

Latin@s and IPV: An Evidence-Based Factsheet

While the number of studies examining intimate partner violence (IPV) in Latin@ populations is growing, research on this issue continues to be limited in quality and breadth. We have compiled what we believe are the most current data on this topic and summarized it below.

Prevalence & Occurrence of IPV

National statistics about the experience of IPV among women in the United States and throughout represent estimates that may vary by different methods of data collection. The various strategies used by researchers to collect data (e.g., phone vs. in-person surveys), the specific questions asked (e.g., number of acts of physical violence vs. the context of the violence), and the social/community conditions where the study is conducted (e.g., new immigration laws) all impact the results of the study. For Latin@s, the language in which the study is conducted (including the use of variations in the Spanish language) can also affect the results. Below we present some of the most recent prevalence information published on Latin@ populations. It is important to remember, however, that these findings must be considered within the context of the issues outlined above and may be limited in their representations.

- About 20-25% of Latinas will experience IPV during her lifetime³⁰ and 1 in 20 in the previous 12 months¹⁵.
- This rate is approximately the same as for women from other racial/ethnic groups. In fact, a recent study found no significant difference across racial groups once socioeconomic status was taken into consideration⁴.
- Reported rates of IPV were lower for Mexican immigrants (13.4%) than for persons of Mexican descent born in the United States (16.7%)¹.
- These differences are consistent with other studies examining physical and mental health outcomes³¹, school achievement²⁹, and substance abuse¹⁸. This surprising strength of immigrant groups despite the social and economic challenges they often face, has been labeled *the immigrant paradox*²³. There are also differences among Latin@s based on their country of origin and level of acculturation; more years in the U.S. predicts poorer health outcomes. The apparent protective nature of being an immigrant is the subject of several current studies^{29,31}.
- Immigrant women (including Latinas) who are married are more likely to experience IPV than unmarried women⁶.
- A study that included 2,000 Latinas found 63.1% of women who identified being victimized in their lifetime (i.e., interpersonal victimization such as, stalking, physical assaults, weapon assaults, physical assaults in childhood, threats, sexual assault, attempted sexual assault, etc). reported having experienced more than one victimization, with an average of 2.56 victimizations⁵.
- In a sample of over 300 pregnant Latinas, IPV during pregnancy was reported at 10% for physical abuse and 19% for emotional abuse¹⁴.
- Research is beginning to document work related IPV among Latin@s. One study reported abusive strategies such as, on the job surveillance, on the job harassment, and work disruption tactics. However, they also found strategies that were unique in a Latino sample, such as denying access to driver's license, lying about childcare arrangements, and sending the partner to their country of origin temporarily¹³.

Help Seeking

Low rates of reporting and self-help seeking among Latinas experiencing IPV may create the illusion that IPV services are not needed by this population. However, understanding the specifics of help seeking behavior among Latinas can create a more cohesive picture.

- Latinas reported seeking access to shelters less than women from other ethnic/racial groups; this is especially true for immigrant Latina survivors⁹.
- Latinas are only half as likely to report abuse to authorities as survivors from other ethnic/racial groups³⁴.
- Latinas prefer to tell family members⁷, female friends, or neighbors about IPV (i.e. utilize informal resources for help)^{27,28}, while non-Latinas may be more likely to tell health care workers or clergy^{9,34}.
- Nearly half of Latinas in one study did not report abuse to authorities³⁴, possibly due to a variety of reasons, including fear and lack of confidence in the police²⁵, shame, guilt, loyalty and/or fear of partners⁸, fear of deportation²¹, and previous experience with childhood victimization²⁸.
- One of these studies found that about 4% of participants had fled their countries of origin in search of protection and safety from IPV³⁴.
- Low-acculturated Latinas (both abused and non-abused) are less likely to seek and use formal social services than their more acculturated counterparts^{11,27}.
- Non-immigrant Latina survivors contact formal services for IPV resources more often than immigrant Latinas⁹.

Commentary: Latina survivors' help-seeking behaviors are closely tied to their level of acculturation and other cultural factors.

- More recent immigrant Latinas are usually unaware of the laws, options, and possibilities regarding their experience of abuse.
- Latina survivors who have been in the United States for a longer period of time or were born in this country have had the opportunity to learn about resources and are more likely to use them. However, *where* they seek help varies from other ethnic/racial groups. Latina survivors are more likely to depend on family members and friends, rather than health care workers, clergy, and police.

Needs

The needs identified by Latina survivors point to the importance of culturally appropriate resources and approaches to assist Latin@ families experiencing IPV. Below is a list of needs identified by Latina survivors and community advocates¹⁷.

Information about:

- Rights as a survivor
- Legal services
- IPV
- Help when going to court
- English lessons
- Protection/safety
- Transportation
- Education for independence

- A place to stay
- Someone to talk to in private

Commentary: Despite the focus on shelters as the preferred mainstream strategy to assist IPV survivors, Latina survivors did not mention shelters among their most urgent needs. This finding should be viewed in the context of not only the potential unawareness of the existence of shelters in this country but also the reluctance of Latina women to leave their community for a variety of reasons. This in no way negates the need for Latina survivors to have access to emergency shelters and housing to address their experience of IPV.

Contextual Factors

IPV happens within the context of a family's daily life, which is deeply affected by numerous factors, both personal and systemic, that impact and are impacted by IPV. Some of these have been documented in the literature.

- **Cultural values** must be identified and understood to develop effective IPV interventions¹⁹. Two values of particular importance in the occurrence and prevention of IPV in Latin@ communities are the importance of family (*familismo*) and strong gender role expectations.
 - *Familismo* refers to the central place that the family has in most Latin@s' lives. Strong family roles point to the father as the primary breadwinner (although this role is rapidly changing due to economic realities) and to the mother as the person responsible for the well-being and cohesiveness of the family²².
 - Gender role expectations change as Latin@ immigrants acculturate to their new environment. However, for many Latinas their role as mothers is still the most important aspect of their lives, a responsibility against which most of their decisions and actions are weighed. A study found that Latina survivors prioritized their children over themselves, protected them, and provided for them as best as they could¹⁰.
- **Religion** often plays a strong role in Latinas' decisions on how – or if – to address IPV.
 - Religious beliefs may stop some Latinas from using services because they believe that the “sanctity of marriage” precludes their taking steps that could result in divorce or separation.
 - Negative and/or uninformed reactions of religious leaders to disclosures of IPV often result in Latina survivors feeling responsible for making their marriage work regardless of the violence they are experiencing²⁰.
- **Racial/ethnic conflicts** between Somali and Mexican communities in San Diego were identified as having an impact on IPV in the Latin@ community. This illustrates the role of apparently unrelated societal factors on the occurrence of IPV in Latin@ populations¹⁹.
- **Economic factors** (such as employment issues related to immigration status) were also identified by Latina survivors as important elements that affect IPV¹⁹.
- **Immigration** is, for many Latin@s, the most salient element of their lives. As a result, Latina survivors' decisions about IPV are deeply affected by their immigration status and the climate of their communities. As discussed in the *Barriers to Services* section, this contextual factor is a prime barrier to their ability to access resources.
- **Anti-immigrant environments** created by strict immigration enforcement policies and increased rates of deportation have impacted many Latin@ communities. For example, immigrant Latina women affected by IPV have reported experiencing increased rates of harassment, including reports of being followed by strangers, called derogatory words and discrimination at work²⁶.

- In addition, in a focused survey conducted by the National Domestic Violence Hotline, 35% of Latina survivors reported an increased climate of fear due to the immigration enforcement environment³.

Resilience and Resistance Strategies

Although the literature in the field has begun to highlight how IPV affects Latina survivors and their children in negative ways, a few studies have focused on the strengths and resistance strategies used by the women.

- Latina survivors report multiple strategies to survive abuse. Among them²:
 - Avoiding (placating batterer, walking away, talking batterer down, and encouraging counseling for the batterer)
 - Defending (protecting one's body, fighting back, locking self in room, and teaching children to call the police)
 - Spiritual or psychological (joining a support group and maintaining a relationship with God)
 - Social or familial (maintaining relationships with supportive people, not involving family members to protect them, and support/advice from other battered women)
 - Escaping (moving to an undisclosed location, disguising themselves, and saving personal money)
- Other strategies reported by Latina survivors who had used violence against their partners²⁴:
 - Religion
 - Dialoguing with partner
 - Using threats
 - Hobbies or studying
 - Exercising
 - Flight
 - Calling police
 - Divorce

Commentary: Regardless of their immigration status, Latina survivors of IPV demonstrate remarkable resilience and resourcefulness in addressing their plight. These strengths should be investigated further and used in programs and services that attempt to assist them.

Barriers to services

In light of recent immigration enforcement policies, the apprehension to call the police due to the fear of deportation has become more salient for many Latina survivors.

- Immigrant Latinas may fear deportation while seeking help from social services⁶.
- In a recent study, immigrant Latina survivors reported a decrease in the likelihood of calling the police due to heightened immigration enforcement policies and increased fear of deportation²⁶.
- Latina survivors report that immigration status is often used as a control mechanism to ensure that they do not leave the abusive situation¹⁹.
- Immigration status is a common and powerful control mechanism used by partners of immigrant women to force them to stay in a relationship⁶.
- The strength of this control tool is amplified by the current realities of heightened deportation and immigration enforcement²⁶.

- A survey of over 500 foreign-born Latina women found that 14% of participants reported experiencing problems in accessing IPV services due to immigration issues, some reporting they were denied IPV services for lack of proper identification³.
- Threatening Latina survivors to take away their children if they leave their partners was an especially powerful strategy used by men against undocumented, non-English speaking women¹⁰.

In addition to immigration, studies have found that language and cultural differences act as significant barriers to Latina survivors' ability to access services.

- There is little awareness of IPV services and options among Latina survivors³².
 - Women report a lack of knowledge about available resources in the community as a common barrier to services¹⁷.
 - Less than 3 in 10 Latinas had heard of IPV protective orders. Not many knew about local domestic violence agencies¹⁶.
- Lack of culturally and linguistically appropriate services is also a barrier for many Latina survivors, as it is for women from many other racial/ethnic groups.
 - A study found that 1 in 3 shelters did not have any Spanish-speaking staff.
 - Only half of the participating shelters offer child-related services.
 - Additionally, many of the problems stemming from diverse cultural values were not respected and went unresolved¹².

Future steps

Future studies exploring IPV among Latin@ populations must address two general areas:

- **Methodology**
 - Future national studies need to include sufficiently large Latin@ samples that permit teasing apart the relevant differences and commonalities of Latin@ subgroups.
 - Many of the scales and methods used currently may not be appropriate for capturing information that accurately reflects the experiences of Latin@ populations. The relevance and appropriateness of current measures and methods should be explored and new ones developed as needed.
 - The direct voices of diverse Latin@ populations need to be incorporated into research to explore in greater depth the context in which violence occurs.
- **Resilience, Current Realities, & Prevention**
 - In order to recognize the resilience of Latin@s, studies of physical and mental health outcomes of Latin@s should also incorporate a focus on the strength and protective factors of this population.
 - In the light of the current immigration enforcement policies that are impacting thousands of Latin@s across the United States, it is critical that future research continue to document the various unintended consequences of such policies on Latina survivors and their children.
 - Because IPV is a worldwide public health issue of epidemic proportions, prevention strategies that are developed within culturally specific and relevant frameworks will ultimately be required. This is particularly important in the case of Latin@ populations, given their increasing presence and prominence throughout the United States.

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