



The Effects of Migration on the Mental Health of Immigrant Children in Canada

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Introduction

Mental health is something that impacts the lives of many individuals, whether they are affected directly or know of someone in their family or friend group who is. Statistics Canada (2004) defines mental health status as “a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community” (Davison & Gondara, 2021, p. 112). The stigma surrounding issues with mental health has slowly been changing as more awareness is being brought to an issue that so many people face. While mental health struggles are experienced by the global population, certain groups of people are at greater risk of facing such difficulties due to their circumstances. Immigrant families in Canada have higher susceptibility to a variety of difficulties such as poor health, social isolation, violence, addiction, and mental health issues (Ginn et al., 2018, as cited in Elkchirid & Motia, 2021, p. 95). For this paper, I will focus on immigrant children in Canada and how factors related to poverty, housing, food insecurity, and social support impact their mental health. I hypothesize that these stress inducing experiences negatively affect the mental health of developing immigrant children and argue that the “healthy immigrant effect” is far from the reality that many foreign-born individuals experience following their migratory process.

Literature Review

Canada has become a popular destination for immigrants from Asia, Latin America, and Africa (Salami et al., 2020, p. 126). According to Statistics Canada (2017), nearly 7.6 million foreign-born individuals made up the country’s population in 2016 (Salami et al., 2020, p. 126). 68% of arrivals came from developing countries in Asia, Central and South America, Africa, and the Caribbean between 2011 and 2016 (Statistics Canada, 2017, as cited in Salami et al., 2020, p. 126). Statistics Canada (2017) adds that based on the 2016 population census, 37.5% of Canadian

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children under the age of 15 years old were first- or second-generation immigrants (Salami et al., 2020, p. 126). In the same year, 136,505 African immigrants resided in Alberta, 44,925 of whom were children, aged 14 years or younger (Statistics Canada, 2017, as cited in Salami et al., 2020, p. 127). Based on projections, 30% of Canada's population will be represented by foreign-born residents by 2036 (Davison & Gondara, 2021, p. 109). As the population of immigrant children in Canada continues to grow, their well-being and mental health status has become an important focus of public health research (Salami et al., 2020, p. 126). Migration from one's country of origin to another is a stressful process and has the potential to have detrimental effects on the mental health of immigrant children (Elkchirid & Motia, 2021, p. 92). Many immigrant children and their families experience a variety of psychological stressors when faced with resettlement including academic difficulties, financial restraints, and minority status following their arrival in a new country (Khan & Khanlou, 2021, p. 48). Additional stress-inducing factors that many immigrant children and families in Canada face include learning a new language, adapting to new social and cultural norms, securing employment, and acquiring affordable housing and food (Davison & Gondara, 2021, p. 110). Although many immigrant families in Canada adapt to their new environments, "resettlement stories with happy endings are far from universal" (Beiser et al., 2002, p. 224). Immigrant children in Canada exhibit significant variation in their mental health outcomes in comparison to non-immigrant youth and therefore, identifying environmental factors that play a role in this issue, can help understand why some children struggle and others do not (Sim & Georgiades, 2022, p. 2).

Human Resources and Social Development Canada (HRSDC) developed the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY) in 1994, a long-term study designed to focus on the development and well-being of over 35,000 Canadian children from birth to early childhood (Beiser, 2010). Findings from the study provided insight into factors influencing children's social, emotional, and behavioural development. The study was conducted in six cities – Toronto, Winnipeg, Montreal, Vancouver, Calgary, and Edmonton. Results from the study, conducted on children from Hong Kong Chinese, Mainland Chinese, and Filipino immigrants in Canada, showed that immigrant children whose parents spoke little or no English, experienced discrimination, or suffered from stress related to resettlement, had an elevated risk of emotional issues and of aggressive behaviour. Beiser (2010) adds that immigrant children living in Toronto were found to have worse mental health status than immigrant children living in the other five cities included in the study. In an additional study, a parent who immigrated to Canada from Africa was interviewed. The individual expressed that they felt as though Canadians lives were built around independence, so much so, that in many cases, independence appeared to be more like isolation (Salami et al., 2020). The foreign-born parent added that they believed this culturally accepted isolation was part of the reason for higher rates of depression and suicide, in comparison to the communal country they came from. While migration from a collective to an individualistic culture may be a major adjustment in and of itself, additional factors place the mental health of immigrants in Canada even more at risk.

Poverty

Poverty is considered to be "one of the most potent of all factors" placing children's mental

health at risk (Beiser, 2010, p. 104). Findings have shown that recent immigrants in Canada have a higher chance of living below the poverty line than non-immigrant Canadian families (Sim & Georgiades, 2022, p. 2). A family that spends 20% or more of their income on food, clothing, and shelter than an average household, is classified as being at the “low income cut off” (Beiser et al., 2002, p. 220). For example, the average Canadian family in 1997 spent 34.3% of their income on these necessities, whereas families below the cut off, spent 54.3% or more of their income (Beiser et al., 2002, p. 221). Beiser et al. (2002) adds that children living in families experiencing deep poverty spend 75% or more of their total income on basic needs. A study conducted by Beiser et al. (2002) found that just over 36% of immigrant children aged 4 through 11 years, lived in poor households, compared to 13% of children from non-immigrant families. Additionally, many immigrants have found themselves juggling multiple part-time, minimum wage jobs to provide for their household, despite having comparable education and professional qualifications as others born in Canada. Balancing multiple jobs at once can negatively affect cohesion within the family and as a result, increases the risk of stress felt by children within the household (Salami et al., 2020). While difficulties surrounding employment and income are often thought of as being “adult issues”, such difficulties impact the mental well-being of struggling parents which in turn, also affects the mental health of their children (Beiser et al., 2002, p. 220). Ultimately, children in families experiencing poverty are at greater risk of developing mental health issues than children of non-poor families, and in many cases, tend to be immigrants (Beiser et al., 2002).

Food Insecurity

One factor that often goes hand-in-hand with poverty, and that many immigrant families and children experience, is food insecurity. Food security “is achieved when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life” (Tarraf et al., 2017). Foreign born individuals tend to have an inadequate consumption of micronutrients, face higher levels of food insecurity, and experience more mental health issues in comparison to native-born Canadians (Davison & Gondara, 2021). Davison and Gondara (2021) found that immigrants settled in the country for five years or less were more likely to report higher levels of food insecurity and add that this stress-inducing circumstance has been associated with mental health issues in immigrant children in Canada (p. 115). A study on nutrient levels was conducted by Davison and Gondara (2021) and found that foreign-born males between the ages of 9 and 19 had lower levels of vitamin B₁ compared to native-born Canadian males of the same age range. Deficiencies in vitamin B₁ are associated with mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, insomnia, and loss of memory. If the brain does not receive enough vitamin B₁, it will likely lack the energy required to function at an optimal level (*What to Know About Vitamins and Mental Health*, 2021). Additional findings showed that foreign-born females between the ages of 9 and 19 had lower vitamin A levels compared to similarly aged native-born female Canadians (Davison & Gondara, 2021). Vitamin A is essential to boost blood oxygen levels and promote mental health. Deficiencies in vitamin A can lead to mental health issues and have a negative affect on learning capacity (*4 Ways in Which Vitamin Deficiency Affects Mental Health*, 2022). As stated by Broussard (2010), migration from

a non-Western country to a North American country has shown association with a loss of gut microbiome diversity which can not only negatively impact one's nutritional health, but also their mental health status.

Neighborhoods

Living in poorer communities is an additional risk factor for mental health issues in children. Studies have shown that living in neighborhoods characterized by high levels of disorder, such as communities with frequent crime occurrences, may be associated with an increase in mental health issues of immigrant children (Sim & Georgiades, 2022). Neighborhoods and communities, as part of children's exosystem, have a major influence on their development and well-being. Characteristics of a neighborhood including the quality, quantity, and accessibility of institutional resources, including schools, libraries, and family resources also play an important role in the lives of developing individuals (Milbrath & Guhn, 2019). However, findings have shown that many immigrant families in Canada reside in neighborhoods that lack important resources including health care services (Asanin & Wilson, 2008, as cited in Salami et al., 2020, p. 127). Sim and Georgiades (2022) add that immigrant families, who have a higher likelihood of living in poorer communities in comparison to native-born Canadian families, also have a higher chance of raising children with mental health issues. Furthermore, communities that have easily accessible arts-based programs have been shown to have positive effects on the mental health of children (Elkchirid & Motia, 2021). The unfortunate reality is that these types of programs tend to be less prominent in low-income neighborhoods, where many immigrant families and children reside.

Social Support

An additional factor that can negatively contribute to the mental and emotional wellbeing of immigrant children across Canada is a lack of social support. As mentioned by Beiser et al. (2002), language barriers and an absence of social support are both strong predictors for emotional issues in immigrant children. Canadian studies have shown that many immigrant children, especially those of racialized groups, experience social isolation for being different from their non-immigrant peers (Salami et al., 2020, as cited in Elkchirid & Motia, 2021, p. 97). Salami et al. (2020) adds that social isolation can lower the self confidence of immigrant children and harm their mental health (Elkchirid & Motia, 2021, p. 97). According to Khanlou et al. (2008), negative experiences of prejudice and discrimination that many immigrant children experience at school and in their community, can impact their sense of belonging, lower their self-esteem, and even worsen symptoms of depression (Khan & Khanlou, 2021). In addition, children of racial and ethnic minority backgrounds are less likely to seek professional psychological help or use mental health resources compared to non-minority students (Loya et al., 2010; Masuda et al., 2009, as cited in Khan & Khanlou, 2021, p. 49). In cases where mental health issues are detected by parents in immigrant families, many are reluctant to seek help for their children because they are afraid that

they will be removed from the home as a result of police or social workers' interference (Salami et al., 2020, as cited in Elchirid & Motia, 2021, p. 98). As a result, the mental and emotional struggles that many immigrant children in Canada face, go untreated.

The Healthy Immigrant Effect

The Healthy Immigrant Effect is a term used for the phenomena of immigrants arriving to Canada with stronger health than those born in the country. However, the health of immigrants tends to take a steep decline over time and usually after 5 to 10 years, reaches the Canadian-born population's health level or even lower (Athari, 2020, p. 1). While this decline can occur for many reasons, the two main contributing factors are challenges related to mental health and food insecurity (Davison & Gondara, 2021). Although many Canadian immigrants do arrive to the country with lower levels of disability and fewer chronic conditions than native-born residents, it is thought that the reason for this may be due to policies which favour immigrants who are both healthy and educated (Davison & Gondara, 2021). While the use of this term itself may not be a direct cause for poor mental health in immigrant children, it may be part of the reason as to why this issue is not discussed or addressed as much as it should be. One may argue that as the inaccurate term continues to be used around the country, there is a likelihood that the population will continue to believe that immigrants are healthier in comparison to native-born Canadians, when in reality, findings suggest otherwise.

Conclusion

In conclusion, many socio-economic factors play a role in the well-being of immigrant families in Canada and given the fact that leaving one's country of origin is often associated with loss, the mental health of immigrant children should not be ignored (Elkchiris & Motia, 2021). Findings from a variety of studies conducted across Canada have provided evidence of the ways in which stress-inducing experiences related to socio-economic factors negatively impact the mental health of immigrant children. One way to address the issue of mental health difficulties in immigrant children across the country, is to challenge Canadian policies associated with minimum wage, employment standards, affordable housing, and childcare. Changes in such policies could, in turn, have a positive influence on food security and the mental health of immigrant children in Canada (Davison & Gondara, 2021).

While there are contributing factors that can be addressed through an adjustment and change in policy, other factors affecting the mental health of immigrant children may be more difficult to tackle. Additional difficulties that many immigrant families experience once arriving in Canada include discrimination and trauma associated with their migratory process, each of which have the potential to detrimentally affect the mental health of developing immigrant children (Sim & Georgiades, 2022). One way to address trauma that many immigrant families and children face following their arrival in Canada, is to ensure that they are provided with proper resources and services. It is especially important that such resources are offered in lower income neighbour-

hoods and communities, given that they are often populated by immigrant families. An additional way in which migratory related trauma can be addressed is through the inclusion of greater arts-based programs in schools across Canada. This would allow children of all socio-economic statuses to engage in activities that have been shown to be beneficial for both development and mental well-being. In terms of discrimination, it is crucial that immigrant children are provided with a strong support system that promotes the development of a sense of self and belonging in Canada. While issues surrounding racism and discrimination are evident nation-wide, Canadians must actively work towards eliminating the negative stereotypes surrounding foreign-born individuals in our country.

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