

Risky Behavior among Young Adolescents in Immigrant Families: Evidence from the 1997 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY97)

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The aim of this paper is to investigate the risky behavioral outcomes of U.S. young adolescents aged 12-16 in immigrant families. This issue is imperative given the rapidly changing demographic profiles of U.S. immigrant children who, over the last two decades, increasingly migrate from Latin America and Asia. Thus, what we understood about immigrants several decades ago (who mainly migrated from Europe) is not necessarily readily applicable to the current cohorts of immigrants. Furthermore, mainly because the majority of studies on immigrants have mainly focused on the academic performance rather than the risky behavior (e.g., ever had sex, drinking, delinquency, etc.), and the majority of studies on immigrants have mainly used small-scale local sample of immigrant young adolescents in cross-sectional lens, we still have much to learn about the experiences of immigrant children and the effects of various factors on immigrant children's development. This is important given that in the coming years, the vast majority of the elderly who are most likely the baby-boom generation will be non-Hispanic whites, and they will become heavily economically dependent on the productivity and civic participation of adults who are members of racial and ethnic minorities – many of whom lived in immigrant families when they were children.

Numerous studies have paid particular attention to young immigrant adolescents' academic experience in the U.S. and findings indicated that the various academic experiences of young adolescents in immigrant families may have to do with, but are not limited to, family socioeconomic background, parental educational practices, adolescents' own attitudes and behaviors, and school and neighborhood resources or social capital related factors (Chao, 2001; Conchas, 2001; Fuligni, 1997; Fuligni, Tseng, & Lam, 1999; Kao & Tienda, 1995; Louie, 2001; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001). For example, family socioeconomic background may partially explain the academic success of immigrant populations from Europe or Asia and the academic struggles experienced by immigrant populations mainly from Latin America. Studies using ethnographies or qualitative approaches have further suggested that the academic performance of immigrant adolescents may have to do with the findings that immigrant children may be raised in a family environment that strongly supports academic achievements. Evidence from previous studies has identified the great effort and time devoted by immigrant adolescents to doing homework with the desire to achieve academic success (Caplan et al., 1991; Gibson, 1991; Gibson & Bhachu, 1991; Fuligni, 1997; Louie, 2001). Furthermore, the academic performance of immigrant adolescents may have to do with the school as well as the neighborhood environments, or so-called social capital related factors that the inner-city school environments as well as neighborhoods may pose particular difficult time for these immigrant youth to their learning experiences. Comparatively, relatively little research has paid attention to the risky behavior (e.g., ever had sex, doing drugs, etc.) among young adolescents in immigrant families (e.g., Harris, 1999). The importance of examining their risky behavior is derived from the fact that the majority of new immigrants to the U.S. settle and live in inner-city areas, where the urban problems of poverty, unemployment, crime, and social disorganization have historically been most intense (Sampson & Groves, 1989; Wilson, 1987), which exacerbates the

negative effects of the low socioeconomic status observed in some immigrant families (e.g., Latin American). Research has consistently identified such stressful conditions (such as poverty or unemployment) as related to negative parental psychological functioning and parenting behavior, thus adversely affecting a child's cognitive as well as socio-emotional development (Conger et al., 1992; Elder et al., 1992; McLoyd, 1990; McLoyd & Wilson, 1991).

Moreover, many of the previous studies involved only small-scale local sample and often cross-sectional data; therefore, it is difficult for us to know whether or not the findings in these small samples are applicable to other groups of young adolescents. In this study, we build on that prior research by examining the risky behaviors of young adolescents in immigrant families using nationally representative samples of adolescents aged 12-16 (as of December 1996) from the 1997 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY97). The public release data are currently available for the assessments collected in the 1997 to 2000. The NLSY97 is well suited for this analysis because, in addition to collecting detailed data on family demographic background (e.g., family structure at age 2, at age 6, at age 12, and at current age), it also contains information on various dimensions of risky behaviors along with a rich set of information on home and school environment (e.g., enriching environment at home, peer influence, and so forth). Specifically, the behavioral outcomes analyzed in this paper and available in the NLSY97 include the following measures: ever been suspended, ever repeated a grade, ever have had sex, the delinquent behavior, and substance use behavior. These outcomes were obtained from young adolescents' self reports. In addition, a variety of factors are included, such as youth characteristics (i.e., age, gender, early child care experience), parental characteristics (e.g., mother/father's age, education, and mother's age at the birth of the youth), family characteristics (e.g., family structure, number of children under age of 6, number of children between ages of 6 and 17, and family poverty status), and social capital related factors (e.g., parental religiosity, parental supportiveness, parental monitoring, spending time with family members, family enriching environment, the safety of the school as well as the neighborhood, and the peer influence at school). These measures are also obtained from adolescents' self reports. We have also carefully estimated the models by using the outcome variables at later time point (such as year 2000) than those explanatory variables (e.g., from year 1997).

As a greater share of young children is raised in foreign-born families (i.e., either they themselves or their parents were not born in the U.S.), there is a void in our understanding about the experiences of these young immigrant adolescents in general, and the extent to which a variety of individual and external factors may affect adolescents' risky behavior in particular. The results from this study will fill gaps in knowledge about young immigrant adolescents' risky behavior using a nationally representative sample, in hopes of shaping an appropriate policy response.

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