For more information see De Vos, S. (1999). Comment of coding marital status in Latin America. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 30, 79–93.

Background

Mexican immigrant families in the United States and North Carolina. Thirteen percent of the U.S. population is foreign-born, about half of which is Hispanic. One in four U.S. children are either foreign-born or living with at least one foreign-born parent.⁶ Between 1980 and 2010, the foreign-born Hispanic population in the United States increased more than three-fold, from 4 million to 19 million, of which the majority were from Mexico.^{7,8} Growth was especially rapid in the South, including North Carolina, where the foreign-born Hispanic population increased from 4,000 to 391,000—a more than 9,000 percent increase. Whereas roughly one-third (36 percent) of the 53 million Hispanics in the United States are foreign-born, almost half (47 percent) of North Carolina’s Hispanics are foreign-born, making North Carolina the state or district with the fourth-highest percent of foreign-born residents after Maryland, the District of Columbia, and Florida.⁹

Recent estimates indicate that after more than three decades of continued growth, there was a modest decline in the Hispanic foreign-born population of the United States during the Great Recession (December 2007 - June 2009).¹⁰ Reasons cited for the decline include higher border enforcement, weaker job and construction markets in the United States, and lower birth rates in origin countries.¹¹ Despite the overall decline, the foreign-born population increased during the recession in some parts of the United States, particularly in new gateway destinations.

Pre-emerging gateway communities. Communities characterized by small immigrant populations prior to 1980, but rapid growth in their foreign-born populations beginning in the 1990s are referred to as pre-emerging gateways.¹² Hispanics make up the largest share of the foreign-born growth in these communities.¹³ Notably, five of the seven pre-emerging gateway communities in the United States are located in North Carolina, highlighting the state’s significance as an increasingly popular destination for foreign-born settlement. It is likely that a large part of the growth in North Carolina was due to internal migration from established gateways, such as California, New York, Florida, and Texas.¹⁴ The rich data gathered from UNIDOS families are uniquely positioned, therefore, to inform our understanding of Latino immigrant families’ experiences in Southern pre-emerging gateways.

Hispanics and the impact of the Great Recession. Representing the longest economic downturn in the United States since World War II, the Great Recession impacted Americans across the economic and racial/ethnic spectrum, though the impact was felt more harshly among some groups, including Hispanics. The impacts of the recession were notable in regard to unemployment, income, share of low-income children, and household net worth. Though nationally all groups experienced increased unemployment during the Great Recession, Hispanics experienced disproportionately higher levels of unemployment and slower job recovery.^{15,16} Further, not only did Hispanic households earn about 20 percent less income than other households at the start of the recession (both nationally and within NC), by the end of the recession this gap had increased by five percent in the United States and 34 percent in North Carolina.^{17,18}

As a result, the percentage of Hispanic children living in low-income households is disproportionately higher than the percentage among the general population in both the United States and North Carolina; it has grown in recent years, but has not yet returned to pre-recession levels. Within North Carolina, 78 percent of Hispanic children currently reside in low-income households.¹⁹

Additionally, across the four years leading up to the recession’s end in 2009, the median net worth of Hispanic households decreased 63 percent relative to the average household decrease of 26 percent.^{20,21} In 2011, the median household net worth across the total population in the United States was approximately \$69,000; for Hispanics, this figure was below \$8,000.²² In sum, although the Great Recession affected many in the United States, the impact on Hispanics was particularly substantial.

UNIDOS study families

About the study. The UNIDOS study was designed to be an in-depth investigation of marital relationships and contextual stress in Mexican-origin families with children. Data were collected at the advent of the Great Recession (2007–2008) in several central North Carolina counties. To be eligible for the study, couples had to be legally married or “living as married” in consensual unions at the initial point of contact, be the biological parents of their minor children, and live together in the same household with their minor children. In addition, couples had to include at least one spouse of Mexican descent, and both spouses had to be of Spanish-speaking, Latin-American origin.

Cultural insiders (i.e., community leaders, clergy, and social service workers with established relationships within the local Latino community) served as liaisons between the research staff and potential participants in the recruitment of 120 couples (240 parents) living in pre-determined census tracts identified for their relatively high concentrations of Latino immigrant family households. Initial contacts with couples were done in person by Latino project staff, social service workers, and community leaders, either in couples’ homes or at social service agencies that served the Latino community. Couples were given an informational flyer that included a phone number to call to express interest in participation.

Eligible couples who expressed interest in the study were interviewed by Latino project staff during two- to three-hour in-home, structured interviews, of which all but one were conducted in Spanish. Interviewers were trained in current best practices for research with immigrant populations.⁹ Information about cultural adaptation and orientation, depressive symptoms, social network and neighborhood resources, marital quality, family demographic information, and spouses’ perceptions of economic pressure was gathered via verbally-administered surveys to compensate for variations in literacy and to allow for a more conversational feel to an otherwise structured interview. All study questionnaires had been used in prior regional and national research with Latino populations and were available in both Spanish and English. In addition to the verbal survey, parents also responded to a brief set of open-ended questions about their immigration experience and raising their children in the United States.

The sample. The majority of participating couples (69 percent) were legally married, with the remaining 31 percent of couples “living as married” in consensual unions. Husbands and wives were 30 and 28 years old on average, respectively, and couples had been married/living as married for an average of seven years. Most couples had married or begun living as married in the United States, and all couples were parents with children under the age of 13 living in the home with them. Couples had on average two children, and first-born children tended to be around six years old at the time of the study. The number of children in the family ranged from one to five. No parents reported children who remained in their homeland. For the majority of couples, both spouses were from Mexico; the remaining couples included one spouse from Mexico and one spouse from Central or South America (e.g., Guatemala, El Salvador, and Peru). Ninety-six percent of mothers and all fathers were foreign-born. Consistent with national statistics that indicate that most children in immigrant households are born in the United States, the majority of UNIDOS first-born children were born in the United States. Wives and husbands averaged ten and nine years of formal schooling, respectively. The majority of husbands were employed, and a little over half of wives were employed; family income averaged \$33,000.

^a Knight, G. R., Roosa, M. W., & Umana-Taylor, A. J. (2009). Sampling, recruiting, and retaining diverse samples. In G. R. Knight, M. W. Roosa, & A. J. Umana-Taylor (Eds.), *Studying ethnic minority and economically disadvantaged populations: Methodological challenges and best practices* (pp. 29-78). Washington, DC, USA: American Psychological Association. doi: 10.1037/11887-002

Lessons learned: Sample recruitment in pre-emerging gateway communities

Scholars have documented the difficulty of recruiting and retaining both mothers and fathers in ethnic minority, immigrant couples for marital and family research.^a The methods used in the UNIDOS study provide a useful model for data collection with potentially hard-to-reach immigrant couples living in pre-emerging immigrant communities. We offer four suggestions based on our experiences with the UNIDOS study. These suggestions align with advice offered by others who have recruited immigrant couples for marital research and/or successfully studied, in two-parent immigrant families, both mothers' and fathers' perspectives of parent-child relationships.^{b,c}

1. **Choose an appropriate sampling frame.** We recommend selecting a sampling frame with an adequate number of immigrant families. Publicly-available census tract data is a useful tool for the purpose of identifying geographic areas with dense Latino and other immigrant populations. Population data is also useful to further identify communities that have experienced rapid growth as well as to determine whether growth is attributed to births versus the arrival of new immigrants.^d
2. **Establish relationships with cultural insiders.** Developing relationships with cultural insiders (e.g., community leaders and organizations, clergy, and social workers) is imperative for recruitment and the identification of appropriate sampling frames. Cultural insiders typically have a sense of the ethnic terrain in various geographic locations, and are likely to know the communities in which families with children live, gather, shop, and conduct business. Taking the time to discuss the nature of the research project, protections for participants, and potential benefits to the larger community with cultural insiders prior to sample recruitment is an important first step. Endorsement of the research project from cultural insiders is essential in areas where actual and/or perceived anti-immigration sentiments exist. We found conventional methods of subject recruitment such as mailings, phone calls, or the distribution of flyers and brochures by local social service agencies, doctors' offices, and public health centers to be ineffective. Indeed, even personal contacts made by Latina project staff members with parents in waiting rooms were unsuccessful. Instead, the majority of couples were recruited via the efforts of cultural insiders who acted as liaisons between the research team and participants. In the context of a pre-emerging gateway community, we found that immigrant couples' willingness and interest evolved out of: 1) the personal contacts made by cultural insiders with whom they were familiar, 2) public endorsements of the research project by these same individuals, and 3) more generally, an established, trusting relationship between couples and cultural insiders in their immediate social context. Finally, although others have written about the difficulty in recruiting husbands and fathers for participation in marital and family research, we found husbands to be open and willing to participate and attributed this to their trust in the referring source who endorsed the research project as beneficial to furthering understanding of Mexican American couples and families.
3. **Intentionally sample both husbands and wives,** to recognize the important role of husbands and fathers in immigrant families. This approach also allows researchers to examine the extent to which parents' experiences—both within the same family and across different family contexts—are similar and different. Underlying this approach is the assumption that marital, parenting, and family experiences are differentiated by gender, and that heterosexual marriage is potentially comprised of two, often distinct, "his" and "hers" experiences. These distinct experiences are particularly apparent during family transition periods (e.g., immigration, birth of a child). For example, whereas immigration requires change for both husbands and wives, cultural adaptation is not necessarily experienced in the same way for both. Immigrant husbands and wives may adapt to the host culture at differential rates, have different household and workplace experiences, embrace their ethnic heritage to varying degrees, differ in immigration status, experience the stress of acculturation at different levels of intensity, and perceive and respond to stressors differently.
4. **Reduce costs and offer benefits to participation.** Finally, we recommend reducing potential costs of participating by adequately compensating couples for their time, providing transportation to the interview site or interviewing couples in their homes, providing childcare during the interview, conducting interviews in participants' language of choice, and using bilingual interviewers—preferably from the same country of origin. The oral administration of commonly used measures in participants' language of choice allows researchers to interpret their results in the context of the larger literature, while at the same time attending sensitively to participants' language use and literacy abilities. In addition to compensation as a direct benefit, we found that parents also valued educational DVDs and brochures produced by local extension agents pertaining to issues such as parenting, marriage, immigration law, and health care, and educational resources that targeted issues specific to Latinos in that area and that were produced in their native language.

For more detailed reading on this topic see:

- Bouchet, S., Torres, L., & Hyra, A. (2012). *Marketing, recruitment, and retention strategies*. Washington, DC, USA: Administration for Children and Families. Retrieved from: http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/marketing_recruit.pdf
 - Bouchet, S., Torres, L., & Hyra, A. (2013). *Hispanics and family-strengthening programs: Cultural strategies to enhance program participation*. Washington, DC, USA: Administration for Children and Families. Retrieved from: http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/hhmi_brief_5_cultural_adaptations_final_6_5_13_2.pdf
 - Knight, G. R., Roosa, M. W., & Umana-Taylor, A. J. (2009). *Studying ethnic minority and economically disadvantaged populations: Methodological challenges and best practices*. Washington, DC, USA: American Psychological Association. doi: 10.1037/11887-002
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- a Karney, B. R., Kreitz, M. A., & Sweeney, K. E. (2004). Obstacles to ethnic diversity in marital research: On the failure of good intentions. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 21(4), 509-526. doi:10.1177/026540750404484
- b Roosa, M. W., Liu, F. F., Torres, M., Gonzales, N. A., Knight, G. P., & Saenz, D. (2008). Sampling and recruitment in studies of cultural influences on adjustment: A case study with Mexican Americans. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 22, 293-302. doi: 10.1037/0893-3200.22.2.293
- c Helms, H. M., Supple, A. J., & Proulx, C. M. (2011). Mexican-origin couples in the early years of parenthood: Marital well-being in ecological context. *Journal of Family Theory and Review*, 3, 67-95. doi: 10.1111/j.1756-2589.2011.00085.
- d Pew Hispanic Center (2011). *The Mexican-American boom: Births overtake immigration*. Washington, DC: Pew Hispanic Center. Retrieved from <http://www.pewhispanic.org/files/reports/144.pdf>

The larger context of family life

In the following sections, we provide an illustration of the everyday experiences of both mothers and fathers in Mexican-origin families within their social, economic, cultural, and marital contexts, as well as couples' perceptions of family strengths and stress related to cultural adaptation and economic hardship. Insights gleaned from the UNIDOS couples living in pre-emerging communities at the start of the Great Recession provide an important inside look at the larger family contexts in which parenting and young children's development is embedded.

Neighborhood context. Most couples resided in small towns and rural areas rather than cities. Approximately half of the families lived in neighborhoods classified as 50 percent Hispanic (according to 2008 Census data), a third of families lived in neighborhoods ranging from 10-25 percent Hispanic, and the remaining families resided in neighborhoods classified as less than 10 percent Hispanic. Most couples lived in neighborhoods characterized by high poverty (i.e., neighborhood poverty rates ranging from 19 to 32 percent across participants' census tracts). The majority of families lived in neighborhoods with crime indices lower than the national average, though this varied somewhat across communities. Parents' perceptions of neighborhood quality and safety were mixed. Most mothers and fathers generally agreed with statements such as "I think this neighborhood is a good place to live" and "Overall, I am satisfied with my neighborhood." Yet, at the same time, over half of mothers and fathers disagreed with statements that "It is safe in my neighborhood" and "It is safe for my child to play outside my home." Some couples who found themselves in neighborhoods where they felt unsafe looked for new housing in better locations, prompted by the arrival of their first child. For example, one father, reflecting on the birth of his first child in the United States, underscored that looking "for a better and nicer area to live" had become important to him when he and his wife had decided to start a family.

Economic and work context. Nearly all fathers and about half of mothers were employed. The majority of employed parents worked 40 hours per week, primarily in low-wage, physically demanding occupations. Fathers were commonly employed as landscapers, home appliance mechanics, painters, construction workers, upholsterers, welders, factory machine operators, and meat cutters. For employed mothers, the most common jobs were meat cutters, production inspectors, packagers, and factory workers. When both parents were employed, fathers earned an average of \$9,000 more than their wives. There were no differences in fathers' earnings based on mothers' employment. The majority of families were low-income, earning less than twice the federal poverty level. Within this low-income classification, 22 percent of families were living below the federal poverty line. Almost none of the employed fathers and mothers had access to health insurance, paid sick leave, or paid vacation through their employers and most indicated that a lack of access to affordable health care or "not being able to go to the doctor in case of an emergency" (23-year-old mother of two children) was extremely stressful.

Although participation in social assistance programs tends to vary widely by type of program and population, national estimates indicate that 24 percent of all American households received at least one means-tested benefit (e.g., cash assistance,

Supplemental Security Income, Food Stamps, Medicaid, or WIC) in 2008,²³ with higher rates reported for those more likely to experience economic hardship, such as those headed by single mothers (46 percent)²⁴ and parents without a high school degree (33 percent).²⁵ Notably, UNIDOS families rarely used any type of social assistance, despite likely meeting income eligibility criteria. Approximately half of the employed fathers and mothers reported experiencing discrimination at work. As illustrated by the words of a 28-year-old mother of two children, Mexican immigrant parents living in pre-emerging immigrant communities often felt less than welcomed: “Anglos sometimes look down on us . . . they discriminate against Mexicans or Latinos in general.”

Parents’ cultural identities and perspectives on immigration. Almost all parents were first-generation immigrants and identified strongly with a Mexican cultural orientation (e.g. classified as “very Mexican/Latino” based on their responses on the Acculturation Rating Scale for Mexican Americans).²⁶ On average, husbands had lived in the United States for 11 years, and wives for 9 years, although variations existed in this general pattern, with some wives immigrating before their husbands and other couples immigrating together. For the participating couples who were married prior to immigrating, staggered migration patterns in which husbands and wives were separated from one another for significant periods of time, or separated repeatedly, were mentioned as a significant stressor and strain on the marriage. When asked about the challenges of immigrating to the United States, a father of three children who had been married for 13 years indicated that “to be separated from my wife twice” created a cascading effect of stressors that he and his wife had to overcome when reunified. When commenting on their decision to immigrate, several themes consistently emerged from parents, including coming to the United States for the future of their children (both in terms of economic and educational opportunities), job security for themselves, and providing financial support to extended family residing in their home country. Immigrating parents consistently spoke about the challenges of acculturation, learning English, missing family back home in Mexico, and the long work hours necessary to support a family on low wages.

Why did you immigrate? Challenges and opportunities

The education of my children . . . but we now have to work a lot. (36-year-old mother of two)

[In the United States] I was able to finish high school. In Mexico I wouldn't have had that opportunity. (31-year-old father of two)

For a stable job, to give our children what they need material-wise, and to give them a better future . . . but not seeing my family has been difficult. (27-year-old mother of one)

The situation in Mexico was very difficult. I left my parents behind in Mexico, and when I arrived in the U.S. I had a hard time finding a job and had no money. I now work and own a car. (22-year-old father of one)

I was able to go back to school and then get a job. My brothers were able to stay in school here in the U.S. (21-year-old mother of one)

I came to the U.S. for a better life and to help my parents [who stayed behind in Mexico]. I have been able to raise enough money to buy land for my family in Mexico and have learned English but being far away from my family has been hard. (48-year old father of one)

To help my parents financially . . . but not being able to help my children with their schoolwork because of my language difference has been hard. (31-year-old mother of two)

To have a better lifestyle and a better salary . . . but learning to drive and learning the English language has been difficult. (23-year-old mother of one)

[Living in the U.S.] has allowed me to own a house and a car but there have been many challenges. When I first arrived in North Carolina there were only a few Latinos. [It was difficult to] get accustomed to life in the U.S. society because of this. (34-year old father of three)

Social networks and extended family context. The majority of mothers and fathers endorsed *familism*, in which the primacy of family and kin, including the importance of providing emotional and practical support for family members, was valued. “We have a loving family. We think of our kids.... We work hard for them” (30-year-old father of four). This value was reflected in their behaviors and living conditions, with a little over one third of the families housing additional adults in their home. Parents also routinely provided financial assistance to extended family members who remained in Mexico, with some indicating economic provision for extended family as a motivating factor in their decision to immigrate.

As stated by a 30-year-old mother of two children, “It [immigrating to the U.S.] allowed me to send money to Mexico to help my siblings continue school and [to support] my parents.” Approximately half of the participating families reported sending remittances to extended family; 50 percent of annual financial remittances ranged from \$100 to \$1,000, 47 percent totaled between \$1,000 and \$6,000, and the remainder exceeded \$6,000. As illustrated in the words of a 32-year-old mother of three, extended family members remaining in Mexico often came to rely on remittances, which further impacted immigrant parents’ decisions to remain in the United States. “I came to the U.S. to work to collect money and then return to Mexico to finish my studies. Then my family faced some difficult issues in Mexico and I decided to stay in the U.S. to help my family economically.” In the context of low family income, these remittances are significant and may make upward mobility more difficult. They also stretch already limited family resources.

The majority of parents reported **religious affiliations**. Approximately half of the parents in the study identified as Catholic and a little over one third as Protestant. The majority of mothers and fathers attended religious services or activities once a week, although fathers’ attendance was slightly lower than mothers’. Both mothers and fathers reported relatively high levels of satisfaction with one another’s involvement in religious activities. Statistically significant differences in spouses’ scores, however, suggested that wives were somewhat less satisfied than were husbands with their spouses’ level of church attendance and participation in religious activities. Parents also spoke of how the relationships they formed with their “church family” helped to fill the void or sense of loss they felt in living far from extended family who remained in Mexico. “My spiritual family at church is a large support!” said a 32-year-old mother of three.

When asked to identify **individuals in their social network who were important to them and to whom they felt close**, wives averaged five individuals, whereas husbands averaged four individuals. Siblings were identified most frequently by both spouses; most siblings lived in the same or a nearby town/city in North Carolina. Participants’ own mothers and non-kin friends were also identified, although less frequently than siblings. The majority of the non-kin friends identified as close social network members by participants were likely to reside in the same or a nearby town. In contrast, the majority of wives’ mothers and husbands’ mothers who were identified as close social network members remained in Mexico. Both husbands and wives discussed the difficulty in living far from their parents, particularly when they were not able to return home to visit. For example, one wife and mother of five stated “I left my family behind in Mexico and close friends/relatives. [It has been challenging] not being able to see or visit people in Mexico.” Similarly, another mother of one expressed that one of the most difficult experiences related to immigrating to the United States was “when loved ones such as my mother pass[ed] away, I couldn’t attend the funeral.” To a lesser degree, participants’ fathers, mother-in-laws, father-in-laws, and other relatives were also represented as members of their close social networks. The frequency of parents’ interactions with members of their social network ranged from several times a month to several times a day in the past year and included both face-to-face contact as well as phone contact with those abroad. The average frequency of interaction reported by parents was “daily to several times a week.” Importantly, parents reported that social network members were sources of social support (e.g., emotional support, providing care when ill) and childcare (e.g., babysitting, source of parenting advice) that they relied on often, with best friends also serving as confidants regarding marital concerns for both husbands and wives (i.e., “marriage work”).²⁷ Both wives and husbands averaged high levels of satisfaction with the support they received. Husbands and wives did not differ in their perceptions of support received, frequency of contact, or overall satisfaction with their social networks.

Marital relationships. Because consensual, or “living as married,” unions in Mexico and other Latin American countries are typically publicly (if not legally) recognized as marital unions, and because legal marriage in the United States is not possible when neither partner is a United States citizen, couples who self-identified as legally married or living in a consensual union (viewed as marriage by both partners) were included in the study. No differences were found for the **legally-married versus consensual-union couples** in terms of family size, family income, husbands’ and wives’ education, nor the number of years husbands had lived in the United States. But compared with legally-married couples, spouses in consensual unions were younger, had younger first-born children, and involved wives who had been living in the United States for fewer years. Couples’ legal marital status was also associated with mothers’ and fathers’ reports of economic pressure and stress related to cultural adaptation; spouses in consensual unions were more likely to experience stress in these domains than legally married spouses. Finally, women (but not men) in consensual marital unions reported higher levels of depressive symptoms, lower marital satisfaction, and more marital negativity than did wives in legally-recognized marital unions.²⁸

Overall, spouses reported relatively high levels of **marital quality**, with the majority of the sample reporting that they were satisfied or extremely satisfied with a variety of general marital domains (e.g., satisfaction with marital communication, decision-making, managing finances, and conflicts) as well as culturally relevant domains (e.g., involvement as a couple in cultural traditions and celebrations, interactions with extended family). Similarly, mothers and fathers reported, on average, relatively high levels of warmth, closeness, and love in their marriage, and low to moderate levels of marital conflict and negativity. Although most husbands and wives reported relatively low levels of conflict, marital tensions existed and were often related to or became apparent with the arrival of children.

"We argue due to the baby . . . not getting enough sleep. I feel that I am doing many chores around the house . . . but maybe my wife does not see [it] like that." (30-year-old father)

"He used to understand me more, however, now he is more stubborn. We used to communicate more. He does not like to talk. We argue more because he does not have patience. Maybe he gets bored. [We have] more responsibilities because of the kids." (28-year-old mother of four children)

Although many parents acknowledged having more disagreements since the arrival of their children, some expressed that amidst the conflicts they also gained a new appreciation of one another. A 35-year-old father of four said: *"We do not have time for one another. We keep ourselves busy with our kids' activities. We talk more [with each other] but we talk about our kids' childcare, about their school. We talk about our kids' discipline and this has been a big argument for us. We love each other more [since having] kids. [I] appreciate and love my wife for everything she does for me and the kids."*

Regarding **conflict resolution**, husbands and wives were equally likely to bring up marital concerns to their spouse (a.k.a. "marriage work"), with both spouses indicating that they were somewhat likely to bring up concerns and talk them through with their partner when they arose. Again, many parents discussed how talking through marital concerns with their spouse became more important to them after the arrival of children, with some indicating that their love for their children motivated them to work harder on their marriage.

"When we had no children, we did not take problems as seriously. Now we try to talk more and try to solve the issue (mainly for the children). We now prioritize family above friends and everything else. We have grown closer." (25-year-old mother of three)

"We communicate more about how to solve problems and we talk about how each other feels. We also talk about the baby. I'm more attached to my wife and to her work; I understand her job. We argue less." (39 year-old father of one)

"[After having children] we became closer and we both became more mature. We thought things through more carefully. We fought for our relationship with more rigor and our communication [with one another] got better." (25-year-old mother of three)

"It [our marriage] is better because I feel more unified or united to my family. We both wanted a baby. We cannot go out the same as before, for example, to parties or to the mall. I love my wife more because she gave me three beautiful kids and she treats my kids well . . . with respect. I want to spend more time with my wife. We communicate more because I trust my wife more. With my three babies, it is harder because we did not expect to have a third baby, but now we are happy." (29-year-old father of three)

Overall, husbands reported greater **marital satisfaction** and less **marital negativity** than did wives. Husbands and wives did not differ in their perceptions of marital warmth. Importantly, variation in spouses' marital satisfaction was predicted by the psychological distress that arose from the challenges of making ends meet during difficult economic times while simultaneously adapting to life in a new country. Specifically, we found that stress external to the marital relationship (e.g., economic pressure and stress related to cultural adaptation) was transmitted to spouses' marital satisfaction via a variety of mechanisms including spouses' depressive symptoms and negative marital exchanges. Wives' marital satisfaction was shown to be uniquely vulnerable to the effects of these contextual stressors through their own and their husbands' depressive symptoms and marital negativity, whereas variations in husbands' marital satisfaction were primarily via husbands' own expressions of marital negativity.²⁹

Parents' mental health and stress. Approximately 25 percent of parents scored above the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale's cutoff for "significant" **depressive symptomatology**, suggesting potential for clinical levels of depression.

These percentages are similar to those reported for men and women separately in a study using the National Comorbidity Survey,³⁰ but lower than reported in other studies of Latino adults in the United States.^{31,32} Husbands and wives did not differ significantly in their levels of depressive symptoms or in their **perceptions of stress related to cultural adaptation**. The majority of both mothers and fathers reported experiencing stress related to English proficiency. Fathers and mothers also reported stress related to pressures to acculturate to U.S. customs and practices, and, to a lesser degree, stress related to pressures to maintain their cultural heritage. As one 42-year-old father of three children stated, “[We came to the United States] to search for a better future . . . but it has been challenging to adjust to life in the USA and Anglo society.” Of those parents who reported stress across these three domains of cultural adaptation, the majority reported moderate levels of stress. Regarding **stress related to economic hardship**, wives perceived more economic pressure related to paying bills and having enough money by the end of each month than did their husbands, with about twice as many mothers as fathers indicating that they did not have enough money to cover necessities each month, including clothing, housing, household items, and car expenses.

Parenting. Mothers’ and fathers’ gendered parenting beliefs about raising sons versus daughters, discussions with one another and other close social network members about parenting concerns, and satisfaction with their co-parenting relationship were examined. Although a statistically significant gender difference emerged for parents’ **gendered parenting beliefs** indicating that fathers endorsed more stereotypic beliefs than mothers, the majority of both mothers and fathers *disagreed* with statements indicating that education, personal strength, independence, and the ability to hold down a good job in adulthood are more important to foster in sons than daughters. Spouses’ scores were positively correlated and indicated within-couple agreement in parents’ beliefs, with most couples endorsing flexible beliefs about gender roles for boys and girls that challenged stereotypic notions about Mexican-origin families.

In addition to assessing parents’ gendered beliefs about raising sons and daughters, mothers and fathers were also asked the **extent to which they talked to one another and other close individuals outside the family about childrearing and parenting concerns**. The majority of mothers and fathers indicated that they talked to their spouse about parenting issues and childrearing. Wives reported bringing up these discussions to their husbands more frequently than their husbands reported bringing up similar concerns with their wives. Although this gender difference was statistically significant, it was relatively small in magnitude and indicated that both spouses sought out one another often in the past year to discuss parenting concerns, childrearing, and their division of co-parenting responsibilities, and often prioritized co-parenting over their marital relationship and personal interests.

“Our children are first and then us. We always talk about our kids and less about our relationship. We always try to come to an agreement [about the kids].” (36-year-old mother of three)

“Our roles change a lot because now that we have kids . . . all of the attention goes to them, to the kids. Discipline issues; my wife wants to be less rigid. We have more responsibilities . . . checking kids’ homework. We communicate more. We have to tell the kids what’s right or not right. I’ve learned how to communicate more with my wife.” (36-year-old father of three)

“We are . . . busy with the baby. We sleep less because he is six months old. We think of our child first before making any decisions. We communicate more about the things that our child does. We have no time for intimacy because we are tired. My husband helps me in household duties and the baby. He understands me . . .” (25-year-old mother of one)

Although husbands and wives generally felt supported in their parenting roles by members of their social networks, spouses talked to one another more often than their closest social network members about childrearing and parenting concerns. Even so, a majority of mothers and fathers reported talking to trusted individuals outside the family “often” to “very often” about childrearing and parenting concerns. Mothers were more likely than fathers to seek out their closest social friends or kin as sources of parenting and childrearing advice and guidance.

Overall, parents reported **satisfaction with their co-parenting relationship** with one another. A statistically significant gender difference in mothers’ and fathers’ co-parenting satisfaction was found, however, and indicated that husbands were more satisfied with their co-parenting relationship than their wives. Again, the gender difference in co-parenting satisfaction within couples was small and indicated that wives reported that they were very satisfied, whereas husbands reported that they were extremely satisfied, on average, across a variety of domains of co-parenting. Neither mothers’ nor fathers’ co-parenting satisfaction was significantly related to either spouse’s gendered parenting beliefs or orientation toward *familism*, or the level of agreement between spouses in these areas. Nor did husbands’ and wives’ co-parenting satisfaction vary based on wives’ employment status. Instead, parents’ co-parenting satisfaction was linked to both spouses’ reports of marital warmth and the extent to which they discussed parenting concerns with one another, suggesting that positive co-parenting is more likely to

occur in a marital context characterized by expressions of affection and warmth in which both spouses feel connected to one another emotionally and valued by their partner.³³

Implications for research, practice, and future directions

Findings from the UNIDOS study are consistent with other known challenges facing immigrants to the United States. However, a focus on Latino families in the Southern United States sheds additional light on different pressures that may influence Latino families in pre-emerging communities, why families raising children in these contexts may be facing risks associated with their environments, and how policies and programs might capitalize on families' strengths. We recommend that future research and practice efforts more specifically consider the needs of the adults within Hispanic households, given the tremendous impact that family context can have on the development of young children. Below we detail some of these considerations and offer recommendations for practice and new research.

1. Understanding of cultural adaptation. Cultural adaptation within an emerging immigrant context is complicated due to less-established social networks and less infrastructure to address the needs of Latino families. Going beyond standard recommendations for service providers to engage in outreach to this population requires innovative strategies and pilot programs to determine efficacy. For example, helping newly-arriving immigrant families develop, access, and expand local social networks can be critical for connecting them to health, educational, and vocational resources. This is vitally important in communities like those in North Carolina, which have lost industry and vocational opportunities filled by Latino families prior to the Great Recession, and where families are less likely to have financial safety nets.

2. More attention to the workplace and family functioning. When families are working, attention to the workplace climate, hours, and other aspects of parents' employment is critical for researchers and practitioners seeking to understand and promote family well-being. Many families reported no health insurance and/or paid leave. This lack of protection and workplace flexibility creates tremendous stress for parents with young children, and is an important piece of the family context that has trickle down effects to children in Latino immigrant families. Moreover, opportunities for job training or adult education programs are limited due to significant funding cuts for these programs at the federal level;³⁴ so, supports previously offered to employed Latino adults or those seeking employment are now significantly lacking throughout all communities, not just those in pre-emerging or emerging communities. Lack of insurance also prevents families from accessing services for mental health needs, which is troubling given the high prevalence of stress and depressive symptoms reported by both mothers and fathers in the UNIDOS sample. Ultimately, economic instability may be associated with instability in other domains (such as family functioning), which can spill over and negatively impact children in vulnerable families.³⁵

3. Nuanced perspectives on families' use of social assistance. Very few families reported use of social assistance programs, despite significant economic strains. To better understand this issue for Latino families is a pressing concern for policymakers and practitioners seeking to enroll families in economic assistance, job training, and/or early care and education programs. While it is likely that a number of families experience significant access barriers including lack of knowledge or language barriers, it is also necessary to understand the beliefs of families who decline social assistance despite eligibility. To better meet the needs of Latino families, including those in pre-emerging communities and/or those who are first-generation immigrants, a more careful examination of parents' preferences, beliefs, and concerns regarding social assistance use is needed.

4. Fostering family resiliency in Latino-focused marriage programs. Interventions seeking to support resilience within the family in programs that serve married or cohabitating Latino parents may be informed by the UNIDOS study results, which highlight both resilient behaviors and values. Family strengths identified in this research include strong parental values of family cohesion and warmth (*familism*), satisfying and supportive social network relationships, mothers' and fathers' commitment to employment and the financial support of their families, relatively high levels of marital quality and co-parenting satisfaction, the involvement of both fathers and mothers in household decision-making and childrearing, and parents' flexibility in gendered beliefs about childrearing. Practitioners are encouraged to differentiate between family-oriented behaviors (e.g., family cohesion, expressions of marital warmth) and family-oriented values that emphasize these behaviors (e.g., *familism*, gendered beliefs about family roles), to better help parents identify and bridge gaps that may exist between the values they endorse and their parenting and marital behaviors. Comments from the UNIDOS parents emphasize that the arrival of children often motivated spouses to work harder on their marriage, including changing their marital behavior patterns and improving their marital problem-solving skills. This period of family transition could be capitalized on in interventions with couples, as it presents a point of entry for better aligning values parents hold about the importance of family with actual marital behaviors that are linked with family stability. Future research can also test how these factors relate to child adjustment over time.

5. Examining pressures on wives and husbands. A more careful consideration of potentially gendered stress transmission processes in the family should be a focus of future research and practice. The UNIDOS study findings underscore the importance of attending to a variety of contextual pressures and stressors experienced by both parents and the manner in which stressors external to the family may be linked to parents' personal well-being and family functioning. For example, practitioners working with Latino couples should be mindful of the potential for stress related to cultural adaptation and economic hardship to influence parents' marital and family functioning via increases in spouses' psychological distress and negative marital exchanges. The gendered nature of this process suggests an added burden on wives. Perhaps due to a relationally-oriented sense of self and underlying cultural values that emphasize the centrality of marital roles for women, wives may be uniquely vulnerable to their partners' depressed mood and negativity. Accordingly, adaptive coping strategies for dealing with partner stress for wives could be added to existing marital interventions efforts.

6. Building community strengths to supplement governmental assistance. Ultimately, leveraging additional resources to assist Latino families in emerging immigrant communities is a complex issue. While existing programs, such as early childhood education and financial assistance programs, may be expanded to serve Latino communities better, such efforts will ultimately fail if support in the community is not broadly available or trusted. One report discussed "pockets of good practice," defined as community support identified by Latino families living within an otherwise non-supportive environment.³⁶ As evidenced in the words of the UNIDOS parents, disenfranchisement and fear in their local communities may exist. Safe havens or supportive influences may be key for connecting available resources with those in need. Cultural insiders or brokers as described in this report may serve in this role.

7. Investing in community coalitions or research-to-practice networks. University-community partnerships may be an effective strategy for engaging Latino families in emerging communities in longitudinal research that will showcase how resilience within the family impacts the adaptation of young Latino children. The UNIDOS study was possible because of grant funded-research and a carefully established partnership developed between 120 families living in a range of communities across North Carolina, social service agencies, and university researchers and graduate students. Such research requires a significant time investment in establishing dialogue with communities about the types of concerns and problems that are of interest to both researchers and community members. Other partnerships or research-to-practice networks might be equally effective in mobilizing resources to address needs of Latino families at the local or state level. For more detailed reading see: La Hoz, A. E. (2013). *Working with Latino individuals, couples, and families: A toolkit for stakeholders*. Washington, DC: National Resource Center for Healthy Marriage and Families. Retrieved from: <http://tinyurl.com/latino-toolkit-p>

Read more about the UNIDOS findings

To learn more about the UNIDOS study and the quantitative findings summarized in this report, please refer to the following publications:

Wood, C., Helms, H.M., Supple, A. J., & Perlman, D. (2015). Gender-typed attributes and marital satisfaction among Mexican immigrant couples: A latent profile approach. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 29 (3), 321-30.

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About the Center

The National Research Center on Hispanic Children & Families is a hub of research to help programs and policy better serve low-income Hispanics across three priority areas—poverty reduction and economic self-sufficiency, health marriage and responsible fatherhood, and early care and education. The Center was established in 2013 by a five-year cooperative agreement from the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation within the Administration for Children and Families in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to Child Trends in partnership with Abt Associates and New York University, University of North Carolina at Greensboro, and University of Maryland, College Park.

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