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
are very talented. They're hard-working and they bring an excellent work ethic. They are risking to risk, not knowing where they might live or how they might survive. But they either earn 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 coun-
tries’ 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 main-
tained their cultures. It was their chil-
dren who learned English. So the level of tolerance has seemed to decline; we forget that in other groups assimila-
tion usually took a generation. Why should we 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 identi-
fication and deportation. There is a phenome-
on called the Hispanic Paradox: immigrants come into this country with much better health status than those who are here for a long time.

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who are left behind, those who are here, and those who migrate to other parts of this country. With accultura-
tion, we see some elements of the cul-
ture 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 proba-
bly a better term.

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 particu-
lar, 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 dis-

crimination on mental health, where hopelessness, helplessness, and depression are frequent. There have been studies on African Americans and 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 perse-
cuted.

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 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 worker, 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.

BR: How is the immigrant 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 people’s 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 affect-
ed 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 diver-
sity in their practices and how this practice will be challenged by pres-
sures brought by a diverse population operating from the importance and centrality of the family in Hispanic cul-
tures. 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 univer-
sities in the United States and in Latin America. We’re operating from the importance and centrality of the family in Hispanic cultures. We’re looking at research across the lifespan of this population “from the ground up” to understand how their lives are affected across the years and generations.

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.

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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 problem of a very large size—here and to stay.

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“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.”

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