Emerging Issues at the Intersection of Immigration and Child Welfare: Results from a Transnational Research and Policy Forum

Alan J. Dettlaff, Maria Vidal de Haymes, Sonia Velazquez, Robert Mindell, and Lara Bruce

In July 2006, the American Humane Association and the Loyola University Chicago School of Social Work facilitated a roundtable to address the emerging issue of immigration and its intersection with child welfare systems. More than 70 participants from 10 states and Mexico joined the roundtable, representing the fields of higher education, child welfare, international immigration, legal practice, and others. This roundtable created a transnational opportunity to discuss the emerging impact of migration on child welfare services in the United States and formed the basis of a continued multidisciplinary collaboration designed to inform and impact policy and practice at the local, state, and national levels. This paper presents the results of the roundtable discussion and summarizes the emerging issues that participants identified as requiring attention by child welfare systems to facilitate positive outcomes of child safety, permanency, and well-being. Suggestions for further research and implications for policy and practice are also presented.

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Immigrant children and families represent one of the largest and fastest growing populations in the United States. During the 1990s, more than 15 million immigrants entered the United States, an increase of 50% since the 1980s and over 100% since the 1970s (Capps & Fortuny, 2006). As of 2005, foreign-born immigrants comprised 12% of the total U.S. population, while children of immigrants represented one-fifth of all children under 18 (Capps & Fortuny, 2006). Immigrants from Latin American countries account for over half of the immigrant population in the United States, with immigrants from Mexico alone accounting for 31% of all immigrant families (Capps & Passel, 2004). While the majority of immigrants live in the country’s six largest states—California, New York, Texas, Florida, Illinois, and New Jersey—the number of immigrants grew more rapidly in 22 other states across the West, Midwest, and Southeast during the 1990s than in those traditional destination states (Capps & Fortuny, 2006). Additionally, the number of undocumented residents in the United States continues to rise each year, with data indicating 11 million undocumented residents as of March 2005, of which approximately 1.7 million are children under 18 (Passell, 2005).

Although the increase in the immigrant population may suggest a corresponding increase in contact with social service systems, the number of immigrant children involved in the child welfare system is unknown, as this information is not collected uniformly at the local, state, or national levels. Nonetheless, due to the complexity of these cases, immigrant children and families involved in the child welfare system have unique needs that need to be addressed to achieve positive outcomes of safety, permanency, and well-being. Upon migrating to the United States, immigrant children and families face a multitude of challenges resulting from

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the process of immigration and acculturation. Differences in culture, language, and traditions serve as significant sources of stress for immigrant children and families and create barriers to accessing needed resources. Additionally, existing laws and policies may impede the ability of child welfare agencies to provide effective services to immigrant children and families.

In response to this emerging issue, the American Humane Association and the School of Social Work at Loyola University Chicago began a dialogue about the growth of the immigrant population and the challenges this poses for child welfare systems. These discussions provided the impetus for a wider degree of engagement and discourse with professionals from many disciplines, including those in higher education, child welfare, international immigration, and legal practice. This dialogue resulted in creating a roundtable specifically focused on the intersection of migration and child welfare. This roundtable created a transnational opportunity to discuss the emerging impact of migration on child welfare services in the United States and formed the basis of a continuing multidisciplinary collaboration designed to inform and impact policy and practice at the local, state, and national levels. This paper presents the results of the roundtable discussion and summarizes the emerging issues that participants identified as requiring attention by child welfare systems to facilitate positive outcomes of safety, permanency, and well-being.

**Issues and Experiences Affecting Immigrant Children and Families**

Immigrant children and families face numerous challenges that can affect intervention and service delivery when they become involved with the child welfare system. Children of immigrants are significantly more likely to live in poverty than children of native parents and are at significant risk of poor outcomes in a number of other factors. Data from the 2002 National Survey of America’s Families indicate that 29% of children of immigrants have parents
with less than a high school education, compared to 8% of children of natives, while 58% of children of immigrants have at least one parent with limited English proficiency (Capps, Fix, Ost, Reardon-Anderson, & Passel, 2004). As a result, immigrant parents earn lower wages, resulting in lower family incomes (Hernandez, 2004). Working immigrant families with children are twice as likely as working native families to have incomes below 200% of the federal poverty level, and overall, 52% of children of immigrants are living below the poverty level, compared with one-third of children of native parents (Capps et al., 2004). Children of immigrants are twice as likely as children of natives to be reported in fair or poor health, and they are at risk for slower cognitive and language development, as well as poorer academic performance in school (Capps & Fortuny, 2006).

Although immigrant families have higher rates of poverty and economic hardship, immigrant families are less likely than native families to receive public benefits, including Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), food stamps, and housing assistance. Children in immigrant families are also more likely to lack health insurance coverage (Douglas-Hall & Koball, 2004). These disparities exist largely due to eligibility rules that exclude noncitizen parents, both documented and undocumented, from accessing these benefits. However, although most adult immigrants in the United States are noncitizens, among children in immigrant families, 80% are U.S.-born citizens and eligible for many of these benefits (Capps et al., 2004). Yet, many legal immigrants fear that attempts to access these benefits may interfere with their process of becoming citizens, while undocumented parents fear deportation and separation from their citizen children (Holcomb, Tumlin, Koralek, Capps, & Zuberi, 2003).

In addition to poor outcomes in social factors and access to services, immigrant children and families experience a variety of challenges upon migration that have implications for the child welfare system. Beginning with the migration experience, many immigrants experience violence, robbery, and sexual assault during the process of entering the country (Solis, 2003). When families migrate, this
often occurs in stages, resulting in children being separated from parents and other siblings for extended periods (Partida, 1996). The stress associated with this initial transition can result in depression and anxiety, while individuals experiencing significant trauma during migration may develop symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (Smart & Smart, 1995). Once in the new country, pressures resulting from acculturation often lead to a variety of strains and difficulties on immigrant children and families. Language barriers, loss of social support, inadequate financial resources, and discrimination are all factors associated with acculturative stress (Padilla & Perez, 2003). High levels of acculturative stress have been found to be significantly associated with depression (Hovey, 2000; Thoman & Suris, 2004) and increased risk for family conflict and domestic violence (Cunradi, Caetano, & Schafer, 2002). Among immigrant adolescents, acculturative stress has been associated with depressive symptoms (Romero & Roberts, 2003), suicidal ideation (Hovey & King, 1996), and substance use (Vega, Alderete, Kolody, & Aguilar-Gaxiola, 1998).

The Transnational Research and Policy Forum

In July, 2006, 70 participants from 10 states and Mexico convened to address the growing issue of immigration and its intersection with child welfare. The roundtable, titled Migration: A Critical Issue for Child Welfare: A Transnational Research and Policy Forum, was held July 24–26 at Loyola University Chicago. A key objective of the roundtable was to bring together practitioners, academics, and advocates from multiple fields to engage in a dialogue that crossed professional fields and national borders. Convening such a diverse group of professionals promised an unusual opportunity to gather insights from the multiple vantage points offered by the participants. The breadth of perspectives, expertise, and experience of such a group of key informants could provide the knowledge needed to forge a program of response to address the unique challenges immigrant families present to the child welfare system.
By convening experts in this field, the roundtable also built on a broad range of previous efforts. In 2005, the Annie E. Casey Foundation convened a meeting of experts on immigration and child welfare that resulted in the comprehensive report, *Undercounted, Underserved: Immigrant and Refugee Families in the Child Welfare System* (Lincroft & Resner, 2006), which was used extensively throughout this roundtable. Prior to this, the national technical assistance project Bridging Refugee Youth and Children’s Services (BRYCS) held several national roundtables and workshops on migration and child welfare. Similarly, in 2001, the New School, a university in New York City, convened a meeting of public and private child welfare service providers to address issues of language access, resulting in the nationally recognized *Immigration and Language Guidelines for Child Welfare Staff*, published by the New York City Administration for Children’s Services (2005). Additionally, in 2005, the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA; Earner & Rivera, 2005) published “Immigrants and Refugees in Child Welfare,” a special issue of the *Child Welfare* journal. Each of these resources, as well as the agencies and organizations involved in these efforts, further enhanced the ability of this roundtable to address the issues and challenges facing immigrant children and families and develop a program of response to address these issues and challenges.

**Roundtable Process and Methodology**

**Planning and Participants**

Planning for the roundtable began with a series of discussions to establish the composition of key informants and the process for framing the dialogue and gathering data. Conference calls were held with key professionals specializing in child welfare and immigration, who provided guidance in articulating roundtable objectives and identifying potential participants from various professional sectors. Invitations were sent to the individuals and organizations identified through these discussions, which yielded a rich group...
of approximately 70 participants, including (1) researchers and academics from social work, anthropology, sociology, religious studies, and demography; (2) legal practitioners from immigration, child welfare, and policy advocacy; (3) practitioners and administrators from public, private, local, and state child welfare agencies; (4) representatives from United States and Mexico federal child welfare agencies; (5) consular staff; (6) public and private immigrant service agency staff; (7) immigration and domestic violence organization staff; (8) philanthropic foundation staff; and (9) individuals with direct experience in child welfare systems and immigration detention centers.

**Framing**

The roundtable forum provided a slate of expert panelists who addressed various aspects of the intersection of migration and child welfare. These panel sessions offered presentations and supporting data on (1) causes, patterns, and projections of migratory flows; (2) immigration and its effects on the family; (3) the effects of immigration on child well-being; (4) current and proposed immigration laws and policies; and (5) the impact of immigration laws and policies on child welfare systems. Following the panel sessions, participants convened in small work groups. Work group participants were instructed to focus on four substantive areas: (1) research, (2) workforce and training, (3) cross-systems collaboration, and (4) policy and advocacy.

**Information Gathering and Recording**

Work groups were cochaired by preidentified content experts who facilitated the discussions, guiding the participants in identifying strategies to advance a program of action to address the critical intersection of immigration and child welfare policy, practice, research, and advocacy. Participants were asked to reflect on the designated focus area while facilitators moved participants from issue identification to response formulation through the following steps: (1) defining issues, (2) recommending corresponding responses/actions, (3) identifying resources and opportunities, (4) identifying barriers
and limitations, and (5) delineating strategic steps toward implementation. Graduate students from the Loyola University Chicago Schools of Social Work and Law served as recorders. To standardize information collection and facilitate synthesis of information across groups, recorders were instructed to take notes along the five steps.

Analysis of Data

Data analysis was conducted through a series of phases involving an inductive process to allow for a thorough understanding of participants’ views concerning the emerging issues and implications in the intersection of immigration and child welfare. The first phase of analysis began with a synthesis of data and review by work group participants. Following the work group sessions, recorders transcribed their notes into electronic word-processing files. Roundtable staff and graduate student recorders worked together to synthesize the information gathered across work groups for each of the four focus areas. Within each area, they examined the recorded observations made by participants to uncover emerging themes and unrepeated ideas. A summary of emerging themes was distributed to all roundtable participants on the final day of the roundtable. Participants were asked to review the emerging themes to ensure fidelity to the discussions that were held in work group sessions. A facilitated discussion was held with all work group participants to allow for clarification and further comment.

Following this initial phase of analysis and review, a research team consisting of faculty and staff from American Humane Association, Loyola University Chicago, and the University of Illinois at Chicago continued the analysis of work group data. Using the themes identified in the initial review as a framework, this second phase of analysis consisted of an independent review of the work group transcripts by each member of the research team to identify additional themes, as well as categories and patterns within themes. Following these independent analyses, members of the research team met to discuss their findings. Differences were discussed and the members worked together to create a unified set of issues and implications. The results of this process represent the views of
roundtable participants concerning the emerging issues and implications at the intersection of immigration and child welfare.

**Limitations**

The methods used to collect and analyze these data have several limitations that must be considered when viewing results. The purposive sample of roundtable participants can affect the reliability and validity of findings, as well as the generalizability of results. Although participants were selected because of their experience and expertise with this topic, the data gathered might not contain many important views of those who were not invited to participate. Additionally, a significant limitation of these data is the lack of a voice from immigrant children and families themselves. While this roundtable focused on professionals working with and on behalf of immigrant children and families, it is important to recognize that the issues and implications from the perspective of these children and families may be different than those identified through this roundtable. Finally, the data analysis and resulting findings are mediated by the authors’ interpretations of the data and their own experiences working with and on behalf of this population. Despite these limitations, these findings provide a unique insight into the emerging issues and implications for child welfare agencies in their response to immigrant children and families from national and international experts. These findings provide an important contribution to the social work literature on the intersection of immigration and child welfare and can be used by child welfare agencies to develop a coordinated program of response to immigrant children and families who come to the attention of their systems.

**Emerging Issues and Implications**

Emerging issues and implications were identified in each of the four focus areas: (1) research, (2) workforce and training, (3) cross-systems collaboration, and (4) policy and advocacy. The following describes each of these emerging issues, and Table 1 includes a summary of these issues, along with implications for safety,
# Table 1
Emerging Issues and Implications at the Intersection of Immigration and Child Welfare

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emerging Issues</th>
<th>Implications for Safety, Permanency, and Well-Being</th>
<th>Recommendations for Policy, Practice, and Research</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Research</strong></td>
<td>• Evidence-based practices are needed to prevent abuse and safely maintain children in their homes.</td>
<td>• Policies are needed that address the collection and storage of data on immigration status to provide reliable data.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Lack of data on the number of immigrant children involved in child welfare system</td>
<td>• Permanency may be affected without knowledge of evidence-based interventions to reduce risk of maltreatment.</td>
<td>• Interventions are needed that use the latest empirical information available to facilitate cultural sensitivity and positive outcomes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Lack of research on unique needs of immigrant children and families</td>
<td>• Positive outcomes of well-being cannot be achieved without knowledge of the health, mental health, and educational needs of immigrant children.</td>
<td>• Research is needed to ensure policies and practices with immigrant families are empirically based.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Lack of research on empirically based practices with immigrant children and families</td>
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<td>－</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Workforce and Training</strong></td>
<td>• Practitioners need to understand the potential risks resulting from immigration and acculturation to protect children from abuse and safety maintain them in their homes.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Need for advanced training on issues affecting immigrant children and families</td>
<td>• Permanency may be affected due to cultural misunderstandings or the provision of interventions that do not respond to the cultural needs of families.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Need for training on policies that affect immigrant children and families</td>
<td>• Well-being outcomes need to be understood through the cultural lens of the family to ensure positive outcomes.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Lack of bilingual/bicultural staff</td>
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<td>4. Cases involving immigration issues present complexities that need to be considered in workload assignments</td>
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</table>
**Cross-Systems Collaboration**

1. Need for cross-systems collaboration with those working with and providing services to immigrant families
2. Lack of bilingual/bicultural service providers
3. Lack of engagement between child welfare agencies and immigrant communities
4. Lack of collaboration between the United States and Mexico and other Latin American countries

- Services need to be provided by providers who understand the needs of immigrant families to protect children from abuse and safely maintain them in their homes.
- Permanency may be affected due to the lack of culturally relevant services.
- Barriers resulting from the lack of transnational collaboration may further delay permanency.
- The health, mental health, and educational needs of immigrant children may be unmet if culturally relevant services are unavailable.
- Policies are needed that promote interagency collaboration with those providing services in immigrant communities.
- Service providers familiar with the needs and experiences of immigrant families need to be sought from the community.
- Community outreach positions are needed to develop connections with immigrant communities and service providers.
- Policies and programs are needed that facilitate transnational collaboration.
- Research is needed to evaluate the effectiveness of cross-systems and transnational collaborations and make recommendations for improvement.

**Policy and Advocacy**

1. State and federal policies create barriers to providing effective services to immigrant children and families
2. State and federal policies, combined with anti-immigrant sentiment, result in immigrant families afraid of accessing needed benefits

- Children cannot be safely maintained in their homes if families are unable to address issues leading to stress, such as immigration status and fear of discovery.
- Permanency may be affected due to barriers that prevent service delivery based on parental or child immigration status.
- Needs of health, mental health, and education may be neglected due to parental fear of accessing needed services or barriers that prevent service delivery.
- Policies are needed regarding the child welfare system’s response to immigrant children and families to ensure equitable service delivery.
- When barriers to services are present, child welfare agencies need to work collaboratively with other systems to eliminate barriers.
- Further research is needed to evaluate federal and state policies and their impact on immigrant children and families in the child welfare system.
permanency, and well-being, and recommendations for policy, practice, and research.

Research

There is a lack of reliable data on the number of immigrant children and families involved in the child welfare system. Information on immigration status is not uniformly collected at the local, state, or national level, which often results in immigrant children and families being underreported or misclassified. Several factors contribute to this lack of reliable data, including fear of reporting immigration status, mixed immigration statuses within families, and inadequate reporting systems not designed to capture this information. As a result, it is difficult to document the need for additional research, policy development, and practice guidelines regarding this population. While it is believed that the number of immigrant children and families in the child welfare system is relatively small, the complexity of these cases combined with the growth of the immigrant population suggests the need for child welfare agencies to examine and address the unique needs of this population. However, the lack of reliable data prevents policy and practice improvements from moving forward.

There is a lack of research that provides information on the unique needs of immigrant children and families in the child welfare system. Immigrant children and families have unique needs 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 stress, depression, and a host of other complications while these parents attempt to establish safe and permanent homes for their children. These experiences affect the health and mental health needs of immigrant children and families. While a small body of research has been developed in recent years on immigrant populations, additional research is needed that identifies the needs of immigrant children and families that come to the attention of child welfare agencies in order to facilitate positive outcomes.
There is a lack of research that provides information on evidence-based practices with immigrant children and families in the child welfare system. Because of the unique needs of this population, research is needed that provides information on interventions that improve outcomes of safety, permanency, and well-being. Culture and cultural experiences affect the ways in which families view their problems and respond to interventions. As a result, interventions used with nonimmigrant populations may not be effective with immigrant children and families, due to cultural differences. For effective change to result, interventions need to consider the cultural influences and experiences in immigrant families and how these influences affect service delivery.

**Workforce and Training**

There is a need for advanced training in child welfare agencies on the issues affecting immigrant children and families involved in the child welfare system. Training is needed that provides information to child welfare practitioners on the experiences of immigrant children and families. Culturally competent practice requires that child welfare practitioners understand the effects of immigration and acculturation on immigrant family systems to conduct adequate assessments and provide interventions that result in positive outcomes of safety, permanency, and well-being. Practitioners unfamiliar with the issues affecting immigrant families may filter information and make decisions through their own cultural lens, resulting in misunderstandings and errors in judgment.

There is a need for increased understanding in child welfare agencies of federal and state policies that affect immigrant children and families. Child welfare practitioners need to be familiar with federal and state policies that affect immigrant children and families and understand how these policies affect service delivery. Practitioners need to be familiar with resources and programs available for immigrant children and families to provide comprehensive services that meet the needs
of these families. Practitioners need to be able to educate their clients and make appropriate referrals to assist families in addressing issues resulting from immigration and immigration status.

There is a lack of bilingual and bicultural staff in child welfare agencies. Culturally and linguistically competent practice requires that services be provided in the native language of immigrant children and families. Language barriers can result in miscommunication and misunderstandings, which can significantly affect families’ abilities to respond to interventions. Although some families may be able to speak English, they may be more comfortable speaking in their native language, particularly when addressing issues concerning their children’s well-being. It is also important to recruit bicultural staff to respond more appropriately to children and families from diverse cultures. Improved cultural understanding can lead to improved engagement, more thorough assessments, and more effective service delivery.

Child welfare cases that involve immigration issues present additional complexities that need to be considered in workload assignments.

Immigration issues, as well as other complexities in cases involving immigrant families, impact workload demands. Often these additional complexities are not taken into consideration when making workload assignments, which can result in caseworkers’ inabilities to address issues unique to immigrant children and families. Cultural considerations and culturally appropriate practices become even more critical for families new to the United States and unfamiliar with U.S. customs and practices, further adding to workload demands.

Cross-Systems Collaboration

There is a need for cross-systems collaboration between child welfare agencies and those working with and on behalf of immigrant populations (e.g., legal professionals, service providers, and advocacy organizations).

Cross-systems collaboration is needed to effectively meet the complex needs of immigrant children and families involved in the child welfare system. Often, service delivery to immigrant families is
complex and fragmented, resulting in families not receiving needed services. When working with immigrant families, it is important that immediate crises and concerns are addressed so families can concentrate on the issues that led to their involvement with the child welfare system. For many families, these immediate concerns involve their immigration status and citizenship. Service delivery can be aided through collaborative relationships between child welfare agencies and immigrant service providers who work as a team to meet the complex needs of families.

There is a lack of bilingual and bicultural service providers who can effectively respond to the needs of immigrant children and families.

Service providers familiar with the issues and experiences of immigrant children and families and who can provide services in families’ native language are needed in the community. The lack of culturally and linguistically competent service providers can significantly affect the safety, permanency, and well-being of immigrant children in the child welfare system, as providers unfamiliar with the issues resulting from immigration and acculturation will be unequipped to appropriately respond to the needs of these children.

There is a lack of engagement between child welfare agencies and immigrant communities.

Child welfare agencies need to increase their involvement with immigrant communities to be seen as a resource. Many immigrant communities are distrustful of governmental agencies and resistant to receiving help. This can be improved by increasing visibility and availability within the community. Child welfare agencies need to educate the community on the services and resources they can provide.

There is a lack of collaboration between the United States and Mexico and other Latin American countries concerning the intersection of immigration and child welfare.

Many child welfare cases involving immigrant families have transnational dimensions that require collaboration between child
welfare and human service systems in both the sending and receiving countries. Collaboration and coordination between the respective agencies are needed to effectively carry out a number of transnational case transactions (e.g., obtaining birth certificates from the country of origin for immigrant children, home studies by local child welfare authorities for transnational family placements, and documentation needed to complete applications for immigration relief). However, such collaboration and coordination is lacking between most states and countries.

**Policy and Advocacy**

*Existing state and federal policies create barriers for child welfare agencies to provide effective service delivery to immigrant children and families.*

In 1996, Congress enacted the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA; P.L. 104-193), which had a significant impact on the eligibility of public benefits for immigrants. PRWORA denies supplemental security income and food stamps to immigrants, including legal immigrants, residing in the United States. Before its passage, qualified legal immigrants were eligible for public benefits immediately upon gaining legal status. PRWORA also gives states broader power to determine eligibility of “qualified” immigrants for state-funded programs. States also retain the option to deny nonemergency Medicaid, social services block grants, and the supplemental food program for women, infants and children. This has created confusion and inconsistencies across states and has decreased the number of supportive programs available to vulnerable immigrant families.

*State and federal policies, combined with anti-immigrant sentiment, result in immigrant children and families fearing to access benefits.*

Immigrant families, particularly undocumented families or those applying for legal permanent residency (LPR), often fear accessing public services and benefits. Undocumented families fear deportation, while those applying for LPR may fear being deemed a “public charge” under immigration law, which indicates that they
cannot support themselves and must depend on benefits that provide cash assistance. This designation can jeopardize immigrants’ ability to enter or reenter the United States or to become legal residents if they are considered unable to support themselves. Those fears, as well as confusion regarding eligibility, leave many immigrants without access to needed resources and supports. Additionally, many children of immigrant parents live in families with mixed immigration statuses, where at least one parent is a noncitizen and one child is a citizen. Although these children are legal citizens, many undocumented parents fear being deported or prohibited from becoming naturalized if they attempt to access resources for their children. This creates a barrier for child welfare agencies to provide effective services, as parents may be resistant to receiving services because of fear over their immigration status. Additionally, families may be ineligible for certain services due to a parent’s undocumented status, even though their children are citizens.

**Conclusion**

With the dramatic growth in the number and complexity of immigrant communities over the past 20 years, the population landscape across the United States has noticeably changed. While this has not necessarily produced a marked increase in the number of new child welfare cases, it has undoubtedly increased the complexity of cases and the challenges for agencies, professionals, and families in achieving safety, permanency and well-being for immigrant children. Child welfare practice with immigrant families is compounded by (1) language issues and the difficulty in providing appropriate linguistic resources for individuals with limited English proficiency, (2) undocumented or mixed immigration status of family members and the lack of familiarity with immigration laws among child welfare practitioners, and (3) cultural differences and general difficulty in providing culturally responsive services. These challenges may hold particularly true in areas of the country currently experiencing the fastest growth in immigrant populations.
Following on the sustained work of the many professionals and organizations that answered American Humane and Loyola University Chicago’s call to participate in the roundtable, this paper attempts to articulate the major challenges to achieving better outcomes of safety, permanency, and well-being for children in immigrant families. It also suggests practical strategies and actions for improvement. Working in the best interests of these children will require coordinated efforts between child welfare practitioners and immigration advocates to bring about meaningful improvements in providing appropriate and responsive child welfare services to immigrant families. While, in some areas, this will require the development of new resources, policies, and even consular agreements, in many instances, significant progress may be made through improved communication and informal collaboration between child welfare and immigration professionals and researchers.

While many of the strategies identified throughout this paper have focused on the U.S. child welfare context, collaboration of child welfare researchers and professionals across borders presents innovative and fruitful opportunities to address some of the research, training, and policy voids identified by forum participants. For example, researchers and child welfare professionals from Loyola School of Social Work, Iberoamericana University of Mexico City, and the National School of Social Work of the National Autonomous University of Mexico, in collaboration with Catholic Charities of the Archdioceses of Chicago and the Mexican federal human service agency, Sistema Nacional para el Desarrollo Integral de la Familia (SNDIF), have received funding from the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) to support a transnational curriculum, program development, and field practicum project for U.S. and Mexican social work students, professionals, and faculty. With the support of IASSW, these organizations are working together to modify a family strengthening and prevention program developed and implemented in Mexico by SNDIF for implementation in the Chicago metropolitan area with Mexican immigrant families. The curriculum is based on the findings of a landmark study of the Mexican family, the Diagnóstico de la
Familia Mexicana, which was replicated in a pilot study by Loyola researchers with a sample of Mexican immigrant families in Chicago. Data from the Chicago comparative study are being used to modify the program to address some of the unique challenges identified by immigrant families and will be implemented by Mexican and U.S. social work students in transnational field placements.

Furthermore, additional support has been received from the Lois and Samuel Silberman Fund for an expanded study of Mexican immigrant families. This expanded study will continue the collaboration with SNDIF researchers to further explore the characteristics, dynamics, and well-being of immigrant families along several dimensions, including parent and child relationships, social support and resource exchanges, immigration experience, family adaptation and cohesion, and acculturation stress. The information generated from this study will be useful to both policymakers and social service professionals in both Mexico and the United States concerned with immigrant child and family well-being.

These projects provide examples of the continued cross-national collaborations between individuals and organizations that participated in the Transnational Research and Policy Forum, as well as examples of the types of collaborative relationships needed to advance the knowledge base and facilitate policy and practice improvements with immigrant children and families who come to the attention of child welfare systems. It is hoped that the issues and ideas identified in this paper, together with parallel work of agencies and organizations including the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Casey Family Programs, and CWLA—in addition to the many innovative practices from state and county child welfare agencies already in place—will be viewed as positive and practical first steps toward a more consistent and concise understanding of the challenges facing immigrant children and families in the child welfare system.

References


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