Child Abuse & Neglect 39 (2015) 197–206

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Child Abuse & Neglect

Domestic violence and immigration status among Latina mothers in the child welfare system: Findings from the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-being II (NSCAW II)

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 4 July 2014
Received in revised form 3 October 2014
Accepted 14 October 2014
Available online 15 November 2014

Keywords:
Child welfare
Domestic violence
Immigration
Latina

ABSTRACT

Many children involved with the child welfare system witness parental domestic violence. The association between children's domestic violence exposure and child welfare involvement may be influenced by certain socio-cultural factors; however, minimal research has examined this relationship. The current study compares domestic violence experiences and case outcomes among Latinas who are legal immigrants ($n = 39$), unauthorized immigrants ($n = 77$), naturalized citizens ($n = 30$), and US-born citizen mothers ($n = 383$) reported for child maltreatment. This analysis used data from the second round of the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-being. Mothers were asked about whether they experienced domestic violence during the past year. In addition, data were collected to assess if (a) domestic violence was the primary abuse type reported and, if so, (b) the maltreatment allegation was substantiated. Results show that naturalized citizens, legal residents, and unauthorized immigrants did not differ from US-born citizens in self-reports of domestic violence; approximately 33% of mothers reported experiences of domestic violence within the past year. Yet, unauthorized immigrants were 3.76 times more likely than US-born citizens to have cases with allegations of domestic violence as the primary abuse type. Despite higher rates of alleged domestic violence, unauthorized citizens were *not* more likely than US-born citizens to have these cases substantiated for domestic violence ($F(2.26, 153.99) = 0.709$, $p = .510$). Findings highlight that domestic violence is not accurately accounted for in families with unauthorized immigrant mothers. We recommend child welfare workers are trained to properly assess and fulfill the needs of immigrant families, particularly as it relates to domestic violence.

Introduction

Children's exposure to domestic violence is an alarming public health concern. Based on the National Survey of Children Exposed to Violence (NatSCEV), in 2008 6.2% of children in the general population aged 0–17 witnessed an assault between their parents during the past year; and 16.3% witnessed such an assault during another period in their life (Finkelhor, Turner,

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2014.10.009
0145-2134/

Ormrod, & Hamby, 2009). The percentage of children who witnessed parental assault was even greater among older children, with 34.6% of children aged 14–17 having witnessed this type of violence. These estimates are disturbing given the adverse consequences associated with exposure to domestic violence, such as emotional and behavioral problems, and an increased risk for child maltreatment (Herrenkohl, Sousa, Tajima, Herrenkohl, & Moylan, 2008; Kelleher et al., 2008; Kohl & Macy, 2008; Ogbonnaya & Guo, 2013). Further, families contending with the co-occurrence of domestic violence and child maltreatment are likely to become involved with the child welfare system. Past research suggests 29.0% of all children involved with child welfare (who remained in home following the maltreatment investigation) had a female permanent caregiver who reported experiencing physical violence perpetrated by a spouse or partner during the past year; 44.8% reported this type of abuse in their lifetime (Hazen, Connelly, Kelleher, Landsverk, & Barth, 2004).

The association between children's domestic violence exposure and child welfare involvement may be influenced by certain socio-cultural factors; however, minimal research has examined this relationship. For example, it is possible that Latino child welfare-involved children with parents who are immigrants may be at greater risk of witnessing family violence than children with non-immigrant parents because of exposure to stressors related to the immigration and acculturation process, chronic poverty, and social isolation characteristic of the immigration experience (Raj & Silverman, 2002). Yet, immigrant families may also find protection from violence in strong culturally-based values such as familism, reflective of loyal family ties, collective family responsibilities and expansive support networks. Immigrants also tend to fare better than non-immigrants on many indicators of well-being that have been correlated with domestic violence, including mental health and substance abuse (Vega, Alderete, Kolody, & Aguilar-Gaxiola, 1998; Vega, Sribney, Aguilar-Gaxiola, & Kolody, 2004; Vega & Alegría, 2001).

Because immigrants' access to a wide range of supports to protect from stressors is influenced by their legal immigration status (Fix, Capps, & Kaushal, 2009), it is also possible that children's level of risk for witnessing domestic violence may vary depending on their parent's legal immigration status. Legal immigrants (i.e., persons who carry some type of valid visa, including legal permanent residency/green card, employment and student visas, or visitors' visas) have somewhat limited access to federally funded benefits, until they gain all of the privileges of citizenship by becoming naturalized citizens. However, unauthorized immigrants (i.e., those who enter into the US without a visa or who overstay the expiration date on their visa) may be more vulnerable and socially isolated than others, as they are ineligible to receive most federally funded services and fear risk of deportation if they engage with government authorities and seek out assistance for family violence.

Given the limited understanding of the extent to which child welfare-involved children's domestic violence experiences may be influenced by immigration experiences, the current study attempts to understand the specific role that legal citizenship status plays in the relationship between domestic violence and child welfare involvement. Therefore we compare the domestic violence experiences among legal immigrants, unauthorized immigrants, naturalized citizens, and US-born citizens reported for child maltreatment.

Immigration and Child Welfare

Despite recent declines, unauthorized immigrants and their children represent a large share of the general US population. In 2012, as many as 11.7 million foreign-born people living in the US were unauthorized immigrants and 28.3 million were legal permanent residents (Passel, Cohn, & Gonzalez-Barrera, 2013). Unauthorized immigrants represented 28.0% of the 41.7 million US foreign-born population – a 7.0% increase from 1995. Many of these families had children. In 2008, 24% of all US births included children born to immigrant mothers, of which 8.0% were born to unauthorized immigrants (Passel & Taylor, 2010).

Children in immigrant families are considered at increased risk for child maltreatment due to their struggles related to economic hardship; adverse interactions with law enforcement; racism and discrimination; poor physical and mental health; poor educational outcomes; and low social support (Androff et al., 2011; Dettlaff & Johnson, 2011; Finno, Vidal de Haymes, & Mindell, 2006). Of course, these child maltreatment risks may vary within immigrant groups depending on their unique circumstances, such as reasons for migration (traditional labor work or family reunification, seeking refuge from political persecution; e.g., Euser, van IJzendoorn, Prinzie, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2010). However, when compared between groups, given their distinctive risk profile, children in immigrant families significantly differ from children with US-born parents in the types of maltreatment experienced (e.g., Dettlaff & Earner, 2012; Dettlaff & Johnson, 2011; Ima & Hohm, 1991). In addition, there is limited evidence that children in immigrant families, especially those with unauthorized status as compared to legal residency or citizenship, may be at greater risk of remaining in the child welfare system for longer periods than children in nonimmigrant families (Osterling & Han, 2011).

Immigration and Domestic Violence

Domestic violence impacts people of all racial and ethnic backgrounds; however immigrant women may be especially vulnerable to domestic violence. Although older studies using large nationally representative samples have found immigrant and nonimmigrant women experience similar rates of domestic violence (Kaufman Kantor, Jasinski, & Aldarondo, 1994; Sorenson & Telles, 1991), more recent geographically limited research suggests that immigrant women in one US city report experiencing higher rates of domestic violence than nonimmigrant women (Biafora & Warheit, 2007). Furthermore, studies on the prevalence of domestic violence among immigrants indicate substantial rates (Hass, Dutton, & Orloff, 2000; Hazen &