

research snapshot

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Stress of Immigration Can Be a Risk Factor for Child Abuse

What is this research about?

Research shows that minority children who suffer from abuse have a harder time than abused white children. The child welfare system often treats minority children differently than their white counterparts. However, little is known about how a person's status as a minority affects her experiences in the child welfare system. This is a problem since child welfare workers need to have a firm understanding of families who are both immigrants and members of minority groups. They need to know how the process of migration and being a minority impacts on families and children.

What did the researchers do?

Researchers at York University, Wilfrid Laurier University, and the University of Toronto looked at the experiences of South Asian immigrants to Canada who came into contact with the child welfare system. Most of the immigrants spoke English, though many weren't fluent. A majority were unemployed, and more than half had a college or university degree. Some of these immigrants had had fights with their teenage children over issues related to discipline and the new culture in which the teenagers were taking part. Some of the teenagers had been engaged in extreme risk-taking. Mental health issues had afflicted a few of the parents. There also were cases of neglect, domestic violence, and sexual abuse.

What you need to know:

Immigrant families that come into contact with the child welfare system face a number of challenges: loneliness, financial struggles, language struggles, struggles to provide for the family, and a sense of betrayal and hopelessness.

What did the researchers find?

Immigrants who come into contact with the child welfare system face a number of challenges. Lacking the support of an extended family, many immigrants feel a great sense of loneliness. Many struggle to find work and upgrade their education. A limited income often leads to tension between parents and older children.

A difficulty speaking English makes it hard for immigrants to find jobs. Immigrants often attend English as a second language (ESL) classes to help secure work or get ahead in their field. But many also note the problem of wanting to study to attain a better job and being held back by the need to support their family. They often work long hours, doing shift work or work of lesser status. Child care can be hard to find. Discrimination is rampant. Because of these struggles, immigrants can experience a lot of stress, which can create situations that result in the intervention of child protection services. A number of immigrants express a profound sense of betrayal

about the way their lives have turned out in Canada. Many of these migrated with a lot of hope for a better life for themselves and their children. Many left difficult situations and expected to become settled in Canada and gain new opportunities.

The Conservation of Resources (COR) theory of stress can help explain the experiences of some immigrants. Migration inevitably involves the loss of important resources: one's home, job, and social support, among other things. As a result, immigrants can lose a sense of mastery – a sense of competence and self-esteem. This overall spiral of loss can have an impact on their family life and lead to conflict.

How can you use this research?

Newcomers to Canada should be linked up with others who share their culture and language and who can give support. Quality and affordable housing needs to be made available. Newcomers should also be provided with information about the new culture and its norms as soon as possible. ESL classes should be available and accessible to all. Great efforts must be made to discourage employers from discriminating against people who have foreign training and experience. Helping to stop the loss of resources will give newcomers a sense of mastery, self-esteem, and support. This will reduce the sort of conflicts that require the intervention of child welfare services. Child welfare professionals need to look for the resources that immigrant families do possess and help them access these resources. Community agencies that push for more ESL classes and more immigrant support will help reduce the need for child welfare services.

About the Researchers

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