

# Sleep duration buffers effects of adversity among recently immigrated Latinx adolescents

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While access to mental health services may be limited by financial, logistical and/or practical factors among recently migrated families, a

new study by University of Houston psychology researchers suggests that maximizing sleep can offer psychological benefit to adolescents in this at-risk group.

"The current study takes an important first step in identifying that short sleep duration is prevalent among Central American immigrant [youth](#), and critically, in suggesting that intervening has important public health potential as a means of buffering the effects of childhood adversity on mental health in a vulnerable group," said Amanda Venta, associate professor of psychology and director of the Youth and Family Studies Lab at UH. Venta has published the results of her study in the *Journal of Child & Adolescent Trauma*.

Although multiple studies find Latinx youth in the United States exhibit shorter sleep duration than non-Hispanic white children, little is known about the sleep health of immigrant youth. To advance the research, Venta collected data from 112 first-generation Latinx migrants who have lived in the U.S. for approximately two years, and 46 caregivers. On average, participants reported sleeping 6.83 hours per night, in line with national estimates of short sleep duration.

"Findings indicated experiences of neglect in childhood were associated with youth-reported [mental health](#) symptoms, but this relation was significantly moderated by sleep duration such that the relation was weakened in the presence of high sleep duration," said Venta. "Caregiver reports supported the buffering effects of sleep."

The surveyed youth averaged 19 years old and were from El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala. They reported greater symptoms of posttraumatic avoidance when they had been exposed to childhood neglect, but this effect disappeared when sleep duration was high.

Large main and indirect effects of abuse on caregiver-reported somatic,

or physical, complaints emerged, such that when sleep duration was low or average the relation between abuse and somatic complaints was positive, but directionality switched when sleep duration was higher.

The rate of Latinx migration from Central America to the United States has risen rapidly over the last several decades, with a particularly pronounced increase more recently. United States Custom and Border Protection estimated an increase of 131% in immigration from Central America between 2015 and 2016 and high rates have continued in recent years despite increased immigration enforcement activities in the U.S.

"In addition to developing brief education and intervention programs targeting sleep in this population, more pragmatic efforts that protect sleep should be considered," said Candice Alfano, UH professor of psychology, director of the Sleep and Anxiety Center of Houston (SACH) and co-author of the study.

"Specifically, providers of medical care for immigrant families should inquire about and emphasize the need for sufficient sleep; teachers and school administrators who serve immigrant youth should structure school policies and homework burdens to accommodate adequate sleep, particularly given the likelihood for outside employment and caregiving responsibilities in this population," said Alfano.

**More information:** *Journal of Child & Adolescent Trauma* (2021).  
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