

Anxiety and PTSD in Latino Children of Immigrants: The INS Raid Connection to the Development of These Disorders

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INTRODUCTION: For many years, social workers have been acutely aware of the impact of poverty and marginalization on the emotional, psychological, and physical health of children and adolescents. Among our country's newest citizens, are thousands of Latino children and adolescents, born in the United States, whose parents are foreign born. Their families live in constant hiding and fear of discovery, prolonged incarceration, and eventual deportation. Our newest citizens, the Latino children, live in constant fear and terror that their mother or father will be taken, will disappear, and will never be seen again. They carry and express this terror daily both verbally and with their actions. They take it to school with them daily, to bed with them every night, and it is constantly present in every interaction they have with others. The level of chronic stress and fear experienced is what anxiety disorders and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) are made of. In fact, their normal reactions to the very real threat of separation/abandonment *are*, by definition, the same as the definition of a diagnosable anxiety disorder. INS raids are bad for the developing children who need the love and safety of their parents and family to be present and assured so they are free to be children and to grow.

The authorities and our elected officials, often focus on the undocumented immigrant but seldom on the daily plight of the innocent child or teenager. Latino children have become victims of government policies that threaten the integrity of their families and that deny their existence and their human need for their parents.

Latino children are citizens of the United States and will grow up in this country and be this nation's next generation. The INS raids are forcing them to grow up in fear and with extreme chronic stress. They are frequently referred to community based treatment facilities with symptoms of Anxiety Disorders including Generalized Anxiety and Post Traumatic Stress, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, Selective Mutism, and Regressed Behavior.

Latino children need your advocacy and need you to be a voice for them and for their families. The ethics of our profession dictate that we say no to government policies that terrorize innocent children and teenagers and that threaten them with parental abandonment and rejection on a daily basis. As social workers it is time to proactively educate elected officials and to assist them and demand from them that policies have vision and compassion. Your voice must say no to the psychological abuse and neglect of these children.

As social workers and mental health experts, we are in a position to demand that our nation respond to the plight of the undocumented parent with compassion and understanding and with pro-active policies that create an environment where Latino children can feel safe, supported and can grow and prosper. In doing this we will be creating a sound and stable future generation.

This article will define Anxiety Disorders and PTSD as seen in children, and will provide a framework for understanding that the mental health of Latino children is being jeopardized by INS raids of Latino families. It will connect the symptoms experienced by children and teens to the chronic stress, fear, and anticipatory anxiety they live with daily...a fear that is real. It will support the notion and only pro-active and compassionate policies make sense and are needed in building our next generation.

ANXIETY DISORDERS: As previously mentioned, the current problems faced by many Latino children relative to real fear and stress over potential family loss are, by definition, the same as what the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, define as diagnosable symptoms of an Anxiety Disorder in Children. We can clearly argue that our current social policies and how they are impacting on Latino children through INS raids are, in fact, creating anxiety disorders in our children. The criteria for diagnoses, is presented below next to the “bullets”. Following each criterion, in *italics*, is a reflection of current circumstance in the daily life of Latino children.

They are as follows:

- Constant thoughts and intense fears about the safety of parents and caregivers
Latino children worry that their mother or father will be taken away or will fall victim to violence.
- Refusing to go to school
Due to marginalization and also due to learned hyper vigilance. This is more common in teens who experience hopelessness and also who feel they must be responsible for younger siblings if parents are taken or hurt.
- Stomach aches and other physical complaints
Latino children describe these symptoms as well as headaches and muscle aches and pains.
- Being overly clingy
Fear of separation due to anticipated possible loss or violence. Regressed behavior.
- Panic or tantrums related to having to separate from parents

Often described in referrals of school personnel to community treatment facilities.

- Trouble sleeping or nightmares

Hyper vigilance is frequently present in Latino children and teenagers. If left untreated it results in more serious mental health and physical problems.

- Fear about a specific thing

Afraid of losing their parents and families. Afraid of foster care placement. Afraid of the “unknown”. Afraid of violence directed at their parents and/or themselves and their siblings.

- Fear that causes significant distress

Frequently a presenting problem in treatment.

- Fear of meeting or having to talk to particular people

Afraid of anyone who comes to their door. Afraid of school personnel. Afraid of treatment professionals. Afraid of all or most authority figures. Families frequently seek refuge in the Church as it is the institution that historically has protected the family in their countries of origin.

- Avoidance

Avoid contact with adults, particularly non-Latino adults and most authority figures.

- Having few friends

Related to issues of poverty and marginalization.

- Worries over things before they actually happen

Chronic worry over parents being taken or harmed. This fear heightens when news media show clips of INS raids or violence targeting Latinos.

- Constant worries or concerns about family

Fear of losing their families and being victims of violence.

- Repetitive or unwanted thoughts (obsessions) or actions (compulsions)

Over time, and given genetic pre-disposition, children can also develop

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder an anxiety disorder that requires on-going treatment.

- Fears of embarrassment

Caused by marginalization and poverty.

- Low self esteem or lack of self confidence.

Also caused by marginalization and poverty coupled with their families

being the target of possible INS raids and also community violence and rejection.

The National Center for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) further defines criteria for the development of this disorder in children. It states that children and teenagers can develop PTSD when exposed to “a threat involving one’s or another’s life or physical integrity and that this exposure caused great fear, helplessness, or horror”. As is clear, this is the plight of the Latino child and teenager and it is therefore no wonder that more and more children are exhibiting such symptoms.

Latino children, like all children, need the freedom and safety to just be children and to grow. The energy the child must invest in managing and coping with their fear and stress is energy that is lost to them relative to their cognitive, emotional, psychological, and academic development. Chronic anxiety impedes children from

moving effectively through the many stages of human development (per Erickson) and can hinder a child or adolescent from eventually attaining mature relationships and mature functioning in their adult life. This causes problems for them, their families, their future children, and for all of society.

SUMMARY: The relationship between chronic fear and stress and the development of anxiety disorders and PTSD, as well as resultant delayed human development (difficulty meeting developmental milestones), is clear. Current social policy in the form of INS raids is seriously impacting on the mental health of Latino children and adolescents and is something that requires immediate advocacy and education. Social workers can and should take the lead in informing elected officials and in holding government accountable for humane treatment of citizens. If the Latino child, our newest citizen, is to have a chance to fully contribute to this nation as a future adult, the emotional needs and feeling of safety and belonging of Latino children must be protected. Policies that show compassion, that strive to keep families united, and that support diversity are needed immediately so that the Latino child and all children have an opportunity to grow and develop to their full potential.

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