

A Closer Look at Immigration

IMMIGRATION REFORM TOOK CENTER STAGE LAST SPRING as hundreds of thousands of immigrants from Latin America and elsewhere filled American streets to protest proposed legislation widely seen as harsh and punitive. The immigrants' numbers and fervor took many by surprise, but Luis Zayas, the Shanti K. Khinduka Distinguished Professor of Social Work and professor of psychiatry at the School of Medicine, finds nothing historically unusual in today's migrations.

BETSY ROGERS: What are the roots of the immigration issue?

LUIS ZAYAS: Immigrants are fleeing conditions in their countries. As people have for centuries, they look for places where they can feed and clothe and shelter their families and advance their children's futures. We're seeing nothing that different from centuries of immigration across countries.

Many of our immigrants—regardless of country or continent—are often less skilled and less educated, but they

By Betsy Rogers



Photo by Geoff Story

are very talented. They're hardworking and they bring an excellent work ethic. They are willing to risk, not knowing where they might live or how they might survive. But they either learn a trade or have some skills they put to use, in landscaping, restaurant work, farming, and other industries. A segment of this immigration group is made up of skilled professionals, too, such as physicians, accountants, lawyers, and merchants—whose countries' economies cannot sustain them. But they have skills we can use. This immigrant labor force is an important element in our economy. We cannot find people to work farms and factories and slaughterhouses.

BR: What do you make of the current immigration debate?

LZ: The vitriolic rhetoric is really unprecedented, at least in my lifetime. There has been this assumption, for instance, that people must learn English immediately. That was not expected of other groups, whether it was the Italians in their enclaves or the Eastern Europeans who maintained their cultures. It was their children who learned English. So the level of tolerance has seemed to decline; we forget that in other groups assimilation usually took a generation. Why we should expect a more recent group to speed up that process is not clear to me.

BR: How does the immigrant experience impact mental health?

LZ: We can see from research that many immigrants have high levels of depression. They are removed from their families, there is hostility to them, and there is a danger of identification and deportation. There is a phenomenon called the Hispanic Paradox: immigrants come into this country with much better health status than those who are here for a long time. So there's something about

living in the United States that begins to erode the immigrant's health and mental health. We're also finding that a good 40 percent of the people surveyed in a recent study had not gone to any government, health, or social service agency for fear of deportation, so they might not be getting services in spite of need.

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BR: Does the rhetoric contribute to mental health problems?

LZ: We haven't been able to make a direct correlation between the debate and Hispanic mental health in particular, although we have indirect markers that the controversy keeps people from getting services they desperately need. We have seen over many years, though, the deleterious impact of discrimination on mental health, where hopelessness, helplessness, and depression are frequent. There have been studies on African Americans and on the Japanese interned during World War II. We can only say that the effect would be the same for any person who feels discriminated against or persecuted.

BR: Does assimilation into American culture erode the Latino family?

LZ: We have to look at that more. People who immigrate, often young men or young couples, of course have to leave their families behind, their elders, their siblings, sometimes their own children, so there is less social support available to them. There is a splintering of families between those

who are left behind, those who are here, and those who migrate to other parts of this country. With acculturation, we see some elements of the culture erode and it affects the family as it adopts more of our "American" ways. However, there are other cultural elements that endure, even symbolic ones like music, art, culture, the

"quinceañera" (a coming-out party for 15-year-old girls akin to the Sweet 16). Not all is eroded. Adaptation is probably a better term.

BR: Latinos are indeed migrating and establishing communities in places where they never lived before. Is assimilation harder in North Carolina or Wisconsin than in traditional Hispanic communities in Miami or Los Angeles?

LZ: This is probably the most interesting aspect of immigration today. The need for labor in our agricultural industry has driven immigration to places like Iowa and North Carolina, where in the past farmers' children stayed on the family farm. Today they go to college and don't want to return to the farm, so these small communities begin to wither if they don't bring in workers. Now we see small communities growing in these places, which have not historically been gateways for immigrants. These communities, while at first looking at immigrants with some suspicion, have really embraced them. I'm not naïve: I know there is bias, but some of these communities are welcoming immigrants because

they work hard and fill in the labor force in a much-needed way. The question of whether it is harder or easier to assimilate will take time to answer as sociologists study these new communities more.

BR: What do you think immigration reform should include?

LZ: The current proposals (for a road to citizenship, guest workers, learning English, paying taxes) sound perfectly reasonable. These proposals offer hope; there is a promise. I have never met an immigrant of any culture or country who expects to come here and have things given to them. They are accustomed to earning their work; they expect to work and make a living. What they want is a chance to prove their worth. Citizenship, however long the road, seems a just reward.

It is impossible to deport 12 million people. And I do not think a wall is going to stop immigration. Yes, we need reform. But I do not think current ideas about putting the National Guard or the Minutemen or fences on the border will solve it. Immigrants and the children of immigrants are here to stay, and they are flourishing.

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BR: How is the immigration issue shaping social work research and education?

LZ: There are new lines of research—about the impact of immigration and fear of deportation, for instance. How does it affect peoples' lives? How does it affect their child-rearing? Their chil-

dren? We certainly need to look at this population "from the ground up" to understand how their lives are affected across the years and generations.

Today's social worker can't rely on the lessons of the past. We have to train them to understand and manage diversity in their practices and how this practice will be challenged by pressures brought by a diverse population.

BR: You head the School of Social Work's new Center for Latino Family Research. What are your hopes for the center in addressing these challenges?

LZ: We're developing this center to conduct research across the lifespan of the Latino population in the United States and in Latin America. We're operating from the importance and centrality of the family in Hispanic cultures. We want to bring in researchers who will help us understand Latino families so that we can help improve their situations.

Our other mission is to train doctoral and postdoctoral researchers in the United States and Latin America who will go on to study Latino families, whether it's social and community

development, economic development, mental health, health, or education. We hope these researchers will be faculty members at the great universities in the United States and Latin America, leaders in the research world.

There are other centers in the United States that we will partner with. We have begun to make connections in Latin America with universities in Nicaragua and Chile.

BR: So social work scholarship is globalizing. Is a global perspective important as well in understanding the human problems it addresses?

LZ: Globalization is very evident in our hemisphere. Telecommunications and air travel keep people in touch with their countries in ways that perhaps we haven't seen in the past. We can see how the health and social and economic successes and problems that people have, both here and in Latin America, might be deeply interconnected.

There are also social issues that come from people returning to their original countries. It is a smaller world, and globalization has brought us nearer together. Not only do we as social workers need to be concerned with the immigrants here, but we must think also about their families in their countries of origin. The suffering of family "back home" still affects deeply those who are here.

This is the right time for this new center because of the growth in immigration and the growth of the Hispanic population already here. We need to learn more about what the problems are. We need to find out the best way to serve these growing populations. Washington University is well suited to launch this endeavor. Any great university leads by its scholarship, by finding solutions to human problems. That's what this center will do. The timing is right and the place is great to address a group that's large, growing—and here to stay. ☺