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“IF THE PARENTS ARE OKAY, THE CHILDREN ARE OKAY”

COMMON THEMES FROM 2022-2023 CTAN LISTENING SESSIONS WITH IMMIGRANT PARENTS AND YOUTH

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CLASP

The Center for Law and Social Policy



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INTRODUCTION

In partnership with 7 immigrant, youth, parent organizations, and one independent researcher, the Children Thrive Action Network (CTAN) held 9 listening sessions with 71 individuals: 53 immigrant parents and 18 immigrant or first-generation immigrant youth (youth who were born in the United States to foreign-born parents). CTAN and partners held listening sessions between October 2022 and January 2023 in Albuquerque, NM; Aurora, IL; Seattle, WA; Columbus, OH; New York City, NY; Washington, DC; and Minneapolis, MN. The Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP)—a CTAN coordinating committee member and anchor organization—audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed these sessions using grounded theory and Dedoose, a qualitative software. Parents and youth received monetary incentives for their participation.

These listening sessions provided a space for immigrant parents to voice their concerns about challenges facing their families and their children and to tell us the issues they think should be CTAN's focus. Listening sessions with youth allowed us to hear directly from them about how their and/or their parents' immigration statuses affect their lives, perceptions, and experiences.

BACKGROUND ON THE 22-23 CHILDREN THRIVE ACTION NETWORK LISTENING SESSIONS

CTAN formed in 2019 to defend and support U.S. children in mixed-status immigrant families.¹ Member organizations are advocates and service providers that work directly with or on behalf of children in immigrant families at the national, state, and local levels. CTAN's goal is to center children in mixed-status families on immigration and intersecting issues, envisioning a society where all children, regardless of race, ethnicity, nationality, income, ability, or religion have equal opportunity to grow and thrive.² CTAN will incorporate findings from listening sessions alongside consideration of our network's strengths and the context of the greater immigration movement into its action plan.

COMMON THEMES FROM DIVERSE EXPERIENCES

This report focuses on a number of similar concerns and desires that emerged across these groups, along with other themes related to participants' experiences as immigrants or children of immigrants. The findings below do not encompass every perspective expressed during sessions, nor are they intended to make generalizations about any group, much less a group as diverse as U.S. immigrants. At the same time, the findings parse out relevant nuanced differences in the nature of repeated themes as expressed across listening sessions, as well as some themes that were unique and important to individual listening session discussions.

KEY FINDINGS

» **Our immigration system impoverishes people, both financially and emotionally.**

Fees for visas/waivers, paperwork processing delays, and the need for lawyers are only some examples of financial barriers for immigrants wishing to live, work, and thrive in the United States. These delays and fees cause a great deal of stress and mental anguish for parents as well as their children, particularly due to the fear of family separation. Children and youth's experiences with discrimination, fear of being separated from their parents, and having to shoulder additional responsibility (e.g., caregiving) affect their emotional well-being.

» **Participants expressed a desire to change the public narrative about immigrants.**

Many said they perceive negative stereotypes about their immigrant community to be the source of the discrimination they experience. They would like to be seen as parents and families wanting a better life for their children, just like anyone else, free from the burden of preconceived notions about their perceived racial/ethnic identity, religion, or country of origin.

» **Families with a parent who has been deported experience stress, isolation, and financial difficulty.** The hardships associated with the deportation of a family member impact all family members left behind, including children.

» **The immigration process, educational institutions, and available resources—including access to health care and public benefits—need to be more accessible.**

Immigrants experience cultural, linguistic, and financial barriers as well as administrative burdens across immigration and public benefit systems, eroding their trust in the government and undermining their ability to access important supports.

KEY FINDINGS (CONTINUED)

» **Immigrants hope for belonging, acceptance, and a sense of community in the United States.** At the same time, they have a desire to safeguard and celebrate cultural norms and traditions.

» **Immigrant youth are proud of their parents** for overcoming barriers to give them opportunities their parents may not have had in their countries of origin.

» **Immigrant parents and children of immigrants deeply value the role of education** in their children's and their own lives.



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MAIN CONCERNS FROM PARENTS' LISTENING SESSIONS

CTAN and partners conducted 6 listening sessions with 53 immigrant parents of minor children. Parent listening sessions were initially recruited based on racial identity (Asian, Black, and Latinx), although one group in Washington state consisted of participants from a range of racial identities. Ultimately, CTAN and partners aimed to create spaces that were open, welcoming, and comfortable.



**We pay taxes. We aren't here for free.
We aren't taking anything from anyone.**

DISCRIMINATION

Parents expressed frustration at feeling like their struggles and experiences were not seen or valued. A number of participants spoke about instances when they experienced discrimination at their place of employment; from social services administrators; the police; members of their own community; the voting booth; and, in the case quoted below, their customers.

"I work in Uber, and I am also a cook, and four days ago, a woman got in the car and obviously, the GPS is in Spanish. And the woman started to speak with another woman saying, 'No, these Mexicans just come here to have children and take our jobs. They get everything.' And well, this woman had the wrong information. There is racism. [S]he kept talking, saying we come here to take away their benefits. She said we just came here to have many children to get something, but that's not always the case. We get up very early and work. We pay taxes. We aren't here for free. We aren't taking anything from anyone."

Latinx parent from New Mexico

Participants were also concerned about their children facing this type of discrimination, especially at school, from both peers and teachers.

"[My son is] 12 years old and he was having a problem with another student. When the other student hit him, he tried to go pay back and the teacher just hold his shirt like this [gestures]...and push him down. And the school they call me, 'Oh your son get in trouble.'...And I told her, 'Why did [the teacher] just do that to a little boy like this, push him down and hold his clothes?' I called the social worker, and she told me, 'That's racist, they shouldn't do that to your son.' And I think they fired the teacher [because of] the way that he [did] that to my little boy."

Parent from Washington State

A participant in the mixed-race immigrant session in Seattle expressed concern that even though her children feel American, they may not be treated that way when they grow up and enter the workforce. She was concerned about the continual discrimination they would face as adults and how it would affect their higher education, income, and job prospects.

"[My kids] say, 'I'm from America, I'm American.' They don't think about the origin mostly. But when they grow up and they want to be part of society, they want to be part of the working people, they always get discriminated [against]. Sometimes getting higher education is not easy or going to college...it's so hard to get in. And also getting a good job. You get discriminated [against]. Even if you get it, you won't get the same salary that other people like you are getting all doing the same work. So, my concern is that when my kids grow up...and they want to become a part of their own families or get a job, I'm afraid of what they're going to face."

Parent from Washington State

CHILD SAFETY

Parents in all of the groups expressed fears related to their children's safety. At least three parent groups expressed concerns specifically about their children's safety in schools in relation to bullying, gun violence, and drugs (Seattle immigrant group, and Ohio and Minnesota Asian immigrant groups). This was especially acute in Columbus, Ohio, likely because the listening sessions took place shortly after an incident of gun violence in an area school. Participants in the Seattle group also mentioned that the high cost of rent in safer neighborhoods forced them to live in neighborhoods where they were more concerned for their children's safety.

As demonstrated by a prior quote, concerns about child safety overlapped with discrimination concerns, with parents wondering if their children were being bullied or targeted because of their immigration status or race.



Sometimes if our kids do well at school, they're targeted. If they do bad also, they are bullied and targeted.

Asian parent from Ohio



Concerns about child safety also overlapped with concerns about their children's mental health.

"[K]ids being bullied these days can cause a lot of mental health [concerns/conditions] and that's probably my concern with it."

Asian parent from Minnesota

FRUSTRATION WITH IMMIGRATION PROCESS

All groups expressed frustration and helplessness with how long immigration cases take and how expensive the process can be. These barriers prolong family separation and have serious consequences for a family's economic security as they present obstacles to gaining work authorization and health insurance coverage.

"It's not fair to ask us to pay for money we haven't earned yet. It's too much money, those fees, it's just too much [very emotional]. You know I've lost my green card in April [and] I can't afford to have another one. I want to go straight for citizenship. I've already paid, but they say if you don't have the physical [green] card, you have to get it first and come back for [the citizenship application]. It's just too much, it is too much!"

Asian parent from Minnesota

"It's not fair to ask us to pay for money we haven't earned yet. It's too much money, those fees..."

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The fee to replace a lost green card is \$540. Immigrants must pay this replacement fee even if their green card was stolen.

A number of parents said that both the slow and expensive process of obtaining legal immigration status and restrictive immigration laws prevent them from reuniting with family. One woman from Egypt didn't know what to say to her young son who asked to see his father and siblings.

"Yeah, slowly almost now eight years, no anything, I have [a] lawyer, is good lawyer...Just only [I] have ID. I have other kids [who] live in Egypt. My son all time cry, 'No sister, no brother, why?...I need brother, I need sister, I need to see dad...why in America can[not] family live together...?"

Parent from Washington State

Another Black immigrant participant mentioned filing Form 1-601, Application for Waiver of Grounds of Inadmissibility, in an attempt to reunite with her deported husband. The filing fee of \$930 is nonrefundable no matter what action the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services agency takes. She had to pay this fee twice, in addition to lawyer fees, because officials took no action on the first waiver she filed.

"[B]efore [the time after you file a waiver] hits one year, you have to do an update [to the waiver application]. So, you have to let the visa center know that you are doing this... If you don't do it, nobody do nothing. So, you lose that case, [and] you have to pay it back again... \$930 go to the government... You pay the advocate almost \$2000 [in lawyer fees]. That's the problem."

Black parent from Ohio

Another woman in the listening session reported paying over \$10,000 in lawyer fees, also in an attempt to get her husband back to the United States after being deported. In addition to waiver and lawyer fees, she and another participant whose husband was also deported had to pay approximately \$250 a week for 15-minute phone calls to speak with their husbands while they were in immigration detention prior to being deported.

"What she say, her husband was like four months in jail? [others responding: yes] Mine, he was in for over six months, and... they call you 15 minutes every day and [for] that 15 minutes, I pay \$250 a week for him to pay [for] the call."

Black parent from Ohio

Participants who navigated the immigration process also recounted numerous obstacles related to language access, misinformation, uninformed lawyers, and both Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA)'s narrow eligibility guidelines and its impending termination.³

"My husband got DACA, but I didn't get it because of my age. On the one hand, I am very happy because he could do what he had to do, but also, I think... what's my place? Why did they skip that group, that age?... I am outside, and I think that's not fair."

Latinx parent from New Mexico

One participant in an Illinois listening session mentioned being confused about information she received from an immigration officer that led her to believe that, if she was deported, U.S. authorities could prevent her from taking her U.S.-born child back to her country of origin. Other participants reassured her that she would be able to either take her child with her if she were to be deported or leave the child in the care of someone else, regardless of the caretaker's immigration status. Yet the incorrect information she received from the immigration official clearly caused this mother a great deal of stress and anguish.

Delays in the immigration process are a barrier to obtaining health insurance and work authorization. Both undocumented and documented immigrants face restrictions to accessing public health insurance programs like Medicaid. An immigrant with legal permanent resident (LPR) status, otherwise known as a green card, must wait five years after receiving LPR status before being allowed to access Medicaid or the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP). Undocumented immigrants cannot access any federally funded health care coverage, nor can they purchase health insurance on the federal health insurance marketplace.

If they are able to obtain work authorization, they can rely on employer-provided health insurance for coverage; or, if they can afford it, they must purchase expensive private health insurance outside the federal health insurance marketplace. Unfortunately, many immigrants have no choice but to be uninsured.

"I have it, is immigrant too much waiting, me almost eight years waiting. I don't have insurance, now me is diabetic, I don't have insurance."

Parent from Washington state



I have some friends, they're Indonesian, they live here, and they really struggle to get the work permit and they say it takes like three months, and we don't know how to get it. So, what happen[s] is, like, they work without [a] work permit.

Asian parent from Ohio



FEAR, DEPORTATION, AND FAMILY SEPARATION

All groups expressed frustration and helplessness with how long immigration cases take and how expensive the process can be. These barriers prolong family separation and have serious consequences for a family's economic security as they present obstacles to gaining work authorization and health insurance coverage.

"You are always afraid, [like] when police stop you for some infraction, even though it's insignificant, such as I didn't stop well at a stop sign. In the past, I didn't know there were different police divisions, immigration and general police, and I prayed a lot for my children, to not have to go back to Mexico... I was anguished for [my children] because if you don't have family as I do to give them a foster home [in case you are deported], you live in constant fear... It's horrible for immigrant families."

Latinx parent from Illinois

Latinx groups expressed a fear of potential future family separation. However, many Black Muslim immigrants who participated in the Ohio listening session were already suffering the consequences after being separated from family members who had been deported or fled the country because of hostility toward Muslims.

The husbands of several women in this group had been deported; as a result, the mothers were struggling as single parents. Parents in this group expressed frustration specifically with the 10-year-bar, which prohibits those who have been deported from returning to the United States for 10 years after their removal.

One couple had three adult children with DACA who moved to Canada during the Trump Administration due to fears of being persecuted as Muslims in the United States.⁴ While their children were able to receive asylum in Canada, the youngest child wished to return to the United States, where he had spent most of his formative years. But he felt that his ability to do so was limited because of the discontinuation of the DACA program.



You live in constant fear... it's horrible for immigrant families...

ECONOMIC STABILITY

Parents were also concerned about making ends meet. This worry stemmed directly from their immigration status, since many immigrants have less access to benefits like SNAP and Medicaid and fewer opportunities to earn a living.

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Limited access to benefits

All of the parent groups and the NYC youth group were concerned about access to benefits. Many parents expressed frustration that even though they were paying taxes, they were unable to access benefits due to narrow eligibility requirements, language and literacy limitations, and/or bureaucratic barriers.

For example, multiple participants mentioned that when they asked for interpretation services on benefits helplines, their calls were dropped. Furthermore, the public benefits that some participants did receive were not sufficient in meeting their and their family's needs.

One participant mentioned that they and others they know had to work while sick during the COVID-19 pandemic because they had to make ends meet. But they were left out of government benefits like the stimulus payments and continued to be ineligible for assistance that helped people find economic stability, like a home loan.

“I even knew about some families that were infected and kept working because they didn’t have anything to feed their children or pay the rent. They pretended not to be sick because they didn’t have any other way.”

“[N]ow that we are in a pandemic, at least my family was very affected because we didn’t receive the stimulus, so we had to work, whether you... want to [or not]. We ran risks. We were afraid. I even knew about some families that were infected and kept working because they didn’t have anything to feed their children or pay the rent. They pretended not to be sick because they didn’t have any other way. That’s something that really marks us regarding all the benefits you can receive by having [a] Social Security [number]. For example, something that has brought problems to my family is not being able to buy a house. I’ve been here for 10 years. Since my husband came to the U.S., he has been paying taxes... [I]f you buy [a house] and you don’t have [a loan], you pay a lot of money, almost \$50,000.”

Latinx parent from Illinois

Barriers to career growth

Many participants were limited in advancing in their careers or pursuing more education due to their immigration status, which affected their ability to provide for their families.

“At my job, you have opportunities to get a raise and drive trucks in other states, and that’s one of my limitations, not having an immigration status. That’s what I need to leave the state with a driver’s license and have a good position at the company. That’s one of my limitations, driving trucks, unfortunately.”

Latinx parent from Illinois

PARENT MENTAL HEALTH

Frustration with immigration processes, discrimination, and fear or lived reality of family separation greatly affected the mental well-being of these parents. Participants expressed a great deal of sadness, anguish, and fear. Several participants and even facilitators were moved to tears while sharing their own struggles or listening to others’ stories. Parents also expressed feeling isolated and lacking support in any community, even within the immigrant communities to which they belong.

The Minnesota Asian immigrant group in particular, who were primarily Hmong, discussed the impact of generational trauma on their experiences, which were made more complicated due to stigma around mental health.



Mental health is a stigma.

“Even in our Hmong community, as long as we’ve been here, mental health is a stigma. You don’t want to talk. Like we were talking about, there is no [Hmong] word for mental health... It’s very difficult.”

Asian parent from Minnesota

Intergenerational and intercommunity healing

The majority, if not all, of participants in the Minnesota group belonged to the Hmong community. They expressed a desire for discussions within their community to resolve intergenerational and intercommunity issues related to gender equality, parenting, and mental health.

CHILDREN’S MENTAL HEALTH

Parental well-being is closely connected to that of their children. Parents in the majority of groups discussed the need to support the mental health of their children as well, especially in context of the fear of separation, uncertainty, and frustration with immigration processes and programs like DACA. One parent expressed her frustration with not being able to accompany her son to El Salvador to help him through the grief of losing his grandfather.

“[M]y son learned his grandpa had died. So, he got really depressed. He didn’t tell me anything. He told the doctor because he started having many lines on his body, like stretch marks, but that wasn’t normal. He felt pain and they burned. He told the doctor he wanted to see his grandpa, but he couldn’t because his mom couldn’t go. He got more and more depressed, so the doctor called me and told me, ‘You need someone to take him there so he can heal a bit.’ Thank God, after two months, I could ask my brother so he could take him. My son was there for a while, but it wasn’t the same. He called me and said, ‘Mom, what if you could come?’ It was very frustrating because they are suffering because their parents are like this [unable to travel].”

Latinx parent from Illinois

“If something happens to us in the future, [my son] is only 17 and he doesn’t have to be in charge of his siblings. He shouldn’t have to have that responsibility. He has the right to enjoy his youth and this life moment. We say, ‘If something happens to us, he will be in charge.’ Yes, we are worried. We are afraid. But once [the children] know our status, they start feeling afraid and worried. We have watched in the news parents being caught and children staying here and struggling. So, when we see those situations, we think about our children. Who would they stay with?”

Latinx parent from Illinois

Latinx parents especially expressed a palpable fear for the mental and overall wellbeing of their children.

“If something happens to us in the future, [my son] is only 17 and he doesn’t have to be in charge of his siblings. He shouldn’t have to have that responsibility. He has the right to enjoy his youth and this life moment.”



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CHILDREN’S EDUCATION

Concerns about their children’s education came up in all of the parent listening sessions. Some parents were concerned about their children’s progress in school; others related concerns about the cultural responsiveness of teachers and other staff; and two parents in the Ohio Black immigrant group were very concerned about the lack of reliable transportation to school. One parent worried that their son’s lack of documentation would prevent his educational success after high school.

“[C]hildren can’t defend themselves. So, we send children to school, and we think that they are fine there, and they are not. In my case, I am having problems with my child because he says the teacher screams a lot. So, my child has been at that school for about a month, and he has come back from school three times. So, if teachers, principals, counselors are supposed to protect them, then where are they? There are children suffering from that.”

Latinx parent from New Mexico

WHAT PARENTS WANT

Near the end of the session, facilitators asked parents and participants in the NYC youth group, “What do you want policymakers to know about you and your family? What would you like for them to work on?”



[Policymakers] have to support the immigration reform because it’s a benefit for children. If parents are okay, children will be okay.



IMPROVEMENTS TO IMMIGRATION PROCESS

“[Policymakers] have to support the immigration reform because it’s a benefit for children. If parents are okay, children will be okay. If you have a voice and can defend this... all our concerns and problems are related to how our children are, if they have a house, everything they need, school and everything, and emotional stability. If their parents are here and aren’t worried about not having them one day... I think my children aren’t worried about that, but it’s a reality.”

Latinx parent from Illinois

- High-quality, free legal representation and/or assistance with immigration paperwork.
- Shortening the paperwork processing time and making it less expensive: A number of immigrants reported paying thousands of dollars and waiting for years to get their immigration paperwork processed. They want the process of applying for a green card, renewing their status, and applying for waivers to be quicker, more transparent, and less expensive.
- Language access: Parents would like increased access to court interpreters and better interpretation services when accessing information about immigration processes and available benefits. This was an important issue that parents brought up in all but one listening session brought up in.
- Freedom of movement: Parents expressed a need to be able to enter and exit the United States freely while their immigration cases are processed. Some people reported being frustrated with the inability to see family in their home country for years, including sick parents and young children they had to leave with family. One participant from Illinois recounted with great sadness how she left her young son in the care of her mother in Mexico. Twenty years later, her son is now married and has a child, but she hadn’t been able to see him in all of those years. Some individuals also expressed fear about even leaving the state because they perceive some states to be more or less immigrant-friendly than others.
- Work authorization: The need for work authorization came up in four parent groups. To many people, having work authorization would allow them to access employer health insurance and provide for their families.

“As one of you mentioned, you can see a difference between a person that can work legally and one that can’t. You can have benefits. You say, ‘I will be able to go to the doctor freely. I can go to the psychologist.’ Some people would even be happy with just a work permit.”

Latinx parent from New Mexico

HEALTH INSURANCE FOR THE ENTIRE FAMILY, ESPECIALLY FOR CHILDREN’S MENTAL HEALTH CARE

This is connected with a desire for work permits, as access to health insurance is closely tied to employment. Participants expressed frustration with the current health care system, as well as with the difficulty of obtaining Medicaid, either because they don’t qualify or because of bureaucratic hurdles. Notably, participants expressed gratitude for health care coverage for children where available, especially in Illinois, where all income-eligible children can receive state-funded health coverage, regardless of immigration status.

MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT

Overall, participants mentioned a desire for more mental health resources for children and social support for adults. Parents expressed a desire for counseling to help kids resolve conflicts and provide support in making safe decisions.



We’re not sponges, we work, we pay taxes, even sometimes they tell us even with just a work permit, you’re working, you’re paying taxes. Yet you don’t get anything because you need to have the green card or be a U.S. citizen...We need to change, to be the one changing our stories.

NARRATIVE CHANGE

Participants expressed frustration with, and a desire to counter, negative assumptions about the immigrant community. They wanted the public to know that immigrant parents want what every good parent wants: a better life for their children, free from crime/violence, with a high-quality education.

They wanted more support within and outside their community. Some viewed changes in pre-existing prejudices about immigrants as a way for those outside their communities to understand and view immigrants as they saw themselves or other citizen families.



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“Even us refugees are bringing so much to this country. They need to understand that we are not here to take, and we don’t necessarily come here for [a] better life. A lot of us have good lives. I came here for the freedom to be able to live in a society where law and order exists. You know I don’t have that in my country. So, we’re not here just to take. The media and everything, the narrative ha[s] to change. We have to be the one telling our stories, not some media, not Fox. We’re not sponges, we work, we pay taxes, even sometimes they tell us even with just a work permit, you’re working, you’re paying taxes. Yet you don’t get anything because you need to have the green card or be a U.S. citizen... We need to change, to be the one changing our stories.”

Black parent from Ohio

CULTURAL SENSITIVITY AND RESPONSIVENESS IN SCHOOL

While wanting to be seen as any other parents looking out for their family, parents also expressed a desire to retain cultural traditions and norms from their countries of origin. They wanted to pass their traditions and knowledge down to their children, with support from schools in the form of culturally relevant holidays, more programming to meet immigrant children’s needs, and trainings in cultural responsiveness for school staff, including teachers and counselors.

- School meals: One example of a desire for culturally aware school programs centered on meals served in schools. Parents would like for the food provided in schools to be healthy and/or culturally sensitive to children from cultures and religions with dietary restrictions (e.g., Hindu vegetarians). One parent expressed that having more culturally appropriate meals at school would lead to improvements in self-esteem and mental health.
- School programming: Parents also mentioned a desire for schools to acknowledge and provide time off for Muslim holidays and cultural celebrations, as well as for culturally relevant afterschool programs where children can be comfortable with their background and identities.

MAIN THEMES FROM YOUTH LISTENING SESSIONS

CTAN and partners conducted 3 listening sessions with 18 immigrant youth or children of immigrants. Youth listening sessions were separated by age: Eighteen to 24-year-olds (NYC), high schoolers (DC), and middle schoolers (DC). Youth sessions consisted primarily of young people whose parents were from Latin or Central America. The following themes summarize findings from these conversations as well as written reflections from middle and high schoolers on their and their families' immigrant experiences.

CONCERNS

Discrimination

A number of children (middle schoolers and high schoolers) mentioned experiencing discrimination and facing negative stereotypes about Hispanics, especially from peers and teachers. For example, they encountered sweeping generalizations that they are lazy, they are all from Mexico, or they are "illegal." This clearly also affects their mental health. One participant shared that he had to briefly leave school because he was being bullied about his family and racial/ethnic heritage.

"I entered a school before where I used to be called lazy, called sometimes a bum. But there was this one time where I had to take a break and I had to like leave the school for like a couple of days, because they used to stay stuff about my family, how one day I'm probably going to be sent back where I'm from and how something's going to happen to us just because of the way that we act, the way that we look, how we treat other people, also because how we grew up in our backgrounds, in our race, in our culture."

Washington, D.C. high schooler

Mental health and stigma

This issue, more explicitly discussed among the 18-24-year-old group, centered on how it is difficult for their parents to understand mental health concerns because of long-standing stigma associated with mental health and how that negatively affects their own emotional wellbeing.

"I think society hasn't cared too much about mental health and...it's something that we have to increase more [awareness about] within [our communities], especially older people because they don't know anything about that."

New York City youth

"[Y]ou invalidate your own feelings because there is just not room for it. You can't open up the door to be like I'm not mentally okay when like shit around you is physically falling apart. I'll look at someone, like my dad, or someone like my mom, they are going to be like this for the rest of their life. Like, I'm not getting my parents into therapy, it's never happening, but are they more vulnerable...I think the children of immigrants...are still vulnerable to the fact...that [their parents] are passing on trauma to you because they don't view it as trauma because [they] used to get it ten times worse and it's like that is still not okay."

New York City youth

Family separation

At least three children expressed a fear that their parents or another family member would be deported. This affected their emotional well-being and sense of safety.



I can't get used to having things, knowing it could be all snatched away if my parents get deported. Therefore, I live knowing my parents can't come back and I have to live with relatives or foster parents.

Washington, D.C. middle schooler

Additional responsibility

Children of immigrants or immigrants growing up with their parents often have many responsibilities and/or play multiple roles. A few children and youth mentioned serving as translators for their parents or as primary caregivers for younger siblings.

"I've always been my mother's advocate. Growing up as a first gen Latina I feel as though I have more weight on my back compared to people of majority. Support for my mother as a bilingual Latina has always been my priority but it hasn't been easy. I have a younger sister and I feel as though I am her caretaker. Both my parents work really hard to maintain me and my sister. At a young age I learned to be independent and help translate documents for my mother."

Washington, D.C. high schooler

DESIRES

Participants in the 18-24-year-old NYC group expressed a desire for support in navigating education and career paths. Middle and high school children had a different discussion format that did not address what they would like to see changed.

Desire for role models and mentors

Participants in the NYC group discussed how important it is for them to see people who look like them in positions of power, so that they know these positions are accessible to them. They also expressed a desire for mentorship, specifically for help with navigating the educational system, particularly higher education.

Desire for easily accessible information, including language access

Related to the desire for mentorship and a perceived sense of insufficient school support is an overarching need for more information about how to apply for higher education, how to navigate college, how to access certain benefits like Medicaid, and how to navigate the health care system. The session included a lot of discussion about how, due to unaffordable health care, participants delay obtaining care. They also noted that there didn't seem to be enough language support in schools for newcomers – either for themselves or their peers.

Gratitude and pride

As frustrated as they are with bullying and stereotypes about their communities, and, for older youth, being able to get their parents to understand the importance of mental health, all children and youth felt grateful and proud about what their parents had been able to provide for them.

They were proud that their parents worked hard to come to the United States to give themselves and their kids more educational and economic opportunities. More than once, youth mentioned how they would like to be able to care for their parents in their old age (this was primarily among high schoolers and 18-24-year-olds).

“My parents were able to raise me with [an] immense amount of love and caring [and] provided for me any way possible, and I'm eternally grateful for that.”

New York City youth

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FINDINGS FROM END-OF-SESSION QUESTIONNAIRE

At the end of each parent session and the NYC youth session, we asked participants to list the top two to three issues that they hope CTAN can work on. The top three issues were a pathway to citizenship, access to work authorization, and health care for children and parents.

Other salient issues were protecting the DACA program, children's education, and mental health.

CONCLUSION

A number of participants and their parents came to this country in the hope that their and their children's futures would be free from violence, war, and discrimination. Parent participants hope being in the United States will offer their children more educational and economic opportunities than they would have had in their countries of origin.

Unfortunately, both parents and their children encounter many barriers to establishing their lives in this country. The U.S. immigration system impoverishes people financially. Participants' experiences demonstrate how this happens in myriad ways: delays in work authorization, visa and waiver fees, attorney fees, deportation of a family breadwinner, narrow eligibility guidelines for DACA, high fees to call loved ones in detention, long green card waiting lists, or lack of TPS designation for their country of origin.⁵

Delays prolong uncertainty about one's status, which impacts job and educational prospects, and the ability to visit family who are not in the United States. Encountering all of these barriers negatively affects parents' mental health and the mental health of their children.

Both youth and parents share a desire to change how people perceive immigrants. Immigrants hope for belonging, acceptance, and a sense of community in the United States and, at the same time, have a desire to safeguard and celebrate their cultural norms and traditions. Immigrant parents hope for a better future for their children and grandchildren in this country, which they believe has better educational systems, freedom from persecution, and more opportunities to thrive.

While the listening sessions brought up a number of themes related to the immigrant experience, one thing that is abundantly clear is that the well-being of parents and their children are linked. In the words of one parent in New Mexico, "If the parents are okay, the children are okay."



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ENDNOTES

¹ Mixed-status is a term to signify a family or a group of people with varying immigration statuses. For example, an undocumented parent with U.S.-citizen children would be considered a mixed-status family.

² Read more about CTAN here: <https://childrethriveaction.org>.

³ The Obama Administration created the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, also known as DACA, through executive action in 2012. This program granted certain individuals who came to the United States as minors, temporary and renewable work authorization and relief from detention and deportation for two years at a time. Then in 2017, the Trump Administration rescinded the DACA program, resulting in ongoing debates about the legality of the DACA program in federal courts. In 2022, the Biden Administration codified DACA through the issuance of a final rule. The legal battle is not over, however, as Judge Andrew Hanen has yet to rule whether the final DACA regulation is lawful in the *Texas v. United States* case, which will likely be appealed and eventually reach the Supreme Court. In the meantime, at the time of this publication, the DACA program is no longer accepting new applicants, but existing applicants can renew their DACA status. (Sources: “Considering applying for DACA?” Immigrant Legal Resource Center, <https://www.ilrc.org/daca-toolbox>; Laurence Benenson, “Explainer: The Fifth Circuit’s DACA Ruling,” National Immigration Forum, October 7, 2022, <https://immigrationforum.org/article/explainer-the-fifth-circuits-daca-ruling>.)

⁴ See former President Trump’s **Executive Order 13796** issued in January 2017, which prohibited entry of immigrants from 7 predominantly Muslim nations. This was colloquially known as the “Muslim Ban.”

⁵ TPS, short for Temporary Protective Status, provides temporary relief from detention and deportation for individuals from countries the Department of Homeland Security has officially designated for TPS due to conditions in those nations that prevent their nationals from returning safely. There are currently 16 countries designated for TPS. For more information see <https://www.uscis.gov/humanitarian/temporary-protected-status>.