

Family reunification among Mexican and Vietnamese immigrant children in the child welfare system:
Toward an understanding of promising practices to improve service availability and effectiveness

Executive Summary

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Introduction

California is home to 38% of all Mexican immigrants in the U.S., and 40% of all Vietnamese immigrants in the U.S., making California the state with the largest populations of Mexican and Vietnamese immigrants in the nation (U.S. Census, 2007). Immigrants comprise 27% of the total population in California and among immigrants in California 44% are from Mexico, and 34% are from Asia, with 13% of all Asian immigrants originating from Vietnam (U.S. Census, 2007). Once in the U.S., immigrant families experience disproportionately high rates of poverty, unemployment and crowded housing conditions, yet, they are less likely than non-immigrant families to receive housing assistance, food stamps, mental health services, or to have health insurance (Capps, Fix, Ost, Reardon-Anderson, & Passel, 2004; Center for Immigration Studies, 2004; Reardon-Anderson, Capps, & Fix, 2002). This context, combined with stressors associated with resettlement and acculturation may place some immigrant families at high risk for involvement in the child welfare system (Lincroft & Resner, 2006). Despite these risks, no national, state or local-level data are available on characteristics of immigrant children in the child welfare system, the proportion of immigrant children who reunify, or the constellation of services that may be associated with family reunification among immigrant families. As a result, child welfare professionals working with immigrant families have virtually no information on the effectiveness of their current practices, or promising approaches to improve reunification outcomes. To fill these gaps in the literature, practice and policy, *this project examined family reunification among Mexican and Vietnamese immigrant and non-immigrant children, and identified promising practices to improve service availability and effectiveness.*

Research Design and Methods

This study was guided by five research questions. Quantitative methods were used to answer the first three questions:

- 1) What are the characteristics of Mexican and Vietnamese immigrant children and families involved in family reunification services?
- 2) Are there differences in the rate of reunification between Mexican immigrant, Vietnamese immigrant, and non-immigrant children involved in family reunification services?
- 3) What factors are related to reunification among Mexican immigrant, Vietnamese immigrant, and non-immigrant children?

Qualitative methods were used to answer the last two research questions:

- 4) What strategies may improve the availability of services for Mexican immigrant and Vietnamese immigrant parents?
- 5) What services may improve the likelihood of reunification among Mexican immigrant and Vietnamese immigrant families?

Research Design

This study used a mixed methods approach with quantitative and qualitative methods. The quantitative design included an exploratory retrospective longitudinal design using administrative data from Santa Cruz County and Santa Clara County. The qualitative study included an exploratory design using interview data from child welfare workers and Mexican and Vietnamese immigrant parents who had successfully reunified.

Sample and Sampling Procedures

The quantitative sample included children entering the foster care system for 8 or more days between January 1, 2001 and December 31, 2007 in both Santa Cruz and Santa Clara Counties. CWS/CMS data were merged with CalWIN eligibility data because information on parents' and children's place of birth and citizenship status is only available in the CalWIN system. The match rate in Santa Clara County was 65% and in Santa Cruz County it was 59%. A sample of 3,607 children in Santa Clara County and 335 in Santa Cruz County was identified, resulting in a total sample size of 3,942. In order to maintain the independence of observations needed to conduct the multivariate analyses, one child per family was randomly selected for inclusion in the sample. In addition, this study's focus was on comparing Mexican and Vietnamese immigrants to non-immigrants, and thus immigrants from countries other than Mexico or Vietnam were excluded from the study. As a result, the final sample included 2,184 children (1,943 from Santa Clara County and 241 from Santa Cruz County), with 259 Mexican immigrant families (185 in Santa Clara County and 74 in Santa Cruz County), 32 Vietnamese immigrant families (all from Santa Clara County), and 1,893 non-immigrant families.

The qualitative sample of child welfare workers was selected using a combination of purposive sampling procedures and selection of key informants. These procedures resulted in a sample size of 21 workers from Santa Clara County and 6 workers from Santa Cruz County who participated in an interview; 19 of these workers had expertise working with Mexican immigrant families and 8 had expertise working with Vietnamese immigrant families.

The qualitative sample of Mexican and Vietnamese immigrant parents who had reunified was selected using a combination of purposive and convenience sampling procedures. Child welfare workers were asked to identify Mexican and Vietnamese immigrant parents on their caseloads who had successfully reunified. Workers then contacted the parents to invite them to participate in an interview, resulting in a total of 14 Mexican immigrant parents (9 from Santa Clara County and 5 from Santa Cruz County) and 7 Vietnamese immigrant parents (all from Santa Clara County) who participated in an interview.

Measures and Instrumentation

Quantitative measures drawn from the merged CWS/CMS and CalWIN dataset included: child

age, child gender, type of maltreatment that led to the case opening, type of placement for first and last placement, citizenship status of parent and child, generational status of child (1st or 2nd generation), length of time in the child welfare system, and reunification and reentry outcomes. Reunification was defined as the child's return to the custody of the parent without a subsequent reentry into the foster care system within the 6 months following case closure. Qualitative data collection instruments included semi-structured interview guides for child welfare workers and parent participants (see Appendix C and D for interview guides).

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection from the administrative databases occurred by first merging child welfare and eligibility administrative data files. Using unique case identifiers, administrative data from both systems was generated and merged by county personnel in both counties and then provided to the PI and the CI. Interviews with child welfare workers were conducted by the PI and CI and took place at county offices, and were audio-recorded and transcribed. All interviews with parent participants were conducted in Spanish or Vietnamese by bilingual research assistants and were audio-recorded and then translated and transcribed into English. Interviews with parent participants took place either at the home of the parent or over the phone.

Results

Data Analysis Procedures

Research questions 1 and 2 were answered with descriptive and bivariate statistics, including chi-square and ANOVA. Research question 3 was answered using the multivariate Cox proportional hazards model. A multivariate model was not generated for the Vietnamese immigrant children in this study due to the small size. Research questions 4 and 5 were analyzed with content analysis procedures.

Research Question 1: What are the characteristics of Mexican and Vietnamese immigrant children and families involved in family reunification services?

- Mexican immigrant children were found to be significantly older than non-immigrant children at time of case opening and Mexican immigrant mothers were found to be significantly older than non-immigrant mothers at time of case opening. Significantly more Mexican immigrant mothers were unauthorized immigrants than were Vietnamese immigrants (see Table 3 in Appendix E).
- Significantly more Mexican immigrant children experienced emotional abuse, physical abuse or sexual abuse than non-immigrants.
- The most common types of abuse among Vietnamese children were caretaker absence/incapacity, and physical abuse.
- Significantly more Mexican immigrant children were placed in a group home as their first placement than non-immigrants, and fewer Mexican immigrant children were placed with relatives as their first placement than non-immigrant children.
- Significantly more Mexican immigrant children were placed in a foster home as their last placement than were non-immigrant children; more Mexican immigrant children were placed in a group home as their last placement than were non-immigrant children; and fewer Mexican

immigrant children were placed with relatives as their last placement than non-immigrant children

- The majority of Vietnamese immigrant children were first placed in foster care, however most had moved to relative care for their last placement.
- Significantly more Mexican immigrant children had just one out-of-home placement than Vietnamese immigrant children and non-immigrant children.
- No significant differences were found between the groups for the number of previous referrals or the number of previous referrals that were substantiated.
- Mexican immigrant children spent significantly fewer months in the child welfare system than did non-immigrant children.

Research Question 2: Are there differences in the rate of reunification between Mexican immigrant, Vietnamese immigrant, and non-immigrant children involved in family reunification services?

- A significantly higher proportion of Mexican immigrant children (70.7%) were reunified than non-immigrant children (43.1%). Results from the Cox proportional hazards model comparing Mexican immigrant and non-immigrant children indicated that Mexican immigrant children (i.e. mother born in Mexico) were 1.63 times more likely to be reunified than non-immigrant children after controlling for other covariates in the model (see Table 4 in Appendix F).
- No significant bivariate differences were found between Vietnamese immigrant children and Mexican immigrant or non-immigrant children.

Research Question 3: What factors are related to reunification among Mexican immigrant, Vietnamese immigrant, and non-immigrant children?

- Mexican immigrant children with three or more placements were less likely to be reunified than children with one placement (see Table 5 in Appendix G);
- Mexican immigrant children whose mothers had authorized citizenship status were more likely to be reunified than children whose mothers were unauthorized immigrants;
- Mexican immigrant children whose mothers spoke Spanish as their primary language were more likely to be reunified than children whose mothers spoke English as their primary language; and
- Mexican immigrant children from Santa Cruz County were more likely to be reunified than children from Santa Clara County.

Research Question 4: What strategies may improve the availability of services for Mexican immigrant and Vietnamese immigrant parents?

Overall, most parent participants reported that they did not have problems accessing services.

Qualitative findings from the child welfare worker and parent interviews indicated five themes related to strategies to improve the availability of services for Mexican and Vietnamese immigrant parents:

- 1) Increasing Worker Trainings to Enhance Cultural Competency (Worker and Parent Interviews)
- 2) Hiring more Bilingual and Bicultural Workers (Worker and Parent Interviews)
- 3) Addressing Issues of Access to Services for Spanish and Vietnamese Speaking Parents (Worker and Parent Interviews)
- 4) Addressing Issues of Access for Unauthorized Mexican Immigrant Families (Worker Interviews)
- 5) Easing the Significant Service Burden Families Experience (Parent Interviews)

Research Question 5: What services may improve the likelihood of reunification among Mexican immigrant and Vietnamese immigrant families?

Qualitative findings from the child welfare worker and parent interviews suggested four themes related to services that may improve the likelihood of reunification among Mexican immigrant and Vietnamese immigrant families involved in family reunification services:

- 1) Importance of Parenting Education Services (Worker and Parent Interviews)
- 2) Importance of Parent Orientation Classes for Vietnamese Families (Worker Interviews)
- 3) Importance of Substance Abuse Treatment (Parent Interviews)
- 4) Prevention and Community Education (Worker and Parent Interviews)

Discussion

This project examined family reunification among Mexican immigrant, Vietnamese immigrant and non-immigrant children, and identified promising practices to improve service availability and effectiveness. **Aim #1: Characteristics of Mexican Immigrant and Vietnamese Immigrant Children Involved in Family Reunification Services**

Mexican immigrant children were more likely than non-immigrant children to have experienced physical abuse, sexual abuse or emotional abuse. The finding regarding sexual abuse is consistent with previous research that has found relatively high rates of sexual abuse among Mexican immigrant children involved in the child welfare system (Kuehn et al., 2007; Vericker et al., 2007a, 2007b). The finding regarding physical abuse is consistent with the qualitative findings from parent participants indicating that parenting classes that teach alternatives to physical discipline were the most helpful service for them. In addition, Mexican immigrant children were more likely than non-immigrant children to be placed in foster care or a group home as compared to relative care, which is consistent with previous research (Kuehn et al., 2007; Vericker et al., 2007a, 2007b). This finding may suggest that Mexican immigrant families do not have available relatives, or that if relatives are available they are not deemed appropriate as caregivers.

Overall, the Vietnamese immigrant sample (N = 32) was smaller than anticipated, which may suggest that Vietnamese immigrant children become dependents of the court at a relatively low rate. A study of the Informal Supervision program in Santa Clara County found that Asian/Pacific Islander families tend to receive Informal Supervision services at more than double their rate in family reunification services (Osterling, Sims, Tyminski, & Radillo, 2009). These findings may suggest that Vietnamese children may be reported to the child welfare system for suspected child maltreatment, but that they are commonly offered diversion services as opposed to having a child removed. This finding is consistent with one study of Vietnamese children in Los Angeles that found that the majority of children were offered family maintenance services, rather than family reunification services (Rhee & Chang, 2006).

Among the Vietnamese immigrant children in this sample, the most common type of

maltreatment leading to entry into care was caretaker absence or incapacity, which may be related to parental substance abuse. This finding is consistent with the qualitative findings indicating that substance abuse services were particularly helpful for Vietnamese parents who reunified. Physical abuse was the second most common type of maltreatment among Vietnamese immigrant children, a finding that is consistent with previous research (Pelczarski & Kemp, 2006; Rhee & Chang, 2006). Almost all Vietnamese immigrant children were placed in foster care as their first placement; however over 50% of these children moved to relative care for their last placement, suggesting that among these Vietnamese immigrant families, the majority has extended family in the area available to provide substitute care.

Aim #2: Comparison of reunification outcomes among Mexican immigrant, Vietnamese immigrant, and non-immigrant children involved in family reunification services

A significantly higher proportion of Mexican immigrant children (70.7%) were reunified than non-immigrant children (43.1%), and this finding remained even after controlling for case characteristics. The significantly higher rate of reunification among Mexican immigrant children may seem surprising at first, given the additional barriers to accessing services that were identified in the qualitative findings. However, it should be noted that among the parent participants, who had all reunified, most reported that they did not have problems in accessing services. The rate of reunification among Vietnamese immigrant children was nearly 54%, which was higher than the rate for non-immigrants, but was not statistically significant.

Aim #3: Identification of factors related to successful reunification among Mexican and Vietnamese immigrant, and non-immigrant children

Mexican immigrant children whose mothers were authorized immigrants were more likely to be reunified than children whose mothers were unauthorized immigrants. This finding may reflect problems in accessing services among unauthorized immigrants, which was noted in the qualitative findings. Findings also revealed that children whose mothers spoke Spanish as their primary language were more likely to be reunified than children whose mothers spoke English as their primary language. This is somewhat counterintuitive, given the qualitative findings indicating a need to address problems in accessing Spanish-language services. It may be that Mexican immigrant mothers who were identified as having English as their primary language would have been more comfortable with Spanish-language services, even though their English language proficiency was presumably good. In addition, Mexican immigrant mothers identified as having English as their primary language were likely paired with English-speaking social workers, and it is possible that outcomes would have been improved if families could speak in Spanish to their social workers.

Aim #4: Identification of strategies to improve availability of services for Mexican immigrant and Vietnamese immigrant parents

Qualitative findings suggested the importance of culture and language in accessing services and in service effectiveness. Workers emphasized the need for social workers to be bilingual, as well as bicultural. This cultural knowledge was described as vital by both workers and parents in forming a working relationship between worker and parent. In addition, both workers and parents described the need to increase services for Spanish and Vietnamese speaking parents. Workers also emphasized the need to develop strategies to address issues of access for Mexican immigrants with unauthorized citizenship status, which is consistent with the above presented quantitative finding. In addition, parents reported challenges in attending all of the services on their case plan, while also trying to maintain employment.

Aim #5: The identification of services that may improve the likelihood of reunification among Mexican immigrant and Vietnamese immigrant families involved in family reunification services.

Qualitative findings indicated that both workers and parents identified parenting education services as particularly helpful with regards to learning new parenting strategies and understanding American cultural expectations about parenting. Workers identified the parent orientation class as particularly helpful for Vietnamese immigrant parents. Parents with substance abuse problems identified substance abuse services as the most helpful service for them. Workers emphasized the need to provide more education to immigrant communities about American cultural expectations about parenting and the role of the child welfare system, and parents discussed their unsuccessful attempts to find services prior to their entry into child welfare.

Limitations, Lessons Learned and Future Research

There are three main limitations to this research. First, the match rate between CWS/CMS and CalWIN data was 65% and 59% in the two counties, which means that a number of cases were not included in the study. Second, the qualitative child welfare worker sample was chosen with non-probability sampling and it is not known if the perspectives expressed by the workers are representative of all workers who work with immigrant families in both counties. And lastly, the qualitative parent sample of successfully reunified families was also chosen with non-probability sampling. Therefore, the parent sample for this study may not be representative of all reunified Mexican and Vietnamese immigrant parents involved in family reunification services. Future studies need to utilize more representative samples of immigrant families and workers across geographical locations and to test the effectiveness of specific family reunification services for both Mexican immigrant and Vietnamese immigrant families, as well as the effects of social worker cultural competency.

Policy Implications

There are seven main policy implications from this study.

- 1) There is a need to continue efforts to enhance cultural competency of social workers, to hire more bilingual and bicultural workers, and to increase available Spanish and Vietnamese language services for parents involved in the child welfare system.
- 2) There is a need to identify strategies to improve access to services for Mexican immigrant parents with unauthorized citizenship status.
- 3) There is a need to identify strategies to ease the service burden for immigrant families and ensure that services are appropriately matched to the families' needs.
- 4) Based on the effectiveness of parenting education services identified by Mexican and Vietnamese immigrant parents, families may benefit from prioritization of parenting services on their case plan.
- 5) Since the orientation to the child welfare system was identified as helpful for Vietnamese immigrant families, it would be useful for other counties to implement such a service for immigrant families.
- 6) Substance abuse treatment for some immigrant families may be an important service related to reunification. Therefore, substance abuse services may need to be available in their native languages.

More outreach, prevention and community education with the Mexican immigrant and Vietnamese immigrant communities is needed.