

# HEALTH & WELLNESS COMMUNITY BRIEF ON: Latino Young Children and their Families in Alameda County

## FAMILY SEPARATIONS: TRAUMA AND RESILIENCE

### Introduction

Migration is a universal process that can have life-long consequences. This community brief will focus on the Latino immigrant community. Providers may find the information in this brief helpful in understanding any client who experiences a migration.

This brief will present three main aspects of migration as seen through a lens of trauma and resilience:

1. The impact of the process of migration;
2. The distinct perspectives of parents and children with an emphasis on emotional and behavioral responses to separation; and
3. How providers can support family resilience.

In particular, the brief will highlight issues and experiences of the Latino<sup>1</sup> immigrant community in Alameda County, where 22.7% of the residents are Latino. The following case illustrates many of the issues discussed in this brief.

### Andrea's Story

Andrea is 4 years old and recently started a Head Start program. She cries when her mother, Lupita, leaves her at school; and her teacher reports that Andrea is difficult to console. She has recently started to wet the bed at night. She is wary of her father, Roberto. She has a new baby brother, Antonio, who recently came home after a 3-month hospitalization due to prematurity. The hospital staff was concerned that the mother had inconsistent visitation and had a high level of anxiety. Over a few months, the home visitor established a trusting relationship with the mother and was able to obtain a migration narrative that revealed the effects of family separation and trauma during the border crossing.

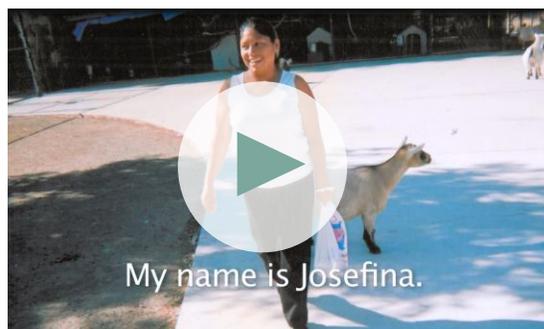


## This is her “Migration Narrative”

Roberto came to Oakland as an unauthorized immigrant from Mexico in search of work to be better able to support his family. He left Lupita and Andrea in their pueblo in Mexico when Andrea was 7 months old, sending money every month. He worked and saved money for 3 years until he was finally able to arrange for a ‘coyote’<sup>ii</sup> to transport Lupita and Andrea to Oakland.

Lupita and Andrea traveled by bus for 2 days to meet the coyote at the border. Lupita carried 3½-year-old Andrea on her back through the desert, feeding her Cheetos and fruit juice to keep her quiet. She was not prepared for the physical difficulty of the journey, the cold of the night or the snakes. Although exhausted, Lupita was elated when they crossed the border into the U.S. The coyote put mother and daughter in a car. Andrea cried from exhaustion and a stomach ache. The coyote angrily yanked Andrea from Lupita’s arms scolding the mother that the child’s cries would alert the agents who were patrolling the border. He put Andrea in a different car with another coyote and told the driver to take off—Lupita in one car, Andrea in another. Lupita narrated this horrifying event to the home visitor with a flat affect, as she described the terror of mother and daughter as their eyes locked and the driver sped off. Lupita and Andrea were reunited in a hotel en route to Oakland 18 hours after their terrifying separation.

Lupita and Andrea were reunited with Roberto the following day. Lupita was numb, and didn’t tell Roberto about the ordeal because she was ashamed that she had not been able to protect their daughter. Roberto was jubilant at the reunification and could not understand his daughter’s rejection or his wife’s nightmares.



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## I. Migration as a Process

Migration is a life-changing process that can shape individual and family experiences. Knowing the uniqueness of a family's migration experience can help providers better understand and support the family in a meaningful way. The following questions are not a checklist, but rather a reference for the provider to hold in mind when working with an immigrant family to understand their migration process. Migration is a process that has 3 stages:<sup>iii</sup>

1. **PRE-MIGRATORY STAGE** is the phase during which the idea and then decision is made to migrate. Questions to consider include:
  - What motivated the move?
  - Was the migration voluntary, i.e., job promotion, love, college; or forced, due to poverty, war, persecution, displacement, escape from violence, trauma? How have historical factors influenced the decision to migrate?
  - How did the decision-making process occur?
  - Who participated in the decision-making process?
  - Who had the final say?
  - Who migrated and who got left behind?
  - Did individuals get to say goodbye to loved ones and acquaintances or to bring familiar objects with them to the new home?
2. **MIGRATION STAGE** is the act of relocation, including transit and entry. Questions to consider include:
  - What is immigrant status—is the person authorized or unauthorized?
  - What were the transit experiences?
  - Were there ordeals during the border crossing?
  - Did the person experience danger or trauma during the relocation process?
3. **ADAPTATION STAGE** is the ongoing period of adjustment, settlement and negotiation after arrival in a new country. Although the immigrant may feel the migration was necessary, the period of adaptation can include mixed emotions such as sadness, mourning, grief, confusion, worries, and fears. Some factors that can influence the quality of the adaptation include:
  - Immigration status: Authorized or unauthorized
  - Age of individual at time of migration
  - Does individual know the new language?
  - Is communication maintained with those left behind?



- Is there fear of detention and deportation?
- Attitude of host country toward immigrants
- Experiences with racism, discrimination, and stereotypes
- Is there a support system available upon arrival?

Migration is a complex process that has gains and losses; and individuals in the same family may have different experiences and feelings. The gains can include better financial, health, educational opportunity, and more personal freedoms. Losses occur at many levels and can include:

1. The familiarity of sounds, smells, tastes, landscape, food, music, etc.; the loss of personal competence in knowing how to navigate social institutions and systems (i.e., schools, health care, etc.);
2. Loss of social relationships, status, and networks (this loss can be acutely felt during milestone periods such as during childbirth and during childrearing);
3. Cultural losses such as language, customs, values, traditions. All of this can result in simultaneous feelings of sadness and elation.

## II. Separation Between Children and Parents

Many parents who migrate in search of a better life must make the difficult decision to leave a child/children behind. Often, children are left with family members, such as grandmothers, aunts or older sisters who then receive regular remittances for family support. This result in many and varied types of separations within families: between parents, between parents and children, between sibling, and between extended generations of relative.

Families migrate in different patterns. Some migrate together as a whole unit with parents and children. Historically, men were more likely to be the first immigrants in a family. Currently, about half of the world's migrants are women of reproductive age.<sup>iv</sup>

A Harvard research study found that 42% of Mexican children of immigrant families in the study were separated from their mothers during the migratory process. 72% of them were separated for approximately 2 years. For the Central American children, 47% were separated from their mothers for 5 years or more. 28% of the children in the study were separated from



siblings.<sup>v</sup> Many children gain new stepparents and/or siblings while they are apart from their parents.

## Detention, Deportation, Unaccompanied minors

Between April 1997 and August 2007, the lawful permanent resident mother or father of approximately 103,000 children was deported. At least 88,000 (86%) of the children were US citizens. Approximately 44,000 of the children were under age five when their parent was deported.<sup>vi</sup>

In 2011, there were an estimated 5100 children who were placed in foster care because their parents were in detention or deported.<sup>vii</sup>

The government has predicted that 60,000 or more unaccompanied children could enter the U.S. in 2014. Unaccompanied children flee to the U.S. for many reasons including escaping persecution or increasing violence in their home countries, abandonment, family abuse, to reunite with a caregiver, exploitation, or sexual or labor trafficking against their will.<sup>viii</sup>

Being able to live and work without the terror and fear of detention and deportation is more important than a path to citizenship to the majority of Latino immigrants.<sup>ix</sup>

The consequences of deportation result in broken families and the fear of deportation results in anxiety and hyper vigilance for families who feel vulnerable to deportation.

**“Living in a community with the fear of deportation and detention heighten insecurity and may undermine a sense of belonging and trust. If the child is a citizen, her sense of belonging to the nation could be undermined as its authorities actively seek to expel his or her parents, siblings, and other loved ones”.**

Suarez-Orozco, et al. (2011).  
“Growing Up in The Shadows”,  
Harvard Education Review pp. 459

## Trauma of Separation on Children

Separation between parents and children is traumatic. The experience of trauma is influenced by the type and length of separation, among other factors.

Children who experience separation due to parental incarceration, foster care placement, divorce, or death may experience a range of short term and long term psychological risk that includes symptoms of depression, sleep disturbances, anxiety, and posttraumatic stress disorders. These symptoms can interfere with the parent/child relationship, the child's emotional development, capacity for learning, and regulatory behaviors.<sup>x</sup> There are similarities between these children and children separated from their parents due to parental migration, deportation or detention.

Children that live with one or two undocumented parents in the U.S. can live in constant fear of separation, even if they do not know anyone that has been deported. They may show increased anxiety, frequent crying, changes in eating and sleeping patterns, withdrawal and anger, especially if there has been a recent deportation in their family or community. These symptoms can interfere with children's emotional development, capacity for learning at school, and the regulation of feelings.<sup>xi</sup>

Children who are separated from their parents due to parental deportation are devastated and can suffer long-term consequences such as posttraumatic stress disorder, depression, adjustment disorders, domestic violence, and substance abuse.<sup>xii</sup>

Children in immigrant communities may associate immigration officers with police in general, bringing up uncertainty, fear, and reluctance to seek help from police when needed.

## Child Emotional and Behavioral Responses to Separation

Children can have various emotional and behavioral responses to separation. The response is influenced by age, length of separation, and level of support the child receives.

**INFANTS:** can show a regression in terms of dependency needs; the sense of security and trust that an adult will be available is affected. If the separation from the primary caregiver is abrupt, the child can show symptoms of withdraw, fussiness, irritability, increased frequency of crying, loss of appetite that can potentially evolve into failure to thrive, not meeting developmental expectations.

**TODDLERS:** can present with disruption of age appropriate balance between dependency and independence. They can exhibit clinginess and separation anxiety as a manifestation of fear of losing the caregiver. There can be regression regarding the most recent acquired skills; normal language development can be disrupted, especially when the parent who has been lost was the bridge for communication between the child and the world; increased crying and tantrums, loss of interest or rejection of food, sleeplessness, and withdrawal.

**PRESCHOOLERS:** Due to magical thinking, they can feel responsible or guilty for the parental loss. Young children can also show separation anxiety and clinginess. Depending on circumstances of the loss of the parent, i.e., if the child witnessed the parental removal, the child might be anxious during drop offs, might refuse to participate in activities previously enjoyed. Preschoolers can respond behaviorally through regression such as bedwetting, or loss of skills already acquired; rebelliousness, acting out behavior, limit-testing, sleep-disturbances, and somatic complains. Furthermore, it is possible that without support, there can be long-term behavioral and emotional effects that can extend into adulthood. The effects can include:

- o Feelings of rejection, anger resentment and envy; behavioral problems such as outbursts of anger; substance use and abuse; gang affiliation; anxiety; depression; sleep disturbances; decline in school performance; somatic complaints.

For further information on child emotional and behavioral responses to separation, please see Dreby, Hois, Yoshikawa and Kholoptseva.



## Parent Concerns and Challenges Due to Separation and Immigration Status

Parents may have conflicting emotions about their migration and family separation. As in the case described above, the father felt he had to stay in the U.S. for economic survival and safety. Yet, he constantly worried about whether he should return to the family in Mexico, or bring them to join him in Oakland.

Parents separated from their children must endure the physical and emotional demands of supporting two households during the period of separation.

The separation often produces grief, guilt and loneliness for the parents. This can result in somatic symptoms, sadness, depression, and anxiety. These symptoms are exacerbated if the child is having a difficulty.

Parent may have difficulty hearing child's painful feelings such as their sorrow, anger, resentment.

In order to protect their family and not worry the child and caretaker, parents may be reluctant to share their difficult experiences.

Parents with children in the U.S. live with fear of being taken away from their families due to detention and deportation. This is especially true for parents who have children with special needs. The fear of deportation and detention can result in isolation, reluctance to join community activities, to reach out for services, or apply for entitled benefits. This fear of detection has an impact in all of their decisions. This fear limits families from risking going outside of their communities, thus limiting exposure and participation for the child to developmentally enriching activities and places.

## How Providers Can Support Family Resilience

### DURING SEPARATION, ENCOURAGE PARENTS TO:

- Plan continued communication with children and caretaker such as—phone calls, Skype, emails, videos, letters, gifts, and photos.
- Not make promises that can't be kept (i.e., date of return or reunifications).
- Establish collaborative co-parenting through positive connection, cooperation and communication between the child's absent parent

Parents and children are challenged with trying to maintain and nurture intimacy and connections long distance.

and the temporary caretaker so that the parent can be a long-distance partner with the caretaker in raising the child.

- Encourage connection with child’s support system
- Keep child updated on family changes such as new sibling; stepparent while allowing for child’s potentially difficult emotional responses to these changes.
- Hold their own complicated feelings about separation while allowing the child to voice their feelings and experiences, even if this is painful for the parent to hear.

**AT TIME OF REUNIFICATION, PROVIDERS CAN HELP BY:**

- Helping to make meaning out of separation—clarify what motivated the separation, including the hopes and dreams that motivated the migration.
- Encourage telling of each person’s experience. Parents may need support to tolerate the uncomfortable sharing of their child’s feelings and experiences of the reunification and adaptation to their new life. As in the case described, due to the trauma of migration, the fantasy the parents held of reunification and the child’s experience in reuniting with her father were far from being celebratory as they had hoped. The provider helped them create their migration narrative, which helped Roberto understand how Andrea’s trauma of separation from him, and her ordeal during the border crossing made her initially afraid and rejecting of her father. This was an important step in building trust in the family relationship.
- Discuss and acknowledge feelings, which may be ambivalent regarding siblings that were born in the U.S.
- Discuss and negotiate new boundaries and relationships as the family reintegrates itself.
- Celebrate the reunification and celebrate the child’s caretaker during the parent-child separation, taking into consideration each family’s unique circumstances.

**Plan continued communication with children and caretaker such as—phone calls, Skype, emails, videos, letters, gifts, and photos.**

## Issues to Consider for Children Who Have Lost a Parent Due to Detention and/or Deportation

More than 5 million children live in the U.S. with at least one unauthorized immigrant parent. Close to 75% of these children are U.S.-born.<sup>xiii</sup>

Many children witness the arrest of their parents by immigration officials.

This can be one of the most traumatic events in the life of a child.

In young children, magical thinking can bring guilt, fear, constant worry, etc., as they can believe themselves responsible for the loss of the parent and they can have fantasies about how they can bring the parent back.

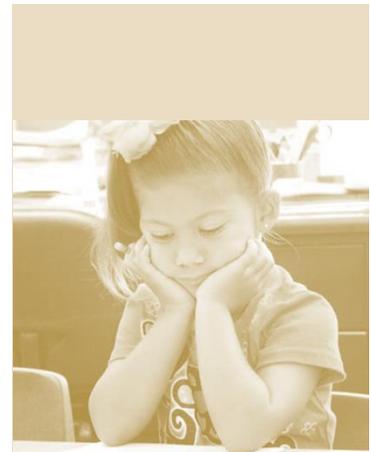
A parent's deportation can create severe economic, psychological and social consequences. It causes family and community fragmentation and results in de-stabilization of the child's life. Studies indicate that children can experience separation anxiety, PTSD, depression, and attachment disorders.

## How Providers Can Support Parents and Children Who Live With Fear of Detention and/or Deportation

Facilitate linkages to legal and community resources that can assist the family and avoid isolation due to fear.

Discuss with parents if they want to communicate with their children about the threat of deportation. If so, support parents to consider the child's developmental stage in their discussion of detention, deportation, and legal status; and the feelings that may be associated thereto such as fears, uncertainties, confusion, and anger.

Consider making a safety plan for how to respond in the event of a detention or deportation. For example, identify a temporary caretaker for the child, have important documents such as birth certificates, medical cards, provider information, etc., readily available. Consider having written authorization for the caretaker to authorize important decisions on behalf of the child such as needed medical care, educational needs, etc. This is particularly relevant for children with special needs. As developmentally appropriate, discuss (or not) these plans with children and support the child's concerns.



**Facilitate linkages to legal and community resources that can assist the family and avoid isolation due to fear.**

## Children Whose Parent(s) Has/Have Been Detained or Deported

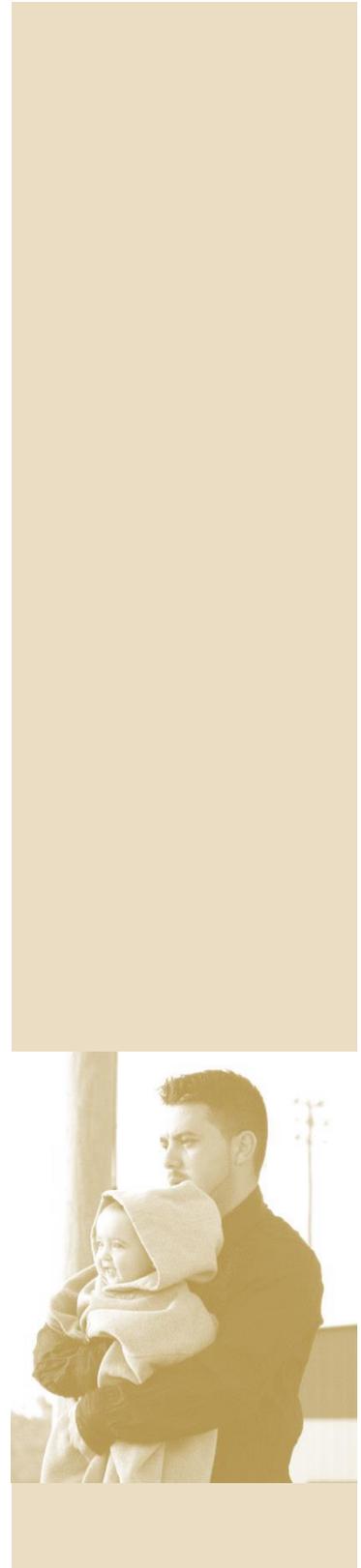
Encourage caregivers who remain with the children to try to provide a consistent routine.

Help caretakers develop an appropriate plan to inform adults involved with the child such as teachers, medical providers, etc., of the circumstances in order for the adult to be alert to any emotional or behavioral changes in the child.

Encourage and facilitate mental health support if the child is exhibiting psychological distress or behavioral problems.

## How Providers Can Support Immigrant Parents and Their Children

- Providers can consider the traumatic impact of separation and loss due to migration
- Providers can better support families by understanding the complexities of migration that include the influences of political, social, economic, historical, and cultural contexts.
- Be an advocate and cultural broker to connect families to concrete services and community resources. This can include connection to mental health services to address difficulties in relationships due to separation.
- Be willing to consider that reluctance or wariness to receive services may be due to mistrust from fear, rather than resistance.
- Be a cultural bridge and educate family about the functioning of social institutions and systems such as schools, health care, financial institutions, entitlement programs, transportation systems, etc.
- Support families to develop strategies and skills about how to negotiate systems and how to advocate for themselves in their new homeland.
- Encourage families to request interpreter services.
- Break isolation, help mobilize family to make new social connections and create new support networks through groups, community centers, school organizations, libraries, etc.
- Providers can acknowledge with families that there are no rituals to prepare, recognize, or support those who leave, or those who are left behind.



- Give families impacted by migration permission to grieve. Encourage telling of “migration narrative” to give meaning to migration, pre- and post-migration stressors, gains and losses, hopes and dreams.
- Support families to recreate and adapt important practices, traditions, rituals, celebrations, ceremonies, etc.
- Support connection to spiritual beliefs and spiritual communities for comfort and strength. Congregations also provide a place of belonging, connections to others, and an opportunity to keep traditions.

## Useful Terms and Information

**TPS:** Temporary Protected Status is a status granted by the U.S. to immigrants from Central America, based on the unsafe or problematic circumstances in their countries of origin.<sup>xiv</sup>

**ITIN:** An Individual Taxpayer Identification Number (ITIN) is a tax processing number issued by the Internal Revenue Service (IRS). The IRS issues ITINs to individuals who are required to have a U.S. taxpayer identification number but who do not have, and are not eligible to obtain a Social Security Number (SSN). ITINs are issued regardless of immigration status. Unauthorized immigrants with an ITIN who meet loan qualifications can purchase a house.<sup>xv</sup> The Department of Motor Vehicles will issue California driver’s license to undocumented CA drivers by January 1, 2015. CA GOV.<sup>xvi</sup>

**U VISA** provides legal status to victims of certain serious crimes that happened in the U.S. (such as domestic violence, rape, sexual assault, etc.) who have suffered substantial physical or mental harm, and can document cooperation with law enforcement. The U Visa grants permission to remain and work in the U.S. for up to four years, and allows beneficiaries to eventually apply for permanent resident status.<sup>xvii</sup>

**PUBLIC BENEFITS:** Please refer to <http://nilc.org/> and <http://www.firrp.org/resources/prose/> and local immigrant rights and legal organizations for information.

Alameda County Resource Guide at <http://www.AlamedaKids.org>

## Community Resources for Immigrants in Alameda County

### LEGAL ASSISTANCE RESOURCES

Centro Legal de la Raza (Provides free or low cost services)  
3022 International Boulevard, Suite 400  
Oakland, CA 94601  
(510) 437-1554

International Institute of the Bay Area  
405 14th Street, Suite 500  
Oakland, CA 94612

Services, Immigrants' Rights, and Education Network (SIREN)  
Spanish line: (408) 453-3017  
English/Vietnamese: (408) 453-3013

Bay Area Legal Aid (Not specific for immigration, but they offer advice in other legal matters that affect immigrants such as housing, public health and health access)  
(510) 250-5270 or 1-800-551-5554

East Bay Sanctuary Covenant  
2362 Bancroft Way  
Berkeley, CA 94704  
(510)540-5296  
Urgent/Toll Free 800-548-0956  
Alameda County Resource Guide

AlamedaKids.org

"211" for additional resources in Alameda County

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2. Dreby, J. "How Today's Immigration Enforcement Policies Impact Children, Families, and Communities", August 2012, Center for American Progress
3. Falicov, C.J. *Latino Families in Therapy*, Second Edition, 2014, The Guilford Press
4. Capps, R., Castañeda, R. M., Chaudry, A, and Santos, R. (2007). "Paying the Price The Impact of Immigration Raids on America's Children", A report by the Urban Institute for the National Council of La Raza

<sup>i</sup> United States Census Bureau, Alameda County, California <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/06/06001.html>

<sup>ii</sup> Coyote is a colloquial term that refers to a human smuggler who for a price, will cross immigrants over the border into the United States

<sup>iii</sup> Sluzki, C.E. "Migration and Family Conflict", *Family Process*, 1979, 18(4):379-390

<sup>iv</sup> Deen, T. "Over 100 Million Women Lead Migrant Workers Worldwide", March 12, 2014, Inter Press Service News Agency <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/06/06001.html>

<sup>v</sup> Suarez-Orozco, C., Suarez-Orozco, M. and Todorova I. *Learning a New Land: Immigrant Students in American Society*, 2008 Harvard University Press

<sup>vi</sup> "In the Child's Best Interest? The Consequences of Losing a Lawful Immigrant Parent to Deportation" March 2010, International Human Rights Law Clinic, University of California, Berkeley, School of Law, Chief Justice Earl Warren Institute of Race, Ethnicity and Diversity, University of California, Berkeley, School of Law, Immigration Law Clinic, University of California, Davis, School of Law

<sup>vii</sup> Wessler, S. "Shattered Families: The Perilous Intersection of Immigration Enforcement and the Child Welfare System" (New York, NY: Applied Research Center, Nov. 2012)

<sup>viii</sup> Center for Gender and Refugee Studies, Kids in Need of Defense, 2014, "A Treacherous Journey: Child Migrants Navigating the U.S. Immigration System"

<sup>ix</sup> "On Immigration Policy, Deportation Relief Seen as More Important Than Path to Citizenship", December 19, 2013, Pew Research Hispanic Trends

<sup>x</sup> Hois, S. (2007). "Effects of Loss and Separation in Children's Development"

<sup>xi</sup> "Position Statement Regarding the Impact of Immigration Policy on Children, Individuals, and Families", 2009, American Psychoanalytic Association

<sup>xii</sup> Yoshikawa, H. and Kholoptseva, J. (2013). "Unauthorized Immigrant Parents and Their Children's Development: A Summary of the Evidence". Harvard Graduate School of Education Migration Policy Institute

<sup>xiii</sup> Reitmayer, E. (2010). "When Parents Get Deported Children Fight to Survive", *Latino America*, Arizona State University

<sup>xiv</sup> United States Citizenship and Immigration Services: <http://www.uscis.gov/humanitarian/temporary-protected-status-deferred-enforced-departure/temporary-protected-status>

<sup>xv</sup> Internal Revenue Service: [http://www.irs.gov/Individuals/Individual-Taxpayer-Identification-Number-\(ITIN\)](http://www.irs.gov/Individuals/Individual-Taxpayer-Identification-Number-(ITIN))

<sup>xvi</sup> California Department of Motor Vehicles, October 2013, CA. GOV

<sup>xvii</sup> "U VISA Laws for Crime Victims", WomensLaw.org

