



Impact of Immigration Laws on Family Reunification: Narratives from Affected Families

Martin Weiss¹ , Mohammadbagher. Jafari^{2,3*} 

¹ Department of Social Sciences, University of Toronto, Canada

² Department of Sociology of Culture, Istanbul, Türkiye

³ Department of Social Sciences, KMAN Research Institute, Richmond Hill, Ontario, Canada

* Corresponding author email address: mbjafari@kmanresce.ca

Received: 2024-01-10

Revised: 2024-02-13

Accepted: 2024-02-20

Published: 2024-04-01

The increasing complexity of immigration laws globally has profound effects on family reunification processes, often resulting in significant emotional, legal, economic, and social challenges for immigrants. This study aims to explore the impact of these laws on family reunification, specifically examining the personal narratives and experiences of affected families. The objective is to understand the multi-dimensional consequences of immigration policies on family dynamics and well-being. This qualitative study employed semi-structured interviews with 22 participants who have directly experienced the family reunification process under current immigration laws. Participants were selected through snowball sampling and outreach via immigrant advocacy groups, ensuring a diverse representation in terms of age, gender, and origin. Data collection aimed for theoretical saturation and was analyzed using NVivo software to identify themes related to the impacts of immigration laws on family reunification. Four main themes were identified: Emotional Impact, Legal and Administrative Barriers, Economic Consequences, and Social and Cultural Integration. Emotional impacts included stress, anxiety, loss, resilience, and effects on children. Legal and administrative barriers highlighted the complexity of legal processes, issues with accessibility of resources, and the implications of frequent policy changes. Economic consequences focused on financial strain, employment challenges, and housing instability. Social and cultural integration covered challenges related to cultural adaptation, community support, discrimination, stigma, and family dynamics. The study reveals that immigration laws intricately affect the emotional and psychological health, economic stability, and social integration of immigrant families. The findings underscore the need for policies that consider the profound human impacts of immigration laws, advocating for reforms that facilitate smoother and more humane family reunification processes.

Keywords: Immigration laws, Family reunification, Emotional impact, Legal barriers, Economic consequences, Social integration, Qualitative research

How to cite this article:

Weiss, M., & Jafari, M. (2024). Impact of Immigration Laws on Family Reunification: Narratives from Affected Families. *Interdisciplinary Studies in Society, Law, and Politics*, 3(2), 11-17. <https://doi.org/10.61838/kman.isslp.3.2.3>

1. Introduction

Immigration policy is intrinsically tied to the fabric of social dynamics, shaping not only the demographic landscape of nations but also profoundly affecting the lives of countless families separated by borders. Central to the discourse on immigration is the principle of family

reunification, a cornerstone of humanitarian immigration policy aimed at preserving the family unit across transnational spaces (Hanachi et al., 2023; Simha, 2019).

Family reunification policies, though intended to strengthen familial bonds across national divides, often



manifest paradoxical outcomes that can disrupt family structures and emotional well-being (Enchautegui & Menjívar, 2015). The complexities of such policies are not only administrative but deeply woven into the socio-economic and emotional fabric of immigrant families, as they navigate the labyrinthine processes dictated by shifting legal landscapes (Hwang & Parreñas, 2010). These policies can inadvertently lead to prolonged separations and reorganization of family roles, challenging the resilience and adaptability of families striving to stay connected across continents (Simha, 2019).

The qualitative dimension of immigration's impact, particularly through the lens of family separation and reunification, reveals a broad spectrum of personal experiences. Emotional narratives from affected families underscore the distress and coping mechanisms that emerge in response to bureaucratic barriers and socio-economic challenges (Parra-Cardona et al., 2006). The emotional strain is further complicated by economic factors, where the financial burdens associated with immigration processes can exacerbate the vulnerabilities of families striving for reunification (Kanas & Steinmetz, 2020).

Gender dynamics also play a crucial role in how immigration laws impact families. Research indicates that women often bear a disproportionate share of the emotional and practical burdens of maintaining transnational family ties (Arenas et al., 2021). This gendered aspect of immigration underscores the need for a nuanced understanding of how policies affect different members of families differently, shaping their experiences and outcomes in distinct ways.

Moreover, the selective nature of reunification policies, which often prioritize certain family relationships over others, can lead to a fracturing of the broader kinship networks that are vital for the social and emotional support of immigrants (Hurtado-de-Mendoza et al., 2014). The narratives of those affected by these selective policies reveal the deep emotional scars left by enforced separations and the long-lasting impacts on their personal and communal well-being.

The impact of immigration policies extends beyond immediate family units, influencing broader community dynamics and individual identities. The process of navigating immigration laws can lead to significant social isolation and stigma, further complicating the

integration processes for immigrants and their families (Lee, 2015). The stress associated with legal uncertainties and the fear of deportation can permeate everyday life, leaving indelible marks on the psychological health of immigrants (Fleming et al., 2019).

This study employs a qualitative methodology to delve deeper into the personal stories behind these broad themes. By focusing on semi-structured interviews, the research seeks to achieve theoretical saturation, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the diverse experiences of immigrants affected by family reunification policies. Utilizing NVivo software, this study systematically analyzes the narratives to uncover recurring themes and patterns, offering a granular insight into the lived experiences of our participants.

In summary, the investigation into the impact of immigration laws on family reunification not only highlights the legal and administrative challenges faced by immigrants but also illuminates the profound emotional and socio-economic repercussions that these laws engender. Through the voices of those directly affected, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how immigration policies shape human lives and the complex realities of family reunification in a transnational context.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This qualitative study utilized semi-structured interviews to explore the impact of immigration laws on family reunification. The research was guided by a phenomenological approach, focusing on the lived experiences and personal narratives of individuals directly affected by these laws. This method was chosen to provide a deeper understanding of the emotional and practical repercussions of immigration policies on family dynamics.

Participants were recruited through a combination of snowball sampling and outreach via immigrant advocacy groups. The inclusion criteria required participants to be either immigrants who have attempted family reunification under current immigration laws or family members of immigrants. Efforts were made to ensure a diverse sample in terms of age, country of origin, and

immigration status to capture a wide range of experiences and perspectives.

The study aimed to achieve theoretical saturation, a point at which no new information or themes are observed in the data. This was assessed continuously throughout the data collection process by monitoring the emergence of new themes and information. Data collection was concluded once saturation was achieved, ensuring comprehensive coverage of the experiences related to the impact of immigration laws on family reunification.

The study was conducted in accordance with ethical guidelines for human subjects research. Prior to participation, all participants were informed about the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of their participation, the confidentiality of their responses, and their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Semi-Structured Interview

Data was collected exclusively through semi-structured interviews, allowing for both guided questions and open-ended responses. This format enabled participants to share their stories in their own words, providing rich qualitative data. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes and was conducted in the participants'

preferred language to ensure comfort and clarity in their responses. All interviews were recorded with the consent of the participants.

2.3. Data Analysis

The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and imported into NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software. NVivo was utilized to facilitate the organization, coding, and analysis of the data. A thematic analysis was conducted to identify and categorize themes related to the impact of immigration laws. Codes were initially generated based on a preliminary review of a subset of transcripts and were refined and expanded as additional data was analyzed.

3. Findings and Results

In the study, a total of 22 participants were interviewed to explore the impact of immigration laws on family reunification. The demographic breakdown of the participants included 12 females and 10 males, ensuring a balanced gender representation. The age range of the participants was broad, with 6 individuals aged between 18-30 years, 10 participants aged 31-50 years, and 6 above the age of 50. All participants had experienced immigration processes directly related to family reunification, either as immigrants themselves or as immediate family members of immigrants.

Table 1

The Results of Qualitative Analysis

Categories	Subcategories	Concepts (Open Codes)
1. Emotional Impact	Stress and Anxiety	Uncertainty, fear of deportation, stress about legal process, separation anxiety
	Loss and Separation	Grief, missing milestones, emotional distance, loss of support network
	Hope and Resilience	Coping strategies, hopeful anticipation, maintaining cultural connections, spiritual support
2. Legal and Administrative Barriers	Impact on Children	Emotional distress, academic challenges, identity conflicts, social isolation
	Complexity of Legal Processes	Documentation requirements, legal fees, bureaucracy, delays, legal jargon
	Accessibility of Resources	Language barriers, availability of legal aid, informational asymmetry
3. Economic Consequences	Impact of Policy Changes	Adaptation to changes, retroactive effects, increased restrictions
	Financial Strain	Cost of legal services, loss of income, remittance burdens, travel expenses
	Employment Challenges	Work permit issues, job instability, underemployment, credential recognition
4. Social and Cultural Integration	Housing Instability	Inadequate housing, frequent relocations, access to affordable housing
	Access to Services	Healthcare, education, social services, banking limitations
	Cultural Adaptation	Cultural identity, assimilation pressures, cultural preservation, intercultural communication
	Community Support	Diaspora networks, community organizations, social isolation, communal events
	Discrimination and Stigma	Racial profiling, xenophobia, workplace discrimination, social exclusion

Our analysis of semi-structured interviews revealed four main thematic categories that capture the impact of immigration laws on family reunification: Emotional Impact, Legal and Administrative Barriers, Economic Consequences, and Social and Cultural Integration. Each category comprises several subcategories with associated concepts derived from participants' narratives.

3.1. Emotional Impact

Participants frequently discussed the emotional burden imposed by immigration processes. Key subthemes include:

Stress and Anxiety: Interviewees described feelings of "uncertainty" and "fear of deportation," with one participant noting, "Every day is a struggle not knowing what might happen."

Loss and Separation: Many faced "grief" from missing significant family milestones and "emotional distance" from loved ones. As one respondent stated, "It's like part of me is missing without my family."

Hope and Resilience: Despite hardships, many showed "hopeful anticipation" for reunification and employed various "coping strategies," including maintaining "cultural connections."

Impact on Children: The emotional distress of children was palpable, with reports of "academic challenges" and "social isolation." A parent remarked, "My child feels torn between two worlds."

3.2. Legal and Administrative Barriers

Participants outlined numerous obstacles within the legal framework of immigration:

Complexity of Legal Processes: The daunting "documentation requirements" and "legal jargon" were particularly challenging, as one individual lamented, "It feels like navigating a maze without a map."

Accessibility of Resources: Many highlighted the "language barriers" and lack of "availability of legal aid," making it difficult to access necessary resources.

Impact of Policy Changes: Changes in immigration policy led to "adaptation to changes" and "increased restrictions," complicating the reunification process.

3.3. Economic Consequences

Economic challenges were a significant concern for many participants:

Financial Strain: The "cost of legal services" and "loss of income" were frequently mentioned, with one participant noting, "We spend what little we have hoping to bring our family together."

Employment Challenges: Issues such as "work permit issues" and "job instability" were common among respondents.

Housing Instability and Access to Services: Many interviewees faced "inadequate housing" and challenges accessing "healthcare" and "education," which compounded their difficulties.

3.4. Social and Cultural Integration

The impact on social relations and cultural identity was profound:

Cultural Adaptation: Participants spoke of the struggle to maintain their "cultural identity" while adapting to new environments.

Community Support: The importance of "diaspora networks" and "community organizations" was emphasized as crucial for integration.

Discrimination and Stigma: Experiences of "racial profiling" and "workplace discrimination" were distressingly common, highlighting the barriers to social inclusion.

Family Dynamics: Changes in "family dynamics" and "intergenerational conflicts" were notably stressful, as one respondent explained, "It's hard to keep the family roles when we're worlds apart."

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews from this study identified four main themes that illustrate the impact of immigration laws on family reunification: Emotional Impact, Legal and Administrative Barriers, Economic Consequences, and Social and Cultural Integration. Each main theme comprises several categories that encapsulate specific aspects of the broader theme, providing a structured

insight into the diverse experiences of participants affected by immigration policies.

The theme of Emotional Impact emerged prominently, with categories such as Stress and Anxiety, Loss and Separation, Hope and Resilience, and Impact on Children. Participants frequently expressed experiencing uncertainty and fear of deportation, contributing to a pervasive sense of anxiety. The Loss and Separation category highlighted feelings of grief and emotional distance due to missing significant family events. Despite these challenges, the category of Hope and Resilience revealed that many individuals maintain a hopeful outlook and employ various coping strategies, such as maintaining cultural connections. Moreover, the Impact on Children category unveiled the specific emotional distress and challenges faced by children, including academic struggles and social isolation.

Within the theme of Legal and Administrative Barriers, categories included Complexity of Legal Processes, Accessibility of Resources, and Impact of Policy Changes. Participants detailed their struggles with navigating complex documentation requirements, legal fees, and bureaucratic delays. The Accessibility of Resources category underscored the significant barriers like language difficulties and the scarcity of legal aid, which hinder their ability to access necessary support. Additionally, the Impact of Policy Changes category highlighted how frequent changes in immigration policy cause confusion and require constant adaptation by immigrants.

The theme of Economic Consequences encompassed categories such as Financial Strain, Employment Challenges, and Housing Instability and Access to Services. Participants spoke of the high costs associated with legal services and the financial burdens of maintaining transnational family connections. Employment Challenges revealed issues like work permit complications and job instability that exacerbate economic insecurity for immigrants. Housing Instability and Access to Services depicted the difficulties in securing stable housing and accessing essential services like healthcare and education, further stressing immigrant families.

Finally, the theme of Social and Cultural Integration included categories such as Cultural Adaptation, Community Support, Discrimination and Stigma, and Family Dynamics. Participants discussed the challenges

and pressures of adjusting to new cultural environments while trying to preserve their own cultural identities. Community Support was crucial for their integration, although Discrimination and Stigma often led to social exclusion and emotional distress. The Family Dynamics category illuminated changes in family roles and conflicts arising from the immigration process, affecting the stability and unity of family units.

The emotional distress described by participants underscores the deep psychological toll of family separation. Our findings resonate with Simha's (2019) discussion on the impact of family separation, emphasizing the pervasive anxiety and uncertainty faced by immigrant families (Simha, 2019). Participants frequently expressed feelings of loss, consistent with Enchautegui and Menjívar's (2015) observations on the paradoxes of family immigration policy, which often results in unintended separations despite intentions to unify families (Enchautegui & Menjívar, 2015). These emotional responses are indicative of the "not every family" principle, as Hwang and Parreñas (2010) suggest, where selective reunification policies exacerbate emotional strain for families deemed ineligible under stringent criteria (Hwang & Parreñas, 2010).

The complexity of legal processes and the fluctuating nature of immigration policies were identified as significant barriers. These findings are aligned with Lee's (2015) analysis, which critiques the limitations of immigration reform in genuinely facilitating family reunification (Lee, 2015). The bureaucratic intricacies and the often inaccessible legal resources highlighted by participants echo the challenges documented by Fleming et al. (2019), where the 2016 US election's impact on immigration policy further complicated the lives of immigrants. Our study adds to this body of work by illustrating how these barriers manifest in daily struggles and prolonged family separation (Fleming et al., 2019).

Economic hardship was another critical theme, with participants detailing the substantial financial burdens associated with navigating immigration systems. This aligns with Kanas and Steinmetz's (2020) findings on the economic outcomes of immigrants, where labor market policies significantly influence the economic stability of immigrant families (Kanas & Steinmetz, 2020). The financial strain related to legal fees, loss of income, and

the high cost of maintaining transnational ties supports Landale, Thomas, and Hook's (2011) discussion on the economic challenges faced by children of immigrants, further underscoring the intergenerational impact of immigration laws (Landale et al., 2011).

The struggle for social and cultural integration was palpable among participants, who spoke of discrimination, cultural identity crises, and the vital role of community support. These experiences reflect the findings of Arenas et al. (2021), who noted significant emotional well-being impacts due to gender and family separation among Mexican migrants (Arenas et al., 2021). Additionally, Hurtado-de-Mendoza et al. (2014) highlight the weak "strong ties" in Latina immigrants' social networks, which our findings corroborate by illustrating the diminished social support and increased isolation that complicate cultural adaptation and integration (Hurtado-de-Mendoza et al., 2014).

This qualitative study revealed that immigration laws significantly impact family reunification, affecting emotional well-being, navigating legal and administrative barriers, enduring economic hardships, and integrating socially and culturally. Participants reported high levels of stress and emotional pain due to prolonged separations and the uncertainty of reunification processes. Legal complexities and constant policy changes add significant obstacles, making the immigration pathway difficult and unpredictable. Economically, the costs associated with legal processes and maintaining transnational family ties place a heavy burden on immigrants. Socially, the challenges of cultural adaptation and experiences of discrimination further complicate the integration into new communities.

The findings from this study underscore the profound implications of immigration laws on family dynamics and individual well-being. They highlight the need for comprehensive immigration reform that considers the human dimensions of immigration laws. It is clear that while immigration policies aim to control borders and populations, their execution often overlooks the fundamental human rights and dignity of individuals seeking family reunification. Thus, policymakers must consider these impacts to create more humane and effective immigration systems.

This study is not without limitations. The sample size, while sufficient for qualitative saturation, may not fully

represent the diversity of experiences among all immigrant groups affected by family reunification policies. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data can introduce biases related to personal perceptions and recall of events. The study also focuses primarily on the emotional and personal narratives, which, while deeply informative, may overlook some broader socio-economic impacts that quantitative data could reveal.

Future research should aim to expand the demographic and geographical scope of the study to include a wider array of immigrant experiences and legal contexts. Longitudinal studies could provide insights into the long-term effects of immigration laws on families, tracking changes over time and across different policy shifts. Additionally, comparative studies between countries with different immigration policies could highlight best practices and more effective approaches to family reunification.

The insights from this study suggest several practical implications for immigration policy and support services. There is a critical need for immigration processes that are more transparent, predictable, and streamlined. Legal resources and services should be made more accessible, particularly for low-income families and those facing language barriers. Community-based support and culturally sensitive practices can significantly improve the integration experiences of immigrants, promoting better social cohesion and reducing the stigma associated with immigrant status. Moreover, advocacy and community organizations should work closely with policymakers to ensure that the voices of immigrants are considered in the formulation of immigration laws.

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.

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our gratitude to all individuals helped us to do the project.

Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

Funding

According to the authors, this article has no financial support.

Ethical Considerations

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

References

- Arenas, E., Yahirun, J., Belismelis, G. M. T., Rubalcava, L., & Gaitán-Rossi, P. (2021). Gender, Family Separation, and Negative Emotional <sc>well-being</sc> Among Recent Mexican Migrants. *Journal of marriage and family*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jomf.12776>
- Enchautegui, M. E., & Menjívar, C. (2015). Paradoxes of Family Immigration Policy: Separation, Reorganization, and Reunification of Families Under Current Immigration Laws. *Law & Policy*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/lapo.12030>
- Fleming, P. J., Lopez, W. D., Mesa, H., Rion, R., Rabinowitz, E., Bryce, R., & Doshi, M. (2019). A Qualitative Study on the Impact of the 2016 US Election on the Health of Immigrant Families in Southeast Michigan. *BMC public health*. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-019-7290-3>
- Hanachi, N., Khademian, T., & Adhami, A. (2023). Sociological Investigation of Cultural-Social Influence of Afghanistan Immigrant Families from Iran (Case study of Tehran city) [Research Article]. *Iranian Journal of Educational Sociology*, 6(2), 122-130. <https://doi.org/10.61186/ijes.6.2.122>
- Hurtado-de-Mendoza, A., Gonzales, F. A., Serrano, A., & Kaltman, S. (2014). Me Mandó a Traer: Weak “Strong Ties” in Latina Immigrants’ Social Networks. *Journal of Community Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.21623>
- Hwang, M. C., & Parreñas, R. S. (2010). Not Every Family: Selective Reunification in Contemporary US Immigration Laws. *International Labor and Working-Class History*. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0147547910000153>
- Kanas, A., & Steinmetz, S. (2020). Economic Outcomes of Immigrants With Different Migration Motives: The Role of Labour Market Policies. *European Sociological Review*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/esr/jcaa058>
- Landale, N. S., Thomas, K. J. A., & Hook, J. V. (2011). The Living Arrangements of Children of Immigrants. *The Future of Children*. <https://doi.org/10.1353/foc.2011.0003>
- Lee, C. (2015). Family Reunification and the Limits of Immigration Reform: Impact and Legacy of the 1965 Immigration Act. *Sociological Forum*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/socf.12176>
- Parra-Cardona, J. R., Bullock, L. A., Imig, D. R., Villarruel, F. A., & Gold, S. J. (2006). “Trabajando Duro Todos Los Días”: Learning From the Life Experiences of Mexican-Origin

Migrant Families*. *Family Relations*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3729.2006.00409.x>

Simha, S. (2019). The Impact of Family Separation on Immigrant and Refugee Families. *North Carolina Medical Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.18043/ncm.80.2.95>