Nearly one in four children (23%) in the U.S. live in immigrant families. Currently, there exists limited data about the number of immigrant children and families under the care and custody of state or local child welfare agencies. According to recent research from the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW), children of immigrants represent 8.6 percent of all children who come to the attention of the child welfare system. It is important to note that among children of immigrants, more than 4 out of 5 are U.S.-born citizens. Foreign-born immigrant children represent less than 3 percent of all children who come to the attention of the child welfare system. More than two-thirds of children of immigrants involved in the child welfare system are Latino, followed by non-Latino White (14.8 percent), non-Latino Black (10 percent), and non-Latino Asian (7.5 percent). Compared to their percentage in the general population of children of immigrants, Latino and Black children are overrepresented among children of immigrants involved with the child welfare system, while White and Asian children are underrepresented.

Limited regional research also exists, focused on the involvement of Latino families in the child welfare system. While the U.S. immigrant population is very diverse, Latinos account for more than half of the U.S. immigrant child population. Data from NSCAW reveals that overall, Latino children represent nearly one-fifth of children who come to the attention of child welfare agencies. Among Latino children involved in the child welfare system, 64 percent have a parent born in the U.S. and 36 percent have a foreign-born parent. In the state of New Jersey, International Social Service – USA (ISS-USA) worked with families from 58 different countries in a three year period, illustrating the geographic diversity of immigrant children in the foster care system.

A child welfare study conducted in Texas by the Urban Institute focuses on the immigration status of children and families by matching birth records and child welfare records. The researchers found that “Latin American immigrant children and Latin American children of immigrants were underrepresented, while Latino children of U.S.-born parents were over-represented in the Texas child welfare system.” This may not be surprising, given the limited interaction of immigrant families with service providers and government systems. However, even if the number of immigrant children in the child welfare system is not proportionate to the general population, it is still a significant population with complex needs. Additional findings from a series of interviews conducted with child welfare caseworkers with the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services in
the San Antonio, Brownsville, and Laredo regions reveal that system-involved immigrant families are primarily mixed legal status families, the majority being Mexican, and parents often hold multiple jobs and have limited education.\textsuperscript{11}

The Urban Institute study on the Texas child welfare system also documents significant differences in the placement settings and permanency goals of children who are removed from their homes due to maltreatment. Latin American immigrant children were placed with relatives much less frequently than other children in state custody.\textsuperscript{12} Latin American immigrant children were also much less likely than other children to have case goals of reunification or relative adoption.\textsuperscript{13} Both of these findings warrant further attention to address the source of these disparities.

**RISK AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS**

Interviews with social workers suggest that immigrant families often enter the public child welfare system for the same reasons as the general population - poverty, domestic violence, substance abuse, mental and physical health problems.\textsuperscript{14} In addition, immigrant children and families may have unique risk factors because of their experiences with immigration and acculturation. Changing cultural contexts combined with the loss of their community and other social supports make them vulnerable to marginalization, stress, depression, and a host of other complications.\textsuperscript{15}

Recent research has shown that children of immigrants are at no greater likelihood of being confirmed as victims of maltreatment than children of U.S.-born parents.\textsuperscript{16} However, this research has documented important differences in the type of maltreatment experienced by children of immigrants and children of U.S.-born parents. Data from NSCAW indicates that children of Latino immigrants are nearly six times as likely as children of Latino natives to be sexually abused.\textsuperscript{17} Similarly, the Urban Institute study in Texas found that the percentage of Latin American immigrant children who were removed from their homes for allegations of sexual abuse was three times higher than children of natives removed for sexual abuse.\textsuperscript{18} While the researchers had insufficient information to explain these differences, they hypothesized that it is possible that only the most serious cases of abuse in immigrant communities are reported to CPS agencies due to fear of the potential consequences of reporting, particularly in communities with a large population of undocumented immigrants.\textsuperscript{19} However, both studies suggest the need for additional research on the meaning behind this difference.

Poverty is one of the most important predictors of negative outcomes for children, and poverty rates are generally higher among children of immigrants than among children of natives.\textsuperscript{20} Despite the fact that many immigrant parents have more than one job, they often work in unskilled, low-wage jobs due to their low educational attainment and/or limited English proficiency.\textsuperscript{21} While children in immigrant families’ account for more than a third of low-income working families, their families are less likely than natives to participate in income-based public benefit programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).\textsuperscript{22} Furthermore, though many citizen children are eligible for programs such as TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families), food stamps, and housing assistance, immigrant families participate in such programs at substantially lower rates than their native counterparts.\textsuperscript{23} Many immigrants are confused about eligibility rules or are concerned about the effects that using benefits may have on their ability to obtain any kind of legal status or become U.S. citizens. In the case of undocumented immigrants, many fear being reported to immigration authorities. Language and cultural barriers can also intimidate many immigrant families from accessing needed services.

There are also positive factors that may influence the immigrant family's level of involvement in the child welfare system and reduce the length of an immigrant child's foster placement. In addition to high levels of parental work effort, children of immigrants are more likely to live in two-parent families than their native-born peers.\textsuperscript{24} A quarter of children of immigrants also live in extended families with
three or more related adults, such as grandparents, which is useful for childcare purposes and for promoting strong family values.25

MORE RESEARCH NEEDED

Child welfare practice and policy in the U.S. has primarily focused on the U.S.-born ethnic population (i.e. African-American, Asian-American, Latino-American) and been guided by predominate U.S. defined values and norms. Given the rapid growth of the immigrant population in the United States, it is important that more research, both nationally and regionally, is conducted to explore how being an immigrant may impact the dynamics of child abuse and neglect and the process of intervention by child welfare agencies. This research should include how and why immigrant families come to the attention of the child welfare system, barriers they encounter once they become involved, and whether the impact of language, culture and religion affect the treatment and services they receive or fail to receive.

ENDNOTES:

3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
20. Ibid.
25. Ibid.