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Parenting Strain Among Mexican-Origin Mothers: Differences by Parental Legal Status and Neighborhood

Despite increasing recognition of the critical importance of legal status for understanding the well-being of immigrants and their families, there has been scant research on this topic. Using Wave 1 of the Los Angeles Family and Neighborhood Survey (2000–2002) and the 2000 decennial census, the authors investigated how parenting strain among Mexican-origin mothers varies by legal status and neighborhood context. They found significant differences in parenting strain by nativity and legal status, with undocumented mothers reporting the lowest level. Results from multilevel models with cross-level interactions reveal that the influence of neighborhood immigrant concentration differs by legal status. Percent foreign born in the neighborhood is associated with reduced parenting strain for documented Mexican-origin mothers, whereas it is associated with heightened parenting strain for undocumented Mexican-origin mothers. The findings provide empirical support for the need to recognize legal status distinctions in studies of the well-being of immigrants and their families.

Numbering 33.7 million in 2012, the Mexican-origin population of the United States accounted for nearly two thirds (64%) of U.S. Hispanics and more than one tenth (11%) of the total U.S. population (Gonzalez-Barrera & Lopez, 2013). Both the size and rapid growth of this population since 1970 have drawn attention to immigration as a key driver of demographic and social change. Recently a family process—fertility—has surpassed immigration as the major source of growth in the Mexican-origin population (Pew Hispanic Center, 2011). One consequence of this shift is increased recognition of the importance of families to the future incorporation of a large and growing Mexican-origin child population (Jasso, Massey, Rosenzweig, & Smith, 2004; Landale & Oropesa, 2007).

The life chances of children are tightly linked to the material and psychological resources that their parents can provide. In particular, a substantial body of research documents that parental psychological well-being has enduring implications for children because it is closely related to parenting behaviors (Belsky, 1984; White, Roosa, Weaver, Nair, & Murry, 2009). Studies have begun to address the nature and determinants of parenting among Hispanics

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(Fuller & García Coll, 2010; Jung, Fuller, & Galindo, 2012; Livas-Dlott et al., 2010; Rodriguez-JenKins, 2014), including variation by parental nativity. However, few studies have paid attention to a major axis of stratification that has profound implications for Hispanic immigrants, namely, legal status. Although legal status has emerged as a key dimension of diversity in the Hispanic population, it has been regularly ignored because of the lack of data on parental legal status in most representative data sources.

Using one of the few representative data sets with detailed questions on the legal status of immigrants, the Los Angeles Family and Neighborhood Survey (L.A. FANS, http://lasurvey.rand.org/), this study focuses on the role of multiple stressors on parenting strain among Mexican-origin mothers. Some Mexican-origin mothers are disproportionately exposed to numerous individual-level stressors, such as traumatic migration experiences, acculturation stress, and poverty. There is also variation in exposure to contextual-level stressors, such as neighborhood socioeconomic disadvantage, that may contribute to relatively high parenting stress (White et al., 2009). These stressors are shaped by the structural positions of individuals, including their nativity and legal status. Yet the associations between particular statuses and parenting strain may not be straightforward because different ethnic or cultural groups may internalize or interpret a common stressor in different ways. Thus, drawing on theories of family stress and parenting strain, studies of immigrant adaptation, and a multilevel framework, we investigate how parenting strain among Mexican-origin mothers varies by their nativity, legal status, and neighborhood context.

Parenting Strain

Parenting strain or *parenting stress* refers to parents' perceptions of the difficulty of fulfilling their parenting role, often a result of everyday parenting-related hassles or discrepancies between parental expectations and realities (Abidin, 1992; Deater-Deckard, 2004; Pearlin, 1989). Parenting strain is a key determinant of parenting practices and is associated with lower parenting skill levels (Carpiano & Kimbro, 2012), lower parental warmth (Belsky, 1984), a higher likelihood of harsh parenting (McLoyd, 1990; Pinderhughes, Dodge, Bates, Pettit, & Zelli, 2000; Webster-Stratton, 1990), and a higher likelihood of severe physical discipline (Pinderhughes et al., 2000). Parenting strain is also a precursor to chronic parental depression (Huang, Costeines, Kaufman, & Ayala, 2014; Roxburgh, Stephens, Toltzis, & Adkins, 2001), which in turn can further exacerbate difficulties in effective parenting (Lyons-Ruth, Wolfe, & Lyubchik, 2000).

Although parenting strain has been identified as a key factor in parental and child well-being, surprisingly little is known about what influences it. One important theory used to understand parenting strain is family stress theory (K. J. Conger, Rueter, & Conger, 2000; R. D. Conger et al., 2002), which posits that the principal mechanism through which contextual stressors negatively influence parenting is parental psychological stress (K. J. Conger et al., 2000; R. D. Conger et al., 2002). In other words, exposure to contextual stressors contributes to increased parental psychological stress, which then reduces positive parenting. In groundbreaking research, K. J. Conger et al. (2000) demonstrated that socioeconomic risk (e.g., low-income status and economic distress) is positively associated with parental psychological distress. However, this project led to later critiques of the literature's almost exclusive focus on economic disadvantage as a stressor, its lack of attention to the neighborhood context, and its limited generalizability to disadvantaged subgroups other than African Americans (Kotchick, Dorsey, & Heller, 2005).

Nativity, Legal Status, and Parenting Strain

In response to the critique that studies based on family stress theory have primarily emphasized African American mothers (e.g., Cain & Combs-Orme, 2005; K. J. Conger et al., 2000; R. D. Conger et al., 2002), recent studies have started to focus on whether and how the theory is applicable to other racial and ethnic minority groups (Rodriguez-JenKins & Marcenko, 2014; White et al., 2009). For example, White et al. (2009) tested the applicability of family stress theory to Mexican Americans, and they extended the theory to include cultural (i.e., English-language pressure) and contextual (i.e., perceived neighborhood danger) risk factors. They found that acculturative stress is related to parental psychological stress, which

was measured by depression. This finding illustrates that it is not only important to test the applicability of family stress theory to various racial and ethnic groups but also it is important to include risk or protective factors that are specific to the group examined.

A critical factor to consider when studying the Mexican-origin population is legal status, as more than half (51%) of the 11.4 million foreign-born Mexicans residing in the United States are undocumented (Gonzalez-Barrera & Lopez, 2013). Legal status is a central dimension of stratification that can influence social, economic, and political opportunities (Glick, 2010; Massey & Bartley, 2005; Viruell-Fuentes, Miranda, & Abdulrahim, 2012); it is also an important unmeasured source of heterogeneity in studies of immigrants and their children, and this can bias conclusions about the role of nativity (Landale, Hardie, Oropesa, & Hillemeier, 2015). In addition, legal status is closely connected to human capital and the social networks in which immigrants are embedded (McConnell, 2008). Despite the critical importance of legal status for studying any population with a large number of immigrants, legal status has been largely omitted in previous studies because of data constraints; the majority of large-scale surveys lack information on legal status (Bachmeier, Van Hook, & Bean, 2014; Landale et al., 2015). Instead, much of what is known about the realities and experiences of undocumented immigrants has been garnered from ethnographic studies (Dreby, 2010; Menjivar & Abrego, 2009; Zavella, 2011). Although valuable, these studies are limited in terms of sample size and representativeness (Landale et al., 2015).

Legal status is particularly important for studying parenting strain in the Mexican-origin population. Previous studies have found associations between undocumented legal status and multiple risk factors for stress, including exploitation by employers, the possibility of discovery and deportation, marginalization, geographic separation from families and friends, and limited social support (Yoshikawa & Kholoptseva, 2013). In addition, undocumented immigrants are highly likely to experience socioeconomic stressors such as poverty and economic hardship (Cardoso, Dettlaff, Finno-Velasquez, Scott, & Faulkner, 2014). These risk factors are associated with increased overall stress (Jackson, Knight, & Rafferty, 2010) and child maltreatment (Cadzow, Armstrong, & Fraser, 1999) in general and among Hispanics. These multiple stressors may influence parenting stress directly or indirectly, if high stress in one domain of undocumented parents' lives spills over to the parenting domain. However, stressors may be offset to some extent by protective factors, such as two-parent families and the benefits they may provide (e.g., the support of a spouse). Still, whether undocumented legal status is associated with increased parenting strain and the mechanisms involved have not been empirically tested.

Neighborhood and Parenting Strain

In response to the critique that prior studies based on family stress theory focused only on socioeconomic risk as a family-level stressor, recent studies have started to explore other contextual stressors, such as neighborhood contexts (Kotchick et al., 2005; Kotchick & Forehand, 2002; White et al., 2009). Inclusion of neighborhoods in the study of parental psychological well-being is an important extension because, although research on child outcomes has started to incorporate neighborhoods as a critical context (e.g., Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, Klebanov, & Sealand, 1993), relatively few studies have examined how neighborhoods influence parents (Ceballo & McLoyd, 2002; Klebanov, Brooks-Gunn, Chase-Lansdale, & Gordon, 1997). In addition, consideration of neighborhoods can lead to important conceptual and methodological contributions. Conceptually, parenting strain is inherently rooted in a multilevel ecological system (Abidin, 1992; Kotchick & Forehand, 2002; Rodriguez-JenKins, 2014), and incorporating neighborhoods above and beyond individual and family factors moves the conceptualization of parenting stress forward (Noah, 2015). Methodologically, including neighborhoods can reduce serious specification errors, such as omitted variable bias (Noah, 2015; Parcel, Dufur, & Cornell Zito, 2010).

Empirical evidence to date confirms the important role that neighborhoods play in parental psychological well-being, but also points to the need for more nuanced research. For example, Kotchick et al. (2005) investigated the role of neighborhood stress in maternal psychological well-being and parenting. They found that higher levels of neighborhood stress, as measured by mothers' perceptions

of neighborhood violence and poor living conditions, were associated with higher psychological distress among mothers and less positive parenting for African American mothers. On the other hand, in another study that investigated the role of perceived neighborhood danger on parental psychological well-being and parenting among Mexican Americans, White et al. (2009) found that perceived neighborhood danger was not associated with maternal depression or parenting behaviors (although it was for fathers). These findings indicate that the influence of neighborhoods may vary by individual characteristics. They also suggest the need for further research that considers the complexities of the relationships between attributes of the neighborhood context, parental psychological well-being, and parenting practices.

In recent years, a small body of studies has started to document the neighborhood conditions experienced by undocumented immigrants (Hall & Greenman, 2013; Hall & Stringfield, 2014). For example, undocumented immigrants are more likely to reside in neighborhoods with relatively few material and social advantages (Hall & Greenman, 2013) and with a high level of segregation from non-Hispanic Whites (Hall & Stringfield, 2014). Some previous studies have hypothesized that foreign-born Mexican mothers may be less susceptible to negative aspects of their neighborhoods than native-born Mexican mothers because they lack an understanding of the racial hierarchy and stratification system in the United States (Krieger, 2012; Viruell-Fuentes, 2007). However, other recent ethnographic studies have found that Hispanic immigrant parents are in fact aware of their neighborhood contexts and adjust their parenting behaviors accordingly (Cruz-Santiago & Ramirez Garcia, 2011; Perreira, Chapman, & Stein, 2006; Reese, 2002). Examining the roles of legal status and neighborhood characteristics jointly is important for research on the Mexican-origin population, yet little research has done so because of data limitations.

To date, studies of neighborhoods and parental psychological well-being in other racial and ethnic groups have found that several neighborhood characteristics may be important. These include neighborhood socioeconomic disadvantage (Klebanov, Brooks-Gunn, & Duncan, 1994; White et al., 2009), perceived neighborhood violence and danger (Aisenberg, 2001; White & Roosa, 2012), and neighborhood social characteristics, such as collective efficacy (Hill & Herman-Stahl, 2002). Although neighborhood socioeconomic disadvantage and perceived violence are negatively associated with parental psychological well-being, high collective efficacy—a form of social organization among residents that combines social cohesion and informal social control (Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997)—is positively associated with parental psychological well-being. In addition, when studying any population with a large number of immigrants, it is important to consider the race–ethnicity and nativity composition of neighborhoods (Viruell-Fuentes et al., 2012). Previous studies show that living in a neighborhood with a large immigrant population contributes to ethnic solidarity and can have a salubrious effect on psychological well-being, especially among Hispanics (Lee, 2009; Portes & Zhou, 1992; Vega, Ang, Rodriguez, & Finch, 2011). However, whether and how these neighborhood characteristics affect Mexican-origin parents—especially undocumented parents—is unclear.

Statement of the Problem

The present research addresses two understudied and interrelated issues. The first is the relationship between legal status and parenting strain among Mexican-origin mothers. Previous studies detail the substantial disadvantages of undocumented immigrants, including their relatively low levels of education, limited English-language proficiency, and high rate of poverty (Hall & Greenman, 2013; Passel & Cohn, 2011). These disadvantages are likely to increase parenting strain, but it is unclear whether undocumented legal status increases parental strain beyond these compositional factors.

The second is the relationship between neighborhood characteristics and parenting strain among Mexican-origin mothers, above and beyond individual and family characteristics. Based on the family stress theory, we expect mothers living in neighborhoods with relatively few material and social advantages to experience more parenting strain than others. In contrast, we hypothesize that residing in neighborhoods with a large percentage of immigrants and coethnics will be associated with reduced parenting strain. In addition, mothers' perceptions of their neighborhoods are likely to matter. We hypothesize that perceived neighborhood

danger will increase parenting strain, whereas perceived neighborhood social resources (i.e., collective efficacy) will decrease it.

At the same time, given the diverse circumstances and perspectives of Mexican-origin mothers by nativity and legal status, the role of neighborhood characteristics in parenting strain may vary for the native born, documented immigrants, and undocumented immigrants. Thus, we investigate how neighborhood characteristics interact with legal status to influence parenting strain using a multilevel approach. First, although we expect neighborhood disadvantage to influence all groups in a similar manner, we hypothesize that the influence of immigrant and Latino concentrations (measured as percentages of foreign born and Latino in the neighborhood) will vary by mother's' legal status. We expect that neighborhood immigrant and coethnic concentrations will benefit immigrants more than U.S.-born mothers. Among immigrants, we expect the benefits to be greatest for undocumented mothers because of their especially precarious situation and the potential social support provided by coethnic immigrant neighbors. Second, regarding perceived neighborhood characteristics, we anticipate a cross-level interaction for perceived neighborhood danger but have no clear expectation regarding perceived collective efficacy. Although perceived neighborhood danger is likely to increase parenting strain among all Mexican-origin mothers, ethnographic studies suggest that undocumented mothers may be especially susceptible to the view that their neighborhood is dangerous (Cruz-Santiago & Ramirez Garcia, 2011; Perreira et al., 2006; Reese, 2002). Moreover, perceived danger might contribute to greater parenting strain among undocumented mothers when compared with others because of their high level of vulnerability in multiple domains. Thus, the relationship between perceived danger and parenting strain may be stronger among undocumented mothers than among documented or U.S.-born mothers. In contrast, we expect that mothers living in a neighborhood that they view as having high collective efficacy to have lower parenting strain than others, regardless of nativity or legal status.

This study responds to the call for more nuanced research on "whether, how, for whom, [and] under what conditions" neighborhoods matter for parents (Viruell-Fuentes et al., 2012). In addition to providing new information about the role of legal status in parenting strain among Mexican-origin mothers, we investigate whether and how parental legal status and neighborhood characteristics interact to influence parenting strain among Mexican-origin mothers.

Method

Data

The data in this study come from two sources. The individual-level data and subjective measures of neighborhood contexts come from the first wave of the Los Angeles Family and Neighborhood Survey (L.A. FANS), which was collected from 2000 to 2002. The L.A. FANS is based on a stratified random sample of 65 neighborhoods (census tracts) in Los Angeles County. Within each selected neighborhood, blocks were sampled, and then households were sampled within blocks, yielding 50 households per neighborhood. Poor neighborhoods and households with children were oversampled. Finally, one adult was sampled at random from each selected household to answer an adult survey; one child was also sampled at random if children were present. A primary caregiver (almost always the mother) provided information on the selected child and a randomly selected sibling younger than age 18; primary caregivers also completed the adult survey even if they were not the sampled adult. When weighted, the final sample is representative of all residents of Los Angeles County (Sastry, Ghosh-Dastidar, Adams, & Pebley, 2006). All survey components were available in English and Spanish; they were developed by bilingual researchers and survey specialists (Peterson, Sastry, & Pebley, 2007).

Starting with all mothers who were matched to a child (n = 3,122), we first restricted our analytic sample to those who self-identified as Mexican, Mexicana, or Mexican American (n = 1,468). After excluding 32 mothers who had missing values on the geographic identifier and 2 mothers with missing values on the sample stratification variable, our final analytic sample includes 1,433 Mexican-origin mothers who are divided into the following categories: U.S. born (n = 295), documented foreign born (n = 644), and undocumented foreign born (n = 494). The individual-level data for these mothers were linked to objective measures of their neighborhood contexts using geographic identification codes for census tract of residence. These

contextual measures come from the 2000 U.S. decennial census (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).

The L.A. FANS has unique advantages for the purposes of this study. First, the data include a large sample of Mexican-origin mothers with substantial variation in nativity and legal status. To date, few studies have gathered information on legal status. Second, in addition to geographic identification codes for linking survey respondents to objective neighborhood characteristics, the data include rich subjective measures of neighborhood context, including perceived neighborhood danger and collective efficacy. Third, the sampling design and sufficient sample sizes per cluster make this data set ideal for multilevel models (Sastry et al., 2006).

Measures

Parenting strain. Consistent with previous research (Carpiano & Kimbro, 2012), our measure of parenting strain is constructed from four items that asked respondents to rate how much they agree with the following statements: "Being a parent is harder than I thought it would be," "I feel trapped by my responsibilities as a parent," "I find that taking care of my child/children is much more work than pleasure," and "I often feel tired, worn out, or exhausted from raising a family." Responses to each question ranged from 1 (*completely false*) to 5 (*completely true*). Responses were summed so that higher numbers indicate more parental strain. The resulting measure ranges from 4 to 20. Cronbach's alpha for these four items was 0.70.

Maternal nativity and legal status. Adult respondents were first asked whether they were born in the United States. If a respondent was not born in the United States, then he or she was asked a series of questions about legal status. Each respondent was first asked whether he or she (a) was a naturalized citizen; (b) had legal permanent resident status or a green card; (c) had refugee, asylee, or temporary protected status; or (4) had a valid visa. We coded all foreign-born mothers who fell into one of those four categories as documented immigrants. Using the standard residual approach, if a foreign-born mother did not fall into any of those groups, she was coded as undocumented (see Bachmeier et al., 2014, for an evaluation of this procedure). Using information on nativity and legal status, we thus distinguished the following three groups of Mexican mothers: U.S. born (the reference group), documented immigrant, and undocumented immigrant.

Maternal and family characteristics. Several sociodemographic characteristics are included. Maternal age is a continuous measure of age in years at the time of the survey. Low education is a dichotomous variable that indicates whether the mother had less than a high school education (coded 1 if less than high school, coded 0 if high school or higher). Poor family is a dichotomous indicator of whether that family's income was below the federal poverty threshold (coded 1 if family income was below the 2001 poverty threshold for a family of a given size). Single parent is a dichotomous measure of family structure. Maternal employment is measured as a dichotomous variable indicating whether the mother had any employment outside the home (coded 1 if she had employment, coded 0 if she did not have employment). English proficiency is a dichotomous measure created from the survey language (coded 1 if the survey was answered in English and coded 0 if the survey was answered in Spanish). Total number of children is a continuous measure indicating the number of coresident children in the household.

Two additional variables tap maternal depression and spousal support. Maternal depression is a binary variable constructed from the Composite International Diagnostic Interview–Short Form depression inventory, where 1 indicates that the mother's probability of depression was greater than 0.5. Spousal support is constructed from three questions about whether the spouse or partner (a) is willing to compromise, (b) expresses affection, and (c) provides encouragement. Principal component factor analysis was used to capture the underlying construct with measurement precision; higher values represent higher spousal support (ranging from −3.63 to 0.86).

Subjective neighborhood characteristics. Perceived neighborhood danger is a dichotomous variable constructed from a survey question that asked respondents to rate how safe they perceived their neighborhood to be for walking around alone. If a respondent answered "extremely dangerous" or "somewhat dangerous," then he or she was coded as 1, whereas if a respondent answered "completely safe" or "fairly safe," then he or she was coded as 0.

Collective efficacy refers to neighborhood residents' ability to recognize a common goal, and it indicates social cohesion and informal social control among residents (Sampson et al., 1997). Consistent with previous research (Sampson et al., 1997), we constructed a measure of collective efficacy from eight questions measuring mothers' level of agreement with statements about whether (a) the neighborhood is close knit, (b) people are willing to help neighbors, (c) neighbors generally get along, (d) people in the neighborhood share the same values, (e) people in the neighborhood can be trusted, (f) neighbors would intervene if children were hanging out, (g) neighbors would intervene if children were spray-painting graffiti on a building, and (h) neighbors would intervene if children were showing disrespect to an adult. Each question was measured on a scale that ranged from 1 to 5, and responses to the eight questions were summed to create the collective efficacy scale (which ranged from 8–40). Cronbach's alpha for these eight items was 0.85.

Objective neighborhood characteristics. Concentrated disadvantage was formed from six variables from the 2000 decennial census: the percentages of individuals below the poverty line, on public assistance, unemployed, younger than age 18, and Black and the percentage of households that are female headed. Using principal component analysis, we confirmed the emergence of one underlying factor representing these six variables and then created a regression-weighted scale that measures the socioeconomic disadvantage of the neighborhood. The concentrations of immigrants and Latinos in the neighborhood are measured straightforwardly as the percent foreign born and the percent Latino. To make the interpretation more intuitive and to eliminate scale effects, we transformed our neighborhood measures to *z*-scores for multivariable analysis.

Analytic Plan

There are no missing values for parental legal status and the neighborhood characteristics, but some variables for maternal and family characteristics have missing values (less than 1%). Our dependent variable had eight cases with missing values (0.56% of the analytic sample). Thus, we used multiple imputation to create 25 imputed data sets, including our dependent variable in our imputation models as recommended (Johnson & Young, 2011). We report descriptive and multilevel results based on the imputed data sets. To examine the associations between parental legal status, neighborhood characteristics, and parental strain, we estimated multilevel models using the mi estimate xtmixed command in Stata (StataCorp, 2015). We first tested a null model without any explanatory variables to assess whether multilevel modeling was an appropriate analytic strategy; we then included the individual- and neighborhood-level variables after confirming that the variance of the intercept was statistically significant in our null models. We modeled parenting strain as follows:

$$\eta_{ij} = \gamma_{00} + u_{0j} + \sum \gamma_{0l}\, W_{lj} + \sum \beta_{kj} Z_{ijk}$$

where η_{ij} is the parenting strain of the *i*th individual living in the *j*th neighborhood (i.e., tract), γ_{00} indicates the intercept, u_{0j} represents the random effect specific to each neighborhood, γ_{0l} estimates the association of neighborhood level factor W_{lj} (covariate l in the *j*th neighborhood) with parenting strain, and β_{kj} captures the individual level effect of Z_{ijk} (feature *k* or the *i*th respondent in the *j*th neighborhood) on parenting strain. All models were weighted using the adult sample weight. Contextual-level weights were created and rescaled to account for the unequal probabilities of selection for the neighborhoods (West, Welch, & Galecki, 2014).

Results

Descriptive Statistics

We reported descriptive statistics and effect sizes for all variables included in the models by mothers' nativity and legal status in Table 1. Mothers' reports of parenting strain varied by their nativity and legal status. Somewhat surprisingly, undocumented foreign-born Mexican mothers had the lowest level of parenting strain, and U.S.-born Mexican mothers had the highest level of parenting strain. This was inconsistent with their profiles of relative disadvantage.

Other maternal characteristics varied considerably by the mothers' nativity and legal status. Although the average age for documented foreign-born Mexican mothers was nearly 37.1 years old, the average ages were

Table 1. *Weighted Descriptive Statistics for All Variables Included in the Models*

	U.S.-born Mexican (reference)		Mexican documented			Mexican undocumented		
All variables	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	Eff. size	*M*	*SD*	Eff. size
Parenting strain	10.31	2.95[b,c]	9.82	3.05[a,c]	0.16	9.67	3.17[a,b]	0.21
Maternal characteristics								
Age	32.39	8.43[b]	37.13	8.95[a,c]	0.55	31.29	6.35[b]	0.15
Education (low education, <HS)	0.19	0.39[b,c]	0.65	0.48[a,c]	1.05	0.79	0.41[a,b]	1.50
Poor family	0.32	0.47[b,c]	0.46	0.50[a,c]	0.29	0.74	0.44[a,b]	0.92
Single parent	0.51	0.50[b]	0.37	0.48[a,c]	0.29	0.53	0.50[b]	0.04
Employment	0.71	0.45[b,c]	0.49	0.50[a,c]	0.46	0.35	0.48[a,b]	0.77
English proficiency	0.93	0.25[b,c]	0.24	0.43[a,c]	1.96	0.04	0.19[a,b]	4.01
Total number of children	2.49	1.11[b,c]	2.67	1.28[a]	0.15	2.87	1.42[a]	0.30
Depression	0.19	0.40	0.12	0.33	0.19	0.11	0.32	0.22
Spousal support	0.03	0.65[b]	0.01	0.79[a,c]	0.03	0.03	0.61[b]	0.11
Neighborhood direct associations								
Perceived neighborhood danger	0.32	0.47[c]	0.30	0.46[c]	0.04	0.40	0.49[a,b]	0.17
Collective efficacy	25.76	4.69[b]	27.00	4.57[a,c]	0.27	26.39	4.42[b]	0.14
Concentrated disadvantage	−0.49	0.93[b,c]	0.00	0.96[a,c]	0.52	0.30	0.97[a,b]	0.83
Percent foreign born	−0.46	1.01[b,c]	−0.04	0.95[a,c]	0.43	0.33	0.93[a,b]	0.81
Percent Latino	−0.40	1.24[b,c]	0.06	0.99[a,c]	0.41	0.16	0.77[a,b]	0.54
Unweighted *n*	295		644			494		

Source: Los Angeles Family and Neighborhood Study Wave 1; U.S. Census, 2000.

Note: Eff. = effect; HS = high school.

[a]Significantly different from U.S.-born Mexican mothers, $p < .05$ (one-tailed test). [b]Significantly different from documented Mexican mothers, $p < .05$ (one-tailed test). [c]Significantly different from undocumented Mexican mothers, $p < .05$ (one-tailed test).

lower for U.S.-born Mexican mothers (32.4 years) and undocumented foreign-born Mexican mothers (31.3 years). Only 19% of U.S.-born mothers had less than a high school education, but nearly 65% of documented mothers and 79% of undocumented mothers had less than a high school education. Similarly, only 32% of U.S.-born mothers lived in poor families, whereas nearly 46% of documented foreign-born Mexican mothers and 74% of undocumented foreign-born Mexican mothers lived in poor families. Consistent with previous findings, U.S.-born Mexican mothers were more likely to be single parents than foreign-born Mexican mothers (Glick, 2010) and more likely to be employed (71% vs. 50% for documented and 35% for undocumented mothers). English-language proficiency was also highest among the native born (93.0%) and lowest among undocumented immigrants (0.04%). Maternal depression did not vary much by mothers' nativity and legal status; about 14% of Mexican-origin mothers were depressed. Levels of spousal support were only significantly different for Mexican documented mothers, who reported receiving significantly less spousal support than U.S.-born mothers and undocumented mothers.

Both subjective and objective neighborhood characteristics also varied by nativity and legal status among Mexican-origin mothers. Although only 32% of U.S.-born mothers and 30% of documented foreign-born mothers reported perceived neighborhood danger, nearly half of undocumented foreign-born mothers perceived their neighborhood as dangerous. In addition, undocumented mothers reported the lowest level of neighborhood collective efficacy when compared with U.S.-born mothers and documented mothers. Documented mothers reported the highest level of collective efficacy. At the same time, undocumented foreign-born mothers resided in neighborhoods with the highest average levels of concentrated disadvantage, percent foreign born, and percent Latino, whereas U.S.-born Mexican mothers resided in neighborhoods with the lowest average levels

Table 2. *Multivariate Models Predicting Parenting Strain Among Mexican-Origin Mothers*

All variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Maternal nativity and legal status				
U.S.-born Mexican	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.
Mexican naturalized/documented	−0.36*	−0.69*	−0.48†	−0.52†
Mexican undocumented	−0.58*	−0.77*	−0.57†	−0.62*
Maternal characteristics				
Age		0.03*	0.02*	0.02†
Education (low education, <HS)		0.07	0.01	0.02
Poor family		0.02	0.01	0.02
Single parent		0.02	0.02	0.02
Employment		−0.08	−0.07	−0.07
English proficiency		0.05	0.05	0.04
Total number of children		0.15*	0.15*	0.14†
Depression		1.23***	1.24***	1.23***
Spousal support		−0.21	−0.22	−0.22
Neighborhood direct associations				
Perceived neighborhood danger			−0.10	−0.09
Collective efficacy			−0.01	−0.01
Concentrated disadvantage			0.05	0.05
Percent foreign born			−0.06	−0.08
Percent Latino			0.13†	0.13†
Neighborhood moderating associations				
Documented Mexican × % foreign born				−0.22*
Undocumented Mexican × % foreign born				0.47*
Constant	10.23***	8.84***	9.38***	9.46***
Interclass correlation (ICC)	0.26	0.23	0.22	0.20

Source: Los Angeles Family and Neighborhood Study Wave 1; U.S. Census 2000.

Note: In supplementary analyses, we identified that there were significant differences between documented Mexican mothers and undocumented Mexican mothers at $p < .05$ (one-tailed test) in all models. HS = high school; Ref. = reference.

†$p < .10$, *$p < .05$, ***$p < .001$.

of concentrated disadvantage, percent foreign born, and percent Latino.

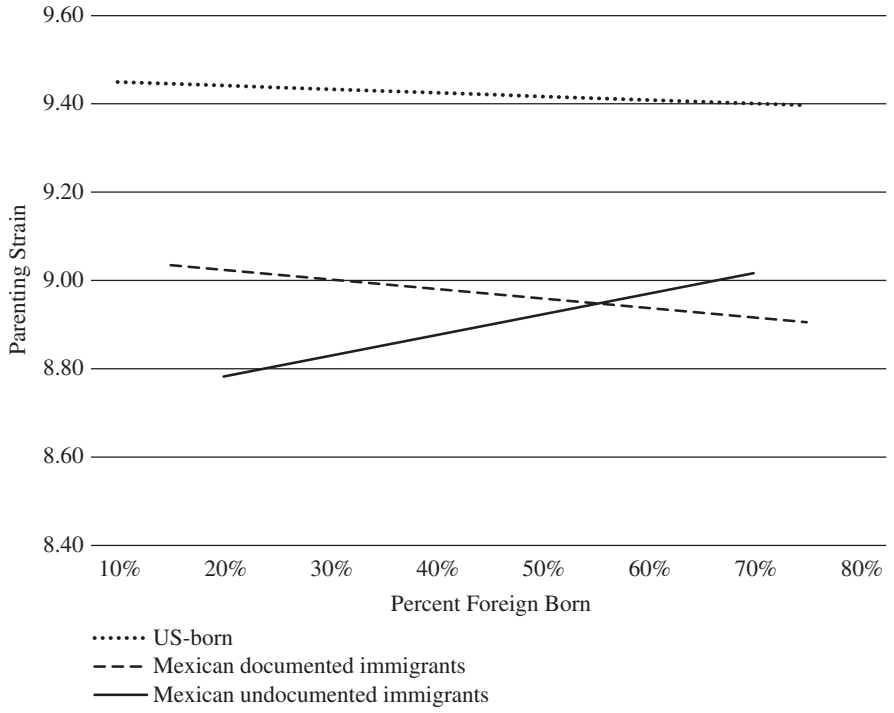
Multilevel Results

Multilevel results are reported in Table 2. The variance of the intercept was statistically significant in all null models, indicating that multilevel models are preferable to ordinary least squares regression. The first model included mother's nativity and legal status. The second model added additional maternal characteristics. The third model included the subjective and objective measures of neighborhoods. The last model added cross-level interaction variables as moderators of legal status. All cross-level interactions with legal status were tested, but the last model only showed the single significant interaction.

The first model showed that there were statistically significant differences in parenting strain by mothers' nativity and legal status. Both documented and undocumented foreign-born Mexican mothers had significantly lower parenting strain when compared with U.S.-born Mexican mothers. As noted, undocumented mothers had the lowest level of parenting strain. This pattern remained in Model 2, although several maternal and family characteristics were significant predictors. Maternal age and the total number of children in the household were both associated with a higher level of parenting strain. In addition, maternal depression was positively associated with parenting strain, with depressed mothers reporting higher strain than nondepressed mothers. Other individual and family characteristics were consistently unrelated to parenting strain among Mexican-origin mothers.

In contrast to our hypotheses, the results in Model 3 showed that only one of the neighborhood variables was significantly associated with parenting strain, net of the other predictors in

Figure 1. Predicted Values of Parenting Strain by Nativity and Legal Status Across the Percent Foreign Born Neighborhood Characteristics.



the model. The percentage of Latinos (percent Latino) in the neighborhood had a marginally significant positive relationship with parenting strain. Nonetheless, Model 4 showed a significant cross-level interaction between maternal legal status and percent foreign born in the neighborhood. Given that U.S.-born mothers were the reference group for legal status, the main effect for percent foreign born represented the association for U.S.-born mothers. The coefficient for this group indicated that there was no relationship between percent foreign born and parenting strain. However, the cross-level interaction showed that percent foreign born in the neighborhood was negatively associated with parenting strain for documented Mexican immigrants, but positively associated with parenting strain for undocumented Mexican immigrants.

To better illustrate and explain the interaction between percent foreign born in the neighborhood and legal status, we created Figure 1, where the predicted values of parenting strain for documented and undocumented Mexican immigrants were plotted across different percentiles of percent foreign born in the neighborhood. These predicted values were based on Model 4, with all variables other than maternal legal status and percent foreign born in the neighborhood set to the overall sample means. In neighborhoods with a relatively low percentage of foreign born, documented Mexican immigrants had higher parenting strain than undocumented Mexican immigrants, which was consistent with the overall group means shown in Table 1. In neighborhoods with a relatively high percentage of foreign born, however, undocumented Mexican immigrants had higher parenting strain than documented Mexican immigrants.

In supplementary analyses in which the reference group was changed to undocumented Mexican mothers (not shown), both U.S.-born Mexican mothers and documented Mexican mothers reported significantly higher parenting strain than undocumented Mexican mothers in all four models. U.S.-born Mexican mothers had the highest level of parenting stress.

Discussion

With approximately 33.7 million Mexican-origin individuals currently residing in the United States and projected population growth for this group (Colby & Ortman, 2015; Gonzalez-Barrera & Lopez, 2013), the Mexican-origin population will significantly shape the health and well-being of the U.S. population in the future. Given that fully 16% of all U.S. children and 65% of all immigrant children are of Mexican origin (Child Trends, 2014), understanding the factors that influence these youths' family environments and later success is important.

Prior studies have focused on parenting practices in Mexican-origin families, especially as they pertain to educational outcomes, but analyses that address the heterogeneity of Mexican-origin parents with respect to legal status are extremely scarce. Moreover, few studies focus intensively on within-group differences in characteristics and outcomes among Mexican-origin individuals in the United States (Rodriguez-JenKins & Marcenko, 2014; White et al., 2009). Using Wave 1 of the Los Angeles Family and Neighborhood Survey, we investigated whether and how parental legal status and neighborhood characteristics influence parenting strain among Mexican-origin mothers, and whether subjective and objective neighborhood characteristics interact with legal status in influencing parenting strain.

Previous studies have shown that being undocumented is associated with multiple risk factors for increased stress, including exploitation by employers, the possibility of discovery and deportation, marginalization, geographic separation from families and friends, and limited social support (Yoshikawa & Kholoptseva, 2013) as well as higher probabilities of experiencing poverty and economic hardship (Cardoso et al., 2014). Because these risk factors are commonly associated with increased stress (Jackson et al., 2010) and child maltreatment (Cadzow et al., 1999), and because high stress in one domain may spill over to other domains, we hypothesized that undocumented Mexican mothers would have the highest level of parenting stress. However, we found that undocumented Mexican mothers have the lowest level of parenting strain compared to both U.S.-born Mexican mothers and documented Mexican mothers. However, given that the effect sizes reflecting these differences in parenting strain are small, we suggest caution in interpreting the findings.

This unexpected finding is consistent with an extensive literature documenting an immigrant mental health paradox where surprising initial advantages in the mental health of immigrants—despite their relatively disadvantaged socioeconomic status—dissipate with longer duration in the destination country (Burnam, Hough, Karno, Escobar, & Telles, 1987; Takeuchi, Alegría, Jackson, & Williams, 2007). We suspect that our unexpected finding may be related to three possible explanations: measurement issues, selection bias, and lack of acculturation. First, it is plausible that undocumented Mexican mothers were less trusting about disclosing parenting stress as a result of their fear of U.S. legal child protection systems and deportation, leading to underreporting. In addition, because undocumented Mexican mothers are more recent arrivals and more likely to answer the survey in Spanish, their low level of parenting strain may reflect the language of interview (Viruell-Fuentes, Morenoff, Williams, & House, 2011). For example, mothers were asked if they feel "tired (*cansado*), worn out (*fatigado*), or exhausted from raising a family." The English word *exhausted* was translated to *sin fuerzas*, which means "without strength" or "powerless" instead of "exhausted" (the word *agotado* is closer to the meaning of "exhausted"). Second, undocumented Mexican mothers may be positively selected on the value of mothering, as immigrant women are generally motivated to migrate for family reasons rather than economic reasons (Cerrutti & Massey, 2001). For instance, more undocumented Mexican mothers may have been motivated to migrate to provide better opportunities for their children in the United States. Third, we speculate that the relatively low level of parenting strain among undocumented mothers may be attributable to the fact that their beliefs and values about parenting are more aligned with those in Mexico, where there is a heavier emphasis on family (e.g., *familismo*) and gender roles that emphasize the value of mothering (Dreby, 2010; Menjivar & Abrego, 2009). These cultural beliefs may be intensified within the migration context, thereby contributing to undocumented mothers' lower levels of parenting strain.

We hypothesized that perceived neighborhood danger would be associated with higher parenting strain and perceived neighborhood

collective efficacy would be associated with lower parenting strain. However, in Model 3 we found that neither of these neighborhood characteristics was significant, net of individual and family characteristics. Furthermore, in Model 4 we did not find a significant cross-level interaction between legal status and perceived neighborhood danger. Thus, although undocumented Mexican-origin mothers report higher levels of perceived danger than U.S.-born and documented Mexican-origin mothers, the groups do not differ significantly regarding the relationship between perceived danger and parenting strain. These findings are somewhat surprising given that previous ethnographic studies have emphasized the importance of perceived neighborhood danger for parenting among Latina mothers, especially undocumented Latina mothers (Cruz-Santiago & Ramirez Garcia, 2011; Perreira et al., 2006; Reese, 2002).

We also hypothesized that the percentages of foreign born and Latinos in the neighborhood would have salubrious effects on parenting strain, but that their influence would vary by legal status. Our results indicate that although residing in a neighborhood with a high percentage of foreign-born residents is negatively associated with parenting strain for documented Mexican immigrants, it is positively associated with parenting strain for undocumented Mexican immigrants. Put differently, percent foreign born in the neighborhood is associated with lower parenting strain for documented Mexican immigrants and heightened parenting strain for undocumented Mexican immigrants. One possible mechanism for this pattern may be differences in the level and quality of social ties within neighborhoods by legal status. Similar to previous findings that foreign-born Hispanics have significantly fewer or weaker social ties than U.S.-born Hispanics (Viruell-Fuentes, Morenoff, Williams, & House, 2013), undocumented immigrants may have fewer or weaker social ties than documented immigrants. Social ties may be less beneficial for undocumented immigrants given their limited resources and the potential economic and psychological burdens from ties with other immigrants (Mahler, 1995; Menjívar, 2000). In fact, some research (e.g., Mahler, 1995) shows that undocumented immigrants often experience alienation from one another as a result of competition, jealousy, and distrust. Thus they may not benefit from living in a neighborhood with a high percentage of foreign-born residents because their neighborhoods lack ethnic and immigrant solidarity or because they isolate themselves out of fear and distrust. It is also plausible that neighborhoods with high immigrant concentration—even those characterized by strong social ties and social support—may have amplified risk factors for stress, such as more exploitation by employers and higher surveillance by police. The resulting stress might be greater among undocumented immigrants than documented immigrants and spill over into the family domain.

There are some limitations to this study. First, our analyses are based on cross-sectional data, so causality cannot be established. Future research should use longitudinal data and methods to investigate the causal relationships among parental legal status, neighborhoods, and parenting stress. Second, our data are based on a representative sample of the total population in Los Angeles County, and thus the findings may not be generalizable to other regions. Los Angeles County is a majority–minority county and a traditional U.S. immigrant destination with a long history of Mexican immigration. Therefore, parental legal status and neighborhoods may operate differently in other places, including new immigrant destinations with much lower concentrations of immigrants in neighborhoods. For example, in new immigrant destinations where there are relatively fewer undocumented Mexican immigrants, such immigrants may be more visible and may feel greater levels of stress in their daily lives. Third, there is a possibility of omitted variables bias because stresses in other dimensions of these Mexican-origin mothers' lives have not been included in the model. Future studies should investigate whether stress in other areas of life spills over to parenting stress among Mexican-origin mothers. Fourth, we have combined four different status categories (i.e., naturalized citizen; legal permanent resident or green card; refugee, asylee, or temporary protected status; valid visa) into "documented" legal status because of the small numbers in some groups. This may mask diversity among documented Mexican mothers. Future studies should examine the differences in parenting strain between the various types of documented immigrants, as their situations may differ with respect to stressors and resource access. Last, the effect sizes of some of the variables included in our study are relatively

small (Cohen's *d* values less than 0.20). Thus, potential contributions to inform either clinical or policy decisions to reduce parenting strain for Mexican-origin mothers are limited. Nonetheless, even though the level of parenting strain is low among Mexican-origin mothers when compared with other racial and ethnic groups, such relative advantage underscores the importance of examining the complex factors influencing parenting strain in this group. This is especially the case for undocumented Mexican mothers, whose legal status can intersect with other forms of oppression to influence their parenting.

Despite these limitations, our study makes an important and novel contribution to the study of Mexican-origin families by investigating the influence of parental legal status on parenting strain. Few studies based on representative samples include information on immigrants' legal status, despite the critical importance of this key determinant of immigrants' well-being and life chances. Despite previous research that asserted that undocumented mothers are exposed to multiple conditions that might lead to high stress (Yoshikawa & Kholoptseva, 2013), our findings show that undocumented Mexican immigrant mothers have low parenting strain when compared with U.S.-born Mexican mothers and documented Mexican immigrant mothers. The children of undocumented Mexican mothers may benefit from their mothers' resilience because parenting plays a key role in child outcomes.

Our findings point to several suggestions for future research. First, given the large number of children affected, additional research on how conditions in various domains of life influence the mental health of undocumented parents is of critical importance. In addition, research should investigate how the presence of mixed documentation statuses within families and transnational family separation may influence the well-being of parents and children (Oropesa, Landale, & Hillemeier, 2017). For example, parenting strain may be exacerbated or alleviated by the number of children that are U.S. citizens in the family. In addition, transnational family separation is a major stressor for undocumented immigrant parents, and future studies should investigate how stress from transnational family separation may influence the parenting stress of immigrant parents in the United States (Dreby, 2010; Menjivar, Abrego, & Schmalzbauer, 2016). More nuanced measurement of mixed documentation statuses in families would help elucidate the complex realities of Mexican-origin children and parents.

Additional research on the influence of neighborhoods in parenting strain among Mexican-origin mothers is also warranted. For instance, it would be helpful to know more about the specific mechanisms that account for variation in the role of neighborhood characteristics by nativity and legal status. Research on the sensitivity of results to different conceptualizations and measures of neighborhood would also be informative. For example, one useful direction is exploration of differences in spatial exposure and activity spaces of Mexican-origin mothers by nativity and legal status (Jones & Pebley, 2014; Noah, 2015). Because the neighborhood characteristics of Mexican-origin adults may vary substantively when neighborhoods are conceptualized as activity spaces—person-centered neighborhoods that capture the actual lived context of individuals and their exposure to multiple contexts—it would be fruitful to investigate how such "neighborhoods" may influence Mexican-origin mothers' parenting experiences. In short, there is ample opportunity to refine and extend approaches to understand how the neighborhood context may interact with legal status to shape the family environments of children.

The current study contributes to the emerging empirical literature investigating the effect of legal status on Mexican-origin children and families by investigating the roles of legal status and neighborhood contexts in parenting strain among Mexican mothers. Despite the prevalent theoretical frameworks and policy discourse that portray undocumented Mexican mothers and their children as a population at risk (cf. Yoshikawa & Kholoptseva, 2013), our findings suggest that undocumented Mexican mothers have the lowest level of parenting strain despite their multiply marginalized position within the legal and socioeconomic hierarchies in the United States. This finding is consistent with literature documenting an immigrant mental health paradox, yet more nuanced investigation of the mechanisms through which undocumented Mexican mothers report less parenting strain and overall better mental health is needed. Furthermore, research would benefit from explicit recognition of protective factors that immigrants bring to the United States and how these protective factors may be strengthened or weakened with their temporal and spatial exposures in the United States.

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