



# Social Policy Report

## Applying a Community Violence Framework to Understand the Impact of Immigration Enforcement Threat on Latino Children

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### ABSTRACT

Heeding the call put out by the *New England Journal of Medicine* (2017), we utilize an ecological–transactional model as a conceptual framework for understanding existing literature and for guiding future research on immigration enforcement threat and Latino child development. Using the World Health Organization’s definition of violence, we draw on literature from psychology, medicine, social work, and developmental psychology to outline how the anti-immigrant climate in the United States and the threat of immigration enforcement practices in everyday spaces are experienced by some Latino children as psychological violence. Researchers, teachers, and practitioners are encouraged to be aware of how uncertainty and threat regarding familial safety adversely impacts the lives of Latino children in immigrant households, especially in charged, anti-immigrant climates.

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## FROM THE EDITOR

This is an especially timely *Social Policy Report*. Since the Trump administration's introduction of a Zero Tolerance Policy regarding illegal immigration across our southern border with Mexico this past April, we have witnessed a remarkable series of events in which parents and children have been forcibly separated when arriving in the United States. Public outcry about these actions led the president to limit this separation policy, but the fate of over 2,000 children who have already been separated from parents and sent around the country to more than a dozen places has not yet been resolved.

SRCD's central office issued an advisory about the likely impact of such separation for children's welfare on June 20th:

The recent U.S. Immigration practice of separating children from their families at the border will be halted, and we at SRCD are relieved at this overdue change in policy. Yet, clear evidence indicates that trauma of separation during the highly stressful circumstances the affected children have experienced can have lasting effects. SRCD stands on the science and urges the immediate reunification of these children and their families, as well as dedicated attention to their ongoing well-being.

This *Social Policy Report* provides a strong review of the social science literature around this critical policy issue and demonstrates several important points. First, it reiterates the concern of the negative impact on children's health and development when separated from their families as a result of illegal immigration into the country. The toll is both psychological and physiological. Children in such circumstances, removed from their homes and their families, suffer increased risk of cognitive and social-emotional trauma including difficulty focusing, eating, and sleeping as well as evidence of depression, anxiety, and fear.

Second, this report notes that Latino children, even those who are legal residents and citizens of the United States, are fearful of the larger context of the political activities surrounding immigration. They fear that they or one of their parents will be removed from their homes by a federal official—either ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) or police. The consequences are that some Latino children are under constant stress and are responding in a manner that includes skipping school and acting out. Third, as noted in this report, the larger discussion emanating from the White House about Latino and Mexican immigrants as “criminals,” “rapists,” and worse is perceived by many children as a form of psychological violence that will have long-term consequences for their health and welfare.

In sum, this report describes a life situation that is toxic to the health and well-being of Latino children, especially those in immigrant households. It is instructive to put this report into a larger context. Nicholas Kristof wrote in the June 27th opinion column in the *New York Times* that “America is guilty of Neglecting Kids: Our Own.” His column reported on findings from a United Nations Report on extreme poverty and human rights, which noted that American children are likely to grow up to be poor (one-fifth of American children live in poverty and about one-fifth are homeless), to drop out of high school, and “even to die young more often than in other advanced countries.” Kristof argues that the appalling treatment of immigrant children at the border is another manifestation of our nation's “indifference” to children growing up in low-income homes. This lack of compassion was not always the case: in the last half of the twentieth century, American public policy initiatives worked to lower child death rates, increase educational opportunities, and provide nutritional and health safety nets for children in need. Most of these initiatives have been diminished in recent years. Let us hope that the evidence provided in this *Social Policy Report* and in other reports like it will push policymakers to take the lives of immigrant Latino children seriously so that their situations may be improved and their hardships ameliorated, and that caring for all of our children will be put firmly on our nation's public agenda.

## Applying a Community Violence Framework to Understand the Impact of Immigration Enforcement Threat on Latino Children

A wealth of literature attests that children need safe, nurturing, and predictable environments to thrive (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2011; National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine, 2016). Continuous, responsive interactions with caregivers shape neural development, influence attachment, and set the foundation for self-regulation skills. Simply stated, feeling safe is fundamental for healthy child development. Yet, the 2016 presidential election, as well as rapid and far-reaching transformations in immigration policy in the United States (U.S.) are fueling a sense of fear and uncertainty in many households across the nation (Roche, Vaquera, White, & Rivera, 2018; Wray-Lake, Wells, Alvis, Delgado, Syvertsen, & Metzger, 2018). The long-term public health impact of this “dramatic societal event” (Williams & Medlock, 2017), remains to be known. Using the World Health Organization’s (WHO, 1996a,b) definition of violence as, “the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against one’s self, another person, or against a group or community that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation” (Krug, Dahlberg, Mercy, Zwi, & Lozano, 2002; p. 1084; NAS, 2018), this paper draws on literature from psychology, sociology, medicine, political science, social work, and developmental psychology to outline how the anti-immigrant climate in the U.S. and the threat of

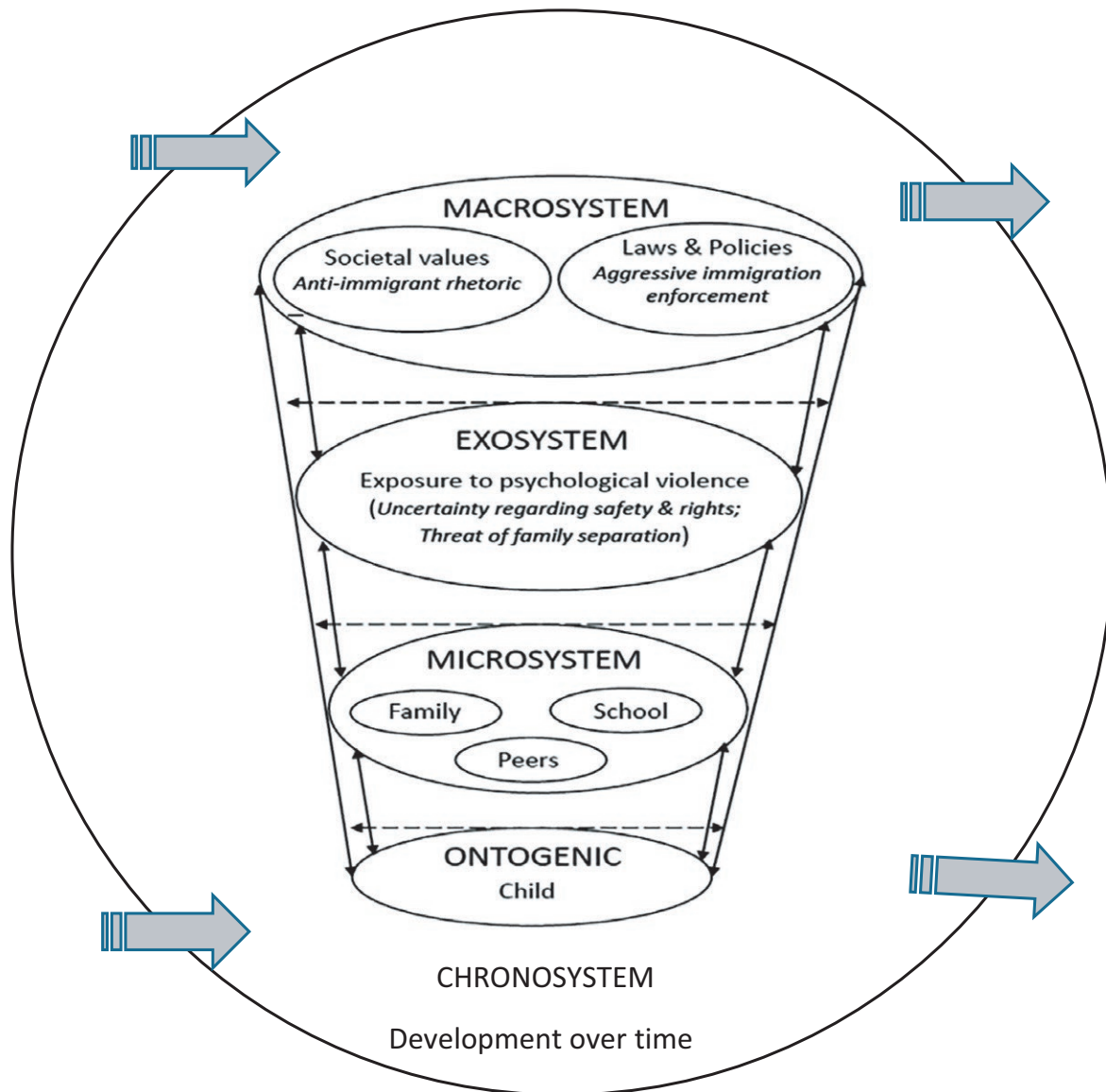
Feeling safe is fundamental for healthy child development. Yet, the 2016 presidential election, as well as rapid and far reaching transformations in immigration policy are fueling a sense of fear and uncertainty in many households ...

immigration enforcement activities in everyday spaces are experienced by some Latino children as psychological violence. Utilizing a model used to understand the impact of exposure to community violence (ECV) on child health and well-being, we situate recent literature on the impact of immigration enforcement and immigration policy within an ecological–transactional framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Cicchetti & Lynch, 1993) to highlight how immigration enforcement threat may be impacting Latino children. A general description of the ecological–transactional model is presented, followed by a specific description of

the components of the model. Current literature is presented within the framework of the model and research and policy implications are discussed.

Ecological–transactional theory proposes that a child functions within multiple contexts, or ecologies, that influence each other as well as the child’s development (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Cicchetti & Lynch, 1993). These ecologies vary in their proximity to the child and include 1) the *macrosystem*, which is the most distal ecology and includes cultural values and beliefs that shape how society functions; 2) the *exosystem*, which consists of community and neighborhood settings in which families and children live; 3) the *microsystem*, which represents the ecologies most proximal to the child, including the family, the school environment, and peer networks; and 4) the *ontogenic* level, which consists of the child and factors within the child that influence developmental adaptation, such as emotional regulation. The impact of exposure to violence is best understood by identifying interactions (i.e., the impact of one context on another) and transactions

Figure 1. **Graphic representation of the impact of immigration enforcement threat on child based on an ecological–transactional perspective.**



Note. Solid arrows indicate direct pathways between systems. Dashed arrows indicate potential impact of moderator.  
 Source: Figure adapted from Overstreet & Mazza, 2003.

(the mutual influence of two contexts on each other over time) among factors in the different ecologies surrounding the child (Cicchetti & Lynch, 1993). These ecologies are situated within a *chronosystem*, to depict that the systems evolve and affect one another over time (Bronfenbrenner, 1994), and to acknowledge the importance of sensitive and transitional periods in a child’s developmental trajectory. Each level of the environment contains “potentiating” and “compensatory” risk factors for the individual (Cicchetti & Rizley, 1981), which either increase or decrease the likelihood of adverse outcomes. These risk factors can be either transient or enduring. As potentiating factors outnumber or outweigh compensatory factors, the likelihood of adverse developmental outcomes increases (Lynch & Cicchetti, 1998). Ecological theory highlights the importance of

transactions between an individual and his/her environment over time, acknowledging that individuals are not passive, but rather social beings that are continually affecting or being affected by their environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Figure 1, adapted from Overstreet and Mazza (2003), illustrates these associations. In the figure, the different ecologies surrounding the child are arranged according to their proximity to the child. Ecologies can directly influence each other, as indicated by the outermost arrows. To illustrate, exposure to violence in the community, an exosystem factor, can have a direct influence on the ontogenic context of the child by interfering with normal developmental processes, such as emotional regulation (Margolin & Gordis, 2000). Similarly, child factors, such as ethnicity, race, or whether (s)he speaks Spanish, can have a direct influence on future encounters with immigration enforcement officers (Getrich, 2013; Romero, 2006, 2011), highlighting the transactional nature of the relationships between contexts within the model. In addition to these direct transactions between two ecologies, indirect transactions involving multiple ecologies also occur (Figure 1, innermost vertical arrows). For example, exposure to immigration enforcement threat creates disturbances within the family microsystem that can disrupt healthy child development, such as restricting family activities outside the home and avoiding conversation regarding certain stressful topics (Ayón & Becerra, 2013; Gulbas & Zayas, 2017). The links between ecologies can also be magnified or diminished, depending on the presence of moderators, as illustrated by the horizontal arrows. The ecological–transactional model highlights the interconnectedness of a child’s well-being with multiple levels of ecological contexts. Below, a review of some of the recent literature on immigration enforcement and its impact across Latino children’s ecological contexts, building on the framework of the ecological–transactional model, is provided.

## **Macrosystem Influences on Exposure to Psychological Violence**

Over the past several decades, heightened immigration policy activity and anti-immigrant legislation have produced a “culture of fear” among Latino and immigrant families in the U.S. (Turner & Sharry, 2012; Vargas, Sanchez, & Juárez, 2017; p. 460). The passage of the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) in 1986 (Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, 8 U.S.C §1101) criminalized the hiring of undocumented people and increased the capacity of immigration enforcement and internal policing of immigrant communities. This legislation, while providing amnesty to some undocumented people who had been residing in the country undocumented prior to 1982, essentially changed the structure of the immigration system by increasing enforcement in immigrant communities and criminalizing undocumented immigrants (Armenta, 2017; Cardoso, Scott, Faulkner, & Lane, 2018). Successive immigration laws and policies since 1986 have facilitated a steady increase in deportations (Massey & Pren, 2012). Additionally, in 2009 Senator Robert Byrd (D-WV), Chairman of the Appropriations Subcommittee on Homeland Security at the time, added a directive into the Department of Homeland Security Appropriations Act of 2010 that required Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) to maintain 33,400 immigrant detention beds on a daily basis (Department of Homeland Security Appropriations Act, 2009). Since the implementation of the quota, known as the “immigration detention quota” or “bed mandate,” the percent of the detained population held in private, for-profit detention facilities has increased. Nearly 75% of the detainee population is held in facilities operated



by private prison companies; in the last decade, the entire ICE detention system has expanded by nearly 47% (Migration Policy Institute, 2018a). The criminalizing of undocumented immigrants, greater enforcement capacity of immigration enforcement officers, and the private prison corporation lobby on immigration and immigration detention issues have vastly changed the immigration enforcement landscape in the past three decades (Rizzo, 2015; Sinha, 2016). While threat of deportation affects communities of various racial and ethnic backgrounds, Latinos account for approximately 95% of apprehensions by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS; Simanski, 2014). The high proportion of Latinos apprehended and living under the threat of apprehension places an enormously disproportionate burden on Latino communities across the U.S. (Armenta, 2017; Magaña-Salgado, 2014). Additionally, the national immigration climate is characterized by a dehumanization of undocumented (“illegal”) immigrants (Epps & Furman, 2016; Esses, Medianu, & Lawson, 2013; Kteily & Bruneau, 2017), which has spillover ramifications for Latino communities—regardless of individuals’ citizenship status (Aranda, Menjivar, & Donato, 2014; Armenta, 2017; Asad & Clair, 2018; Szkupinski Quiroga, Medina, & Glick, 2014; Vargas et al., 2017). Research from cognitive science and sociology indicates that, in the minds of many U.S. citizens, undocumented immigrants are considered “despised, out-group members” (Massey, 2007; p.14). The coupling of immigration with illegality contributes to normalizing, and then justifying, maltreatment against immigrants who are perceived as lawbreakers (Massey, 2007; Menjivar & Abrego, 2012). The 2016 election emboldened anti-immigrant rhetoric across the nation (Costello, 2016; Kteily & Bruneau, 2017); Trump’s candidacy speech, stating that Mexican immigrants are “rapists” (Washington Post, 2015), has the potential to feed into the narrative depicting Latino immigrants as criminals. His recent statement, “These aren’t people, these are animals...” (Davis, 2018) may serve to further dehumanize this population. Prior to the 2016 presidential election, guidelines issued by Department of Homeland Security (DHS) directors (Johnson, 2014; Morton, 2011a,b) prioritized deportations for those who posed a threat to national security or had serious criminal records (e.g., convicted of a felony) and required officers to consider an immigrant’s family situation and community ties when weighing requests to stay. These guidelines also discouraged ICE activity in “sensitive locations” such as schools, churches, and hospitals, where field officers had previously refrained from searching, interrogating, or arresting individuals for the purpose of immigration enforcement. Executive orders signed on January 25, 2017 essentially eliminated the 2011 and 2014 guidelines, and prioritized the prosecution of any offense connected to the southern border—including nonviolent offenses like unlawful entry, effectively making all undocumented immigrants a priority for deportation. The directive also revives the 287(g) program, which recruits local police officers and sheriff’s deputies to help with deportation, expands the number of detention facilities, and increases the immigration and customs enforcement workforce by 10,000 agents. The executive orders also increase the enforcement capacity of ICE, potentially emboldening agents to engage in capricious enforcement actions (Miroff & Sacchetti, 2018; Rochabrun, 2017; Shear & Nixon, 2017). Consequently, ICE has increased its presence near schools, arresting Latino parents driving their children to school (Sanchez, 2017). Enforcement officers have also increased their presence near hospitals, detaining parents of children needing treatment (Burnett, 2017) as well as children receiving treatment (Yee & Dickerson, 2017) and pregnant women

While forced parent–child separation and loss are traumatic events, the *threat* of familial separation and chronic uncertainty regarding familial safety is also experienced by many Latino children in immigrant households as psychological violence.

(Abrams, 2018). The blurring of law enforcement with immigration enforcement, and the presence of ICE in children’s daily environments, has amplified a highly uncertain, psychologically threatening environment for Latino children (Dreby, 2015; Stein, 2017). While forced parent–child separation and parental loss are potentially traumatic events (PTEs) with adverse effects on child mental health and functioning (Bouza et al., 2018; Finkelhor, Turner, Ormrod, Hamby, & Kracke, 2009; Rojas-Flores, Clements, Hwang Koo, & London, 2017), we argue that the *threat* of familial separation and chronic

uncertainty regarding familial safety is also experienced by many Latino children in immigrant households as psychological violence. This is illustrated in the literature reviewed below.

## Exposure to Psychological Violence Influences on Latino Child’s Microsystem Ecology

### Family functioning

Across the nation, chronic uncertainty affects families who fear detainment and deportation of a family member, even in states that have passed pro-integration immigration policies such as California. Evidence of how uncertainty manifests and its toll on overall family functioning can be gleaned from research with Latino immigrant families in Arizona, which passed successive restrictive policies culminating with SB1070 (Ayón & Becerra, 2013). In 2010, the state of Arizona enacted two laws addressing immigration, SB 1070 and HB 2162. These laws included provisions for officers to determine immigration status during any lawful stop; the requirement to carry alien registration documents (“show me your papers”); the prohibition of applying for work if unauthorized; and permission for warrantless arrests if there was probable cause the offense would make the person removable from the U.S. Before these laws could go into effect, a federal judge issued a preliminary injunction that blocked the laws’ most controversial provisions. Immigrant families were in limbo for 2 years as they waited for the Supreme Court’s final ruling on SB1070. During that 2-year time period, immigrant parents described their homes as highly stressed, their fear as debilitating, and the uncertainty regarding their futures as unbearable (Ayón & Becerra, 2013). The experiences of families in Arizona suggest that the effects of deportation were felt beyond those households where a parent or family member has been detained or deported. Rather, the *threat* and uncertainty regarding deportation and family separation had significant impact on immigrant family functioning. Immigrant parents and their citizen children reported constantly worrying about whether a family member would be deported, when the next raid would occur, or when the next enforcement policy change would occur (Ayón & Becerra, 2013).

Emerging evidence documents how threat and chronic uncertainty shapes the daily activities and routines of children in Latino immigrant families (Cardoso et al., 2018; Salas, Ayón, & Gurrola, 2013). In response to a restrictive immigration policy environment, families change their daily activities in attempts to protect themselves, consequently becoming more socially isolated:

Before people could go to the parks, to the malls, to the stores, to camp, to the rivers, and now because we can't go out...Then fights begin between each other, among the kids because there is so much tension and frustration because they cannot go out, as if they have us prisoners in our own homes. (Salas et al., 2013, p. 1012)

Families shift their behaviors significantly in the presence of threat to avoid family fragmentation and protect their children. Immigrant parents report developing strategies and practices in efforts to safeguard their children, such as reassuring children of their safety and ensuring one parent is always with the children (Ayón, 2017; Philbin & Ayón, 2016). In practice, this may mean that only one parent is employed while the other parent is with the children most of the time; families may refrain from going out as a family unit, that is, one parent will remain home to avoid both parents being detained; and families may limit how much time they spend outside of their home or the places they visit to avoid detainment (Ayón, 2017).

Additionally, the immigration climate strains parents' well-being, parenting practices, and the home environment (Brabeck & Xu, 2010; Cardoso et al., 2018; Roche et al., 2018). A recent study with 213 Latino parents, with varying residency status (e.g., U.S.-born and naturalized citizens, permanent residents, Temporary Protected Status [TPS] residents, and undocumented residents), found a 300% increase in the odds of a parent having high psychological distress in response to immigration news and events since the president took office (Roche et al., 2018). Parents with higher levels of legal vulnerability—that is, parents who lack legal documentation, have experienced the detainment or deportation of a family member, or have been detained or deported themselves—report greater negative impact on the family environment (i.e., lower perceptions of parent's emotional well-being, less perceived ability to provide financially for the family, and strained parent-child relationship), which in turn has been linked to the well-being of children (Brabeck & Xu, 2010). Latino immigrant parents in Arizona who experienced multiple forms of discrimination and high rates of discrimination reported more challenges in their parenting practices, such as engaging in less monitoring and using less consistent discipline strategies (Ayón & Garcia, 2017).

Qualitative work with citizen children living with undocumented parents highlights the emergence of a “cultural script of silence,” a script held by family members that prohibits the discussion of legal status (Gulbas & Zayas, 2017, p. 55), as a means of protecting the

Chronic uncertainty regarding family unity and safety can be debilitating for some families- affecting their daily routines, their social engagement and their interactions with one another.

family and fostering daily survival. Silence regarding legal status both within and outside the household not only guides familial interactions, but also influences how parents interact with, and provide support to, their children. Taken together, these findings indicate that chronic uncertainty regarding family unity and safety can be debilitating for some families—affecting their daily routines, their social engagement, and their interactions with one another.

### **School and peer networks**

An emerging body of work is documenting the polarizing and negative impact of national anti-immigrant rhetoric and immigration enforcement policies on school



climate, school personnel, and student well-being and academic achievement (Cervantes, Ullrich, & Matthews, 2018; Gándara & Ee, 2018). Surveys of Kindergarten-Grade12 public school teachers across the nation indicate that during the 2016 presidential campaign, bullying increased in schools and students were more likely to say hostile and bigoted things about minorities and immigrants (Costello, 2016; Pollock, 2017), reflecting the rhetoric heard either via media outlets or adults in their environments. Teachers, principals, counselors, psychologists, and paraprofessionals noted that many students (especially immigrants and children of immigrants) were anxious, depressed, distracted, and missing school more often because of fears that either they or their relatives would be deported or detained by ICE (Cervantes et al., 2018; Gándara & Ee, 2018). Educators across the nation noted a rise in fear among their students, interfering with students' ability to focus in school:

The highest achieving boy in my class has shown particular concern about the upcoming election. He is Hispanic and is always asking me questions about, and worrying.... He has told me he can't sleep at night because he is worried that his family will be sent away in November.... It is completely and utterly heartbreaking to see a 10 year old so concerned with such adult issues. (Costello, 2016)

Interviews with educators indicate that they are experiencing symptoms of secondary traumatic stress and a sense of deterioration in trust in their school communities (Sanchez, Freeman, & Martin, 2018). Teachers and school personnel report an increase in their workload as they work to ensure students feel safe in school (Gándara & Ee, 2018; Sanchez et al., 2018). Interactions with teachers and peers shape a child's academic experience (Atkins, Capella, Shernoff, Mehta, & Gustafson, 2017). While the impact of such highly stressed school environments and aggressive peer interactions on child well-being remains to be fully understood, research indicates that symptoms of psychological distress and depression in teachers are associated with lower teacher sensitivity, increased withdrawal in adult-child interactions, lower classroom organization (Hamre & Pianta, 2004; McLean & Connor, 2015; Sandilos et al., 2015), and dampened student achievement (McLean & Connor, 2015). Additionally, bullying has a detrimental impact on students' academic achievement and emotional well-being (Toomey & Storlie, 2016; Williams & Peguero, 2013). Interviews with students and teachers indicate that ICE raids in the community negatively impact students' ability to focus in school for months following the raids, and that Latino children, regardless of citizenship status, are more likely to be harassed by peers (Blitzer, 2018).

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## Exposure to Psychological Violence Influences on the Ontogenic Ecology

Qualitative, quantitative, and ethnographic research conveys that children of undocumented parents live in constant fear that one or both of their parents may be arrested, incarcerated, and/or deported (Chavez, Lopez, Englebrecht, & Viramontez Anguiano, 2012; Costello, 2016; Dreby, 2012; Sanders et al., 2013; Satinsky, Hu, Heller, & Farhang, 2013). Evidence from neuroscience research indicates that exposure to circumstances that produce persistent fear and chronic anxiety "predict significant risk for adverse long-term outcomes from which children do not recover easily" (National

Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2010, p. 1). Behavioral neuroscience indicates that chronic activation of the stress response system leads to both immediate and long-term problems in physical health and mental health. Moreover, prolonged and/or excessive exposure to fear-inducing stimuli or threatening environments has been found to impair cognitive control and learning (Shonkoff & Garner, 2012). In acknowledgment of the toxic effects of living in fear of familial separation, the American Academy of Pediatrics (Stein, 2017) issued a statement in support of protecting immigrant children:

Far too many children in this country already live in constant fear that their parents will be taken into custody or deported, and the message these children received today from the highest levels of our federal government exacerbates that fear and anxiety. No child should ever live in fear. When children are scared, it can impact their health and development. Indeed, fear and stress, particularly prolonged exposure to serious stress – known as toxic stress – can harm the developing brain and negatively impact short- and long-term health.

Children in mixed-status households (households with at least one citizen or legal immigrant child and at least one parent who is an unauthorized immigrant) are made aware of—and live with—the uncertainty of their family’s safety at a young age (Ayón & Philbin, 2017). Early in their development, children are aware of biases in their social interactions as they experience discrimination directly or indirectly (Ayón & Philbin, 2017). Consequently, children may evade questions about their families’ documentation/immigration status (Dreby, 2012) or may be constantly on the lookout for police (Dreby, 2012; Rubio-Hernández & Ayón, 2016). Children’s hyperawareness of the threat of deportation to their families and possible family fragmentation is often noted by parents describing their children’s responses to the presence of law enforcement officers—children may warn their parents when police officers are nearby (Ayón, 2016) or sit up straight and remain motionless when a police car pulls up next to their family’s car (Dreby, 2012).

Children in immigrant families become aware of differences in legal status and of their own or parents’ deportability through exposure to the media, interactions with peers, and experiences with discrimination (Ayón & Philbin, 2017; Dreby, 2012; Pérez, Espinoza, Ramos, Coronado, & Cortes, 2009; Rubio-Hernández & Ayón, 2016; Suárez-Orozco, Yoshikawa, Teranishi, & Suárez-Orozco, 2011). The emphasis on immigration enforcement that children may witness within their communities or through the media and the increased hostility that immigrants encounter heighten children’s consciousness of how legal status can negatively affect families. Children learn at a young age that immigrant or Latino communities are targeted, and that enforcement strategies can lead to the deportation of a parent and family fragmentation (Ayón, 2016; Rubio-Hernández & Ayón, 2016).

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Research with mixed-status families indicates that, for some children, the stigma associated with being from an immigrant family, experiences with discrimination, and increased consciousness of legal status is marked by fear, hyperawareness,

and hypervigilance (Satinsky et al., 2013). Other children are described as displaying symptoms of depression, of being anxious, sad, and often found crying as they worry about the threat of family separation (De Genova, 2002; Rubio-Hernández & Ayón, 2016). In addition to high levels of fear, anxiety, and hypervigilance (Capps, Castañeda, Chaudry, & Santos, 2007; Chaudry et al., 2010; Dreby, 2012; Rubio-Hernández & Ayón, 2016), children also experience disruptions in their ability to eat and sleep (Brabeck & Xu, 2010; Chaudry et al., 2010; Costello, 2016; Rinaldi & Shah, 2017). “We have children who have nightmares.... We have high school kids who don’t want to go to school anymore, that are depressed, that are suicidal because their parents are threatened” (Rinaldi & Shah, 2017).

Threat and uncertainty regarding familial safety are linked to children’s ability to attend school, focus, and learn. A rise in absenteeism has been noted after ICE raids (Blitzer, 2017, 2018; Shoichet, 2018) as well as after the *threat* of increased enforcement (Costello, 2016). In school, the threat of parental deportation can drain student’s ability to concentrate (Dreby, 2012; Salas et al., 2013; Santos et al., 2018; Satinsky et al., 2013; Wray-Lake et al.,

Threat and uncertainty regarding familial safety are linked to children’s ability to attend school, focus and learn.

2018). To illustrate, when asked to describe any changes in attitudes or behavior resulting from the presidential election, an adolescent Latina shared, “I am not as happy. I live in fear. [My fears] don’t let me concentrate in school. I’m always thinking if my parents are still with me if they haven’t been deported” (Wray-Lake et al., 2018, p. 197).

Latino children are exposed to multiple forms of discrimination and microaggression. Interpersonal discrimination is manifested through verbal abuse in the form of microinsults (e.g., questioning parent’s legal status and nativity), microassaults (e.g., derogatory comments, stereotyping, teasing, name-calling, and threatening), and physical attacks (Ayón & Philbin, 2017; Córdova & Cervantes, 2010; Romero, Gonzalez, & Smith, 2015; Sulkowski, Bauman, Wright, Nixon, & Davis, 2014). Substantial evidence links discrimination to poor health outcomes for Latino children and youth (Ayón, Marsiglia, & Parsai, 2010; Potochnick, Perreira, & Fuligni, 2012; Sirin et al., 2015). Longitudinal research indicates that discrimination adversely affects the development of healthy self-esteem in Latino youth and aggravates risk for depression (Zeiders, Umaña-Taylor, & Derlan, 2013). Additionally, children and youth’s experiences with discrimination increase their consciousness of the threat to themselves and their families (Getrich, 2013; Heard-Garris, Cale, Camaj, Hamati, & Dominguez, 2018).

Interview data with Latino children (ages 6–14) indicates that some children conflate being an immigrant with being undocumented (Dreby, 2012). Dreby (2012) found that while children were often proud of their ethnic heritage and Spanish-speaking skills, they feared discussions about their immigration history, which they considered “a private family matter, not to be shared with others” (Dreby, 2012, p. 841). Children indicated a keen awareness of the stigma associated with being an immigrant. This was true for children regardless of their own or parents’ documentation status. Thus, Latino children—regardless of their documentation status—may experience chronic uncertainty as they navigate how much to disclose about themselves or their home life for fear of the potential ramifications for their family members. Additionally, the shame and fear associated with being an

immigrant may influence children's identity development and sense of self, especially among youth who have learned to hide a part of who they are to keep their loved ones safe (Gulbas & Zayas, 2017; Wray-Lake et al., 2018).

Chronic uncertainty experienced by children is also expressed as a sense of responsibility to protect their parents. While parents may encourage children to "not worry" about the immigration climate, children relay that they are unable to minimize their concern for parent's safety (Rubio-Hernández & Ayón, 2016; p. 23). The burden of the threat of deportability motivates children to think of ways in which they can protect their parents. For instance, a parent shared that her daughter wanted to be an immigration officer when she was older because she would help her "fix" her papers or documentation status (Rubio-Hernández & Ayón, 2016, p. 23). The burden of chronic uncertainty is exacerbated by children's feelings of hopelessness and powerlessness (Gulbas & Zayas, 2017; Wray-Lake et al., 2018).

Fear for familial safety and chronic uncertainty also deprive Latino children of a sense of freedom in several respects. Citizen Latino children and youth describe restricting what they say for fear of bringing attention to their families (Gulbas & Zayas, 2017). In addition to restricting what they say, uncertainty about familial safety and fear of familial separation restricts what children of immigrants do (Horner et al., 2014). Latino citizens may avoid contact with social institutions for fear of being asked about the immigration status of their family members (Castañeda & Melo, 2014; O'Leary & Sanchez, 2011). Uncertainty about familial safety is linked to lower utilization of healthcare services, social services, and public health, nutrition, and educational programs for citizen children of undocumented parents (Ayón, 2014; Kalil & Crosnoe, 2009; Xu & Brabeck, 2012; Yoshikawa, 2011).

Compelling studies using quantitative data and causal techniques that demonstrate the impact of enforcement threat on children are emerging. In a study of adjustment and anxiety disorder among children born in Oregon ( $N = 8,610$ ), Hainmueller et al. (2017) used Medicaid claims data to provide evidence of the impact of parents' unauthorized immigration status on the health of U.S. citizen children. Specifically, capitalizing on the arbitrary birthday cut off for the Deferred Action on Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program eligibility (i.e., a person born on June 16, 1981, qualifies for DACA, but a person born on June 14, 1981, does not) the mental health of children of ineligible mothers born just before the birthdate cutoff was compared to the mental health of children born to eligible mothers. Regression discontinuity analyses indicated that mothers' DACA eligibility reduced adjustment and anxiety disorder diagnoses in children significantly. The findings from this study suggest that protecting unauthorized immigrants from deportation, that is, removing threat and uncertainty regarding familial safety led to immediate significant improvements in the mental health of their U.S. citizen children.

In an examination of the impact that ICE raids have on adverse health outcomes, Novak, Geronimus, and Martinez-Cardoso (2017) examined birth weight among infants ( $N = 52,344$ ) born prior to and after a major ICE raid in Postville, Iowa, on May 12, 2008, during which 297 undocumented people were deported. By employing a quasi-experimental study design, Novak et al. (2017) found that, 1 year after a federal

immigration raid, infants born to Latina mothers had a 24% greater risk of low birth weight in comparison to infants born to non-Latina White mothers. An increased risk of low birth weight was observed for both U.S.-born and immigrant Latina mothers, indicating the “spillover effect” of immigration policy on U.S.-born Latinos (Novak et al., 2017, p. 839).

## The Chronosystem

The chronosystem encapsulates change in the individual as well as the historical context over time. The depth, persistence, and timing of events and policies matter for understanding child developmental trajectories and outcomes. The first years of life are critical for the development of capacity to form trusting relationships, which set the foundation for emotional regulation and subsequent relationships. During the first years of life, parents play the most important role in children’s development. As children age, the peer, school, and community contexts gain greater importance in influencing child well-being. Consequently, the developmental stage at which Latino children and youth experience anti-immigrant rhetoric and family separation threat

The developmental stage at which Latino children and youth experience anti-immigrant rhetoric and family separation threat will likely matter for understanding child development trajectories, as will the duration and severity of uncertainty and threat.

will likely matter for understanding child development trajectories, as will the duration and severity of uncertainty and threat to family safety. For example, Latino infants born to immigrant parents in this country may not be receiving the health check-ups to which they are entitled (Hacker et al., 2011). Latino citizen youth may be motivated to be more civically engaged, “I have to prepare myself and fight through the injustice I’m facing along with many others” (Wray-Lake et al., p. 199).

## Concluding Remarks and Recommendations

An estimated 4.5 million U.S. citizen children live in families in which one or both parents are undocumented (Pew Hispanic Research Center, 2013). A growing body of literature has begun to document the link between parental detention and deportation and Latino children’s trauma and psychological distress (Allen, Cisneros, & Tellez, 2015; Brabeck, Lykes, & Hunter, 2014; Rojas-Flores et al., 2017; Zayas, Aguilar-Gaxiola, Yoon, & Rey, 2015). This review paper adds to the literature by proposing that the persistent *threat* of parental deportation and chronic uncertainty regarding familial safety is also harmful to Latino children and youth, especially those living in mixed-status households, and is experienced by many children as a form of psychological violence.

Childhood adversities are the single most powerful predictor of health conditions and early-onset mental illness, such as anxiety, depression, and psychological stress (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2014; Kessler et al., 2010). Advances in behavioral neuroscience indicate that significant fear-eliciting experiences early in life have the potential to disrupt the typical development of stress regulation, learning, memory, and social behavior (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2010a,b). Moreover, experiencing persistent fear can have lifelong health and mental health consequences (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2010a,b). With the blockage of Deferred Action for Parents of Americans (DAPA), recent repeal of the DACA program,



and rise in immigration enforcement activities (National Immigration Forum, 2017), mixed-status families nationwide remain vulnerable with their futures plagued by uncertainty. As current immigration policy threatens to, and does, separate families and leave children parentless, the educational, emotional, and health impact on U.S.-born children promises to be staggering.

We would be remiss to not acknowledge the impact of the recent repeal of the DACA program, which provided undocumented youth work authorization and relief from deportation, specifically to undocumented immigrants who were brought to the U.S. as children and met educational or military service requirements. Four lower courts have challenged the administrations' decision, allowing some or all of the protections of DACA to remain in place (National Immigration Law Center, 2018). However, a final decision on DACA has not been made, leaving over 700,000 undocumented youth in a state of chronic uncertainty once again (Gonzales, 2016; Migration Policy Institute, 2018b,c). Additionally, the fate of approximately 20,000 K-12 teachers across the country, working legally with permits obtained through DACA status, is in limbo. Families protected under TPS are also experiencing uncertainty regarding their safety and future as the expiration date of their status nears, affecting an additional 273,000 U.S.-citizen children born in the U.S. to TPS holders.

Several states, counties, and cities have passed laws, rules, or policies aiming to provide relief to immigrant communities. Sanctuary states and localities have made a commitment to provide a safe space for all, by not collaborating with ICE during their detention processes. It is unclear how effective these efforts will be at protecting children and their families. Many of these states and localities have experienced some pushback; most notably, the state of California is being sued as at the Trump administration claims that the state is interfering with the federal immigration policy.

Researchers, teachers, and practitioners are encouraged to be aware of how uncertainty and threat impact the lives of Latino children in immigrant households, especially in a nationally charged anti-immigrant climate. Latino children living in fear may present diagnosable symptoms of anxiety disorder; their symptoms are a normal reaction to the very real threat of parental separation. Research indicates that psychological violence in childhood is a risk factor for poor adult mental health (Greenfield & Marks, 2010). Moreover, lifespan psychology (Baltes, Staudinger, & Lindenberger, 1999) and life course theory (Elder, Johnson, & Crosnoe, 2003) emphasize that the relative timing and patterning of events shape adult functioning throughout the life course. The trajectories of children in mixed-status households, and the factors that influence healthy developmental trajectories, need to be better understood. In particular, potential

moderators (dashed lines in Figure 1) of the impact of psychological violence on children's family, peer, and school ecologies need to be studied so as to highlight and support resilience at the individual, familial, and community levels (Cardoso & Thompson, 2010). We caution that although the presence of protective factors can attenuate the effects of risk factors, children are only resilient to a certain point. When risk factors

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outweigh the benefits of their protective factors, child adjustment will deteriorate despite the presence of positive influences (Sameroff, Seifer, Baldwin, & Baldwin, 1993).

Policymakers at the city, state, and federal levels are urged to take into account that one quarter (25%) of all youth under age 18 in the U.S. are Latino (95% of which are U.S. citizens); this is a significant proportion of the future workforce and the economy that may be impacted by current national anti-immigrant, anti-Latino rhetoric. To decrease the fear and uncertainty burdening children in immigrant families, policymakers can advocate for the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) to address the backlog of over 700,000 citizenship applications currently in its possession; affirm that all children in the U.S. have a constitutional right to receive free public school education, regardless of immigration status; pass legislation that provides a pathway to citizenship to undocumented immigrants, including parents and children; eliminate barriers to immigrant families' and their children's access to health, nutrition, and early childhood education services; and advocate for the Protecting Sensitive Locations Act [Protecting Sensitive Locations Act (H.R. 1815 and S. 845)], which would expand and improve upon the existing sensitive locations policies in several important ways, including prohibiting agents from conducting enforcement actions within 1,000 feet of a sensitive location, such as a school. Congress and current and future administrations are urged to ensure the best interests of children are held paramount in immigration policy decisions.

We echo the need for a more compassionate consideration (Levers & Hyatt-Burkhart, 2012) of the lived experiences of the 4.5 million American children living in mixed-status households, as well as for research that documents the damage incurred to citizen children when national policies encourage practices that threaten children's sense of belonging and safety (Santos et al., 2018; Williams & Medlock, 2017; Wray-Lake et al., 2018). Research that takes into consideration family and community strengths, and the impact of supportive settings (e.g., schools) is needed to guide best practices aimed at mitigating uncertainty and ensuring that all children feel safe.

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