

Study examines well-being of Latino immigrant families

October 4 2012, by Sharita Forrest

(Medical Xpress)—The American dream is alive and well in Illinois' rural communities among Latino immigrant families, who demonstrate considerable resilience in the face of multiple challenges, a new study indicates.

However, broader-scale efforts are needed to integrate these families into their communities and help them thrive, suggest the researchers, Angela Wiley and Marcela Raffaelli, who are professors of human and community development at the University of Illinois.

Wiley and Raffaelli's study explored the well-being of immigrant Latino families living in six Central Illinois counties – Champaign, Douglas, Iroquois, Macon, Piatt and Vermilion – that are served by the university's Child Care Resource Service. Wiley is the director of the service. The current study was part of a larger project that examined [Latino parents'](#) beliefs about child care services.

The research team conducted extensive interviews with 120 immigrant Latino parents, primarily mothers. Most of the [study participants](#) had been born in Mexico, had lived in the U.S. an average of 12 years, had limited formal education and spoke little English. All families had at least one child under age 18. More than 46 percent of the families were living in poverty, with annual household incomes of less than \$20,000.

Despite myriad challenges, study participants indicated that they were generally satisfied with their lives and emphasized that the better quality

of life and financial opportunities available to their families in the U.S. mitigated the hardships that they endured.

"The parents are working to improve the future of their children, and this is a message they convey in so many different ways to their kids," Raffaelli said. "That is what I'd say is their greatest strength."

In the first of several publications from the project, the researchers examined how three indicators of [family](#) and individual well-being – [food security](#), [financial security](#) and life satisfaction – were related to a set of risk and protective factors.

Risk factors included community challenges – families' level of difficulty accessing health care, transportation and affordable housing – and personal experiences of discrimination. The extent to which participants experienced these challenges varied. Community challenges were associated with well-being and with decreased food security, while discrimination was linked to decreased financial well-being.

Latina mothers whose families had greater difficulty accessing resources and negotiating life in their communities or who personally experienced discrimination had lower levels of life satisfaction.

Protective factors comprised three types of capital assets: economic resources, such as income and home ownership; [social capital](#), such as people who could provide practical or emotional support or advice; and human capital, which included participants' educational levels, English fluency and years of residency in the U.S. Higher levels of these capital assets were generally associated with increased individual and family well-being.

"We found in our research that personal strengths are important but so are support networks," Raffaelli said. "Even in these small isolated

communities, most of the parents have one or two people they could count on. Having social capital is related not only to [life satisfaction](#) and psychological well-being but also to food security."

The study indicates a need for broader initiatives that promote immigrant families' economic security and social capital, such as policy reforms that help employers provide living-wage jobs or offering financial education programs that promote home ownership and savings through social service providers.

Requiring service providers in [rural communities](#) to learn Spanish to eliminate language barriers probably isn't realistic, Wiley and Raffaelli said.

However, immigrants with limited English proficiency and [formal education](#) may benefit from services that are currently lacking in many small communities, such as English classes and adult education.

Bolstering social capital could also enhance families' well-being, the study suggested. Other analyses by the researchers showed that most participants had rich and supportive social networks in their new communities that served as important pipelines of information and sources of emotional support, advice and shared resources. However, [Latino families](#) were less connected to the greater community and formal support infrastructures, indicating that efforts are needed to welcome and integrate them.

"The young citizens who are being raised within these [immigrant families](#) are the future," Wiley said. "Any investments that we make, if we can't bring ourselves to do it for reasons of dignity and decency, caring and reaching out to others around us, I think we must do it from a policy perspective because of that new generation. That's why we need to care about the factors that promote resilience and reduce risk."

The Bureau of Child Care and Development within the Illinois Department of Human Services provided grant funding for the research.

The study, "Risk and Resilience in Rural Communities: The Experiences of Latina Mothers," appears in the October issue of the journal *Family Relations*.

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Citation: Study examines well-being of Latino immigrant families (2012, October 4) retrieved 19 April 2024 from

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