



Learning From Family Financial and Relationship Strengths & COVID-Affected Challenges in Karen, Latinx, & Somali Immigrant Communities

Authors: Zamzam Dini, MA; Nusroon Fatiha, MA; & Catherine Solheim, PhD

Abstract

Although immigrant and refugee families have demonstrated remarkable resilience through the act of migration and adaptation/acclulturation to the United States, they also have significant vulnerabilities that expose them to financial and relational well-being risk in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. This study used data from 17 interviews of local human services providers that work with Somali, Latinx, and Karen immigrant communities during the beginning 4-6 months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Data analysis included coding for unique barriers and resilience factors that each ethnic immigrant community experienced. Guided by the Family Adjustment and Adaptation Response Model (Patterson, 1988), we identified a pile-up of financial and relationship stressors including employment, distance learning, family relationship strains, and social isolation. Understanding the unique strengths and vulnerabilities of specific ethnic groups will allow more insight into the diverse experiences of immigrant and refugee families in the United States.

Quotes

“They worried for what's going to happen back there, the ones that they left. They cannot do anything for them. They cannot travel. If they travel, that requires a lot of money to spend. They worried for their health if they go there. They worried they might get infected with COVID-19.”

“...Isolation has a very different impact, even more of an impact in people’s houses, people’s homes, because of the level of the stress that families are living in right now.”

“I think the impact could go to the older adults, because they used to go to the adult daycare. Now it’s closed, so they have to stay home. They’ll probably be sad.”

“So some of them lost their jobs because the industry for a lot of our participants is the hospitality industry. The cleaning industry. The retail. So that impacted a big number of our families.”

“For this COVID-19 situation, it has gone far. It has moved things to online platform that has completely forgotten about the community struggles. I think most of them didn’t have the device to connect online, the platform. Not all the families have the connection through the internet.”

“But some of my clients said that, “Oh, those are American food.” And then most of them are canned food. And so a lot of Asian people don’t eat canned food.”

“So, I try to find a way where I can tell them not the tragic story that happened, but that we’re here to support them, that we know that they need our support and if they accept to trust us, it’s great. And if not, I can understand, and I can still help them look for other resources if they ask me”

Shared Experience Across All

Job loss

Families from all three ethnic groups experienced job loss during the pandemic. What was particularly unique about this experience was that these families tend to have jobs in the service industry. They were factory workers, small business owners, labor-focused establishments. Unfortunately, these types of employment could not simply move to a virtual setting, they couldn’t work from home, and they were also labeled essential workers.

Elder isolation

Social distancing was difficult for everyone. However, when social engagement is culturally significant and a major part of your essential way of being, social distancing becomes social isolation. There were reports from all three ethnic groups that the social distancing was isolating the elders who used each other as social supports before the pandemic.

Transnational Families

A unique characteristic of immigrant communities is that they are also transnational families. Within the context of COVID-19, this meant these families could not visit families back home due to travel restrictions. The separation of generations and extended family members put immense pressure on families who were already worried about the deadly virus.

Similar Situation, Different Experience

Communities Shutting Down

In the Latinx and Somali communities, religious establishments closing their doors meant the entire community was shutting down. Places of congregation, that were beacons of hope and symbols of the community, went dark. For the Somali community, it meant experiencing a Ramadan that was unlike any other experience before.

Technology Barriers

In general, community members found it difficult to transition to online learning. Especially parents with no education or parents who were non-native English speakers struggled to assist their children with their homework and online platforms such as Zoom. In particular, Somali community described added difficulty in faith-based learning, where neither online class nor devices were available. Technological barriers also brought difficulty for some families in accessing available services. Non-native English speakers in particular described difficulty in understanding available services that included online navigation. Even when some of them had devices available to them, they did not know how to use certain applications, such as emails.

Food Banks & Cultural Food

Some communities, especially the Karen community, described a low/no availability of culturally preferred food items (e.g., grains, meat, fresh produce). For the Latinx community, however, they had more choices congruent with their cultural preferences (e.g., canned foods, refried beans, etc) compared to the other two communities, and utilized food banks to their advantage.

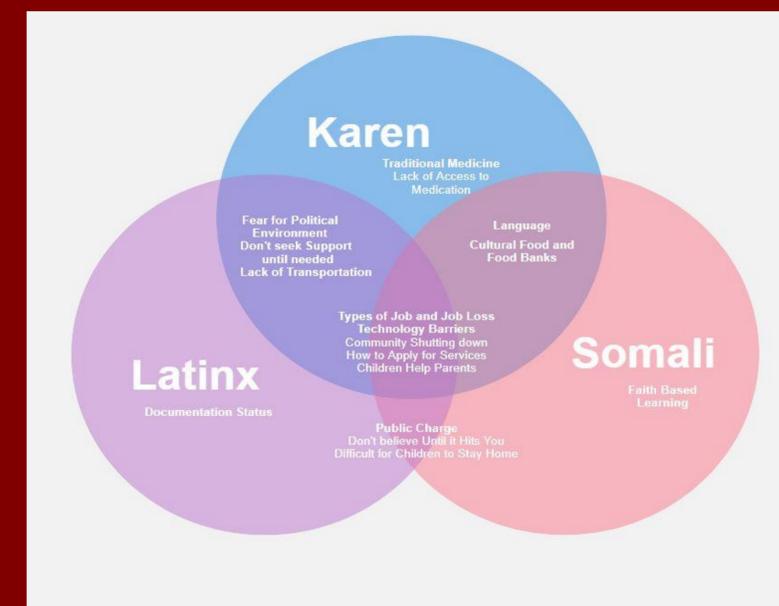
Unique Ethnic Group Experiences

Cultural Food

Somali families were restricted to halal meat and instead utilized local grocery stores using a credit-based agreement, where families took groceries without paying and owed the grocery store.

Documentation Status

For our Latinx communities, some struggled with the barriers that came with a lack of documentation. Families were unable to access important benefits such as Unemployment and Food stamps that could have helped during the pandemic, even though these families were employed and paid taxes before the pandemic. Some families were even afraid to seek help, including medical attention, due to fear of their documentation status coming to light.



Community Strengths

Most of our immigrant and refugee families have already faced numerous challenges in their lives before finding their way to the United States. Undoubtedly, these families develop resilience and strengths that allow them to navigate the barriers they face each day. Some examples of these strengths and resilience were captured in these interviews. For all of our communities, leaning on local non-profit organizations was essential for them to access assistance and gain advocacy. Some Somali families began using exercise as a coping skill to help alleviate their stresses. Karen families supported each other and stepped in to help ill family members, even if they weren’t related. Some Latinx families were able to stay connected to their families back home using social media sites and virtual connections to help with the strain of isolation. As usual, these families adapted to the high stress and ambiguity that came with this pandemic, however, we should continue to learn from these families and make sure that they do not have to survive in a country where they should be thriving.