The intersection of immigration policy impacts and COVID-19 for Latinx young adults

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Abstract

For many Latinx young adults, COVID-19 has exposed exclusionary policies that heighten risk for contracting the virus and that leave them and their parents unprotected. This study has a dual purpose; first, to quantitatively examine immigration policy impacts of discrimination, isolation, threats to family, and vulnerability, and their association to economic consequences experienced by Latinx young adults in Central Texas during the initial months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Second, to qualitatively explore how policy impacts affected Latinx young adults during the pandemic, and the coping mechanisms they utilized to minimize these impacts. Quantitative results show that on average, Latinx young adults (N = 83) reported low discrimination and isolation but moderate threats to family and vulnerability, with rates of isolation and vulnerability higher for foreign-born than U.S.-born Latinx young adults. Perceived discrimination due to one's own or family immigration status was associated with economic hardship. Qualitative findings show that Latinx young adults (n = 21) experienced (a) precarious conditions that pose a threat of COVID-19 infection for Latinxs, (b) parental job loss due to vulnerable employment leads to deprivation, and (c) policies that disproportionately discriminate against the Latinx community and exclude them from vital services. Despite these challenges, participants also drew on resilience and expressed hope for the future. The article concludes with implications for policymakers and practitioners to provide protections and services to Latinx young adults and their family members.

KEYWORDS

COVID-19, economic hardship, immigration policy, Latinx, young adults

INTRODUCTION

Latinx young adults in the United States (U.S.) may have faced some of the greatest challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic (Villatoro et al., 2022). Latinx young adults often work in employment that is considered “frontline” or “essential,” thereby placing them at higher risk of illness exposure than non-Latinx, White young adults (Boehmer et al., 2020; Rodriguez-Diaz et al., 2020). Their employment often lacks benefits that could protect workers were they to become ill, such as paid sick leave, limiting their ability to self-isolate or discontinue working during their recovery due...
to loss of income and/or fear of employer retribution (Hooper et al., 2020). In addition, Latinx young adults may not have access to COVID-19 treatment because of long-standing exclusions of immigrant populations from federally-sponsored health insurance programs (Wilson & Stimpson, 2020).

Minority stress theory applied to Latinx immigrants (Valentin-Cortés et al., 2020) posits that individuals face unique stressors in their personal, community, and social environments based on the systemic marginalization of people with shared ethnic and/or immigrant status. Immigrant status is important because the most vulnerable Latinx young adults are those that lack authorization to reside in the United States. Yet even those who are legal permanent residents or citizens by naturalization or birth, and thus are eligible for services, have often been found to underutilize health services, and to be burdened emotionally and financially by the needs of family members without authorization in the United States, which may be heightened during COVID-19 (Page & Flores-Miller, 2020). Additionally, U.S.-born Latinx young adults experience distress related to immigration because immigration is largely racialized, that is, associated with an ethnic or racial identity (Pinedo & Valdez, 2020; Pinedo et al., 2021). The present mixed-methods study presents how immigration policy and climate are associated with the United States and foreign-born Latinx young adults’ experiences of COVID-19 in 2020.

**Intersection of immigration policy impacts and COVID-19**

According to Minority Stress Theory, individuals who possess a minority identity experience mental health distress as a result of the disproportionate number of stressors in their lives that are caused by marginalization and discrimination (Meyer, 2003). The theory was originally developed to describe the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals (Meyer, 2003) and later applied to other minority groups, including Latinx immigrants (Valentin-Cortés et al., 2020). For Latinx families, immigration status may contribute to experiences of minority stress. Immigration status falls along a continuum with U.S.-born citizens holding the most rights and protections and unauthorized or undocumented persons holding the least rights and protections. Within the continuum from most to least protected are those with naturalized citizenship, permanent residency (i.e., green card holders), and temporary protected or discretionary status such as Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) holders. Despite the variations in rights and protections, even Latinx young adults who grew up with citizen parents and are themselves citizens may experience precarity and uncertainty about their place in the United States (Pinedo et al., 2021). Nativity status is not a proxy for immigration status, although individuals with vulnerable immigration status are foreign-born. Nevertheless, because a significant number of U.S.-born Latinx young adults live in mixed-status households, and because of racialization of immigration, U.S.-born Latinx young adults experience immigration stress by association.

Immigrant identity is relevant to Latinx young adults because immigration status shapes their lives through a constant state of threat and deprivation related to restrictive immigration policy and enforcement (Barajas-Gonzalez et al., 2021). Barajas-Gonzalez and colleagues draw from the Dimensional Model of Childhood Adversity and Psycho-pathology (DMAP; McLaughlin & Sheridan, 2016), to illustrate how for children of Latinx immigrants, threat and deprivation are policy impacts that limit opportunities for advancement and belonging, undermine mental health and behavioral agency, disrupt family preservation and unity, and destabilize youth’s sense of safety. Threat is experienced throughout childhood and young adulthood when children witness their immigrant parents’ fear and avoidance of public spaces, experience the separation of a family member or removal of self through deportation, and have frightening encounters with police and other institutions. Deprivation, defined as the absence of stimulation that aids development, is seen in the form of poverty or hardship that comes from parents’ employment exploitation, which forces immigrant families to live in disinvested neighborhoods with insecure food or housing and lack of safety (Barajas-Gonzalez et al., 2021).

These minority stress experiences are instrumental in understanding COVID-19 impacts for many Latinx young adults because their status and position in society may influence a young adult’s decision to access testing and/or treatment for COVID-19 (Artiga et al., 2021; Haq et al., 2020). Utilization of health services is low among Latinx (Page & Flores-Miller, 2020), in part because of low rates of health insurance coverage among this population, particularly among the foreign-born with no or only partial authorization status, such as those with DACA. Yet, even U.S.-born Latinx young adults may be underinsured and avoid health services to protect vulnerable family members (Cabral & Cuevas, 2020). The consequences of this chilling effect may be heightened during the pandemic, at a time when access to medical care can be the difference between receiving timely and adequate care or not.

Exacerbating these effects is the exclusion from economic relief programs during COVID-19. For example, during the Trump administration, if an individual in a household used an Individual Taxpayer Identification Number, which is common in immigrant families, the entire household was excluded from the cash assistance offered by the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act (Cholera et al., 2020). The exclusion from cash assistance programs is especially concerning because Latinx individuals are nearly twice as likely as White individuals to experience the deprivation of poverty and food insecurity (Maani & Galea, 2020).

**Strategies to cope with the intersection of policy impacts and COVID-19**

To mitigate these policy impacts, Latinx young adults may turn to family members for support (Harkness et al., 2020).
In a study on young adults, family support was linked to improved emotional wellbeing during the pandemic (Liu et al., 2020), which might be especially salient in Latinx young adults because of cultural values (e.g., *familismo*) that emphasize family connection (Harkness et al., 2020). In addition to family connection, Cardoso and Thompson (2010) identified individual characteristics (i.e., competence, shift-and-persist strategies), cultural factors (values and traditions), and community supports (neighborhood efficacy and cohesion) as sources of resilience for Latinx populations. In terms of individual characteristics, recent research on the current pandemic demonstrates that young adults who engage in active and supportive coping strategies are less likely to experience COVID-related distress than those who engage in fewer active and supportive strategies (Kimhi et al., 2020; Shanahan et al., 2020).

The current study is guided by Minority Stress Theory (Valentín-Cortés et al., 2020) to document the challenges Latinx young adults with possible immigration vulnerability (self, family) faced during COVID-19, but also to explore sources of coping and resilience that help them get through these challenges. In addition to Minority Stress Theory, we draw from an expanded childhood adversity framework for children of immigrants (Barajas-Gonzalez et al., 2021) to explore how challenges facing Latinx young adults are experienced as threat and deprivation. Using mixed-methods research, we assessed the impact of immigration policy impacts on COVID-19-related experiences among Latinx young adults by answering the following questions: (a) What sources of threat (i.e., policy impacts) and deprivation (i.e., economic hardship) were experienced by Latinx young adults during the initial months of the COVID-19 pandemic? (b) As nativity status is closely tied to social vulnerability in the United States, did experiences of threat and deprivation during the pandemic vary across those born inside and outside the United States? (c) How were these policy impacts related to pandemic-related experiences of deprivation (i.e., economic hardship)? and (d) What coping mechanisms did Latinx young adults utilize to minimize threats and deprivation? Given these central questions, we test the following hypotheses for the quantitative portion of the study:

1. Experiences of threat related to immigration policy impacts and deprivation related to economic hardship during the initial months of the COVID-19 pandemic will be present among Latinx young adults.
2. Foreign-born Latinx young adults will demonstrate higher experiences of threat and deprivation than their U.S.-born counterparts.
3. Threats will be associated with higher levels of deprivation among Latinx young adults.

**METHOD**

The data derive from the Wellness Study Latinx (WS Latinx), a mental health needs assessment of Latinx immigrant young adults in Central Texas. In an effort to expand mental health support to Latinx young adults, the needs assessment and research were conducted through a community-based partnership with Migrant Clinicians Network, a migrant service organization, and the Mexican Consulate’s *Ventanilla de Salud* (VDS; Health Window) program.

A Transformative Sequential Explanatory Mixed-Methods Design was used to influence every stage of the research and design process with a social justice lens (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). This type of design uses a theoretical-based framework, in this study's case, Minority Stress Theory and the expanded childhood adversity framework for children of immigrants, to uncover the needs and experiences of historically-oppressed groups through research that is change-oriented and focused on empowering individuals within the research process (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Data collection and analysis were conducted sequentially but with equal emphasis on quantitative (observable) and qualitative (narrative) components. Guided by Camacho (2020) and Creswell and Plano Clark (2011), we operationalized the criteria for transformative sequential explanatory designs for each phase of the study, including problem definition, study design, sampling, data collection, and data analysis and reporting.

**Definition of the problem:** Migrant Clinicians Network surfaced the lack of representation in research of Latinx young adults as a concern because of the immigration stress many of them are under and the limited services for this age group. This prompted researchers and community partners to assemble a community-advisory board (CAB) made up of local Latinx leaders, families, and community advocates to provide input on our research questions, suggest ways to build trust with community members, and balance risk and resilience in our research questions.

**Identification of the research design:** Acknowledging that the experiences of Latinx young adults around COVID-19 and immigration climate are complex, the CAB suggested a survey to understand patterns in immigration policy impacts and in COVID-19 experience, attending to subgroup differences, followed by focus groups to explain via anecdotes the role of policy impacts on young adults’ personal and family experiences of COVID-19. Researchers and partners agreed that engaging participants in a survey first could reduce stigma and facilitate trust in subsequent focus groups, thereby enhancing the explanatory potential of this method.

**Selection of data sources and participants:** Although we focused on Latinx young adults given their oppressed and developmental susceptibility, we sought a diverse sample in terms of nativity and educational background. Beginning the study with the survey allowed for purposeful recruitment, from which a subsample could be recruited for the qualitative study.

**Design of data collection methods and instruments:** Aligned with the developmental practices of young adults, we recruited participants via social media and...
word-of-mouth (snowball) sampling, as well as in-person from community and higher education settings. We also selected instruments that measured social determinants of health, such as immigration policy impacts and environmental supports. Focus group questions were selected to explain the effects of immigration policy impacts on experiences during the pandemic, and expanding beyond the quantitative understanding of such effects by asking about personal and family experiences.

Analyzing, interpreting, reporting, and using results: Although data were analyzed and interpreted sequentially (quantitative first, qualitative second) in this article, we reported it in a combined fashion to a youth advisory board and to an audience of youth, parents, and community advocates and professionals for practice and policy implications.

Procedure

All study procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Boards (IRB) of The University of Texas at Austin and Migrant Clinicians Network. In-person recruitment took place at the Mexican Consulate, local universities and community colleges, and at community events. The research team also created social media accounts for the study and promoted the survey via the social media sites of local Latinx-serving organizations. Study materials included information for prospective participants to complete an online eligibility form to assess inclusion criteria of (a) identifying as Latina/o/x, (b) speaking English or Spanish, (c) identifying as a first- (foreign-born) or second-generation (U.S.-born) immigrant from Latin America, and (d) currently residing in one of the 23 Central Texas counties within the consulate's service area.

The eligibility form also asked potential participants if they were expressing current suicidal intent or reporting a suicide attempt in the past year; and self-reporting a diagnosis of a serious mental illness (e.g., psychosis-related disorders) or cognitive disability (i.e., In the past 12 months, have you, a family member, or a professional expressed concern that you might have any of the following? Schizophrenia or psychosis, suicidality, a cognitive delay or disability, or none of the above). Individuals who responded in the affirmative to one of these serious mental health conditions were deemed ineligible for the study due to the sensitivity of survey items that might place undue burden on these individuals. They were contacted by a member of the research team for mental health resources and/or referral.

Those who were eligible were contacted within 24 hours of completing the eligibility form for verification and were then sent a personalized link to access the online consent form and survey. They completed a 30-minute self-administered survey online regarding their experiences with COVID-19, immigration, mental health symptoms and service utilization, perceptions of stigma, and other treatment barriers. Data collection occurred between February and August 2020 with a brief hiatus in March 2020 following the global pandemic announcement of COVID-19, which necessitated the inclusion of new instruments to assess the pandemic's effects. Of all individuals completing the survey (N = 117), only 12 had completed the survey before the addition of COVID-19 items. Thus, 83 of the 117 participants (70.9%) completed questions about their experiences with COVID-19. There were no significant differences between participants who completed the survey before and after COVID-19 was designated a pandemic. All participants were offered a $25 e-gift card for completing the survey.

Participants who agreed and who endorsed nonspecific psychological distress on the Kessler 6 scale (K6; Kessler et al., 2002) were invited to participate in the focus groups. The K6 measures the frequency participants exhibit six distressing symptoms (feeling nervous, hopeless, restless or fidgety, depressed, everything being an effort, or worthless) over the past 30 days from 0 (None of the time) to 4 (All of the time). Validation studies indicate that a score of 13 or higher (24 maximum score) is suggestive of serious psychological distress, and these scores are highly correlated with diagnosable anxiety and depressive disorders (Kessler et al., 2003). Because our study focused on mental health in a community sample, we prioritized focus group participants who scored up to 20, excluding the most severe cases. Research staff contacted 49 participants.

A total of six virtual focus groups were conducted between May and August 2020. Although 26 of the 49 participants agreed to participate in focus groups, five did not attend resulting in a final subsample for the focus groups of 21 participants. Among those who consented to be contacted but did not enroll in focus groups, schedule conflicts, lack of privacy at home to participate in a virtual focus group, nonworking phone numbers, and inability to make contact were among reasons for nonenrollment.

Focus group questions explored participants' understanding of mental health, immigration policy impacts, and ways in which the pandemic heightened policy impacts of exclusion and discrimination. Questions were semi-structured, and each of the 12 questions could be elaborated through probes intended to deepen a response. Focus groups lasted between 60 and 75 min and were audio-recorded. They were moderated in English (as per the stated preference of young adults) by one of two graduate students and a research coordinator, all of whom were trained by a faculty member with experience in focus group research. A note taker took session notes to supplement the recordings. All recordings were transcribed verbatim.
than half were foreign-born (42.35%). Given the purposive sampling of the participants, the study sample is more inclusive of the immigrant experience as only one-quarter of Latinxs in Central Texas are foreign-born (Hispanic Impact Fund, 2021). The overwhelming majority of the study sample were single (85.88%) and had at least some college education (75.29%; see Table 1); in contrast, less than 50% of Latinxs in Central Texas have some college education (Hispanic Impact Fund, 2021). Demographic characteristics were similar across Latinx young adults who were U.S.-born versus foreign-born in the sample, with the exception of gender. More males were represented in the foreign-born group than the U.S.-born group. In general, focus group participants were comparable to the total sample; however, focus group participants were more likely to be older, female, and more educated; there were no differences in immigration-related or COVID experiences reported on the survey between focus group participants and nonparticipants. Given the risks Latinxs face in reporting immigration status, we did not ask about immigration status, but rather, relied on reports of being foreign- or U.S.-born, with immigration topics surfacing in the focus groups without explicitly soliciting them.

### Measures

#### Perceived Immigration Policy Effects Scale (PIPES)

The PIPES (Ayón, 2017) is a 24-item scale with four subscales assessing perceptions of policy impacts: (a) discrimination (11 items; e.g., *Were you treated like a criminal based on who you are?*; \( \alpha = 0.84 \)), (b) social isolation (five items; e.g., *Did you feel unsafe when leaving your home?*; \( \alpha = 0.72 \)), (c) threat to family (three items; e.g., *Did you worry about family separation due to deportation?*; \( \alpha = 0.87 \)), and (d) vulnerability (five items; e.g., *Have you felt unsafe due to immigration policies?*; \( \alpha = 0.90 \)). Items are measured on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*Never*) to 5 (*Always*). Mean scores were calculated for each subscale; lower mean scores (below 3) were indicative of minor immigration-related impacts while higher scores (4 or more) were suggestive of major impacts.

#### COVID-19 pandemic-related experiences

The COVID-19 experiences questionnaire was adapted from the University of Southern California’s Understanding

### Table 1  Sample descriptive statistics of Latinx Wellness Study (2020)

|                      | Total sample \((n = 85)\) | Foreign-born \((n = 36)\) | U.S.-born \((n = 49)\) | \(p\) value |
|----------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|------------------------|-------------|
| **Age**              | M (SD) or %                | M (SD) or %                | M (SD) or %             |             |
| Age                  | 21.10 (3.93)               | 21.53 (4.13)               | 20.77 (3.77)            | 0.383       |
| Male                 | 21.18%                     | 22.22%                     | 20.41%                  | 0.041       |
| **Nativity**         |                           |                           |                        |             |
| U.S.-born            | 57.65%                     | —                         | —                      | —           |
| Foreign-born         | 42.35%                     | —                         | —                      | —           |
| **Marital status**   |                           |                           |                        |             |
| Single               | 85.88%                     | 88.89%                     | 83.67%                  | 0.362       |
| Married/cohabiting  | 9.41%                      | 11.11%                     | 8.16%                   |             |
| Other                | 4.71%                      | 0.00%                      | 8.16%                   |             |
| **Educational attainment** |                     |                           |                        |             |
| High School or Less | 24.71%                     | 22.22%                     | 26.53%                  | 0.649       |
| At Least Some College| 75.29%                     | 77.78%                     | 73.47%                  |             |
| **PIPES Immigration Stressors** \((1 = \text{Never} \text{ to } 5 = \text{Always})\) | | | | |
| Discrimination       | 1.79 (0.57)                | 1.85 (0.58)                | 1.75 (0.56)             | 0.415       |
| Isolation            | 1.90 (0.79)                | 2.16 (0.83)                | 1.71 (0.70)             | 0.009       |
| Threats              | 3.16 (1.43)                | 3.35 (1.41)                | 3.01 (1.44)             | 0.284       |
| Vulnerability        | 2.56 (1.20)                | 2.83 (1.28)                | 2.36 (1.11)             | 0.071       |
| **COVID-19 consequences** |                     |                           |                        |             |
| Economic Hardship \((\text{range: } 0\text{–}9)\) | 1.99 (2.33) | 2.67 (0.47) | 1.49 (0.26) | 0.021 |
America Study of COVID-19 (Bennett et al., 2020) and created for the purpose of the current study. The questionnaire included two sections that assessed the (a) anticipated likelihood of experiencing a COVID-related consequence in the next 3 months, and (b) actual COVID-related consequences that already occurred (No = 0, Yes = 1). Only the actual consequences portion of the scale was used for the current analysis. Exploratory factor analyses revealed three subscales: (1) economic/financial hardship (e.g., Did you and/or a family member run out of money because of the coronavirus?); (2) psychosocial burden (e.g., Have you lost important friendships and/or romantic relationships because of the coronavirus? Are you and/or a family member currently using alcohol or drugs to cope with the stress of the coronavirus?); and (3) violent consequences (e.g., Have you and/or a family member experienced emotional and/or physical violence from someone you know?). For the current study, we only focus on the economic/financial hardship subscale because it was the most common consequence endorsed by Latinx young adults. A count of the number of experienced economic consequences (poisson distributed data) affecting the young adult and/or family member during the pandemic, as reported by young adults, was created (range: 0–10).

Nativity status and control variables

Participants self-reported their nativity status—that is, whether they were born in or outside the United States. The analyses also controlled for participant gender (male vs. female—referent group) and level of educational attainment (high school or less—referent group vs. at least some college) as prior research indicates that these factors directly affect COVID-19-related experiences and immigration-related stressors (Caplan, 2007; Parke & Leidy, 2013).

Analytic process

To answer our first research question, descriptive statistics were estimated for the total sample to characterize the extent of threat (i.e., immigration-related discrimination, isolation, threats to family, and vulnerability) and deprivation (i.e., economic hardship) experienced by Latinx young adults during the initial months of the pandemic. Differences in threat and deprivation were then examined across nativity status (U.S.-born vs. foreign-born) using bivariate tests (e.g., two sample t-tests, χ² tests, etc.), thereby helping us explore our second question. For our third question, multivariable regressions models examined the association of immigration-related discrimination, isolation, threats to family, and vulnerability with economic hardship experienced during the pandemic. As such, count regression models were performed to examine the extent to which the immigration-related policy impacts were associated with pandemic-related economic hardship. Because of evidence of overdispersion (i.e., the model underfits the amount of dispersion in the outcome), a negative binomial regression model was used. Initial models examined the effect of PIPES policy impacts subscales on economic hardship. Subsequent models introduced the control variables (nativity status, gender, and educational attainment) one by one to examine how the main effects of policy impacts on economic hardship changed after introducing potential confounders. The final model results presented include all covariates.

Qualitative data were analyzed using contextualist thematic analysis, a first-order qualitative analysis approach aimed at finding similarities and themes within data that are both personal in meaning and sociocultural in influence (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Coding and theme development followed an inductive, latent approach whereby codes emerged from the data rather than an overarching theoretical paradigm. The first and third authors conducted the analysis following the six-phase analytic process detailed by Braun and Clarke (2006), under the supervision of the senior author. In the first phase, researchers read and reread transcripts to familiarize themselves with the data and to memo initial impressions. Second, they created initial codes, which are descriptive statements linked to participant statements that pull out specific meanings and shifts in meanings. A goal at this stage is to create statements that are near-verbatim so as to not lose participants’ meanings. In a third phase, codes were then linked together into categories based on similarities with other codes in a category, and differences with codes in other categories. Fourth, categories within a focus group were reworked into broader, latent themes to represent the meanings interpreted within the data rather than semantic or “face-value”-level codes. Verbatim excerpts from the data were selected to represent each theme. Fifth, the same process was undertaken with other focus group transcripts, and in the sixth phase, merged and revised into a combined list of themes. Discrepancies between researchers in the coding process were addressed during debriefings with the senior author where the evidence in favor of one code versus another was reviewed and decided upon based on alignment with other codes and our guiding theoretical framework. All authors work closely with Latinx populations through advocacy, research, and clinical practice.

RESULTS

Immigration policies and economic hardship during the COVID-19 pandemic

During the initial months of the COVID-19 pandemic, survey data showed that Latinx young adults experienced a myriad of threats and deprivation related to immigration-related policy impacts and pandemic-related economic hardship, respectively (see Table 1). On average, the sample reported low discrimination and isolation as a result of their or a family member’s immigrant status. In contrast,
other forms of immigration-related threats such as threats to the family and vulnerability, assessed as fear and stress pertinent to immigration policies, respectively, were moderate. With respect to pandemic-related deprivation, the majority of Latinx young adults (nearly 70%; not shown in Table 1) were exposed to any form of economic hardship, including losing a job, having difficulty paying rent, and so forth. Despite its prevalence, the extent of exposure to economic hardship was generally low during the initial months of the pandemic: on average, the sample reported experiencing two out of nine incidents of economic hardship in the summer of 2020. Altogether, these findings support, in part, Hypothesis 1. Consistent with Hypothesis 2, some of these experiences varied by nativity status: foreign-born Latinx young adults were more prone to experience isolation ($p = .009$) and vulnerability ($p = .071$, marginally significant) than their U.S.-born counterparts. Additionally, foreign-born Latinx young adults reported more counts of economic strain than U.S.-born young adults.

Table 2 presents the results of the negative binomial regression models that examined the associations between immigration policy impacts, nativity status, and COVID-19 economic hardship, controlling for gender and educational attainment (Hypothesis 3). In spite of low levels of reported discrimination among the sample overall, perceived discrimination due to one's own or a family member's immigration status was correlated with economic hardship: a one-unit increase in the discrimination scale was associated with a 74% increase in the number of economic hardship consequences experienced during the pandemic, supporting Hypothesis 3. Other immigration-related threats were not associated with pandemic-related deprivation.

### Immigration-related experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic

Themes emerging from focus groups illuminated how immigration policy impacts of vulnerability, exclusion, and discrimination were experienced during the pandemic for Latinx young adults. Participants described (a) precarious conditions that pose a threat of COVID-19 infection for Latinxs, (b) parental job loss due to vulnerable employment leads to deprivation, and (c) policies that disproportionally discriminate against the Latinx community and exclude them from vital services. Participants also expressed resilience and hope for the future.

### Precarious conditions pose a threat of COVID-19 infection for Latinxs

#### Vulnerable work contexts

All participants worried about themselves or a family member contracting COVID-19. By summer 2020, all had witnessed a family member contracting the virus. They feared that because some family members had unauthorized status, they were forced into frontline/essential employment during the pandemic where there was greater risk of exposure. One participant noted that, as a low-income family, her family had to continue to work in precarious conditions, where there is an elevated risk of getting ill: “Are they going to get COVID because they’re all still working because they don’t have, you know, the privilege to say like they’re gonna just relax?” One participant worried about her siblings who were working to assist with the family’s finances: “They were putting themselves in danger because they were still working.”

In response to these threats and fears, a participant noted that she had to educate her parents about COVID-19 precautions at work, “I had to sit down my parents and tell them ‘No, whenever you go out, you’re going to wear a mask… This is not a hoax.’ I kind of became the parent… I did not go out at all.” Yet, attempting to isolate herself and parents in the face of ongoing work demands became challenging.

#### Vulnerable conditions for family abroad

Although participants’ most immediate concern was about their family in the United States, several also expressed feeling helpless about their family members abroad because of the limited resources in those countries to combat the pandemic.
One participant shared, “All of our family lives in Mexico... And it's like we're all kind of far apart from each other now like no one can see each other.” Another participant noted that COVID-19 differentially impacted her family in Peru compared to her family in the United States: “I don't really think about my family in the U.S. because they're all safe, but my family in Peru and just how COVID is affecting Peru, just because they're all in the epicenter right now.”

Deprivation from parental job loss due to lack of employment protections

Lack of employment protections among parents with undocumented immigration status increased risk for parental job loss

While some participants dealt with their family’s vulnerability to COVID-19 because they worked in frontline/essential occupations, others reported witnessing parents losing their jobs because of lack of employment protections. Most participants reported that a parent or other family member was employed in sectors not protected by employment laws because of their immigration status. These jobs were not amenable to social distancing during the pandemic, which led to abrupt lay-offs or lapses in work when stay-at-home orders were mandated. In one participant’s case, her mother, who works as a line cook, “couldn't work for a month” after the shelter-in-place measures were mandated. Another participant’s mother, who worked as a cleaner, lost most of her business: “Before being quarantined she was cleaning homes so that obviously it is not really happening right now, except with one close friend.”

Participants discussed how this unemployment reduced income in their families, depriving them of stable food, rent, and medical provisions during a time when these resources were needed most. One participant poignantly summarized this impact as, “No one has money. So it is kind of like figuring out ways to make sure that everyone is covered.” This participant also perceived that the Latinx immigrant community as a whole has been disproportionally impacted by COVID-related unemployment. In fact, some participants also reported losing their own jobs. As one participant commented, “I lost my job as well because I work in the university and the university closed down. That was stressful during the first few weeks.”

Latinx young adult actions to mitigate parental job loss came with associated strain

In spite of personal job loss affecting some participants, several reported a desire to financially assist their parents affected by job vulnerability and insecurity. As one participant commented, “I have to help take care of my parents.” Another participant reported that she had planned to eventually help her family, before the COVID-19 pandemic:

I had just saved up a lot of money during the school year, just because that's me and that's how I grew up. But I knew that I would be the backup for my parents in case they ever needed any support.

However, financially assisting their parents appeared to come with financial strain for several of the participants. As one participant noted, “I had to get a loan out to be able to cover that, and I'll just have to pay that back once I get my Fall financial aid to be able to come back to that debt free.” In contrast, another participant noted, “For me, fortunately, it hasn't been challenging. I am documented and I'm working full time and I am about to shift into working full time for the city, but I definitely hope to help my parents.”

Most participants reported that either they or their family members began to work extra shifts or start new jobs to address their financial instability associated unemployment in the family. They reflected on the lack of privilege and deprivation that comes with being an immigrant, relative to the rest of the population, as one participant noted, “I had to go back to work because I don't have the option to work from home or to just not be working because I had to pay my bills since my parents can't help me.” Another participant added:

That infuriates me because there's a lot of people who are citizens here and... they can just work from home or they're getting paid from their jobs or their jobs are willing to pay them [for staying home]. For me, that just breaks my heart because [my family is] risking their lives if they manage to catch COVID.

Policies that disproportionally discriminate against the Latinx community and exclude them from vital services

Most participants reported witnessing economic relief policies that discriminated against members of the Latinx immigrant community and deprived them from vital services. In the total sample of survey participants, less than a quarter received financial assistance from their family, community, or government (SNAP) during the initial months of the pandemic. Additionally, one-quarter of Latinx young adults personally received a stimulus check from the federal government as a result of the Family First Coronavirus Response Act. In contrast, two in five mentioned that neither themselves nor a family member received a stimulus check. Focus group participants attributed discrimination from federal relief efforts as being built into social programs against Latinx immigrants and was reported based on parents' immigration status, as follows:

I think COVID is harder for children of immigrants. For example, my dad was laid
off and since he's not a citizen, he couldn't do unemployment, and so it was up to my siblings who are citizens who are still working to like pay the bills and make sure everything was okay.

Several participants noted that they or their parents were ineligible for a stimulus check due to their unauthorized status. For example, one participant shared:

“Something else that I've noticed too is that as immigrants and as children of immigrants, there's also this ability to cope with harder things, there's this resilience that we have.”

But with COVID-9 affecting minorities, mainly for different reasons like predisposition to asthma and all of that, I got a better idea of what I want to focus my master's degree on and hopefully use that to either hold or improve communities and hold policymakers accountable for different things that predispose minorities to the pandemic.

Participants also expressed feeling closer to their community as a result of COVID-19’s impact on their community. A few reported greater awareness of injustice and a desire to become involved in social justice organizations (Black Lives Matter and immigrant rights) so they can increase the tools they can use to make systemic changes related to exploitation. These individuals also expressed a desire to clarify their values and goals as they think about developing leadership within their communities.

Finally, participants shared small actions they have engaged in to take care of themselves. Consistent with Latinx culture, many talked about cherishing the time they spent with their family, participating in cultural traditions that bring comfort, including prayer and meditation, and artistic expression in the form of journaling their experiences and emotions. A few participants described how focusing on themselves has helped them become more introspective about their pre-pandemic busy lifestyle, as illustrated by this participant:

I've worried about my parents' health a lot because my dad's an essential worker, and we had like this scare where we weren't sure if he was—he had gotten sick, and we were worried, like, “Okay, he had to go get tested. Okay, what is our plan if he is sick? What is our plan if he gets charged?” You know, we didn't—we weren't sure if our insurance was going to cover it... It was just a mess, and that was very stressful and worrisome.

Drawing on resilience and hope for the future

Despite the negative consequences of COVID-19 on participants who also experienced immigration policy impacts, several reported hope for the future. One participant described feeling safer that her parents, who had unauthorized status, were not working when she shared, “My parents are home all the time... I have less worry about, 'Oh, what if, you know, something happens to them or ICE or something like that?'” Another participant noted that as a child of immigrants, she has the resilience to cope with COVID-related stress: 

“This participant chose to make a plan with her friends so they could pace themselves in their work and school activities. Another participant chose to read a book on financial stability so she could be more planful with her finances and choice of jobs. Another yet solidified her plans to go back to college so she could enjoy more financial stability upon graduation.
Experiences of threat and deprivation related to policy impacts

Hypothesis 1 examined the extent of immigration-related threats and pandemic-related deprivation (economic hardship) Latinx young adults would experience during the initial months of the pandemic. Immigration-related threats to family and vulnerability were moderate in the sample, whereas discrimination was low. Living in an urban environment, their highly educated status (75% were in college or attended at least some college), and English proficiency, may help explain low discrimination patterns. Other research suggests that Mexican Americans, which largely comprised our sample, are subjected to less discrimination than Black Latinx based on race (Araújo & Borrell, 2006). Nevertheless, and in keeping with Minority Stress Theory (Meyer, 2003) and our qualitative findings, discrimination based on a minority identity, including possible immigration status, has largely affected Mexican Americans, regardless of race, due to increased targeting of Mexicans in the current political U.S. climate. Another explanation for the low reports of discrimination in the survey sample may be that during the pandemic, Latinx young adults were less present in public arenas, limiting their exposure to daily and major acts of discrimination. Understanding how experiences of discrimination changed during the pandemic is an important next step, as well as exploring changes in protective factors, as suggested by our qualitative findings.

The association between policy impacts and deprivation related to economic hardship

Despite the common prevalence of economic hardship in the sample (nearly 70% reported at least one form of hardship), the extent of hardship experienced was low—on average, Latinx young adults reported two out of nine counts of economic hardship. Bivariate analyses revealed differences in experiences of threats and deprivation across nativity status in our sample, supporting Hypothesis 2. The higher counts of economic hardship for foreign-born young adults are consistent with the theory of threat and deprivation and minority stress guiding this study in that foreign-born Latinx young adults may receive fewer protections than U.S.-born young adults, including economic security.

Support for Hypothesis 3 was mixed as only immigration-related discrimination threats were associated with pandemic-related deprivation—that is, economic hardship. Although discrimination was generally low, study participants who perceived discrimination policy impacts reported high counts of economic hardship. This finding is concerning because others have found that the COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately affected the financial stability of Latinx individuals in the United States (Fairlie et al., 2020; Galea & Abdalla, 2020). The fact that Latinx young adults that experience immigration-related discrimination policy impacts struggle to “make ends meet” is crucial, and our qualitative findings suggest that this struggle may be a primary result of economic hardship felt by family members. It is also possible that the linkages between policy-related impacts and economic hardship may vary for Latinx young adults who are U.S.-born compared to those who are foreign-born. As such, we explored potential interactions of nativity status with immigration policy impacts to examine this pattern; however, none of the interaction terms were statistically significant likely due to the small sample size. Future studies should further examine these potential modifying effects using larger samples.

The study sample reported moderate fear and stress related to vulnerability, and foreign-born young adults reported significantly more isolation as well as economic strain. Taken together, these results may suggest that despite lower experiences of discrimination, Latinx young adults are not protected against the fear and uncertainty related to immigration and authorization status of themselves and/or a family member, relating to the theories guiding this study (Barajas-Gonzalez et al., 2021; Meyer, 2003). The current anti-immigrant rhetoric, coupled with the highly uncertain and vulnerable time of the pandemic may be heightening threat of immigration enforcement and deprivation of needed social and healthcare resources to support already “unprotected” individuals and their families (Page & Flores-Miller, 2020).

In spite of some of these quantitative findings, qualitative findings suggested that Latinx young adults in the United States are concerned about the impact of COVID-19 on themselves, family members in the United States, and family members living outside the country. They also expressed concerns about parental job loss for parents with unauthorized status, and discriminatory and exclusionary policies that leave unauthorized family members behind. On top of concern for family, Latinx young adults have themselves also faced disproportionate hardship during the pandemic. Latinx young adults are overrepresented and employed in industries where they must be physically present and in close proximity to others to complete their jobs (Boehmer et al., 2020; Rodriguez-Diaz et al., 2020). Our qualitative findings highlight the
subjective experiences of worry and burden as many of them witness their struggling family members and as they sacrifice their own finances and plans to help support these family members. Likewise, living in multigenerational homes (McConnell, 2015), young adults in our study not only lived with the uncertainty of contracting the virus, but also were burdened by their family's potential exposure.

The finding that Latinx young adults are not only burdened by the impact of the pandemic on their wellbeing but on that of their nuclear and extended family members, can be explained by a cultural orientation towards the family in Latinx culture. Family orientation and obligation appears to be observed not only among foreign born participants, but those who are born in the United States and are perhaps more acculturated (Roche et al., 2012). The added burden of COVID-19 consequences on family in the United States and abroad can further tax Latinx young adults in the United States. Not surprisingly, other research has shown that Latinx young adults who experience immigration stress have higher rates of clinically diagnosed depression, anxiety, and substance use than older adults (Garcini et al., 2017). The present study corroborates the role of immigration stress and suggests that the family experience is powerful in predicting outcomes.

Drawing on resilience during the pandemic

Latinx family orientation, also known as familismo, has also been shown to be protective during times of stress (Cardoso & Thompson, 2010). In fact, in our study, participants expressed feeling relief in being physically and emotionally close to family, and in knowing their legally vulnerable family members were safe during shelter-in-place measures. Despite the impact of the pandemic, and its intersection with immigration policy, these young adults remained hopeful and optimistic toward the future. How Latinx young adults draw on these resources during the pandemic, and have learned to draw on resources in the face of ongoing family vulnerability related to immigration policy throughout their lives, deserves greater attention in the literature.

Limitations and future directions

This study has several limitations that warrant discussion. The first limitation corresponds to the cross-sectional nature of quantitative findings. Future research exploring longitudinal impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic alongside immigration-related challenges will be important to better understand the phenomena described in this study as it evolved over time. In addition, despite our efforts to recruit a diverse sample, the small sample size, paired with a largely educated and urban sample limits generalizability of study findings. Future research on these topics might explore differential experiences of Latinx young adults in urban versus nonurban settings, as well as the impact of education on pandemic- and immigration-related experiences.

Given the precarity of the social and political climate at the time of the survey, we did not collect any information about the participant's personal and family authorization status. It is possible that young adults with unauthorized status experienced worse consequences during the pandemic than those with authorized status; more research is needed to understand how the pandemic impacted unauthorized populations. Nevertheless, we were able to examine pandemic-related threats and deprivation across nativity status. Lastly, the study sample was overrepresented by females. The recruitment of male participants in this study, most especially in the focus group study, was challenging, despite expanding inclusion criteria for participation, calling for new approaches to include male representation in mental health research.

Implications for policy and practice

Results from this study suggest important implications for policymakers and practitioners. First, several participants described being DACA recipients at the time of the study. There is an immense need for policies to include undocumented and DACAmented individuals in federally-funded healthcare and financial aid services. The continuation of DACA during the pandemic is paramount for supporting the mental health and livelihoods of nearly 800,000 DACAmented individuals, the majority of whom are Latinx and young adults (López & Krogstad, 2017). The implementation of DACA has lowered rates of poverty and improved the mental health of eligible Latinx young adult immigrants (Amuedo-Dorantes & Antman, 2016; Pope, 2016). Psychological distress may be amplified because of uncertainty for their parents' safety, yet the legal status of noncitizen parents continues to be denied after Obama's Deferred Action for Parent Arrivals failed to pass in the Senate (Weinstein & Saldana, 2017).

Practitioners working with Latinx young adults during the COVID-19 pandemic need to be aware of the disproportionate impacts the pandemic has had on this population. Trauma-informed practices aimed at addressing threat and deprivation derived from discrimination, vulnerability, isolation, and other immigration policy impacts should be prioritized with this population (Barajas-Gonzalez et al., 2021). Moreover, clinical and family interventions must reflect a social justice response to address health inequities in marginalized groups (Fortuna et al., 2020; Valdez et al., 2018).

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