

INVISIBLE TOLLS OF IMMIGRATION: MENTAL HEALTH AMONG YOUNG IMMIGRANTS

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INTRODUCTION

Hispanic immigrants make up a significant portion of the people living in the United States. Many of them have experienced the extremely difficult and often traumatic process of immigration. Notably, Hispanic immigrants are generally younger than other immigrant groups¹. Despite this, there is little research on the effects of immigration on the mental health of children who endure this process with or without their families. Until now, this issue has been widely ignored by public health officials and politicians. Therefore, this review of existing literature will focus on the experiences of Hispanic immigrants, specifically children, and how these experiences shape their mental health.

METHODS

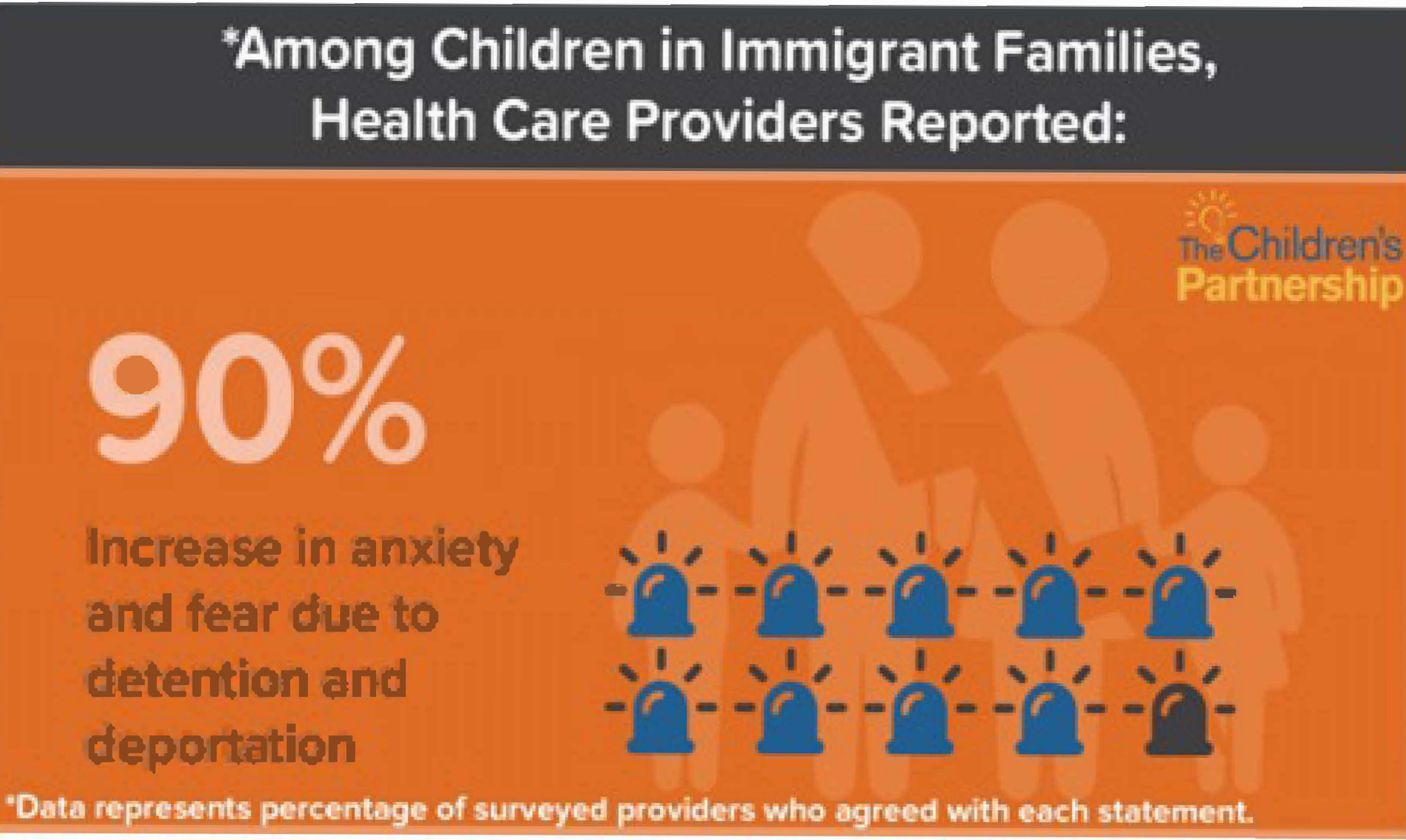
This project was originally completed in Spanish as part of the Spanish for Health Professions (SPN3036) course. The database, PubMed, was searched using keywords relevant to the topic of interest. More specifically, the studies discussed the prevalence of mental illnesses including but not limited to depression, anxiety, and drug addiction among immigrant youth. Studies were considered reliable sources if they have been published in peer-reviewed journals. Additionally, studies that explored methods of preventing mental illness in immigrant children were referenced.



Organizations for the mental health of immigrants.
Source: <https://www.verywellmind.com/mental-health-resources-for-people-who-immigrated-to-the-united-states-3079531>.

RESULTS

A study by Cleary et al. explored the effects of trauma experienced before, during, and after immigration on the mental health of young immigrants (12-17 years old). It was found that 20% of children report experiencing at least one traumatic event during migration while 18% experienced a traumatic event after arriving to the United States². The most commonly reported traumas included natural disasters followed by serious injuries and witnessing/experiencing violence. Furthermore, this study found that trauma, during and after migration, was correlated with a significantly higher prevalence of depression and post-traumatic stress disorder in children².



Increased incidence of anxiety seen in children of immigrants.
Source: <https://childrenspartnership.org/what-we-do/healthy-mind-healthy-future/>

Similarly, a study by Lo et al. explored how various socioeconomic factors affect the mental health of immigrant children. They found that poverty as well as discrimination due to language barriers were correlated with significantly increased incidence of depression and low self-esteem³. Furthermore, previous studies have found that trauma during migration and discrimination after arriving in the United States are major sources of mental illnesses such as attention deficit disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, and chronic panic attacks⁴. The fear of deportation and separation from their families was reported among the primary causes of anxiety among young immigrants.



Immigrant youth at a border retention center.
Source: <https://www.latimes.com/espanol/eeuu/articulo/2019-09-04/alertan-por-trastornos-en-ninos-migrantes-en-estados-unidos>.

DISCUSSION

While the risk of mental illness is significantly higher among young immigrants or children of immigrants, the need for further research remains. One potential reason for the lack of attention to this topic is the stigma surrounding mental illness among Hispanics and other immigrant communities. Additionally, socioeconomic factors generally preclude immigrant families from undergoing routine mental health exams that can help identify mental illnesses in children. Moreover, mental health

exams in the United States are primarily catered towards white children and are not sufficiently tested on Hispanic children⁵. Such systemic issues must be addressed and resolved by public health officials in order to better detect and diagnose mental illnesses in the immigrant community. Politicians should also work to create programs that bring attention to such issues and educate immigrant communities about the risks and treatments of mental illness².

CONCLUSIONS

- Most young immigrants experience at least one traumatic event during or after immigrating to the United States.
- Immigrant youth are at higher risk for mental illnesses such as depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder.
- One cause of mental illness among immigrants is discrimination due to language and cultural barriers following their arrival to the United States.
- Mental health exams must be reviewed and updated to consider the disparities that exist between white and Hispanic children.
- The stigma surrounding mental health in Hispanic communities must be eliminated to improve the treatment of children suffering from mental illness.

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