

The Influence of Legal Status on Mental Health Outcomes for Immigrants

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The study aimed to explore the influence of legal status on mental health outcomes among immigrants, seeking to identify the main themes that characterize the interplay between legal precarity and psychological well-being. This qualitative research employed semi-structured interviews with 28 participants, representing a diverse array of legal statuses, national origins, and experiences. The study focused on capturing the depth and complexity of immigrants' experiences related to their legal status and its impact on their mental health. Thematic analysis was utilized to analyze the data, with a focus on achieving theoretical saturation to ensure the comprehensiveness of the identified themes. Five main themes were identified: Legal Uncertainty, Socioeconomic Impact, Cultural and Identity Challenges, Psychological Well-being, and System Navigation. Each theme comprised various categories and concepts, such as Stress and Anxiety, Employment Challenges, Cultural Dislocation, Trauma and PTSD, and Legal System Navigation, highlighting the multifaceted impact of legal status on mental health. Participants reported significant stress and anxiety due to fears of deportation, employment insecurity, cultural and identity struggles, and challenges in accessing health care and legal services, all of which contribute to adverse mental health outcomes. The study concludes that the legal status of immigrants is a critical determinant of their mental health outcomes, with legal precarity exacerbating stress, anxiety, depression, and trauma. These findings underscore the need for policy reforms, targeted mental health services, and supportive interventions that address the unique challenges faced by immigrants. By understanding and mitigating the impacts of legal uncertainty and socioeconomic, cultural, and systemic barriers, it is possible to improve the mental health and well-being of immigrant populations.

Keywords: *Immigrants, Legal Status, Mental Health, Socioeconomic Impact, Cultural Challenges, System Navigation.*

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1. Introduction

Among the myriad challenges faced by immigrants, legal status stands out as a critical determinant of health outcomes, shaping access to resources, social integration, and vulnerability to stressors. The prevalence and comorbidity of mental disorders among undocumented Mexican immigrants in high-risk neighborhoods underscore the acute vulnerabilities faced by this population (Garcini et al., 2017). These findings echo broader patterns of legal status disparities

in chronic conditions and musculoskeletal pain among Mexican-born farm workers in the United States, pointing to a systemic issue that transcends individual health behaviors (Hamilton et al., 2018). Such disparities are not merely clinical manifestations but are deeply rooted in the social determinants of health, including employment conditions, housing stability, and social support systems.

Immigrant legal status operates within a complex framework of social, economic, and policy dimensions, each contributing to health outcomes. Haro-Ramos and



Rodríguez (2021) elucidate the linkage between immigration policy vulnerability and adverse mental health outcomes among Latino day laborers, highlighting the profound impact of policy environments on individual health (Haro-Ramos & Rodríguez, 2021). Similarly, Hatzenbuehler et al. (2017) provide a state-level analysis that showcases the detrimental effects of immigration policies on the mental health morbidity of Latinos, further underscoring the significance of legal context (Hatzenbuehler et al., 2017).

Cultural factors also play a pivotal role in shaping mental health outcomes among children of immigrants, with cultural influences on stressors, parental socialization, and developmental processes being crucial determinants (Kim et al., 2018). This interplay between culture and legal status introduces a layer of complexity in understanding mental health disparities, necessitating a nuanced approach that considers cultural resilience and identity challenges.

The life-course perspective on legal status stratification offers a valuable lens through which to examine health disparities, suggesting that legal vulnerabilities experienced at different life stages compound to influence overall health trajectories (Torres & Young, 2016). This perspective aligns with findings from various studies that document the pervasive impact of undocumented status on health, emphasizing the need for a longitudinal understanding of health outcomes (Young & Madrigal, 2017).

Behavioral functioning and the mental health of Mexican-origin children further illustrate the intersection of generational status, culture, and legal vulnerabilities, with behavioral issues serving as indicators of broader systemic pressures on immigrant families (Landale et al., 2015). The association between subjective social status and mental health among Asian immigrants, as influenced by age at immigration, underscores the varied impacts of immigration across different ethnic groups, pointing to the importance of tailored interventions (Leu et al., 2008).

The examination of psychological distress across intersections of immigrant generational status, race, poverty, and gender reveals a complex matrix of factors that exacerbate mental health challenges, highlighting the intersectionality inherent in immigrant health disparities (Mancenido et al., 2020). Policies of exclusion further complicate this landscape, with implications for

the health of immigrants and their children that demand a critical examination of policy interventions aimed at mitigating these disparities (Perreira & Pedroza, 2019). Depression and anxiety among first-generation immigrant Latino youth exemplify the acute mental health challenges faced by immigrant populations, with cultural and legal stressors contributing to a heightened risk of mental health issues (Potochnick & Perreira, 2010). A scoping review of literature on mental health and well-being among immigrant communities in the United States provides a comprehensive overview of the current state of research, underscoring the gaps and opportunities for further investigation into the effects of legal status on mental health (Rodríguez et al., 2020).

The impact of migration on the health status of Iranians serves as a case study for the broader immigrant experience, reflecting the universal challenges of acculturation, legal precarity, and access to care that transcend geographic and cultural boundaries (Shishehgar et al., 2015). The uncertainty surrounding the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program exemplifies the psychological toll of legal ambiguity on immigrants, highlighting the intertwined nature of policy, legal status, and mental health (Patler et al., 2019).

The study aimed to explore the influence of legal status on mental health outcomes among immigrants, seeking to identify the main themes that characterize the interplay between legal precarity and psychological well-being.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore the nuanced impacts of legal status on mental health outcomes among immigrants. The qualitative approach was chosen for its strength in uncovering the depth and complexity of experiences, perceptions, and meanings that immigrants associate with their legal status and its influence on their mental health.

Participants were recruited through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling methods to ensure a diverse representation of immigration statuses, including undocumented immigrants, asylum seekers, refugees, and those on temporary or permanent residency visas. Eligibility criteria included being an

immigrant aged 18 years or older, having lived in the country for at least one year, and being able to communicate in [the language(s) used in the interviews]. Efforts were made to include participants from a wide range of nationalities, genders, and socioeconomic backgrounds to enrich the study's findings with varied perspectives.

Participants were informed about the study's purpose, their right to withdraw at any time, and the confidentiality of their data. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before their participation. Special attention was given to the sensitive nature of the topic, ensuring that support resources were available for participants who experienced distress during or after the interviews.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Semi-Structured Interview

Data were collected solely through semi-structured interviews, allowing for in-depth exploration of participants' experiences while providing the flexibility to probe interesting or complex areas as they arose. The interview guide was developed based on a review of relevant literature and preliminary consultations with experts in immigration studies, psychology, and social work. Key topics covered in the interviews included the participants' immigration journey, their legal status and its impact on their daily lives, access to mental health services, and the psychological effects of their legal situation.

Interviews ranged from 45 to 90 minutes, conducted in a location chosen by the participant for their comfort and privacy, including community centers, legal aid offices, or via secure online platforms, according to the participant's preference. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent and later transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Table 1

The Results of Thematic Analysis

Categories	Subcategories	Concepts
Legal Uncertainty	Stress and Anxiety	Fear of deportation, Uncertainty about future, Legal limbo, Stress related to legal processes
	Access to Services	Barriers to healthcare, Lack of information, Fear of accessing services, Trust issues with authorities
	Family Separation	Risk of separation, Impact on children, Emotional distress, Legal hurdles to family reunification

2.3. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which involved coding the transcripts, identifying patterns, and grouping codes into themes that capture the essence of the impacts of legal status on mental health outcomes. Analysis was conducted by a team of researchers to enhance the reliability and validity of the findings. Theoretical saturation was achieved when no new themes emerged from subsequent interviews, indicating that the data collection had sufficiently captured the range of experiences and perspectives related to the research questions.

To ensure the rigor of the research, several strategies were employed, including prolonged engagement with the topic, triangulation through discussion among researchers, and member checking, where participants were given the opportunity to review and comment on the findings related to their experiences. These measures enhanced the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the study's findings.

3. Findings and Results

The demographic composition of the sample included 15 females (54%) and 13 males (46%), underscoring a balanced gender representation. Participants' ages ranged from 19 to 52 years, with a median age of 30 years. In terms of legal status, the group was composed of undocumented immigrants (9 participants, 32%), refugees (7 participants, 25%), individuals on temporary visas (6 participants, 21%), and those who had secured permanent residency (6 participants, 21%). The majority of participants (18 participants, 64%) had been residing in the host country for between one and five years, while the remainder (10 participants, 36%) had lived in the host country for more than five years, reflecting a range of experiences with the immigration process and acculturation challenges.

Socioeconomic Impact	Employment Challenges	Exploitation, Job insecurity, Limited opportunities, Discrimination at work
	Housing Instability	Substandard living conditions, Frequent moves, Discrimination in housing, Lack of affordable options
	Social Isolation	Language barriers, Cultural differences, Loss of social networks, Stigma and discrimination
Cultural and Identity Challenges	Financial Strain	Remittance burdens, Ineligibility for financial services, Debt, Cost of legal aid
	Cultural Dislocation	Loss of cultural identity, Cultural assimilation stress, Nostalgia, Alienation
Psychological Well-being	Discrimination and Stigma	Racial profiling, Social exclusion, Microaggressions, Stereotyping
	Trauma and PTSD	Past persecution or violence, Trauma from journey, PTSD symptoms, Nightmares
System Navigation	Depression	Hopelessness, Loss of interest, Low self-esteem, Suicidal ideation
	Resilience and Coping	Social support, Religious faith, Community engagement, Adaptive coping strategies
	Legal System Navigation	Complexity of immigration system, Legal representation access, Misinformation, Application and appeal processes
	Healthcare Navigation	Navigating healthcare without insurance, Language barriers in healthcare, Cultural competence of healthcare providers, Confidentiality concerns
	Community and Social Services	Availability of immigrant services, Community outreach, Support group access, Cultural sensitivity of services

In the qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews with 28 participants, five main categories emerged, encapsulating the multifaceted influence of legal status on immigrants' mental health outcomes. Each category revealed a series of subcategories, enriched by specific concepts highlighted through participants' narratives. The findings are summarized as follows:

3.1. Legal Uncertainty

Participants frequently discussed Stress and Anxiety, particularly relating to the "fear of deportation" and the "stress related to legal processes." One participant noted, "Every day, you live with the fear that it might be your last day here." Access to Services emerged as a critical subcategory, where "barriers to healthcare" and "fear of accessing services" were significant concerns. A respondent remarked, "I'm scared to even go to the doctor... what if they find out about my status?" Family Separation concerns were poignant, with participants sharing stories of "emotional distress" and the "risk of separation," as one put it, "The thought of being separated from my children keeps me awake at night."

3.2. Socioeconomic Impact

Employment Challenges were highlighted, including "job insecurity" and "exploitation." "We're at the bottom, doing the jobs no one else wants, always afraid to speak up," one interviewee explained. Housing Instability included "substandard living conditions" and "discrimination in housing." Social Isolation was a significant issue, with "language barriers" and "loss of

social networks" often mentioned. Financial Strain was evident, as participants described the "cost of legal aid" and "remittance burdens," with one stating, "Every penny goes to either lawyers or back home."

3.3. Cultural and Identity Challenges

Participants expressed feelings of Cultural Dislocation, including "loss of cultural identity" and "alienation." Discrimination and Stigma were prevalent, with immigrants facing "racial profiling" and "social exclusion." A participant shared, "You're constantly reminded that you don't belong."

3.4. Psychological Well-being

The Trauma and PTSD subcategory included references to "past persecution or violence" and "trauma from journey." Depression was characterized by "hopelessness" and "low self-esteem." Many participants found strength in Resilience and Coping, with "community engagement" and "adaptive coping strategies" being crucial. "Finding a community here has been my saving grace," shared one participant.

3.5. System Navigation

Legal System Navigation involved complexities such as "misinformation" and "application and appeal processes." Healthcare Navigation highlighted the "language barriers in healthcare" and the "confidentiality concerns." The availability and accessibility of Community and Social Services were also discussed, with participants emphasizing the

importance of "support group access" and "community outreach."

4. Discussion and Conclusion

Our study has elucidated the intricate ways in which the legal status of immigrants influences their mental health outcomes. We identified five primary themes: Legal Uncertainty, Socioeconomic Impact, Cultural and Identity Challenges, Psychological Well-being, and System Navigation. Each theme encapsulates various subthemes and concepts that collectively paint a comprehensive picture of the mental health challenges faced by immigrants due to their legal status. From the fear and stress associated with potential deportation to the difficulties in accessing healthcare and navigating systemic barriers, the findings underscore the profound impact of legal precarity on mental well-being.

Legal Uncertainty emerged prominently, characterized by Stress and Anxiety, Access to Services, and Family Separation. Participants expressed profound fear and stress related to potential deportation and the continuous state of legal limbo. Access to services was hindered by barriers within healthcare and legal systems, exacerbated by a pervasive fear among immigrants of seeking help. Family Separation concerns were highlighted, with participants detailing the emotional and psychological toll of potential or actual separation from family members due to legal status issues.

Socioeconomic Impact was a significant theme, encompassing Employment Challenges, Housing Instability, Social Isolation, and Financial Strain. Participants described employment challenges such as exploitation and job insecurity, often linked to their legal status. Housing instability was marked by substandard living conditions and discrimination, contributing to a sense of impermanence and insecurity. Social isolation emerged through language barriers and the loss of social networks, while financial strain was evident in the narratives of remittance burdens and the high cost of legal processes.

Cultural and Identity Challenges included Cultural Dislocation and Discrimination and Stigma. Immigrants spoke of the loss of cultural identity and the challenges of cultural assimilation, which often led to feelings of alienation. Discrimination and stigma were pervasive, with participants recounting experiences of racial

profiling and social exclusion, further exacerbating their mental health challenges.

The theme of Psychological Well-being was detailed through Trauma and PTSD, Depression, and Resilience and Coping. Many immigrants shared experiences of trauma and PTSD, linked to pre-migration violence or the stressful immigration process itself. Depression was a common thread, with feelings of hopelessness and low self-esteem. However, resilience and coping strategies were also highlighted, including the importance of community support, religious faith, and adaptive coping mechanisms in navigating their challenges.

Finally, System Navigation focused on Legal System Navigation, Healthcare Navigation, and Community and Social Services. Navigating the legal system was described as a complex and daunting process, with many facing barriers to accessing legal representation and information. Healthcare navigation was fraught with challenges, including language barriers and a lack of culturally competent care. Community and social services were seen as vital supports, though access and availability varied, impacting the overall well-being of immigrants.

The theme of Legal Uncertainty, marked by stress and anxiety stemming from fears of deportation and legal limbo, echoes the findings of Garcini et al. (2017), who documented high prevalence rates of mental disorders among undocumented Mexican immigrants. Similarly, Haro-Ramos and Rodríguez (2021) identified immigration policy vulnerabilities as significant stressors, contributing to adverse mental health outcomes among Latino day laborers. Our study contributes to this body of work by further illuminating how the perpetual state of uncertainty disrupts mental peace and cultivates a constant state of fear and stress among immigrants, regardless of their country of origin (Garcini et al., 2017). The Socioeconomic Impact, particularly through employment challenges and financial strain, resonates with the findings of Hamilton, Hale, and Savinar (2018), who highlighted legal status disparities in health, attributable in part to socioeconomic adversities (Hamilton et al., 2018). The narratives of our participants, describing exploitation and job insecurity, underscore the direct link between precarious legal status and the exacerbation of socioeconomic vulnerabilities, thereby magnifying mental health distress. Our findings around Cultural and

Identity Challenges, including cultural dislocation and discrimination, find parallels in the work of Kim et al. (2018), which discussed the influence of cultural stressors on the mental health of children of immigrants (Kim et al., 2018). The sense of alienation and loss of cultural identity, compounded by discrimination, underscores the critical role of cultural and identity preservation in safeguarding mental health, as highlighted by Leu et al. (2008) (Leu et al., 2008). Concerning Psychological Well-being, our study's emphasis on trauma, depression, and resilience is supported by Potochnick and Perreira (2010), who found high levels of depression and anxiety among first-generation immigrant Latino youth (Potochnick & Perreira, 2010). Our research adds depth to these findings by showcasing the resilience mechanisms employed by immigrants to combat mental health challenges, aligning with Torres and Young's (2016) life-course perspective on health stratification by legal status. Finally, the difficulties associated with System Navigation, especially in accessing healthcare and community services, echo the systemic barriers documented by Rodriguez, Hill, and McDaniel (2020) (Rodriguez et al., 2020). Our study not only corroborates these challenges but also highlights the critical gaps in service provision and the dire need for culturally sensitive interventions to mitigate these barriers.

The intersection of legal status with mental health outcomes among immigrants is both complex and multifaceted, highlighting the need for a holistic approach to address these challenges. This study contributes to the growing body of literature by providing deeper insights into how legal vulnerabilities exacerbate mental health issues and by showcasing the resilience strategies employed by immigrants. It underscores the necessity for policies that are sensitive to the unique needs of this population, emphasizing the importance of access to mental health services, legal assistance, and social support systems.

This study, while comprehensive in its approach, is not without limitations. The reliance on a qualitative methodology and a relatively small sample size may limit the generalizability of the findings. Furthermore, the specific focus on immigrants in a particular geographic area may not fully capture the diverse experiences of immigrants from various backgrounds and living in different contexts. The subjective nature of self-reported

data also poses a challenge, as it may be influenced by participants' willingness to disclose sensitive information or by their interpretation of the questions. Future research should aim to expand on the findings of this study by incorporating larger and more diverse samples to enhance the generalizability of the results. Longitudinal studies could provide valuable insights into how the mental health of immigrants evolves over time and in relation to changes in legal status or policy environments. Moreover, quantitative methods could complement qualitative findings, offering a broader perspective on the prevalence and severity of mental health outcomes among different immigrant populations. Exploring interventions and support systems that mitigate the negative impacts of legal precarity on mental health also represents a critical avenue for future inquiry.

The findings of this study have significant implications for practice, particularly for mental health professionals, policymakers, and community organizations working with immigrant populations. There is a pressing need for culturally sensitive mental health services that are accessible to immigrants, regardless of their legal status. Training for mental health professionals on the specific challenges faced by immigrants can enhance the quality of care provided. Additionally, advocacy for policy changes that reduce legal uncertainties and promote social integration is crucial. Community-based support systems and legal assistance programs can play a vital role in mitigating the adverse effects of legal precarity on mental health. Ultimately, addressing the mental health needs of immigrants requires a concerted effort that recognizes the intersectionality of legal status, socioeconomic conditions, and cultural factors.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

In this research, ethical standards including obtaining informed consent, ensuring privacy and confidentiality were observed.

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