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Children of Immigrants in the Child Welfare System: Findings From the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being

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Immigration patterns over the last decade have contributed significantly to changing the demographic profile of the United States. Not only have the numbers of foreign-born immigrants living in the United States increased, but also a larger proportion of this population consists of families and children. During the 1990s, more than 15 million immigrants entered the United States, an increase of 50% since the 1980s and over 100% since the 1970s (Capps & Fortuny, 2006). As of 2008, foreign-born immigrants comprised 12.5% of the total U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008), while children of immigrants represented more than one fifth of all children under 18 (Fortuny, Capps, Simms, & Chaudry, 2009). The number of children with at least one immigrant parent has more than doubled since 1990, from 8 million to 16.4 million in 2007, and their share of all children has increased from 13% to 23% during this period (Fortuny et al., 2009).

Children of immigrants are largely concentrated in six states that have been traditional destination states for immigrants — California, Texas, New York, Florida, Illinois, and New Jersey — which account for 67% of all children of immigrants in the U.S. However, along with increased immigration flows and changes in immigration patterns since the 1990s, the number of children with immigrant parents more than doubled in most other states between 1990 and 2006, while North Carolina, Nevada, Georgia, Arkansas, and Nebraska experienced growth rates of more than 300% since 1990 (Fortuny et al., 2009). More than half (55%) of children of immigrants residing in the U.S. are Hispanic/Latino, followed by non-Hispanic White (19%), non-Hispanic Asian (18%), and non-Hispanic Black (8%) (Fortuny et al., 2009).

While the rapid growth of children of immigrants in the population may suggest a corresponding increase in their contact with social service systems, the presence of children of immigrants in the child welfare system is unknown, as this information is not collected uniformly at the state or national levels. As a result, little is known about the characteristics, risk factors, or incidence of maltreatment among children of immigrants who come to the attention of this system. Additionally, little is known about how those factors differ from children in families who are native to the United States.

This research brief provides findings from the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW) related to the involvement of children of immigrants in the child welfare system. These findings represent the first national data concerning the characteristics, risk factors, and types of maltreatment experienced by this population. An increased understanding and awareness of these issues can be used to improve the quality of service delivery to immigrant children and families involved with the child welfare system.

About This Series

This series of research briefs provides national estimates related to the involvement of children of immigrants in the child welfare system. Children in immigrant families are often considered at increased risk of maltreatment due to the stress and pressure experienced by immigrant families as a result of their experiences with immigration and acculturation. Beginning with the immigration experience, families face considerable risks entering the United States, including violence, robbery, and sexual assault during the migration process (Solis, 2003). These risks are compounded for immigrants crossing multiple borders. Once in the new country, families continue to experience stress resulting from language barriers, unfamiliar customs, and isolation. Additional pressures resulting from acculturation can lead to a variety of strains and difficulties on family systems, as parents and children experience changing cultural contexts along with the loss of previously established support systems. Undocumented immigrants experience additional stress, as they live with the fear of discovery and deportation. Combined with cultural differences in parenting styles (Jambunathan, Burts, & Pierce, 2000; Alayo Mendez, 2006) and child discipline (Fontes, 2002), these factors may affect the safety and well-being of children in immigrant families and lead to involvement with the child welfare system.

These research briefs use data from NSCAW to determine the proportion of children of immigrants among children who come to the attention of the child welfare system, and to identify the characteristics, risk factors, and types of maltreatment present within their families. NSCAW consists of a nationally representative sample of children who were subjects of reports of maltreatment to child protective services agencies between 1999 and 2000. NSCAW was collected under contract from the Administration on Children, Youth, and Families, and employed a two-stage stratified sampling design to produce national population estimates. In the first stage, the United States was divided into nine sampling strata. Eight of these corresponded to the eight states with the largest child welfare caseloads. The ninth consisted of the remaining 42 states and the District of Columbia. Primary sampling units (typically child protective services agencies) were selected from within these nine strata. In the second stage, 5,501 children ages 0 to 14 were selected from lists of closed investigations or assessments from the sampled agencies. Sampling within primary sampling units was stratified by age, type of maltreatment, and receipt of services. The analyses in these briefs are based solely on children who were living in in-home settings with a biological parent at the time of the baseline NSCAW interview ($n = 3,717$), as information is not available on the nativity of parents whose children were in out-of-home care at baseline.

The purpose of these analyses is to promote a better understanding of the characteristics and risk factors of immigrant children and families who come to the attention of the child welfare system. Findings are reported on the child and family characteristics, incidence of maltreatment, parent and family risk factors, and community and neighborhood characteristics of children of immigrants who were involved in child maltreatment investigations. In addition, these factors are compared to those in native-born families to examine how these characteristics may differ between immigrant and native-born families.

Involvement in the Child Welfare System

Children living with a foreign-born parent comprise 8.6% of all children who come to the attention of the child welfare system.¹ Among children of immigrants, more than 4 out of 5 (82.5%) are U.S.-born citizens. More than two thirds (67.2%) of children of immigrants who come to the attention of the child welfare system are Hispanic, followed by non-Hispanic White (14.8%), non-Hispanic Black (10.0%), and non-Hispanic Asian (7.5%). Compared to their percentage in the general population of children of immigrants, Hispanic children are overrepresented among children of immigrants involved with the child welfare system (55% versus 67.2%), while Asian children are considerably underrepresented (18% versus 7.5%). Black children of immigrants are slightly overrepresented (8% versus 10%), while White children are slightly underrepresented (19% versus 14.8%).

¹ In some instances, children are not living with a biological parent, but rather with another adult relative (e.g., grandparent, aunt, uncle, adult sibling). Inclusive of these children, 9.6% of children who come to the attention of the child welfare system are living with a foreign-born primary caregiver.

Child and Caregiver Characteristics

Table 1 displays differences in child age, race, gender, and caregiver age. Children of immigrants did not differ significantly from children of native parents by age. However, children of immigrants were significantly more likely to be female than children of native parents. Children of immigrants were more than 4 times as likely to be Hispanic, and 5 times as likely to be Asian compared to children of native parents. Approximately 9 out of 10 primary caregivers in both categories were children’s mothers. Caregivers differed significantly by age, with native caregivers tending to be younger. Native-born caregivers were nearly twice as likely as immigrant caregivers to be under age 30, while nearly three fourths of all immigrant parents were over age 30. In other demographic categories, including marital status and education level, no significant differences were present between the two groups.

Income

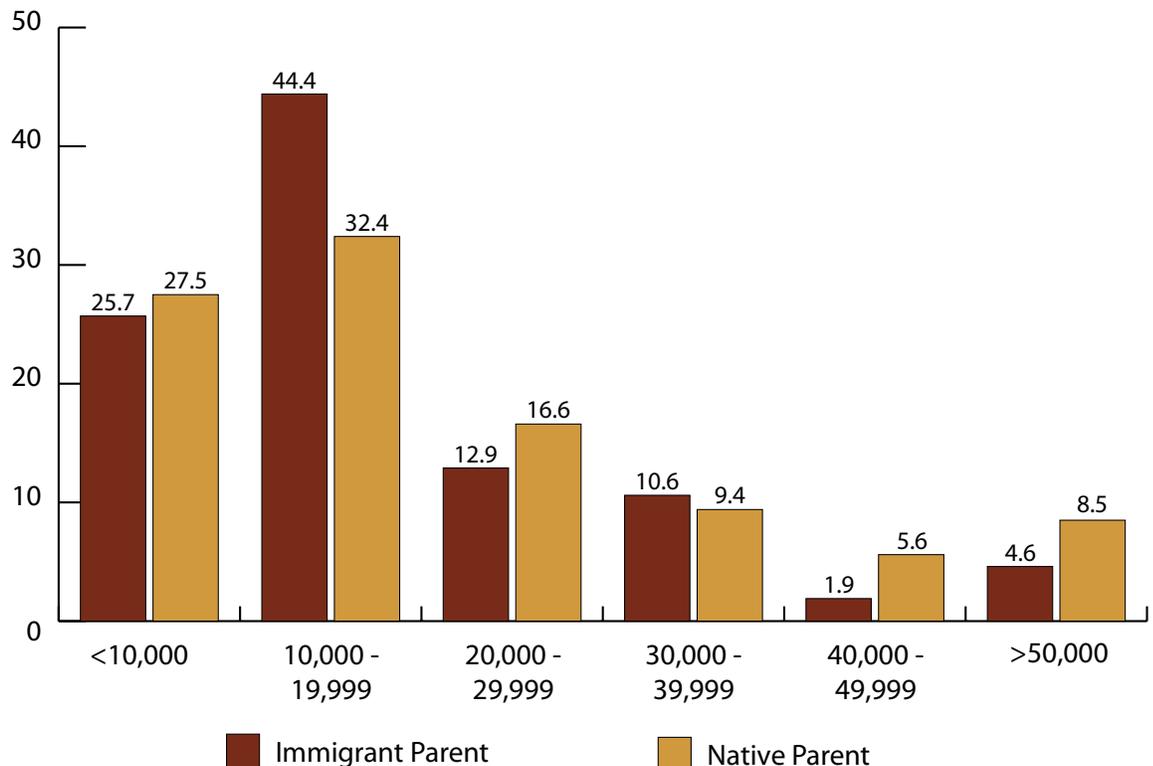
Figure 1 displays differences in income levels between families with native-born parents and families with immigrant parents. Income did not differ significantly between the two groups. On the other hand, the majority of children of both native parents and children of immigrants who come to the attention of child welfare systems are found in families earning less than \$20,000 per year (59.9% of children of native parents and 70.1% of children of immigrants).

Table 1: Children and Caregiver Characteristics

	Native Parent (n = 3336)	Immigrant Parent (n = 351)
Child Age		
0 to 2	18.4	14.0
3 to 5	21.7	22.0
6 to 10	36.3	40.5
11 and older	23.5	23.5
Child Gender*		
Male	51.9	42.2
Female	48.1	57.8
Child Race*		
Black (non-Hispanic)	28.5	10.0
White (non-Hispanic)	50.7	14.8
Hispanic	13.8	67.2
Asian	1.5	7.5
Caregiver Relationship to Child		
Mother	90.4	89.2
Father	9.6	10.8
Caregiver Age*		
15 to 19	4.0	1.5
20 to 29	41.1	24.2
30 to 39	40.7	47.3
40 and older	14.2	27.1

* Significant difference at 95% confidence level

Figure 1. Income Level: Households With Immigrant Parents and Households With Native Parents



Other Household Characteristics

Table 2 displays differences in several additional household characteristics between children of immigrants and children with native parents. Biological fathers were present in 45.9% of homes with an immigrant parent, compared to only 28.5% of homes with a native parent. However, households with a native parent were significantly more likely to have a grandparent present in the home. Children with native-born parents were more than twice as likely to experience a change in primary caregiver during the past 12 months compared to children living with immigrant parents. Families with an immigrant parent were significantly more likely to use a language other than English in the home. Immigrant parents were also significantly more likely to report being uncomfortable speaking English.

Table 2: Other Household Characteristics

	Native Parent (n = 3336)	Immigrant Parent (n = 351)
Presence of adult relatives		
Biological father present*	28.5	45.9
Grandparent present*	12.3	4.4
Other adult relative present	19.3	15.6
Change of primary caregiver in past 12 months*	8.8	3.7
Language other than English spoken in home*	6.3	53.6
Comfortable speaking English*	98.3	73.1

* Significant difference at 95% confidence level

Presence and Type of Maltreatment

Figures 2 and 3 present results concerning the outcomes of maltreatment investigations among children of immigrants and children of native parents. Results indicate no significant difference in the overall rate of maltreatment between children of immigrants and children of native parents. However, significant differences are present in the types of substantiated maltreatment (Figure 3). Children of immigrants are more than twice as likely as children of natives to experience emotional abuse, while children of natives are nearly 8 times more likely to be a victim of physical neglect (i.e., failure to provide).

Figure 2: Outcome of Child Maltreatment Investigations: Children of Immigrants and Children of Native Parents

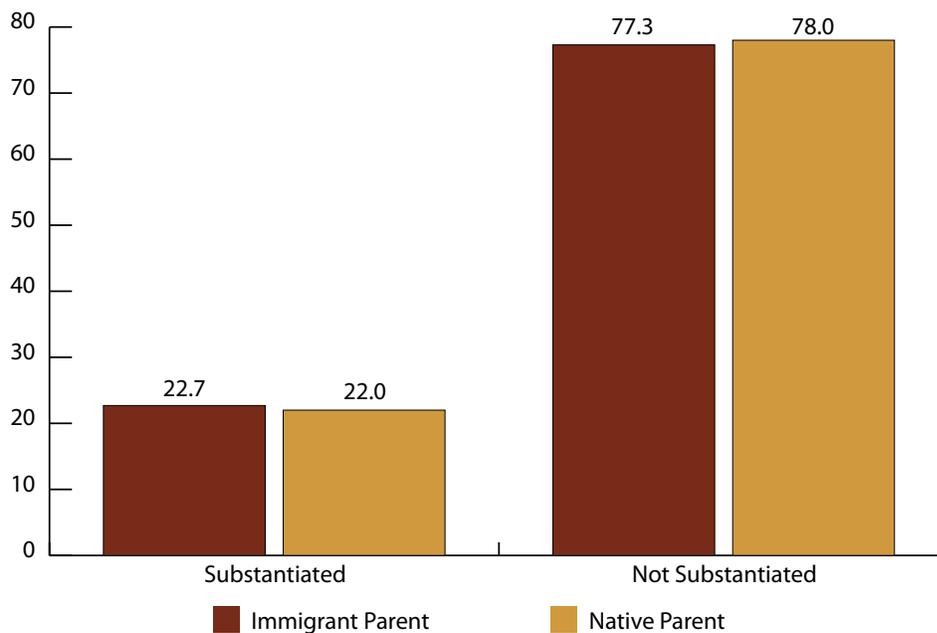
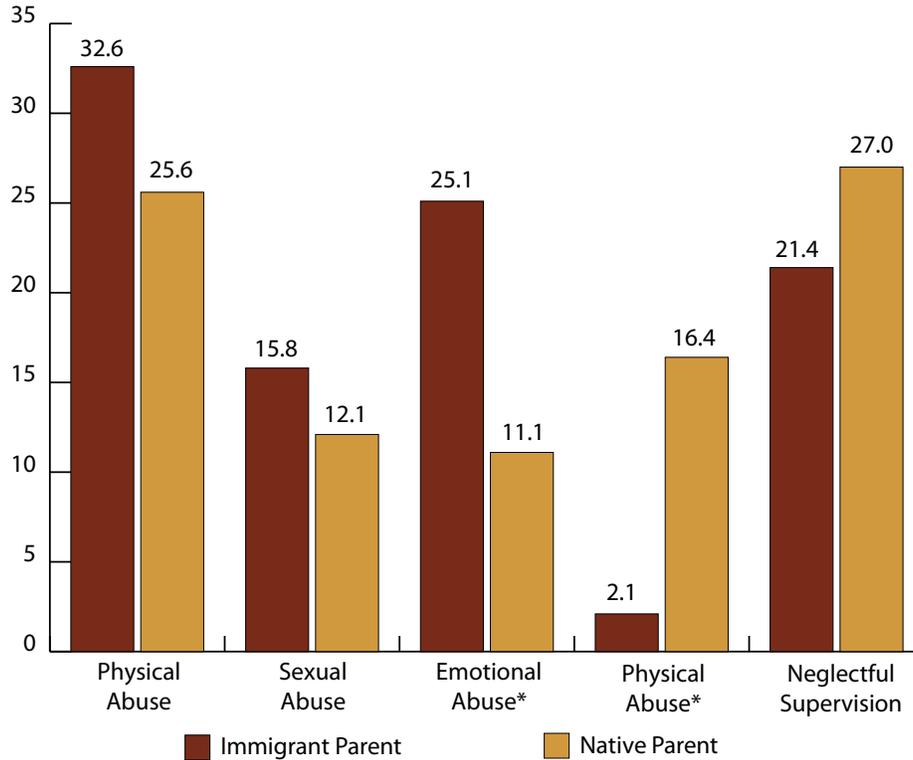


Figure 3: Types of Substantiated Maltreatment: Children of Immigrants and Children of Native Parents



* Significant difference at 95% confidence level

Risk Factors Associated With Maltreatment

Risk factors present at the time of the maltreatment investigation were identified by child protective services caseworkers based on information they obtained in their assessment of each family during the course of the investigation. Risk factors included active alcohol abuse, active drug abuse, serious mental health or emotional problems, intellectual or cognitive impairments, physical impairments, active domestic violence, use of excessive discipline, history of maltreatment, recent history of arrest, low social support, high family stress, and difficulty meeting basic needs.

The presence of risk factors and differences between immigrant families and native families are presented in Table 3. For all of the risk factors in which significant differences were found, those risk factors were more prevalent in homes with native parents than in homes with immigrant parents. Active alcohol abuse and active drug abuse were each 3 times more prevalent in households with native parents than in households with immigrant parents. Native parents were also significantly more likely to have intellectual or cognitive impairments, physical impairments, and a recent history of arrest. It is important to note the lack of significant differences in several risk factors often associated with immigrant families, particularly the use of excessive discipline, domestic violence, low social support, high family stress, and difficulty meeting basic needs.

Table 3: Parent and Family Risk Factors

	Native Parent (n = 3336)	Immigrant Parent (n = 351)
Active alcohol abuse*	6.1	2.0
Active drug abuse*	13.3	4.3
Serious mental health or emotional problem	13.3	9.3
Intellectual or cognitive impairment*	6.4	2.0
Physical impairment*	5.3	1.0
Poor parenting skills	27.7	24.7
Active domestic violence	12.2	13.2
Use of excessive discipline	20.0	24.0
History of maltreatment	19.7	18.4
Recent history of arrest*	33.1	13.0
Low social support	27.6	30.5
High family stress	50.5	43.3
Difficulty meeting basic needs	21.9	17.1

* Significant difference at 95% confidence level

Neighborhood and Community Risk Factors

Neighborhood and community risks were assessed through the Abridged Community Environment Scale from the National Evaluation of Family Support Programs (Furstenberg, 1993). Table 4 presents the presence of risk factors and differences between immigrant families and native families. Native parents were significantly more likely than immigrant parents to report living in a safe neighborhood and having involved parents within their communities.

Table 4: Neighborhood and Community Risk Factors

	Native Parent (n = 3336)	Immigrant Parent (n = 351)
Assaults/muggings	14.2	15.8
Gang activity	23.8	28.1
Open drug use	26.9	26.7
Unsupervised children	38.9	31.9
Teenagers making a nuisance	32.5	22.8
Safe neighborhood*	89.4	76.3
Helpful neighbors	67.8	74.0
Involved parents*	68.1	56.2

* Significant difference at 95% confidence level

Discussion of Findings: Differences Between Immigrant and Native Families

The findings presented in the preceding pages represent the first national data available concerning the presence of children of immigrants in the child welfare system, their characteristics, family and neighborhood risk factors, and incidence of maltreatment. They show significant differences between immigrant families and native families. Not surprisingly, children of immigrants differ significantly by race from children of native parents, with Hispanic children making up just over two thirds of all children of immigrants who come to the attention of the child welfare system. Interestingly, Hispanic children are overrepresented among children of immigrants involved with the child welfare system when compared to their percentage in the general population of children of immigrants, while Asian children of immigrants are considerably underrepresented.

Concerning risk of maltreatment, although children in immigrant families may face a number of risk factors due to their families' experiences with immigration and acculturation, these data show that certain risk factors associated with child maltreatment are significantly more likely to be present in native-born families. Specifically, native-born parents are 3 times more likely to be actively abusing alcohol or drugs. Additionally, native-born parents are significantly more likely to have intellectual impairments, physical impairments, and recent histories of arrest. There are several potential reasons for these differences. Concerning alcohol and drug abuse, although stress resulting from acculturation has been associated with increased risk for substance use within immigrant populations (Vega, Alderete, Kolody, & Aguilar-Gaxiola, 1998), multiple studies have found that immigrants, as a whole, are less likely to abuse alcohol and drugs than native-born citizens.² Thus, the lower rates of alcohol and drug use found among immigrant parents involved in the child welfare system are consistent with national data concerning substance use.

Additionally, although risks may be associated with the stress immigrant families experience from immigration and acculturation, immigrant families may possess a number of protective factors that are less present in native families. For example, data in this study identified that immigrant families are more likely to have a two-parent household and a stable primary caregiver. Immigrant families may also possess a number of protective factors that these data did not address. Many immigrant parents migrate to the United States to ensure a better life for their children, and thus possess a strong sense of responsibility for their children's future. Undertaking a long, expensive, and uncertain journey to a foreign country requires determination, strength, and a focus on the future — characteristics that may mitigate some of the stress associated with their transition. Concerning differences in arrest histories, immigration status may itself act as a social control agent, especially for the undocumented, as an arrest can result in deportation and separation from one's children. Even for those with legal status, an arrest or other anti-social behavior can result in losing legal permanent residency.

In addition to differences in risk and protective factors, significant differences were found in the types of maltreatment experienced by children of immigrants when compared to children of natives. Although children of immigrants are no more likely to be the subject of a substantiated maltreatment investigation than children of native parents, they are significantly more likely to experience emotional maltreatment. This finding is difficult to interpret, as definitions of emotional abuse vary widely across states,³ and the data available do not provide information on the types of behaviors that are associated with allegations of emotional abuse. Given the broad and somewhat vague criteria used to define emotional abuse in some states, it is possible that cultural differences or misunderstandings can contribute to this difference. However, further research is needed to more fully understand this difference in rates of emotional abuse.

While children in immigrant families were more likely to experience emotional abuse, they were nearly 8 times less likely to experience physical neglect. This may be explained by the previously mentioned strengths that are more likely to be present in immigrant families, including the greater likelihood of two-parent families and lower rates of substance

² See, for example, Brown, J. M., Council, C. L., Penne, M. A., & Gfroerer, J. C. (2005). *Immigrants and substance use: Findings from the 1999–2001 National Surveys on Drug Use and Health* (DHHS Publication No. SMA 04–3909, Analytic Series A-23). Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Office of Applied Studies; or Johnson, T., VanGeest, J., & Cho, Y. (2002). Migration and substance use: Evidence from the *U.S. National Health Interview Survey*. *Substance Use & Misuse*, 37, 941-972.

³ See Hamaran, S., Pope, K., Y Czaja, S. (2002). Emotional abuse in children: Variations in legal definitions and rates across the United States. *Child Maltreatment*, 7, 303-311.

abuse and intellectual/cognitive impairments, as well as a combination of these factors. Further research may provide additional information related to this finding.

Implications of Findings

These findings point to the need for child welfare agencies to conduct a thorough assessment of the strengths and protective factors that may be present in immigrant families who come to the attention of the child welfare system. For many immigrant families, the desire for a better life for their children that is associated with families' reasons for migration is a powerful strength and motivating factor that can be built upon during service delivery. However, although these strengths may mitigate risk in some cases, it is important that practitioners clearly assess the risk factors that are unique to immigrant families, particularly in families with undocumented members, as this may increase the potential for risk. In order to do so, child welfare practitioners must understand the impact that immigration and acculturation may have on immigrant children and families, and how these experiences may have contributed to their involvement with the child welfare system.

In addition to understanding the unique needs and strengths of immigrant families, child welfare practitioners need to understand how public policies affect immigrant families' abilities to function. Many of the problems affecting immigrant families originate outside of the family and instead derive from federal policies that have decreased many of the supportive programs previously available to vulnerable immigrant families. This may also affect the services available to immigrant families upon contact with the child welfare system.

Data and Methodology

Data from NSCAW was obtained from the National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect. This study used the Restricted Release version of these data in order to accurately apply sampling weights. All prevalence rates and statistical tests were weighted to yield estimates for the national population of children who were subjects of reports of maltreatment to child protective services agencies. Analysis weights were constructed to adjust for the selection probability of primary sampling units and for the selection probability of individual children within primary sampling units. Weights were further adjusted to account for month-to-month variation in the size of the sampling frame, the exclusion of siblings of children selected in previous months, loss of coverage in certain states, and non-response. Full details of the NSCAW sample design and weight derivation are available from the National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect.⁴

The reported prevalence estimates of child and caregiver characteristics, family and household characteristics, maltreatment, parent and family risk factors, and neighborhood and community environment characteristics were estimated in Stata 10.0 using survey commands to adjust for the two-stage sampling employed in NSCAW. In addition to reporting population-based prevalence estimates, between-group differences were tested using tests of categorical independence. These tests are based on the Pearson chi-square statistic converted to an F-statistic with non-integer degrees of freedom using a second-order Rao and Scott correction (Rao & Scott, 1981).

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⁴ For example, see Dowd, K. et al. (2003). *National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-being: Combined waves 1–3 data file user's manual*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect.

The MCWNN



The MCWNN is a national coalition looking at the intersection between immigrant families and the public child welfare system. Leading organizations and individuals in the fields of immigration and child welfare have come together to increase the effectiveness of the child welfare system's and other corresponding systems' response to issues of migration. Members learn from the experience and expertise of others, they share knowledge and strategies, and they participate in collaborative efforts to improve services for immigrant families in the child welfare system. The network was formed

because members acknowledge that a single field or organization would not have the necessary knowledge or resources to adequately protect the millions of children from immigrant families with legal, human rights, and child well-being resources. For more information, additional resources, or to become a member please visit www.americanhumane.org/migration.

About the Authors

Alan J. Dettlaff, Ph.D., MSW, is assistant professor in the Jane Addams College of Social Work, University of Illinois at Chicago. His practice experience includes 6 years as a practitioner and administrator in public child welfare, where he specialized in investigations of physical and sexual abuse. Dr. Dettlaff's research interests focus on improving outcomes for children of color in the child welfare system through the elimination of disproportionality and disparities. Specifically, Dr. Dettlaff is actively involved in research addressing the disproportionate overrepresentation of African American children in the child welfare system and identifying and understanding the needs of immigrant Latino children who come to the attention of this system. In 2007, Dr. Dettlaff co-edited a special issue of the journal *Protecting Children* on emerging issues at the intersection of immigration and child welfare. Dr. Dettlaff is also principal investigator of the Jane Addams Child Welfare Traineeship Project, which provides advanced training and financial assistance to students pursuing careers in child welfare.

Ilze Earner, Ph.D., LCSW, is an assistant professor at Hunter College School of Social Work and specializes in the field of family and children's services. She is the founder and director of the Immigrants and Child Welfare Project, providing consulting, technical assistance, and training on issues related to foreign-born populations and child welfare. For over 10 years, Dr. Earner has been instrumental in raising awareness about the special needs of immigrant families, children, and youths involved in public child welfare systems, and has published numerous articles on the subject. She is a member of the National Child Welfare Advisory Board in Washington, D.C., and serves on the New York City Administration for Children's Services Subcommittee on Immigration and Language Issues. Her research interests include refugee children and youths, trafficking, and training social work students on immigrant issues.

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