

PRIMARY PREVENTION OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE AMONG IMMIGRANTS & REFUGEES

Approximately 9.8% of New Mexico's population are immigrants (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014.). People make the decision to immigrate to the United States for multiple reasons, but they often do so because they feel they are unable to care for their families or themselves. People may migrate because of poverty, human rights abuses, and violence. The transition from one country and culture to another can have an enormous impact on family security and structure, leaving immigrants, particularly women and children, vulnerable to violence, including sexual abuse (Easter & Refki, 2004).

New Mexico is home to immigrants and refugees from across the globe, but the highest proportion of immigrants are from Spanish-speaking countries, especially Mexico. New Mexico also resettles between 200 and 300 refugees each year. Refugees are those who have a well-founded fear of persecution and are therefore unable to return to their country of origin. Many have experienced sexual and other forms of violence prior to their arrival in the United States, particularly those who have experienced war, civil conflict, and life in refugee camps. Once in the United States, immigrants and refugees are often confused about or are not familiar with the U.S. legal system or their legal rights.

- During the migration journey, women and girls especially fear the possibility of being raped (Watson, 2006).
- State and federal policies pertaining to deportation of undocumented immigrants creates a climate in which abusers can use threats of deportation to keep victims silent about abuse (Runner et al., 2009).
- Immigrant domestic workers are especially vulnerable to sexual exploitation because they depend on their employers for their livelihood, live in constant fear of being deported, suffer social isolation, and are vulnerable to their employer's demands (Vellos, 1997).
- Female farmworkers are 10 times more vulnerable than other women to sexual assault and harassment at work (Lopez-Treviño, 1995).

Social determinants: Social determinants of health include societal factors that contribute to health. For example, poverty may make it more difficult to avoid unsafe environments; social norms around gender roles, inequality, and expression are directly related to sexual violence (Bott, 2010) and norms of secrecy and privacy contribute to spousal sexual assault and child abuse (Davis et al., 2006). Community responses of disbelief and victim-blaming not only cause harm to survivors, but also perpetuate a permissive environment that allows future perpetration. Programs that focus on victims protecting themselves, especially child victims, do not reduce victimization

Lifetime incidence of rape among immigrant youth is **1.4 times higher** than among their non-immigrant counterparts in New Mexico.

(Green et al., 2015)

Married Latinas were less likely to immediately define experiences of **forced sex by their spouses** as "rape" and terminate their relationships; some viewed sex as a marital obligation.

(Bergen, 1996)

Immigrants, both documented and undocumented, may **fear reporting sexual violence to authorities** which contributes to under reporting.

(U.S. Department of State, 2007)

(Finkelhor, 2009). Only by changing the societal factors that permit sexual violence will we be able to substantially reduce sexual violence.

Evidenced-Based and Promising Practices:

So far, no sexual violence prevention curriculum that addresses the unique needs of immigrants and refugees has been shown to be effective in preventing sexual violence victimization. Research shows that the best way to stop sexual violence is through primary prevention strategies – preventing sexual violence before it occurs. Successful prevention efforts combine multiple strategies aimed at reducing risk factors for sexual violence perpetration and victimization related to cultural norms, beliefs and behaviors at the individual, relationship, community and society levels (Davis et al., 2006). Strategies may include programs, policies and environmental changes. Effective prevention programs are comprehensive; employ a variety of teaching methods; provide multiple sessions; are based in behavior-change theory; foster the development of positive relationships; are appropriately timed; and are developed in conjunction with the targeted community so practices are culturally and socially relevant (Nation et al., 2003).

Although these programs were not developed for immigrant populations, the following programs may be effective with immigrants, although culturally specific programming should be evaluated for its effectiveness:

- **Safe Dates:**
<http://www.hazelden.org/web/go/safedates>
- **Men Can Stop Rape:**
<http://www.mencanstoprape.org/>
- **Coaching Boys Into Men:**
<http://www.futureswithoutviolence.org/engaging-men/coaching-boys-into-men/>

Cultural sensitivity depends on trauma-informed prevention specialists and providers who are educated about the history of immigration in the United States, immigrant and refugee policy, and laws applicable to immigrants with different civil statuses (Cuevas & Sabina, 2010). Research

continues on effective sexual violence prevention programming and policies. Go to <http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/sexualviolence/index.html> for the most up-to-date information.

Gaps:

- Sexual violence of immigrants is under-reported. Reasons for under-reporting include fear that one's civil status or that of family members may be reported to authorities.
- Sexual violence occurs in many different contexts (during the migration journey, in employment, and in families) that prevention programming must take into account.
- Lack of language-specific and culturally competent services for immigrant and refugee populations.
- Lack of accurate data regarding sexual assault in immigrant detention centers.

Community Resources:

New Mexico Rape Crisis Centers and Mental Health Center Sexual Abuse Program Coordinators: Contact for individual centers can be found at the New Mexico Coalition of Sexual Assault Programs website: <http://nmcsap.org/>

Catholic Charities, Center for Immigration and Citizenship Legal Assistance (CICLA): Provides low-cost immigration legal assistance to immigrants, U.S. citizens, and U.S. legal permanent residents, including victims of sexual assault. Contact: (505) 724-4662, <http://www.ccasnm.org/immigration-legal-services.html>

NM Immigrant Law Center: Provides legal assistance to low-income immigrant families facing separation due to deportation, asylum seekers, and unaccompanied minors. Contact: (505) 247-1023, <http://nmilc.org/>

New Mexico Asian Family Center: Free domestic and sexual violence outreach, advocacy, counseling and legal services for Asian with Limited English Proficiency (LEP) living in NM. Contact: 505-717-2877, <http://nmaf.org/>

"The majority of us are immigrants and a lot of times our immigration status is illegal. Sometimes we do know that [forced sex within marriage] is wrong, sometimes we know that it is unacceptable, but I'm scared to talk because of that. If I report it and they take him to jail, who is going to support me if I don't have documents and I have children?"

- Focus Group Participant