DO PARENTAL NATIVITY AND LEGAL STATUS INFLUENCE THE MENTAL HEALTH OF MEXICAN-ORIGIN CHILDREN?

RESEARCH PROBLEM AND DATA
A major challenge to understanding the health of children of immigrants is the lack of systematic attention to the legal status of their parents. Ethnographic research suggests that undocumented parents face difficulties that may heighten children’s vulnerability to mental health problems, but this issue remains understudied due to the lack of information on immigrants’ legal status in almost all large-scale surveys. We used one of the few representative surveys that asks direct questions on immigrants’ legal status to examine how Mexican-origin children’s behavioral functioning varies by the nativity and legal status of their parents.

This study is based on data collected from the parents of 2,535 children included in the Los Angeles Family and Neighborhood Survey. Variation in internalizing and externalizing behavior problems among Mexican youth with undocumented mothers, documented or naturalized citizen mothers, and U.S.-born mothers was analyzed using a comparative framework that contrasted their experiences with those of other ethnoracial groups. Multivariate regression was used to examine whether family and neighborhood processes (socioeconomic background, family structure, maternal mental health, and neighborhood collective efficacy) explain the relationships between parental legal status and children’s internalizing and externalizing behavior.

KEY FINDINGS
• Mexican-origin children with undocumented mothers have significantly higher levels of internalizing and externalizing behavior problems than their co-ethnic counterparts with documented or naturalized citizen mothers.
• Mexican-origin children with undocumented mothers have very low socioeconomic status, but socioeconomic disadvantage plays only a small role in their relatively poor behavioral functioning.
• Undocumented parents are able to at least partially compensate for their lack of material resources with other types of resources, such as better than expected maternal mental health and positive family routines. However, having a depressed mother greatly increases the risk of behavioral problems among Mexican-origin youth.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS
The vast majority of children who have undocumented parents are native-born citizens. Nonetheless, their access to mental health services may be limited by: family poverty; a lack of health insurance; socio-cultural barriers; parents' limited awareness of outside resources; and parents' reluctance to seek assistance because of fear of detection, apprehension, and deportation. Barriers to treatment must be reduced through policies that promote comprehensive community-based services in settings in which youth and their undocumented parents are embedded. For example, schools and public health clinics can be effective sites for screening for mental health problems and for engaging with immigrant parents about available resources. Such screening must be paired with culturally-sensitive services that involve both the child and the family.

Figure 1. Internalizing Behavior Problems by Race-ethnicity and Mother’s Immigration Status.
Figure 2. Externalizing Behavior Problems by Race-ethnicity and Mother’s Immigration Status.