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RESEARCH NOTE**“Do the right thing”: Immigrant perspectives of social worker support in the United States**

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Abstract

Social workers play a distinctive role in serving all communities, especially immigrants. Heightened immigrant stress and deteriorating well-being have been reported amid recent anti-immigrant socio-political climate. Given the unique challenges of immigrants, they have distinct needs. In our study, we utilize data from a larger study including a sample of first- and second-generation immigrants, to understand “How can social workers support immigrant communities?” In total, $N = 265$ participants responded to this prompt. We employed a content analysis approach to analyze participant responses. Our analysis yielded four main themes: (1) Resources for immigrants, (2) Doing right by immigrants, (3) Advocacy, and (4) Understanding immigrants. Our findings are timely in highlighting the diverse perspectives about immigrant needs in the current socio-political climate. Study findings have implications for social workers as well as service providers/agencies that engage with immigrants.

KEYWORDS

culturally responsive, immigrants, social work support, social workers

INTRODUCTION

Social workers serve an essential role in supporting first- and second-generation¹ immigrant communities, which respectively constitute 14.1% and 12.3% of the US population (Budiman et al., 2020; Negi et al., 2018; Rafieifar &

Held, 2022). Historically, immigrants have endured substantial stress associated with settlement and integration, including language and cultural barriers, as well as discrimination (Ayón & Becerra, 2013; Handal et al., 2023; Held & Lee, 2017). In the recent sociopolitical context of more stringent immigration policies, heightened enforcement, and COVID-19, mental health and psychosocial needs of immigrants have escalated (Lopez et al., 2018; Nkimbeng et al., 2021; Wray-Lake et al., 2018). For example, exclusionary policies such as travel bans, reduced Temporary Protected Status (TPS), and enhanced border patrol correlated with heightened stress among immigrants

¹First generation immigrants include those born outside of the United States, whereas second generation refers to US-born individuals with at least one immigrant parent.

Abbreviations: IRB, Institutional Review Board; NASW, National Association of Social Workers; US, United States.

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(Benavides et al., 2021; Held, First, et al., 2022; Rai, Held, et al., 2022).

Further, immigrant communities endured increased stress during the pandemic (Gelatt, 2020; Held, Otálora-Villarreal, et al., 2022). Not only were many immigrants unable to see loved ones in their home countries, but they also encountered disproportionate health and economic hardship. Immigrants are overrepresented in frontline healthcare jobs, which presented elevated health risks, as well as the hospitality industry, which experienced economic hardship through layoffs during the height of the pandemic (Chishti & Bolter, 2020; Gelatt, 2020). These stressors yielded an unprecedented need for supports that social workers are well-positioned to offer.

Social workers have a long history of serving immigrants and are specifically called to serve diverse populations but often lack sufficient training to effectively support immigrant communities (Held et al., 2018; National Association of Social Work [NASW], 2021a, 2021b). The National Association of Social Work has released multiple statements promoting both the importance of and strategies for engaging with underrepresented clients. In 2015, cultural competence standards were revised to add specificity around employing culturally responsive approaches to address diverse client needs (NASW, 2015). More recently in 2022, NASW released a statement and report on anti-racism, affirming the profession's commitment to anti-racist practices and importance of diversity in the workforce, while also allocating funds toward these efforts (NASW, 2022a, 2022b). Social work educational programs are encouraged to equip the future workforce through strengthened training strategies and internships toward anti-racist advocacy. Yet, clear pathways for training mechanisms as well as strategies for accountability in achieving anti-racist practices and standards among social work students still need to be established. Such work must be informed not only by social work scholars and educators but also by the very communities our profession serves. Despite this need, the extant body of research is notably limited in regard to immigrants' perspectives of ways social workers can best support them, particularly considering recent exclusionary policies and pandemic stressors. To help address this gap, the current study draws from an open-ended question in a survey with a diverse immigrant sample across the United States, to explore immigrant perceptions of ways social workers can best serve their communities. Micro- and macro-level implications will be presented.

METHODS

Data and sampling

Data presented in this study are part of a larger project (Held, First, et al., 2022; Rai et al., 2022) with a sample of

first-and second-generation immigrants. The larger study was designed to explore stress associated with COVID-19 and immigration policies, in addition to social support, resilience, and mental health. The current subsample is demographically similar to the full study sample (see Held, First, et al., 2022; Rai et al., 2022 for the full sample characteristics). In the full sample, a higher proportion of participants were first generation (51.7%) and female (60.6%), with a mean age of 55.47 (SD = 18.34). The sample was racially diverse to include East Asians (28.3%), White (24.0%), Black/White Latinx (21.4%), South Asian (14.2%), Black/African (4.0%), and Other (8.1%) participants. In regard to household income, 22.5% reported earning \$105,000 or more, with 23.5% reporting \$29,999 or under. Educational attainment varied, with 17.9% having a high school degree or less, 16.1% some college, 41.9% an associate or bachelor's degree, and 24.1% having a graduate degree.

All study procedures were approved by a Southern and Midwestern University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Non-probability convenience and quota sampling strategies were employed to recruit both a community-based sample and a sample via Qualtrics research panels (Engel & Schutt, 2016), between April–June 2021. Data were collected in English, with the following open-ended question being utilized for the current study, “How can social workers support immigrant communities?”

Data analysis

Content analysis strategies were employed due to the brevity of responses (Krippendorff, 2004). Over half ($n = 265$) of participants responded to this survey question. Responses in which participants indicated being unsure or did not know were eliminated. All other responses were coded by four authors (AR, MLH, YDA, LS), applying the following steps. Initially two coders (AR, MLH) developed sample codes for the first 50 responses. Sample codes were shared with coders YDA and LS (student coders) who then coded the data using exemplar codes. In a team-based approach, AR and MLH collaboratively identified 15 codes, while YDA and LS identified 25 codes. All authors collaborated on identification of the four themes, with AR and MLH (lead coders and faculty) finalizing the study themes. Interrater reliability among coders was 95%.

RESULTS

Four themes emerged: (1) Resources for Immigrants; (2) Doing Right by Immigrants; (3) Advocacy; and (4) Understanding Immigrants.

Resources for immigrants

Participants ($n = 103$) emphasized the importance of social workers providing and/or making immigrants aware of resources to support their needs, positive integration, and settlement in the United States. Resources spanned a wide range of services, including basic/financial needs, financial and employment support, legal assistance, English language training, and multiple forms of support for integration and settlement.

In terms of basic/financial needs, participants noted "food, shelter, and medical care," as well as "more options for housing, food, etc." Financial support and assistance with finding jobs each emerged as prominent foci of participants. One participant suggested "providing health care options and help find jobs that will hire immigrants without paying them less due to their status." Health and mental health were also referenced by multiple participants, with codes such as "mental health counseling," and "therapy" noted throughout the responses. Providing legal information and "know your rights" trainings were also emphasized within this theme. For example, responses included, "explaining better about our rights," "help immigrants get work visas[s] and paperwork process[ed] faster," "help them through the immigration process." Legal assistance and support for mental health were linked by several participants and contextualized to the higher focus on exclusionary immigration policies under former President Trump when data were collected.

Also related to legal assistance, participants raised the issue of families being separated, including parents and children, indicating the need for social workers to help. Responses reflecting this concern included the following: "help them get a job and not separate them from their kids," "they should bring families that are separated back together," and "by not separating families and giving them a chance to find resources to help them with immigration status."

Toward integration, a participant suggested that social workers "can give them information on how to adjust to a different culture." Other comments centered on supporting English proficiency, while providing translation services as individuals are learning English. A direct service that social workers can provide included "social workers could help in leading cultural orientations, support immigrants through social services referrals and probably provide job placement assistance." Another suggestion centered on social workers bringing immigrant communities together for improved support during settlement, "helping them find support groups to share similar experiences and suggestions on how to adapt.

Doing right by immigrants

This theme was referenced by 55 participants and focused on reducing discrimination, including responding to systemic barriers and treating immigrants with respect. In regard to discrimination, one participant responded, "support immigrant communities by looking past our skin colors, we are all humans." Another participant wrote, "finding a way to encourage the people in these communities to speak when they are being discriminated or harassed because it's the only way to stop it from continuing." Other references to discrimination were "remove systematic White racism," "stop treating minorities like we're not humans," and "help them settle well in the community, embrace them regardless of their race or color." A White participant highlighted the discrimination seen in immigrants of color.

I am White and speak unaccented English better than most people, so our family had only a few annoyances becoming legal immigrants, but we WITNESSED many non-white immigrants treated disrespectfully and abusively by immigration officials. I don't know how to help with that.

Some tangible suggestions also arose in participant responses, such as a hotline for reporting mistreatment, "there should be a hotline or a place that immigrants can report to if they have encountered some unfair treatment due to their look and English spoken ability."

Within this theme, another related subtheme was treating immigrants with respect. Responses along this subtheme called social workers to be friendly, helping, kind, and welcoming. Other comments centered on listening to immigrant voices, being present, and checking in on how immigrants are coping. For example, a participant responded that social workers can "be our backbone and support us through any social injustices that are looming around." Another response focused on accommodating immigrants, "...social workers should be more friendly and more accommodating to us new immigrants. So that the new immigrants may feel welcome and cared for too in the United States, despite not being a US citizen." One participant's comment summarized this theme well by stating that social workers can "...do the right thing" to best help immigrants.

Advocacy

The third theme that emerged was advocacy, which was referenced by 47 participants. This theme was strictly

focused on advocacy for immigrant rights. Participants suggested that social workers can help immigrants by having a strong voice to support immigrant rights through speaking against injustices and in support of inclusive policies. In addition to shorter statements calling social workers for help by “advocating for immigrants” and “advocating for rights,” some responses provided more depth toward specific actions. One participant wrote that social workers can “...advocate for the preservation of policies and programs that benefit these communities, such as DACA and admission of refugees, and for the prevention or removal of those that negatively [affect immigrants].” Participants also emphasized that social workers can “be the voice” for immigrant communities and “be vocal” to fight for immigrant rights. The underlying tenets of this theme centered on the importance of social workers advocating for fair, inclusive policies and speaking up, especially when immigrants are poorly positioned (e.g., having undocumented status or lacking knowledge of immigration policies) to have their own voices respected and heard.

Understanding immigrants

The fourth theme of understanding immigrants included responses from 45 participants and centered on immigrants' experiences/norms prior to and after arrival in the United States. Several participants highlighted the importance of knowledge regarding challenges traveling to and/or entering the United States. For example, one participant wrote, “try to understand their situations with respect to their country and what they've been through just to get here, why it [is that] they're compelled to risk so much with the possibility of being denied the opportunity.” Another participant shared a similar sentiment, “they [social workers] should understand the background of immigrants and treat them with compassion and try to first relieve them of their fears about staying, assure they are safe and help them get on with daily living.” While one participant indicated that “social workers are doing a good job,” this individual further wrote, “they probably need to understand better the immigrants, they need to remember that no one want [s] to leave their native country and we are here [out of] necessity.” Responses along this subtheme underscored the struggle that accompanies leaving one's own country and journeying to the United States to create a new life. Once in the United States, participants responded that social workers could help by “learning about their culture,” “listen[ing] to their stories,” “being useful and understanding,” and “by understanding them and their problems.”

DISCUSSION

Findings provide meaningful data from the perspectives of immigrants regarding how social workers can best support them. Not only did participants underscore the importance of social workers gaining further insight into their cultures and experiences, but they also highlighted the importance of understanding challenges before and after arriving in the United States. Applying the themes that emerged from the data, including the importance of culturally responsive knowledge, social workers are further called to recognize the rich diversity among immigrant communities (Budiman, 2020). These themes align with the importance of culturally responsive practice approaches, which are essential to account for “power and oppression, positionality, cultures, values or norms, language, acculturation issues or immigration-related structural barriers and relationship with the criminal justice system and other systems of power.” (Rai et al., 2023, p. 5). Participants also noted both the need for additional resources and the importance of educating immigrants about already existing resources. This theme reflects a robust body of literature highlighting the importance of facilitating access to services among immigrant communities (Dombou et al., 2022; Hacker et al., 2015; Perreira et al., 2012).

Participants also called social workers to do right by immigrants, particularly as pertaining to discrimination and respect, and to advocate for immigrant rights. Similarly, and not surprisingly, they requested to be treated with respect, free from racial/ethnic discrimination. Adopting an anti-racist lens is one key strategy toward promoting respect and social work engagement that reduces discrimination based on race, as well as immigrant and legal documentation status (NASW, 2022a, 2022b). This anti-racist lens is especially important in the recent years of shifting immigration policies and an increased sociopolitical climate of anti-immigrant sentiment (American Civil Liberties Union, 2021; Center for Migration Studies, 2021; Chishti & Bolter, 2022; Esses, 2021). This context has placed many immigrants at greater vulnerability for oppression, as well as poorer well-being and mental health status (Held, First, et al., 2022; Held, Otálora-Villarreal, et al., 2022). Promotion of immigrant well-being will require both micro- and macro-level strategies toward inclusive service provision and immigration policies, including an anti-racist lens by providers, such as social workers. These strategies could include awareness among non-immigrants and advocacy that can allow for enhanced social harmony, ultimately creating a welcoming environment for immigrants along with equitable opportunities for integration and service provision. Providers are encouraged to hire

social workers from diverse ethnicities and backgrounds, as proposed by NASW in their recent statement (NASW, 2022a, 2022b) so immigrant clients feel more comfortable in seeking services.

Participants also emphasized the importance of social workers gaining deeper insight into their communities and culture. This theme reflects the core social work value of cultural competence, reflecting the importance of social workers understanding and respecting clients' cultural norms (NASW, 2015). NASW specifically expects that "social workers are sensitive to cultural and ethnic diversity to end forms of social injustice" (2017, p. 1). Strengthening cultural competence, as well as culturally responsive practices, can promote more effective service provision (Uttal & Frausto, 2021). Further, culturally responsive services promote respect of clients' values, while also increasing immigrant access to care, help seeking behaviors, and utilization of available services (Aidoo-Frimpong et al., 2021; Na et al., 2016; Tefera & Yu, 2022).

Limitations

Several limitations must be noted. Data were derived from one open-ended question that was part of a larger quantitative survey, so follow-up questions or clarification of responses were not possible. The sample was drawn from an online survey panel with data collected only in English. Therefore, immigrants with limited technology skills or English proficiency were not included. These subgroups may face discrete vulnerabilities that impact their service provision needs. Given the brevity in participant responses, these distinctions were not made in our present study. Future studies should explore immigrant perceptions of social work through in-depth interviews or focus groups. Despite the limitations, implications for service provision and policy can be drawn.

Implications for social work practice

Social workers in diverse settings will engage with first- and second-generation immigrant clients, including those unfamiliar with the complex US health and social service systems. By understanding the US health care system, as well as policies that impact immigrant access to this system, social workers can best support immigrants and advocate for crucial policy changes. Of particular concern is the exclusionary approach to health care found in the United States, as compared to other Western nations (Held, Rai, et al., 2022). In this system, health-related policies, the US approach to private health insurance, and

the exorbitant cost of care place immigrants at risk of lacking access to essential services.

Many immigrants, including those with documented status, will face barriers to accessing health care. For example, non-citizen immigrants who have legally documented status face restrictions in accessing public benefits, such as Medicaid or the Affordable Care Act, because of a 5-year residence in the US eligibility criteria (Guttmacher Institute, 2021; Pillai et al., 2023). Though individual states have the opportunity to remove this criterion, only five states and Washington D.C. have expanded fully-funded state coverage to all adult immigrants (KFF, 2023a). Immigrants with undocumented status can only utilize public benefits in the case of an emergency, though the interpretation of "emergency" varies by state (KFF, 2023a, 2023b). For example, states have the option of offering prenatal care to undocumented women by expanding the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) coverage to unborn children. Yet, only 20 states offer this benefit, while the remaining states provide medical coverage only for the "emergency" of child delivery (KFF, 2023b).

Another challenge is the involvement of private entities selling health insurance, which is typically most affordable when accessed through an employer that pays part of the cost. Without an employer's support, the average monthly cost for private health insurance in the United States in 2023 was \$453 for an individual and \$1152 for a family (Porretta, 2023). Immigrants, and especially those who are newly arriving, are often employed in hourly-waged jobs that lack options for free or employer-subsidized health insurance (KFF, 2023b). Because of the high costs of coverage, they are unable to secure health insurance for themselves or their families. In this situation, immigrants are faced with out-of-pocket costs when they face an emergency requiring medical care. Not only are the fees high, but individuals without health insurance face greater rates of morbidity and mortality due to reduced utilization of care (Institutes of Medicine, 2003), compounding the risks to immigrants who are unable to secure health insurance coverage. Given this set of challenges, the United States is one of the few high-income countries that does not provide health coverage for all residents, creating a particularly alarming context for immigrants, who may forego medical care when needs arise. Further, the state-level variability in public benefits impedes the ability to implement federal-level policies toward improved access for immigrants, as is done in other countries such as the United Kingdom with more centralized healthcare structures (Llano, 2011; Peter G. Peterson Foundation, 2023). Therefore, social workers must not only work with immigrants on an individual level to navigate access to care

but must also advocate for health care access for all immigrants, especially those that are newly arriving.

Of value in this work is that social workers are often proficient at navigating challenging systems with substantial service gaps, including interrelated systems, as well as overcoming obstacles to needed resources and services (Jones, 2012). In addition, social workers are trained to facilitate community connections and informal networks, as well as educate clients about legal and other rights (Jones, 2012). Such skills and expertise can be vital to strengthening service access and “doing right by” immigrant clients. Simultaneously, social workers are positioned to educate non-immigrant communities that may hold harmful stereotypes and preconceived notions, which may further perpetuate negative attitudes toward immigrants.

Social workers also have opportunities at the organizational level to strengthen availability and accessibility of needed services. Providing services by centering the culture of the client can strengthen the quality of received services (White et al., 2013). Offering all written materials in the languages of those being served at an organization promotes improved access and comprehension of available services and resources as well. Consideration of verbal communication is also essential. Utilization of community liaisons who can serve as cultural brokers may improve comfort of immigrant clients who are being served by non-immigrant providers of different cultures. Another strategy to strengthen client communication is employing routine check-ins via accessible technology platforms that are already used by immigrant clients (e.g., What's App).

Social workers are often well positioned to speak on behalf of immigrant communities and to actively support settlement and integration through direct service provision and broader advocacy (NASW, 2021a, 2021b, 2022a, 2022b). Therefore, to advocate for their clients before state and federal agencies is a crucial approach toward advocacy. For example, lobbyists and social workers jointly advocated for work visas for individuals on dependent visas between May 2015 through the end of 2017 under Obama administration, leading to the approval of almost 127,000 dependent work visas (South Asian American Policy & Research Institute SAAPRI, 2018). Similarly, advocacy for expedited pathways to citizenship or permanent residency (e.g., via a “Green Card”) can promote a path toward permanent status for immigrants.

In response to participant concerns related to discrimination, social workers are trained to recognize and reduce multiple forms of prejudice, stereotypes, discrimination, and systemic racism, harmful tenets that were found to increase among immigrants during the pandemic and under the Trump administration (Davis

et al., 2020; Newman et al., 2020; Saasa et al., 2021). President Biden's handling of Title 42 and its execution (both banning and lifting) reflect ongoing changes that can escalate stress, as well as a perception of discrimination and exclusion, among immigrant clients (Chishti & Bolter, 2022; Morris & Saadi, 2022). Social workers must urgently take an active role to serve and promote the best interests of immigrant clients, which is essential to foster social justice and equity among immigrant communities.

CONCLUSION

This research note provides a timely immigrant-informed reflection of how social workers can best support their communities. Social workers engage with diverse immigrant clients who often carry substantial stress related to the immigration process. In response, social workers must be prepared to provide essential and effective services that promote well-being, positive integration, and settlement. Study findings facilitate a greater understanding of service needs and, in turn, inform strategies social workers can employ to better serve immigrant clients in the current sociopolitical context. Social workers are urged to apply findings to micro- and macro-level practice strategies, while also assessing and addressing the unique needs of their own immigrant clients for improved well-being.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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