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Framing immigration to and deportation from the United States: Guatemalan and Salvadoran families make meaning of their experiences

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The United States (US) deportation system and its recent applications have profound implications for the integrity and well-being of immigrant families. Since harsh policies were adopted in 1996, millions of non-citizens, mostly from Mexico and Central America, have been forced to leave the US. Despite the large numbers of people directly threatened by the deportation system, little is known about how it affects Central American immigrant children and families. A participatory action research project was designed in collaboration with local immigrant organizations to (1) document the impact of deportation policy on Guatemalan and Salvadoran immigrant families and (2) collaboratively develop services and advocacy that reflect local constructions of needs and strengths within these families. This paper reports analyses of interviews with 18 families; interviews explored participants’ experiences and meaning-making of detention, deportation, and other forces that threaten their families. Analyses of interviews demonstrate how participants construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct the significance of current risks posed by the US deportation system; how these risks intersect with other threats to families, including poverty, state-sponsored violence, and previous migrations; and participants’ responses to these risks. Implications for sustaining collaborative relationships toward enhancing human service work, community organizing, and redressing injustices are discussed.

Keywords: Guatemalan and Salvadoran immigrant families; deportation; poverty; migration; war; participatory action research

El sistema de deportaciones en Estados Unidos [EEUU] y su implementación reciente tienen implicaciones profundas para la integridad y el bienestar de las familias inmigradas. Desde que en 1996 se adoptaron políticas duras y severas, millones de inmigrantes no-ciudadanos, en su mayoría procedentes de México y Centro América, han sido obligados a salir de EEUU. Pese a la gran cantidad de personas sobre quienes pende la amenaza del sistema de deportación, se conoce poco sobre cómo el mismo afecta a los niños y familias inmigrantes Centroamericanos. En colaboración con organizaciones locales de inmigrantes se ha diseñado un proyecto de investigación acción participativa con el objeto de (1) documentar el impacto de la política de deportaciones en familias inmigrantes guatemaltecas y salvadoreñas y (2) de manera colaborativa, desarrollar servicios y promover políticas que reflejen los planteamientos que dichas familias hacen de sus propias necesidades y fortalezas. En este trabajo se plantea el análisis de entrevistas con...
18 familias, entrevistas que exploran la experiencia y construcción de significado que las y los participantes han hecho de las detenciones, deportaciones y otras amenazas que pesan sobre sus familias. El análisis de las entrevistas evidencia cómo las y los participantes construyen, de-construyen y reconstruyen el significado de los riesgos que actualmente plantea el sistema de deportación de EEUU; y cómo estos riesgos intersectan con otras amenazas que encaran las familias, entre las cuales se encuentran la pobreza, la violencia emanada del Estado y las migraciones previas, así como las respuestas de los participantes ante dichos riesgos. También se analizan la sostenibilidad de relaciones de colaboración en el proceso de promover el trabajo de servicios sociales, de organización comunitaria y por la reparación de las injusticias incurridas.

Palabras claves: familias inmigrantes guatemaltecas y salvadoreñas; deportación; pobreza; migración; guerra; investigación acción participativa

United States (US) deportation policies threaten the integrity of immigrant families and pose risks to the emotional well-being of immigrant parents and children. A participatory action research (PAR) project was designed in collaboration with local immigrant organizations to document the impact of deportation policy, and other oppressive forces, on Salvadoran and Guatemalan immigrant families living in the Northeastern US, with the goal of facilitating collaborative policy development, advocacy, and actions to disrupt these injustices. While this project aimed specifically to document the threat of deportation, a central thesis that emerged was that current experiences of deportation must be understood within the context of related risks to these individuals and families, including economic marginalization (in country of origin and in the US); state-sponsored war and violence; internal and external migration; and divided and ‘mixed’ status families. We argue here that participating families’ current experiences of detention and deportation can only be understood and effectively responded to in relation to these intersecting historical and contemporary forces. Participants’ responses to policies and practices that threaten their families are central to the present analyses and suggested next steps.

Guatemalan and Salvadoran immigrants: here and there

Economic marginalization of Latinos in the United States (US)

Latinos represent the largest group of foreign-born migrants and the largest minority group living in the US (US Census Bureau, 2006). The Latino population in the US has grown dramatically since 1996 (when the population was approximately 28.4 million, 10.8% of US population), a year in which laws were implemented that significantly curtailed immigrant rights in the US (US Census Bureau, 1996). In 2007, 45.5 million (15.1% of US population) Latinos (US- and foreign-born) lived in the US (US Census Bureau, 2008a). Among non-citizen Latino adults residing in the US, approximately 55% are undocumented immigrants and 80% of whom come from Mexico or Central America (Passel, 2006). Salvadorans and Guatemalans constitute more than 60% of the two million Central Americans in the US (Davy, 2006). The majority of these individuals’ and families’ lives have been shaped by economic, social, and political marginalization both in the US and their countries of origin.

While many Central Americans migrate to the US in the hopes of prosperity, once they arrive in ‘el norte’ [the north] their lives are typically far from affluent.
Rather, immigrant families in general, and Latino immigrant families in particular, are more likely to be poor, lack health coverage, see their children drop out of school, and live in unsafe neighborhoods (Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2008). In 2007, 21.5% of Latinos in the US lived in poverty, up from 20.6% in 2006 (this is compared with 8.2% for non-Latino Whites, 24.5% for African-Americans, and 10.2% for Asian Americans (US Census Bureau, 2008).

Poverty and violence in country of origin; internal and external migration

According to the World Development Indicators (2005), in El Salvador in 2000 (the most recent year for which data are available), 31.1% of the population lived below US$1 a day and 58% lived below US$2 a day, whereas in Guatemala 16% of the population lived below US$1 a day and 37.4% lived below US$2 a day (World Development Indicators, 2005). For many Guatemalans and Salvadorans, this extreme poverty is inextricably tied to long histories of government repression; bloody civil wars; and state-sponsored violence (Black, Jamail, & Chinchilla, 1984; Diskin, 1985). In the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, the violence in Central America, in which the US played a central role (Leogrande, 2000; Schlesinger & Kinzer, 1982), destroyed crops, disappeared or murdered breadwinners, and decimated communities that collectively farmed and subsisted for generations (Betancur, Planchart, & Buergenthal, 1993; Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico [CEH], 1999). Many of the undocumented immigrants from Guatemala and El Salvador fled to the US during these three decades as refugees from state-sponsored violence and civil war (Davy, 2006; Hamilton & Chinchilla, 2001, see especially Chapter 2). However, because of the US Government’s supportive stance toward the Guatemalan and Salvadoran Governments during these decades, less than 3% of applicants from these countries received asylum (Menjivar & Abrego, 2009).

External migration (e.g., to Mexico and the US) was often preceded by internal migration, for example, to cities or to coasts to work on fincas [large plantations], where fair wages tended to be scarce, while exploitation was commonplace (Armstrong & Shenk, 1982; Wilkinson, 2002). As significantly, armed conflict and more recent international trade agreements, e.g., Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), have placed additional economic pressures on peasant families (Cohen, 2006; Washington Office on Latin America [WOLA], 2003). When internal migration fails to produce economic security, individuals may decide to migrate north. Despite the signing of Peace Accords in El Salvador in 1992 and in Guatemala in 1996, migration from these two countries persists. Those who decide to leave homeland and family, incur substantial debt for crossing and risk a dangerous route to the US, do so in large part because they lack the economic opportunities needed to sustain their families in country of origin (Smith, 2006). They are sometimes lured by US companies eager for a low-wage, exploitable workforce, and motivated by the hope of sending remittance money home to build houses, send children to school, and feed loved ones (Champlin & Hake, 2006; Smith, 2006).

Separations in divided families

Extreme poverty, exploitation in country of origin, and state-sponsored violence have divided many Central American families. What appear to many in the
dominant US society as ‘choices to migrate’ are rather structurally generated separations that stem largely from systemic inequalities, deeply imbedded in historical relations between Central American countries and the US (Cohen, 2006; Leogrande, 2000), that constrain families’ economic, emotional, and physical viability in the country of origin (Schmalzbauer, 2004). Research has found that migration-related separation results in negative psychological and psychosocial consequences for children (e.g., grief and loss, academic decline, ‘acting out’ behavior, poor self-esteem, and depression; Jones, Sharpe, & Sogren, 2004), as well as for parents (e.g., sadness, guilt, loneliness, and anxiety; Suarez-Orozco, Todorova, & Louis, 2002).

New threats from shifting United States (US) immigration and deportation policies

Deportation policy and enforcement

This trend of people on the move is an international phenomenon (Nessel, 2008) and policies governing migration and deportation differ from country to country (for example, see Germany, Vogel, 2000; Italy and Spain, Calavita, 2007). In the US, immigration legislation beginning in the mid-1990s and implemented vigorously by the Bush Administration in a post-9/11 anti-terrorism environment has increasingly targeted non-citizens residing in the US, with significant consequences for individual, family, and community well-being. In the mid-1990s, under the Clinton Administration, the US Government passed laws that amplified the authority of the federal government to arrest, detain, and deport non-citizens (Hagan, Eshbach, & Rodriguez, 2008). These laws included the Illegal Immigrant Reform and Responsibility Act (1996) and the Anti-terrorism Effective Death Penalty Act (1996). These laws expanded the offenses for which a non-citizen could be deported, allowed for retroactive deportation, increased the categories of persons subject to ‘removal,’ and eliminated the range of judicial review and due process rights formerly available to immigrants. In 2001, following the attacks on the World Trade Center, the Bush Administration signed the US PATRIOT Act into law. By expanding the ability of the government to deport persons deemed ‘threats to national security’ and allowing for use of ‘secret evidence’ in such cases, the Act further marginalized non-citizens, increasingly labeling them as dangerous threats to the homeland (Kanstroom, 2008).

As a result, in large part, of the aforementioned legislation, between 2001 and 2004, 720,000 individuals were deported from the US, while over four million accepted ‘voluntary departure’ to their countries of origin; the vast majority came from Mexico and Central America (Office of Immigration Statistics, US Department of Homeland Security, 2006). The number of individuals before immigration courts in 2001 was 282,396, 78% of whom were ordered removed from the US; this number increased to 368,848, with 84% ordered removed in this year (Office of Planning, Analysis, & Technology, US Department of Justice, 2006). In addition to the wall being constructed at the Mexico–US border, control mechanisms have been transported into urban and rural communities hundreds of miles from the physical border (Kanstroom, 2008). Arrest and detainment of undocumented immigrants, in particular at places of work, have increased dramatically since 2001; between 2002 and 2006, the number of worksite arrests increased more than sevenfold (US

Effects of policies on children, families, and communities

The National Council of La Raza (NCLR, 2007), the largest US Latino Civil Rights and advocacy organization, studied three communities where large-scale workplace raids had occurred. They reported that in the immediate aftermath of the raid, a total of 500 children, mostly US-born citizens, were temporarily or permanently separated from parent(s). The communities experienced a state of crisis and chaos, while the subsequent impact of these raids and deportations for children and families included feelings of abandonment, symptoms of trauma, fear, isolation, depression, family fragmentation, and economic hardship (NCLR, 2007). The threat of deportation is particularly poignant for families of ‘mixed’ status. When the child is a US-born citizen and a parent is undocumented, the latter is forced to decide whether to leave a US-born child behind, or to uproot him/her from familiar linguistic and cultural communities (Hawthorne, 2007). Individuals who have not been detained or deported also experience the chronic state of vulnerability and insecurity of living in the US, as well as the loss of community and family members; this has negative effects on both emotional and physical health (Cavazos-Rehg, Zayas, & Sptiznagel, 2007).

While deportation policy poses a particular threat to Central American immigrant families, we argue that this threat is further complicated and exacerbated by multiple previous threats to these families. These include poverty, histories of state-sponsored violence and civil war, and previous internal and intergenerational migratory experiences. This paper explores participants’ experiences and understandings of these intersecting risks in order to better understand the current challenges faced by Guatemalan and Salvadoran immigrant families; these understandings then become the catalyst for developing more effective responses and recommendations for policy changes.

Purpose of the project

Despite the enormity of the deportation system, little systematic knowledge of the effects of deportation policies and practices on Guatemalan and Salvadoran
immigrant families has been generated. The current PAR project was designed to create collaborative spaces for bridging the growing chasms between citizens and non-citizens and for deepening a shared understanding of and response to injustices that immigrant families (many of which include US-born citizen children) face. Specifically, a team of university-based researchers, professors, and service providers in collaboration with local immigrant rights organizations sought to: (1) document how Guatemalan and Salvadoran families experience and respond to threats and lived realities of detention and deportation; (2) contextualize current risks to families within a socio-historical/socio-political and transnational framework; and, over time (3) collaboratively respond to current realities through community-based actions, policy development, and social advocacy. This PAR project forms part of a larger Post-deportation Human Rights Project (PDHRP), an initiative of the Center for Human Rights and International Justice at Boston College. This paper reports on the first phase of a larger PAR process focused on developing shared understanding of detention and deportation as experienced by a small group of Salvadoran and Guatemalan families. This initial phase is the first major collaborative initiative of a three-year ongoing, dynamic PAR process. In this paper, we also briefly discuss the iterative action–reflection processes and conclude with a number of emergent recommendations for researchers and service providers. In light of the ongoing nature of the collaborations described herein and the longer term applied objectives of the PAR process, it is critical to situate these analyses within that broader reflection–action process.

**Description of the participatory action research (PAR) project**

During this first phase, university-based researchers and two immigrant rights community organizations in Massachusetts agreed to an initial alliance and participatory research process to work toward the above-described objectives. To strengthen our alliance and the participatory processes, we developed collaborative activities or ‘actions’, for example, bimonthly support groups, leadership development workshops, and periodic meetings to discuss ongoing concerns of the action research process. A central action step in which we engaged throughout the project (i.e., simultaneous with data analysis and community meetings) was a series of interorganizational, community-led Know Your Rights (KYR) workshops. University-based lawyers and psychologists collaborated with community leaders and members to organize and realize these workshops, whose aim was to deliver information in participatory ways, e.g., through the use of participatory drama and small-group discussions. These collaborative experiences were opportunities for observation and participation. They enhanced shared knowledge of the effects of deportation and informed the understandings of the challenges in redressing the injustices confronted by participating families.

Leaders of the community-based organizations and university-based researchers met regularly to develop the research questions and to design a methodology, as well as to identify potential families whose adult member(s) would participate in the first phase of this PAR process (Reason & Bradbury, 2008). Project participants are members of the community organizations and were identified: (1) for their ability to strengthen the organization’s leadership and organizing potential; (2) because they had been directly or indirectly affected by detention or deportation; and (3) because
they had children between the ages of 5 and 16 who were living with them in the US. Only one of the participants was already a community organizer; it was hoped that, through the PAR process, the remaining participants would similarly assume leadership positions in their communities.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted between February and July 2008 and lasted between 45 minutes and two hours. The semi-structured interviews were conducted in Spanish by bilingual two-person research teams of one law student or professor and one social science student or professor. Based on earlier collaborations and some of the community-based activities described briefly above, it was agreed that participants might feel more comfortable revealing their histories, some of which involve previous deportations, to an interview team that included a law student or professor who, with supervision, was able to make a referral and/or advise participants about their legal rights when confronted by the police, immigration authorities, or other state officials. A subset of participants completed a second interview. At the time of the parent interview, researchers asked permission to interview children at a later date. Although six interviews with children were completed, this paper focuses exclusively on interviews with parents. For confidentiality and security reasons, participants were asked to give oral, not written consent for interviews and for tape recordings of the interviews. The interviews were transcribed by a Guatemalan native Spanish speaker; these Spanish-language transcripts contain no identifying information. Subsequently, selected quotations from the Spanish-language transcriptions were translated into English by a bilingual native English speaker for purposes of publication.

All interviewers were guided by a common set of questions about detention and deportation, but interviews were designed to elicit participants’ narratives in their own words. Question prompts were amended iteratively as the data were collected and preliminarily analyzed.

**Interpreting interviews**

Interpretive coding was used to inductively identify themes in the interviews; all codings were completed in Spanish. A bilingual team of university-based US and Latin American researchers, including the three co-authors, developed and revised themes and coded the interviews. Researchers identified in vivo codes, that is, themes that reflected as closely as possible the experiences of the participants. A coding template was developed and revised through discussion and consensus and then separate coders coded the interviews. Credibility and believability (Charmaz, 2006; Riessman, 2008) were achieved by having coders, one of whom has extensive expertise in Central America, engage in ‘constant comparisons’ within and across interviews; disagreements were resolved through discussions among all coders. Subsequently, the co-authors used NVivo8 to consolidate initially coded data into ‘tree nodes’ that allowed for enumeration and analysis of themes and the relationships among one another.

University-based researchers conducted feedback meetings with participants and other community members to conduct member checks and review preliminary findings. These meetings, which were subsequent iterations of the data analysis process described above, happened both midway and at the culmination of the research process. During these meetings, participants and community organization
members were invited to discuss the themes that emerged and the meanings we made of the data and explore alternative interpretations. These meetings are part of the ongoing participatory and action research process and also became spaces in which we explored new initiatives through which immigrants can be better prepared to respond to current realities; discussed how researchers and human service workers can more effectively accompany immigrants through these experiences; and brainstormed alternative policy initiatives. These research and action processes are iterative and facilitate strengthening relationships between collaborating community and university groups.

To further strengthen community members’ participation on the PAR process, community leaders co-presented with university-based researchers at a conference and a community report which explicated the themes from the research in accessible Spanish language was co-created and disseminated (PDHRP, 2009). In spite of these efforts, we recognize the predominance of the university-based researchers in the data analysis process. Because of the logistics of co-ordinating a multisite PAR project (Fuller-Rowell, 2009); challenges posed by the Internal Review Board (IRB) process; the priorities and interests of the community organizations and their members; and the unique challenges faced by undocumented participants (i.e., danger of driving without a license; inability to be formally paid through universities as research assistants), the above-described activities represent our best efforts at democratic processes.

Participants in the interview process

Interviewees included 18 Guatemalan and Salvadoran families living in Massachusetts and Rhode Island (see Table 1 for demographic data). While Guatemala and El Salvador differ in culture, ethnic groups, history, and relations with the US, these two Central American countries share histories of civil wars, state-sponsored violence, poverty, indigenous heritage, influence of US policies and involvement, and migration northward. One participating organization, of which five interviewed families are members, is located in a community that experienced a workplace raid by ICE in 2007 that resulted in the arrest of over 300 workers, many of whom were sent to Texas for detention, and the separation of between 100 and 200 children from their parents (Chaudry et al., 2010; NCLR, 2007). Significantly, 10 of the 12 Guatemalan participants came from El Quiché, a predominantly indigenous region north of Guatemala City, which experienced extreme bloodshed and destruction during more than 36 years of armed conflict that included the majority of over 600 of the massacres committed by the Guatemalan military during the war (CEH, 1999).

Eight of the 18 participating families (44%) had experienced the deportation of an immediate or extended family member; six families (33%) had an immediate family member detained; three families (17%) had undocumented children in the US; and seven families (39%) had both US-born children and children still living in their country of origin. One additional family did not complete the interview because they were deported after agreeing to participate. Another prospective participant declined to participate because her husband, who was detained during the large raid in 2007, died suddenly when he was deported back to Guatemala and subsequently returned to the US.
Analyses of interviews

Participants’ narratives are organized according to three interrelated themes that were identified through the coding processes described above: (1) detention and deportation: risks to children, parents, and families; (2) intersecting threats to families: extreme poverty, violence, and migration; and (3) participants’ responses to renewed threats.

**Detention and deportation: risks to children, parents, and families**

*Psychological effects of threats of deportation on parents and children*

Eight parents interviewed (44%) reported that actual or threatened deportation-related separation affected the psychosocial development of their children. Negative effects on children identified by their parents include academic problems (e.g., failing grades); depressive symptoms (e.g., sadness, crying, sleep, and appetite disturbance and lack of pleasure in previously enjoyed activities); anxiety symptoms (e.g., insecurity about the future, worry, fear, nightmares, and separation anxiety); developmental regression (e.g., speech difficulties); and behavioral difficulties (e.g., withdrawing and increased tantrums).

Parents indicated that their children received information about detention and deportation from a variety sources. Some children received information at school or from friends; Viviana2 recalled a classmate told her seven-year-old son: ‘How great you have your dad; mine is in jail’. According to their parents, children learned of threats to immigrant families through the Internet, observing images on the television, listening to news reports, watching the aftermath unfold in their families after a friend or family member was detained, and overhearing stories the adults shared amongst themselves. Julia, a woman who was in detention after a workplace
raid for nine days, described her two-year-old son’s reaction to scenes on the news of arrested immigrants in handcuffs and chains on legs, which he connected to his separation from his mother:

He said to me, ‘Mommy…’ He grabbed my clothes and brought me over to where the news was playing. Then he said, ‘Look, look!’ It was the people with the handcuffs. Immigration was grabbing them and everything… ‘Not you!’ he said to me.

Parents also reported that they themselves were emotionally affected by direct and indirect threats of deportation; this in turn affected their interactions with their children and thereby the children's development. Each of the 21 parents acknowledged the psychological toll of threats and experiences of deportation. Parents described their own sadness, loss of energy, feelings of hopelessness, crying, anxiety, lost sleep, weight loss and gain, anger, fear, hypervigilance, distrust, nightmares, and worry. Twelve participants (67%) described living in daily uncertainty and fear of deportation.

Parents indicated that their children are sensitive to and aware of their parents’ emotional states. Diana was arrested and issued a deportation order at her place of employment; she and her nine-year-old daughter now face orders of deportation. Diana described the days subsequent to her arrest:

The first days were hopeless for her [daughter] and for me… When a person is nervous, they pass that on to their kids… The first days I was nervous, he [husband] was nervous. ‘Mommy, why are you crying? Daddy, what’s going on?’

Maria, whose sister was detained in a large raid, described how her own changed emotional state (increased sadness and anger) affected her interactions with her six-year-old daughter. As a single undocumented parent of a US-born child, the fear of one day being forced to decide whether to leave her daughter or take her away from the only country she’s ever known, takes its toll, to the point that Maria sometimes thinks, ‘I want to die so I don’t have to keep suffering’. She noted she sometimes scolded her daughter for ‘any little thing’ without understanding why: ‘I feel like I’m not the same as I was before, when nothing was going on. Because before I was calm, there weren’t so many raids, police, nothing’.

**Detention, deportation, and family separation**

Among the families interviewed, 14 (78%) identified the experience and/or threat of detention and deportation as a threat to the family; Luisa stated: ‘It frightens me a lot…You can see that they [ICE] are separating families. They don’t care if a person has children. They only want to throw the illegal person out, without caring about the rest of the family’. Unlike migration, which at least on some level was actively decided upon and planned, deportation is externally imposed, sudden, and often unexpected. Parents described threats of separation due not only to immigration officials, but also due to actions by local and state police, making any movement outside the home a risk (Kobach, 2004). After local police, seeking a crime suspect described as Guatemalan, detained her undocumented husband in their search, Marta recalled, ‘I was so terrorized that I was afraid to go out into the street. Every
police car I saw, I thought they were going to catch me’. Jorge, a Guatemalan father of two US-born children who lives in a community that experienced a large workplace raid in 2007, described the anxiety he feels going to work, unsure of whether he will return safely to see his children: ‘Who knows if we will see each other again?...That’s a fear you have sometimes. Will I make it home after work?’

Moreover, the psychological effects of separation from loved ones are compounded by the limited information given to the family regarding the detained member’s whereabouts, as well as the rumors that spread quickly through the community (e.g., that the government takes one’s children). These effects extend to family members living in the country of origin where individuals and families also experience the sudden panic of losing contact with their family member and often go for weeks and even months with no information regarding loved ones’ whereabouts.

Among the six participants (33%) who had been detained or had an immediate family member detained, the anguish of separation from family members in the US, especially children, was prominent in the interviews. Separation is further compounded by restricted ability to visit family members in detention centers if one is undocumented and therefore at risk of being apprehended.

Separation from children during detention was forcefully articulated by Julia, who was arrested in a large workplace raid and transported to another state for detention, separating her from her two-year-old son. Julia was not able to place a phone call to her family for the first few days of her detention. She pleaded with immigration officials: her son had asthma, a condition for which he had previously been hospitalized and she alone could operate the oxygen machine. She reported that she was threatened by immigration officials that her child would be taken away if she continued to ask for ‘special treatment’, and was informed that her processing could take anywhere from one month to one year. She was separated from her son for nine days. According to Julia, post-raid her son exhibited unprecedented tantrums and nightmares; difficulty sleeping, eating, and speaking; and separation anxiety.

Economic and employment consequences of detention and deportation

Workplace raids, employer demands for legal documents, increased risk of driving without a license, and the recent economic downturn in the US contributed to under and unemployment for many participants. Eight participants (50%) discussed job insecurity. For example, Gloria, who left five children in Guatemala after an abusive husband abandoned her without a means to support her family, was recently laid off from the factory where she worked for two years because she was unable to produce legal documents; she is now unable to find employment: ‘The way the situation is now, there is no work, it’s very scarce. If you don’t have the right papers, you can’t get a job; if one has nothing, one gets nothing’. Participants without drivers’ licenses expressed fear of being pulled over and detained; without transportation to their jobs, many lose their job to competition. Four participants (22%) recounted unemployment experiences, while 10 participants (56%) reported underemployment. Competition for jobs and the vulnerability of living without papers led many participants to tolerate unfair pay, unsafe working conditions, extended hours, and lack of benefits; Jorge recounted:
It’s an injustice, because in this country [US] we are working humbly, not robbing anyone of anything, and they [companies] pay us whatever they feel like... Lots of companies take advantage of us, they tell us, ‘If you don’t like it, that’s fine. Get out of here’. They know we don’t have work papers.

Four participants (22%) noted that deportation of family members negatively affected their ability to thrive financially in the US and support family members abroad. Without the incomes of deported family members and roommates, particularly when they are still struggling to payoff the debts incurred in migration, remaining family members struggle to make ends meet, putting further stress on the transnational family unit.

While participants described detention and deportation as singular threats to individuals’ and families’ psychological and material well-being, they also related these to earlier and intergenerational assaults on their families, including extreme poverty, violence and war, and forced migrations. These additional threats, as described by participants, texture current experiences of detention and deportation.

**Intersecting threats to families: extreme poverty, violence, and migration**

**Poverty**

Just as poverty may be a consequence of deportation, it is a likely precedent of migration. Fifteen of 18 participating families (83%) cited poverty as the main reason for migrating to the US. They migrated despite having to leave children and other family members behind and risking sexual assault, hunger, thirst, abuse, and even death on the route to the US. Because of poverty, they migrated to an unfamiliar land and risked being treated as an ‘other’ and a criminal, with the threat of deportation. Participants described working since childhood for basic necessities. Poverty in their country of origin left many participating parents unable to afford children’s education. In rural Salvadoran and Guatemalan communities, parents have historically paid for education after the equivalent of US eighth grade and attendance typically requires sending children to towns or cities where costs include transportation and living arrangements. In addition, even when education is ‘free’, parents typically were required to pay for children’s books, school supplies, food, fiestas, and uniforms; these expenses historically precluded many parents from sending children to school (Cain & Daponte, 1999; Gorman & Pollitt, 1992). The cycle continues as uneducated children grow up to be poor parents, who are unable to send their children to school, which forecloses opportunities, and so on. One way to potentially break this cycle is to migrate to the US and send remittance money for children’s educations. Seven of the 18 (39%) parents stated that funding children’s education motivated them to stay in the US despite the changing political climate. Hence, poverty and limited opportunity in countries of origin motivate migration northward and, despite increasing risks of deportation in the past several years, they are motivated to stay by the opportunity to payoff debt and remit money home.

Poverty preceded and also resulted from the wars in Guatemala and El Salvador. Despite signing Peace Accords in Guatemala in 1996 and in El Salvador in 1992, the wars decimated local economies and the gross social inequalities that lay at the roots of these earlier conflicts remain unaddressed (Smith, 2006). In Mario’s case, soldiers killed his father, a small business owner. They robbed him and left Mario’s family...
without means of support. Poverty, resulting from war, drove Mario to migrate to the
US:

We endured hunger, poverty; we hardly had clothing for the babies to use each week.
Then coming here [US], seeing the blessings, you want to grab hold of that to be able to
give your children a life, a future, what you yourself never had.

Immigrants from Guatemala and El Salvador who cannot afford to pay coyotes’
(i.e., persons who guide undocumented immigrants from their country of origin
into the US) fees for transporting them to the US still must rely on them and, in so
doing, they incur huge debts, which they often finance by mortgaging whatever
property or land their family owns. In a characteristic example, Esteban worked
two jobs for a year and a half after coming to the US to payoff his debt. The
money immigrants earn typically flows in three directions: (1) to pay back money
borrowed to cross from country of origin into the US (which, according to our
research, can be as high as US$7000 with monthly interest rates ranging from 10 to
15%); (2) to cover living expenses in the US; and (3) to send remittance money
home. For some who cannot pay mortgages and forfeit their homes, the cycle of
debt and poverty is exacerbated in countries of origin. Thus, the gamble is great: if
one can stay in the US and maintain employment long enough, one can potentially
prosper economically; but if one is deported prior to having paid off one’s debt
(which is increasingly likely given employment difficulties noted previously), one
returns to the country of origin with her/himself – and family – in even a more
vulnerable state than when he or she left. Hence, poverty in country of origin both
motivates migration northward and also makes the consequences of deportation
more severe.

Violence
Like poverty, histories of violence both preceded migration and affected the ways
in which participants experience current threats of deportation. The late twentieth
century armed conflicts in Guatemala and El Salvador were prominent throughout
participants’ interviews. Nine of the 18 families (50%) spontaneously discussed the
fear, silence, and displacement of family that took place during la violencia [the
violent war years]. Eight families (44%) reported the murder of an immediate
family member during the years of armed conflict in their countries of origin. Two
male participants reported that they migrated to the US to avoid being forcibly
‘recruited’ into the armed forces. Four participants (22%) described decisions to
migrate to the US as related to loss of family security, land, and community that
followed from la violencia; Arturo recounts:

I left [Guatemala] approximately in the 1980s, as a result of the war. The army came
knocking on the door… to the home of my father… They told us that we belonged to
the mafia or to the guerrillas… This was not correct, and as result of this we could not
live in peace in that community, instead simply every day we lived in fear.

He later remembered the day that, along with his family, he was apprehended by
armed soldiers, interrogated, and tortured. Following this assault on his family,
Arturo sought refuge in Mexico and he later migrated to the US. Seven participants (39%) cited fear of returning to their country of origin as motivating them to stay in the US.

While violence prompted migration, participants also drew connections between the atmosphere during the violent years in their countries of origin and the current atmosphere in the US for immigrants. For example, Mario noted similarities between the current US atmosphere of suspicion, tension, and fear, and the Guatemalan climate of the early 1980s. His wife was detained in a large workplace raid and he described how an old wound, inflicted during la violencia in Guatemala, has been reopened:

What happened last year [raid]. . . It starts to open up the wound, or the fear, that you have held, because these things are not easy to erase. Because the wound is always there and when you open it, it burns anew.

Julia described the current assault on immigrants as a ‘second war’, noting that families are once again being displaced and communities broken: ‘If they are taking children away and everything, then for me, that’s a second war’. The current atmosphere of vulnerability and anxiety caused by deportation is especially poignant when considered against the historical backdrop of state-sponsored violence.

State-sponsored violence and poverty thus drove many Guatemalan and Salvadoran parents to decide to migrate to the US. Yet these decisions to migrate north were not without costs, including separations of families. Current risks to family integrity posed by deportation policies and practices should be understood within the context of these previous experiences of migration-related family separation.

Migration and the separation of families

Six participants (33%) noted that, before migrating north, they sought opportunities to sustain themselves and their families in different regions of their countries of origin. Jorge, for example, recounted how fear during la violencia, and the resulting poverty and destruction, led many Guatemalans to flee to the south coast, where they worked on fincas [plantations], a foreshadowing of the later migrations al norte [northward]:

The war started . . . Soldiers came, entered homes, there was fear. They fired guns, threw bombs. The people left running, they grabbed them all of a sudden. They started killing them, without [the people] having done anything. This is the fear . . . We left, we went as far as the south coast . . . the south coast where they plant sugar cane, cotton, cardamom, vegetables.

Participants recounted harsh work conditions, long hours, and wages that barely covered the expense of bus travel.

When participants decided to migrate northward, disconnection from family in countries of origin produced feelings of isolation, loneliness, and sadness. Thirteen of the interviewed families (72%) discussed migration-related separation. Seven of the 18 parents (39%) interviewed had left a total of 22 children in their country of origin and most had not seen them for many years. Marta, for example, left three daughters
in Guatemala. She hasn’t seen them in 14 years, communicating by telephone 1–2 times per week. While Marta reported that the remittance money she has sent home has funded each girl’s education, enabling them to advance economically in ways unknown to her, she acknowledged, ‘It’s not easy, 14 years of being here [US] without seeing my daughters’. Clara explained her decision to leave four children behind in El Salvador:

Still today I sometimes regret that I came [to the US] because there is nothing more important than your children. But at the same time, I know I’m achieving something…There are people who say, the laws say that a person who crosses [the border] is a criminal. It’s more criminal to let your children starve to death. If I have to lose my life, at least I wanted to try rather than let my children die of hunger.

The seven parents (39%) who had both children ‘allá’ [over there] and children ‘acá’ [right here], described watching their US-born children thrive and succeed in the US; learn and study English; have access to needed services such as healthcare, physical, and speech therapy; and experience opportunities that ‘allá’ do not seem possible. Many mentioned that these experiences left them reluctantly determined to stay in the US, in spite of having other children in their countries of origin. In Clara’s words: ‘My heart is divided; I have three [children] in my country and three here. I’m here because I want my kids to study and speak English, and not go through life cleaning bathrooms like I did’.

Hence, participants described the ways in which migration, a byproduct of poverty and violence, separates families. Participants observed the brutal irony of overcoming being separated from loved ones for years because of migration, only to face separation again due to deportation. Clara’s 14-year-old son recently migrated to the US and is now facing a deportation order that was issued when he was apprehended as he crossed the border. Clara confronts the question of whether she will return to El Salvador with him if he is ultimately deported. Despite wanting to comfort this son, Clara recalled her three US-born children and stated: ‘Understand me, this is why I suffer’. Again, the fear of separation from loved ones due to deportation is exacerbated by previous separations resulting from migration. The means by which participating families respond to these multiple forces that threaten their families will be considered next.

**Participants’ responses to renewed threats**

*Parents’ interactions with children*

Parents described ways in which they attempt to maintain a sense of calmness and normalcy to lessen the impact of deportation on their children. Diana’s husband described these attempts to protect their daughter from the reality of her and her mother’s deportation orders:

I think we are providing her with sort of a protection because, for example, our routine here is that I go to work, come home, if she’s awake I ask her about school…We’re searching for calmness in the home.
One means by which some parents perhaps seek to protect their children is through not communicating directly with them about deportation and threats to the family. Four of the participating parents (22%) indicated that they chose not to discuss deportation with their children. Particularly parents of small children felt it was inappropriate for children to have information about ‘adult’ happenings and worried children would be upset, concerned, or confused.

Knowing one’s rights

Eight participants (50%) related their growing awareness of their rights afforded under the UN Declaration of Human Rights, as well as under the US Constitution (i.e., Fourth and Fifth Amendments), and the resulting sense of empowerment. As a result of her arrest, Diana learned, ‘many things I didn’t know before. That we have rights too. I know that they can’t treat us like criminals, because we aren’t’. Learning that they had the right to refuse to sign documents, provide their names or country of origin, or allow the police to enter the home without a warrant provided some participants with some sense of control and power over an otherwise unpredictable and powerless-rendering threat. Jorge recounted studying labor rights and confronting his boss about their lack of vacation and holidays. When the boss replied that Jorge and his co-workers had no papers, Jorge replied, ‘No, but we do have rights’; the boss conceded and afforded the undocumented workers holidays and vacations. Knowing one’s rights is one means by which to potentially defend against injustice, particularly if it is done in a collective manner: ‘If we were united, learning what our rights are. We have rights, but we don’t know them, and so companies say, “Oh, these people don’t know anything”’.

Community organizing and breaking silence

Organizing to act and speaking out against the policies that threaten their families is complicated by wounds from the wars, as well as contemporary insecurities and threats. Julia, for example, described how indigenous Guatemalans were conditioned to believe that speaking out would result in death for themselves, families, and communities:

> We are all afraid, because I know our [indigenous] race, we all walk with fear like this. Because in our country we were threatened, the indigenous race was threatened in many ways. If one speaks, if you say something, they [government] said we have no right to do so, and so we never did.

Thus, organizing to take action against abuses of human rights is made more difficult by a history of repression and severe consequences for speaking out. Despite this history, two indigenous participants, Julia and Arturo, provided examples of community organizing and action. When a friend admonished Julia not to tell her story to our research team, lest she be placed in danger and deported to Guatemala, Julia responded:
Well, a part of that is true, I told her. But if we don’t speak, we’ll never get through this crisis, because we know we have a crisis. We are...how do you people call it, trauma? We are traumatized, and we’ve felt this way since childhood up to now.

Deciding to breakthrough silence, in 2008, Julia gave public testimony about her detention, separation from her son, and harsh treatment from ICE, including shackling and denial of access to food and a lavatory.

Similarly, Arturo framed deportation, employment exploitation, racism, xenophobia, and threats to the family as human rights issues, and asserted community consciousness raising, leadership development, and organizing responses. Arturo noted the importance of organizing as a unified front: ‘They hear you less if one person shouts, than if we shout together’. For Arturo, current organizing efforts are rooted in his history of organizing collective resistance during the years of armed conflict in Guatemala.

It is noteworthy that both Julia and Arturo, who spoke most eloquently about organizing and breaking silence, are in the process of applying for asylum. They have lawyers working on their cases, and while in process, they have some protection against deportation. It may be that, for the more vulnerable community members (i.e., those without legal status), organizing and telling one’s story — including to well-meaning researchers and community organizers — is considered too risky, as Jorge explains:

I was telling a woman that this [interview] was going to happen, and she said to me, ‘No, what if they send you to immigration?’ ‘No’, I told her, this is an interview... it’s not the same as the newspaper, where everyone in the world knows what you say...’No, I’m afraid’, she told me.

Several participants noted the important role that community organizations play in developing consciousness, agency, and collective action. PAR provides a possible paradigm for university-based researchers and advocates to partner in the community’s efforts to organize, as the research process becomes an avenue toward developing leadership and participation and the research informs actions toward social change.

Implications for ongoing collaborations, organizing, and advocacy

The 18 Guatemalan and Salvadoran families participating in this project spoke clearly and repeatedly about deportation-related risks as part of a longer history of assaults experienced in contexts of extreme poverty, la violencia, internal and external migrations, and other repressive practices. For decades, these families have navigated relationships across national, linguistic, cultural, and legal boundaries (Menjivar & Abrego, 2009) and they situate current challenges within those historical and socio-political contexts. The meanings they make of their current experiences are deeply textured by these previous — and sometimes ongoing — realities ‘alla’. Yet they are also clear that US-based detention and deportation — and the threats of both in the post-9/11 era — pose particular challenges for individuals, families, and communities. The analyses presented here indicate that uncertainty, fear, and mistrust permeate the current environment in which many immigrant parents raise children, resulting in detrimental effects for individuals, families, and the community. They confirm that it
is not only the deported individual who bears the scars of detention and deportation; also his or her family – within the US and in the country of origin – experiences these actual or threatened separations as violations.

The findings presented here also challenge us as participating researchers – some of whom also provide social services in these communities – to rethink existing models of psychological and social threat and their effects. Although some (e.g., Birman & Chan, 2008) advocate the importance of effectively assessing and responding to the psychosocial needs of immigrant families and their children and expanding social service programs to meet the current needs of immigrant families (Padilla, 1997), analyses from this project suggest that addressing and redressing injustices endured by Salvadoran and Guatemalan families require a shift in comprehension and focus. The participants in this PAR process are members of large, extended, and transnational families; they are also participants in community-based immigrant organizations. Although not necessarily representative of the entire immigrant population, their strong social ties and deep historical understandings contrast with the predominantly ahistorical and individualistic assumptions that inform most US-based psychological research and human service work with these communities. Treatments frequently isolate or marginalize those affected, failing to situate them within the historical and socio-political contexts that are central to the meanings immigrants make of their experiences. The research reported here documents how participants’ meaning-making and self-understandings are situated within and framed by deeply historical past and current violence, poverty, and family separations and migrations. While traditional individual and small-group human service approaches may be useful for some, these approaches often fail to acknowledge or respond to the historical and structural complexities of families’ experiences, as the families themselves understand them (as opposed to what theory might suggest).

From a policy perspective, while arguments for family reunification based in international human rights claims have not always found success internationally, they nonetheless may serve as a useful resource for challenging US immigration enforcement decisions that continue to separate families (Nessel, 2008). Policy-makers and advocates might pressure the US to ratify international human rights standards, which emphasize the family as the natural and fundamental unit of society that ‘is entitled to protection by society and the State’ (see 1969 American Convention on Human Rights and the International Convenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966)). The US might further be pressured to ratify the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and their Families (1990), which would afford protection for family unity of migrant workers and reframe in the national debate ‘illegal immigrants’ as ‘undocumented workers and their families’ (Nessel, 2008).

This PAR initiative shifts the gaze of researchers and service providers, offering an avenue for forging partnerships between immigrant participants, who have experiential knowledge, researchers, service providers, and advocates. This coalition, through its action–reflection processes, has the added potential to educate and engage at least this small group of US citizens, contributing to our shifting our professional gaze and, further, to our commitment to discuss and debate with our fellow citizens the multiple ways in which current immigration policies and practices
negate basic human rights principles, disrupt families, and deny citizen children of their basic entitlements.

Our current coalition has been extended to include a third immigrant rights and educational organization. Together, we have begun to: (1) further verify our findings through a survey of a larger sample of immigrant parents; (2) enhance our educational and organizing efforts through participatory workshops driven by immigrant needs, including theater as a participatory resource in our KYR workshops; (3) develop specific disciplinary-based and interdisciplinary practice advisories for lawyers, psychologists, and social workers who serve these populations; and finally (4) develop policy recommendations based on the empirical data described here and our joint analyses. The latter are crucial to pressure the US Government to change practices and policy, both in the US and vis-à-vis international relationships between the US and Central American countries.2

Notes
1. The language that describes participants in this project, i.e., ‘illegal alien’, ‘illegal immigrant,’ ‘illegal’ creates a blurring of boundaries between the ‘immigrant’ and the ‘criminal’, and is not neutral, reflecting rather the US’s history with immigration, race, and ethnicity (Flores, 2003). This discourse has profound implications for understandings of and attitudes and practices toward immigrants, the border and the nation. In this paper we use ‘undocumented immigrant’, although we acknowledge that others who share the concerns articulated here use the term ‘unauthorized immigrant’. No single term fully reflects the complexities articulated and discussed in this paper.
2. Pseudonyms have been used in this paper to protect participant confidentiality.

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