

# Working With Immigrant and Refugee Families: A Guide for Child Welfare Caseworkers

Immigrant and refugee families bring an array of strengths and skills to communities across the United States. Like other families, they may sometimes need the interventions and supports provided by social services and other agencies, including child welfare. Immigrant and refugee families that encounter the child welfare system may face a range of specific challenges, including acculturation and language issues, the detention or deportation of a family member, trauma resulting from difficult migration experiences, and more. This bulletin provides strategies to help child welfare caseworkers provide effective and culturally responsive services to the immigrant and refugee families on their caseloads.

## WHAT'S INSIDE

Overview

Casework strategies for working with immigrant and refugee families

Conclusion

References

## Terminology

The terminology used to define and describe concepts related to immigration varies throughout child welfare and other fields. For the purposes of this publication, the following terms and definitions are used:

**Immigrant:** A child or adult living in the United States who was born outside of the country

**Refugee:** A child or adult who is fleeing persecution and has been admitted to the country due to special humanitarian concerns on the part of the United States

**Naturalized citizen:** A child or adult born outside the United States who has become a U.S. citizen after fulfilling requirements established by Congress in the Immigration and Nationality Act

**Undocumented immigrant:** A child or adult living in the United States who was born outside the country and does not have proper authorization to live in the United States

**Unaccompanied immigrant child or youth:** A child or youth under the age of 18 living in the United States who does not have lawful immigration status and who entered the United States without a parent or guardian

**Mixed-status family:** A family in which members have different U.S. citizenship and immigration statuses

## OVERVIEW

According to the latest data released by the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey, in 2019 there were roughly 44.9 million foreign-born people living in the United States (Congressional Research Service, 2021). Research also shows that there are around 18.2 million children living in the country with immigrant families (i.e., with at least one foreign-born parent) (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2021). These numbers have been growing over the past several decades (Greenberg et al., 2019), and it is increasingly common for child welfare agencies throughout the country to handle cases involving immigrant and refugee families.

While many of these families that come to the attention of the child welfare system have legal immigration status in the United States, it is not uncommon for agencies to encounter cases in which some or all members do not—even in jurisdictions that are far from border regions. There are several possible scenarios in which child welfare caseworkers might encounter families with immigration status issues. Some of the more common circumstances include the following (Casey Family Programs, 2020):

- A child welfare agency discovers that a child or youth they have taken into custody lacks legal status.

- A child or youth who is a U.S. citizen is transferred into the custody of a child welfare agency because their parent has been detained or deported and no alternative living arrangements can be made.
- An undocumented parent who is involved in an active child welfare case is detained or deported, and their ability to participate in dependency hearings and/or make progress toward reunification becomes compromised.

Regardless of citizenship status, immigrant and refugee children, youth, and families involved with child welfare are likely to have specific needs and their cases may present unique challenges for caseworkers. For example, these families may encounter difficulties in accessing services due to language barriers and/or eligibility requirements. Or, caseworkers may have difficulty locating detained or deported parents and may be unable to obtain agency guidance on international reunifications. On the systems level, a child welfare agency might lack translation resources or specialized staff who can interpret the nuances of ever-changing local, State, and Federal immigration policies, making it difficult for frontline workers to apply appropriate and relevant strategies to their casework.

Considering these challenges—and the increasing numbers of immigrants and refugees settling in the United States—it is important for child welfare caseworkers to seek out sustainable solutions for serving these families. For caseworkers to deliver effective practice to immigrant and refugee families, they should first be aware of their common strengths and challenges.

## Unaccompanied Children and Youth

Many unaccompanied children and youth who are immigrants and refugees come to the United States to escape situations of violence, poverty, and abuse in their home countries. Others may be brought to the United States as victims of human trafficking or labor exploitation. (For more information on human trafficking and child welfare, see Child Welfare Information Gateway's [Human Trafficking and Child Welfare: A Guide for Caseworkers](#).) When these unaccompanied children and youth come to the attention of U.S. immigration enforcement, they are transferred to the custody of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' [Office of Refugee Resettlement](#) (ORR). While in ORR care, these children and youth live in congregate care settings or foster homes while ORR assesses each individual for release to appropriate sponsors. Sponsors are often parents, other family members, or friends of the family.

Unaccompanied children and youth who have immigrated to the United States may be eligible for immigration benefits and/or the [Unaccompanied Refugee Minors Program](#) (see ORR's "[How UC Qualify for URM](#)" for more information). Immigration courts determine whether unaccompanied children and youth will be deported or receive benefits. To learn about finding and providing legal services to unaccompanied children and youth, see the [Legal Services for Unaccompanied Children](#) section of the Vera Institute of Justice website.

## STRENGTHS OF IMMIGRANT AND REFUGEE FAMILIES

The act of resettling—of leaving behind home, friends, family, and community—requires a willingness to work through challenges and a determination to make a better life. These traits are reflected in several strengths often found in immigrant and refugee families (California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare, 2020; Hutchinson & Dorsett, 2012; Shields & Behrman, 2004; Villarreal et al., 2021):

- **Family focused:** Immigrant and refugee parents must often make great sacrifices to come to the United States (e.g., leaving good jobs and social networks). Parents typically make these sacrifices so that their children have more opportunities.
- **Education oriented:** Children's education is a priority for many immigrant families. Parents often cite that their greatest aspirations for their children include them receiving a quality education and a professional degree.
- **Resilience and resourcefulness:** Immigrants and refugees have reported relying on their inner strength and ingenuity to overcome adversity. This determination to cope can help families establish a sense of control over their situations.
- **Strong work ethic:** Many immigrants and refugees are willing to take on demanding jobs to support their families.
- **Community minded:** Immigrant and refugee families express a willingness to engage in community-building activities to support other families who are experiencing similar situations and challenges.

- **Faith and/or spirituality:** These families tend to put a great deal of trust in their faith, particularly when faced with uncertainty over how to overcome obstacles and deal with the challenges presented by their new lives.

## CHALLENGES FACED BY IMMIGRANT AND REFUGEE FAMILIES

Starting life in a new country can be daunting. Along with the everyday stressors of family life, immigrant and refugee families face additional challenges that may cause a great deal of stress (California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare, 2020; Villarreal et al., 2021):

- **Transnational migrations:** Many families are not able to migrate or relocate together. These "transnational families" may have to wait long periods of time before family members are reunited. Upon being reunited, power balances may shift (for example, children and youth being reluctant to see parents as authority figures).
- **Shifting family dynamics:** Once settled in the United States, families may have difficulty settling into new dynamics and roles. For example, more family members may need to work to meet new financial demands.
- **Language barriers:** Language barriers can make it difficult for parents to find jobs and access services and for children to excel in school. Language can also contribute to conflict and shifts in the family power dynamic if children learn English faster than their parents.
- **Difficulties with acculturation:** There are a variety of cultural norms that immigrant

and refugee families may find difficult to adjust to. One particularly relevant example is parenting norms, as certain parenting skills practiced in home countries may not be socially acceptable or legally permissible in the United States.

- **Differential treatment:** Immigrant and refugee families may experience differential treatment when accessing social services and government programs. Providers may not know how to appropriately address the needs of these families, or they may refuse to do so based on discriminatory motives.
- **Economic hardship:** Since immigrant and refugee families may have difficulties accessing supports and services, they may be shouldered with the full cost of certain resources like health insurance. This can be especially challenging if family members have minimum- or low-wage jobs.
- **Trauma:** Immigrants and refugees may be dealing with trauma-related issues associated with their migrations that, if not addressed, may cause further stress in their daily lives. (To read more about sources of trauma for immigrant families, see the "Trauma-Informed Care" section of this bulletin.)

## CASEWORK STRATEGIES FOR WORKING WITH IMMIGRANT AND REFUGEE FAMILIES

The caseworker strategies used with immigrants and refugees are often the same strategies used to improve outcomes for all children, youth, and families that encounter the child welfare system. However, there are also additional considerations that need to be made when working with these populations to ensure they have equal access to services

### Interagency Collaboration

When responding to cases involving immigrant and refugee children, youth, and families, child welfare caseworkers may need to partner with other agencies and organizations. While these collaborative relationships are often formed at the leadership level, caseworkers should be aware of how partnerships can serve the interests of the immigrant and refugee families on their caseloads. See Information Gateway's [Working With Immigrant and Refugee Families: A Guide for Child Welfare Agencies](#) for detailed information on the interagency collaborations that are most relevant to these populations, such as refugee resettlement services, foreign consulates, international case-management services, and cultural brokers.

and supports. This section presents strategies that can be used by caseworkers at various decision-making points along the child welfare continuum to promote the safety, permanency, and well-being of immigrant and refugee families.

### TERMINOLOGY AND LANGUAGE

Caseworkers should begin their initial meetings with immigrant and refugee families by asking each individual family member about their language preferences and the ethnic, racial, and cultural terms they use to identify themselves. Exploring racial, ethnic,

and cultural identities at the earliest stages of a case is essential for fostering authentic engagement with families and helps create an environment in which immigrants and refugees feel safe. In contrast, making assumptions about preferred language and identifying terms based on personal perceptions can be harmful to families and may foster feelings of mistrust.

Caseworkers can explore various aspects of a family's cultural identity through ethnographic interviewing. One important aspect of ethnographic interviewing is covering self-identifying terms. For example, people emigrating from Mexico may use a variety of terms to identify their ethnicity, such as Hispanic, Latino or Latina, Latinx, or Mexican American. During an ethnographic interview, caseworkers should ask family members which identifiers they use when interacting with members of their cultural group. It is important to remember that many terms and labels can be regional and generational. Your familiarity with evolving terminology will help you better understand the families in your care. To access a training guide for ethnographic interviewing, see the Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare's [The Contribution of Ethnographic Interviewing to Culturally Competent Practice](#).

Language and communication barriers in a child welfare case can significantly impact an immigrant or refugee family's access to services and the successfulness of the interventions they receive. Parents and families with limited English proficiency may have difficulty communicating with staff that only speak English or specific

dialects of their first language. This can lead to miscommunications between families and service providers, and it can delay court proceedings and impact family dynamics. To ensure that appropriate language and communication services are provided to every family, caseworkers should do the following (California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare, 2020; Calzada & Suarez-Balcazar, 2014):

- Ask each family about their language preferences, even if they speak English.
- Follow a culturally sensitive and family-specific communication style (e.g., in-person rather than digital).
- Ensure each family understands every aspect of their case (especially during court hearings) by using a bilingual staff member or translator who speaks the family's language and dialect to communicate each step.
- Utilize language translation apps, particularly during casual conversations that do not require interpreters.
- Allow extended family members to attend appointments and other agency events.
- Provide written materials for each family in their preferred language.

For additional information, see Bridging Refugee Youth and Children's Service's (BRYCS's) resources geared toward overcoming language barriers in a child welfare setting, including [Suggestions for Interviewing Refugee and Immigrant Children and Families](#) and ["Interviews for Suspected Child Maltreatment: Tips for Foreign Language Interpreters."](#)

## Confidentiality Considerations for Immigrants

While child welfare caseworkers may need to record a family's immigration status for case-management and data-tracking purposes, there are no Federal laws requiring agencies to share this type of information to identify individual families. Therefore, caseworkers should ensure that immigration status is protected at every phase of a case so that families can engage in services without fear they might attract the attention of Federal immigration authorities. All caseworkers should be familiar with their agency's confidentiality policies around immigration status and should understand how to communicate these policies and protections with families in a language they understand at the front end of a case.

## CONCRETE SUPPORTS

Like many other families, some immigrant and refugee families may need concrete assistance in the form of housing, health care, immigration benefits, and more. Immigrant eligibility for these and other supports can vary by jurisdiction and depending on a family's unique circumstances. However, there is Federal guidance on immigrant and refugee eligibility for certain supports.

**Health care.** Many provisions of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (P.L. 111-148) and the Health Care and Education Reconciliation Act of 2010 (P.L. 111-152) (more commonly known as the Affordable Care

Act [ACA]), significantly impact immigrant children and families and the health-care services they are eligible to receive. Provisions require most U.S. and naturalized citizens, refugees, and documented immigrants to have at least minimal health insurance coverage and stipulate that legal permanent residents and refugees shall have the same benefits as U.S. citizens. In contrast, undocumented immigrants living in the United States (with the exception of a limited number of select jurisdictions) are not eligible for health-care coverage and are explicitly excluded from the health-care eligibilities outlined in the ACA. For up-to-date information, see the [Health Coverage for Immigrants](#) page of the HealthCare.gov website.

**Education.** All children residing in the United States, regardless of their legal status, have the right to receive free elementary and secondary school educations. In 2021, the Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Department of Justice and the Office of Civil Rights at the U.S. Department of Education jointly issued [Confronting Discrimination Based on National Origin and Immigration Status](#). This resource for families and educators reiterates the illegality of withholding education access from children based on their national origin or immigration status. It also notes that schools must offer language assistance services for children who need them and must provide parents with school-related information in a language they can understand.

**Housing.** Federal law orders that housing programs designed for safety purposes (e.g., emergency shelters, transitional housing) are available to everyone—including undocumented immigrants—and that access

to these programs cannot be denied by State, local, or territorial governments. Other housing benefits, such as affordable housing programs, may be available to immigrants with certain citizenship statuses. To learn more, see VAWnet's ["What Housing Assistance Is Available to Immigrant Survivors During COVID-19?"](#)

**Disaster support funds.** Immigrant and refugee families may be eligible for aid provided in response to disasters or emergencies. For example, the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act included multiple avenues for financial assistance, some of which did not have immigration status eligibility requirements. For future public health emergencies and other disasters, caseworkers should determine which support funds might be available to the families on their caseloads. To learn more, see Information Gateway's [Working With Children, Youth, and Families on Disaster Preparedness](#).

**Immigration benefits.** Undocumented immigrant children and youth who are taken into care by the child welfare system may be eligible for certain immigration relief, such as naturalization or humanitarian protection (Greenberg et al., 2019). Certain immigration statuses can offer protection from deportation and increase a child's access to services and supports. By helping unauthorized individuals gain access to immigration benefits, child welfare caseworkers can increase the likelihood of positive case outcomes for children and youth.

Caseworkers should be aware of the immigration statuses of the family members on their caseloads so they can access the appropriate immigration relief resources. It may also be beneficial to screen undocumented children and youth for immigration status eligibility. There are several humanitarian protection classifications that might apply, including Special Immigrant Juvenile status, the Violence Against Women Act, U visas for crime victims, T visas for trafficking victims, and asylum. Each of these classifications provides a path to legal permanent residency, also known as a "green card." To read about the specific qualifications for each classification, see [Immigrant Families and Child Welfare Systems: Emerging Needs and Promising Policies](#) by the Migration Policy Institute.

Screenings can be conducted at multiple touchpoints along the service continuum, and eligible children and youth can then be referred to internal and external providers (e.g., immigration liaisons or specialists, legal professionals) for additional services. While caseworkers and immigration specialists who are not attorneys cannot directly provide legal assistance to these families, they can support responding attorneys by providing requested documents and by supporting the child or youth in hearings or interviews when possible.

While all undocumented children and youth should be screened for immigration benefits eligibility, it is important to keep in mind that each case is unique, and benefits ultimately may not be advantageous for everyone. Decisions around when to pursue immigration benefits should be made in consultation



with the child or youth and their attorney or another legal professional. These decisions should be grounded in determining what the safest and most beneficial placement situation is for each individual child or youth, whether that be in the United States or with family members living abroad.

For a sample immigration benefits screener, see the Immigrant Legal Resource Center's [Screening Questions for Immigrant Youth: Determining Potential Avenues for Legal Status](#).

**Family preparedness plans.** If a family has a member or members who are at risk for detention or deportation due to their immigration status, they should have a family preparedness plan in place. Child welfare caseworkers can help families assemble preparedness plans; however, they must respect a family's privacy over their immigration status in the process.

Family preparedness plans should include important family documents as well as indications of preferences for their children's futures. More specifically, these plans should contain the following:

- Important family documents, such as birth certificates, social security cards, medical records, and passports
- Emergency contact information for other family members and caregivers
- School information and times so that another trusted adult can pick up children if parents are unavailable
- Health-care information and instructions, including allergies and any needed medications
- Legal forms that give a backup caregiver authority to care for children if their parents are unavailable

Parents should discuss their plans with their children in detail, including the children's thoughts and feelings on designated backup caregivers. Family preparedness plans should be stored in a place that is known to all family members and to the children's backup caregiver. To learn more about family preparedness plans and to see detailed instructions and templates, refer to the [Family Preparedness Plan](#) on the Immigrant Legal Resource Center website.

### **PERMANENCY FOR CHILDREN IN OUT-OF-HOME CARE**

In addition to the safety and risk issues that might typically necessitate removing a child from their home, children who are immigrants or refugees may have additional circumstances that require their placement in out-of-home care. Specifically, these children may have come to the United States unaccompanied by parents or, in the case of children with undocumented family members, their parents may be detained or deported. The following strategies may improve permanency and well-being outcomes for these children.

**Reunification.** Child welfare policies should prioritize keeping families together—including families with members living outside the United States and/or those that might require placement abroad. Despite the unique barriers to working with these families, caseworkers must ensure that reunification is the case plan goal whenever possible. Because it may take longer to access appropriate services for immigrant families, caseworkers should allow for flexibility in reunification timelines, if possible.

Caseworkers should familiarize themselves with Federal legislation and policies with reunification provisions to help inform their work with detained parents. For example, the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) issued a directive titled "[Detention and Removal of Alien Parents or Legal Guardians](#)" (Detained Parents Directive) in 2017, which contains provisions ensuring that detained

### How to Locate Detained or Deported Parents

Parents detained by ICE may be placed in detention centers far from their families and transferred often, making it very difficult to communicate with them. To locate a detained parent, use the [Online Detainee Locator System](#), which requires the detainee's full name, date, country of birth, and alien registration number (found on most immigration papers). Or contact the Parental Interests team at ICE Headquarters ([Parental.Interests@ice.dhs.gov](mailto:Parental.Interests@ice.dhs.gov)) with questions about a parent's location or to engage a parent in child welfare proceedings. A child welfare agency's diligent search staff, where available, can also assist in this process. If the parent has already been deported, child welfare caseworkers should coordinate with the applicable foreign consulate to locate the parent, provide case plan services, and help reunify the family (for more information on coordinating with foreign consulates, see Information Gateway's [Working With Immigrant and Refugee Families: A Guide for Child Welfare Agencies](#)).

parents are able to participate in child welfare proceedings, visit with their children, and comply with reunification services. There may also be State-level policies that impact reunification efforts. In California, for example, the [Reuniting Immigrant Families Act \(SB 1064\)](#) provides extended family reunification periods for detained or deported parents (Prandini et al., 2019).

For additional information on working with families affected by detention or deportation, see the [Understanding Immigration and Child Welfare](#) section of the Information Gateway website.

**Kinship care.** When removal from the home is necessary, it is often preferable for children to be placed directly with kin. In addition to a range of positive permanency and well-being outcomes, kinship placements can promote the preservation of family, community, and cultural ties (Epstein, 2017). However, caseworkers might be hesitant to place some immigrant and refugee children and youth with kin—particularly relatives who are undocumented immigrants.

There are no Federal laws prohibiting the placement of children and youth with undocumented relatives and kin. However, there are variations in State laws dictating whether undocumented immigrant relatives can qualify for foster care licensure (American Bar Association, 2017). Depending on the State, undocumented immigrant relatives are either explicitly permitted to apply for and obtain licensure, are permitted under limited circumstances, or are not permitted. In some cases, State policies do not explicitly address the issue, or other barriers could prevent licensure, such as background checks

and home study or language requirements (Cooper & Christy, 2017). (For State-by-State guidance on licensing requirements for undocumented immigrant caregivers, see the American Bar Association's [Immigrant Caregivers: The Implications of Immigration Status on Foster Care Licensure](#).)

In some scenarios, caseworkers may be able to find alternative paths to licensure for undocumented immigrant caregivers, such as waivers or court orders (see the American Bar Association's "[Promising Practices When Working With Immigrant Kinship Caregivers](#)" for a complete list of pathways). Caseworkers can also opt to place children in informal kinship arrangements, regardless of any State licensure restrictions. Child welfare agencies and caseworkers may have reservations over placement with undocumented immigrant caregivers given their vulnerability to deportation, which could lead to placement instability for the child or youth. However, one practice that can address this is the use of family preparedness plans that specify backup caregivers and care plans (see the "Family Preparedness Plans" section of this bulletin for more information).

For additional guidance on providing support to kinship caregivers, see Information Gateway's [Working With Kinship Caregivers](#) and [Placement of Children With Relatives](#).

### **CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE PRACTICE**

Culturally responsive child welfare practice effectively responds to the needs of all families, regardless of their race, ethnicity, culture, sexual orientation, faith, or class. This includes respecting the diverse backgrounds of families, valuing their cultural experiences,

and integrating their unique strengths into case plans. Cultural responsiveness is an ongoing, fluid process that can accommodate changes to practice based on knowledge gained during every interaction with a family (Calzada & Suarez-Balcazar, 2014).

For child welfare caseworkers, cultural responsiveness involves learning to recognize and overcome attitudes and perceptions that might lead to the oversurveillance of immigrant and refugee groups and affect their work with these families. It is also important for caseworkers to be aware of how cultural differences can affect their cases and to allow space for cultural adaptation. Different cultures can hold widely varying beliefs about parenting practices and what constitutes child abuse and neglect. Kinship structures can also vary greatly, and it is important for professionals to be aware of traditional family structures and expectations. For example, in some cultures, grandparents may play a larger role in family decisions, or parents may have different expectations of their children (e.g., children may be expected to take on roles that are more mature than what is usually expected of children in the United States).

Another critical element of culturally responsive practice with immigrant and refugee families is awareness around the feelings and perceptions these families may have toward child welfare services. For example, they may feel uncomfortable discussing personal issues with someone who is unfamiliar with their customs or beliefs, and cultural mores or taboos may exist that define what type of contact is appropriate (e.g., physical contact, such as handshakes). There may also be a fear or mistrust of authority

figures, particularly among undocumented immigrants or refugees coming from violent or oppressive situations. In many other cultures and countries, informal resources—including important community figures, such as religious leaders—are engaged in cases of child abuse or neglect, and government involvement is considered a last resort (Prandini et al., 2019). Consequently, some families may not understand why their actions have warranted child welfare involvement.

Professionals who serve immigrant and refugee families can work toward cultural responsiveness by learning about the cultures in their communities and engaging with families to ensure quality services. The following are examples of concrete strategies that can be implemented by caseworkers (Calzada & Suarez-Balcazar, 2014):

- Learn from the families on your caseload by asking questions about how to best work together in a respectful way (e.g., communication preferences; individual family's beliefs, practices, and values).
- Adapt services to times and locations that are more comfortable for families and convenient for their schedules. Find ways to alleviate barriers so that family members can attend necessary services.
- Include aspects of the family's culture and values into services (e.g., programs, classes, and materials in families' language of origin).
- Take part in awareness trainings and think about how personal biases may be affecting the work at hand.

**Training and resources.** The following websites and resources spotlight training to

promote cultural responsiveness and best practices when working with immigrant and refugee families:

- [Child Welfare](#) (BRYCS)
- [Resources for Social Workers](#) (Center on Immigration and Child Welfare)
- [Culturally Competent Practice With Immigrant & Refugee Families Resource List](#) (Center on Immigration and Child Welfare)
- [Course List](#) (Switchboard [ORR])
- [Resources](#) (Switchboard [ORR])
- [Technical Assistance](#) (Switchboard [ORR])
- [Working With Immigrant and Refugee Families](#) (Information Gateway)
- [Working With Youth Who Are Immigrants and Refugees](#) (Information Gateway)
- [Culturally Effective Organizations](#) (FRIENDS National Center for Community-Based Child Abuse Prevention)
- [Cultural Competency and Diversity Publications and Resources](#) (Florida Department of Children and Families)
- ["Implicit Racial Bias 101: Exploring Implicit Bias in Child Protection"](#) (Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity)

These resources can provide fundamental knowledge so that caseworkers are prepared to work with immigrant and refugee families. Caseworkers can supplement foundational training with jurisdiction-specific training and knowledge that is relevant to their area's immigrant and refugee families, such as laws and policies, avenues for obtaining immigration status, culturally specific and responsible community-based services, and cultural norms of resident immigrant and refugee groups.

### **Culturally specific and responsive**

**services.** When referring immigrant and refugee families for services, child welfare caseworkers should seek out options that offer culturally specific or responsive approaches. Culturally specific services are developed specifically for members of particular racial and ethnic groups, while culturally responsive services are designed to respond respectfully and effectively to people of various cultures.

Referring undocumented children and families for services may require some additional considerations. Caseworkers will want to ensure that these families can access services without risking their immigration status (Casey Family Programs, 2020). They should, therefore, determine whether certain services are available to people who are not U.S. citizens while simultaneously protecting a family's privacy and then coordinate a warm hand-off to service providers to cultivate feelings of trust and security for the family.

Finding services that can meet the many needs of immigrant and refugee children and families may be challenging. Child welfare agencies may need to work with existing providers to expand services that are culturally specific and/or responsive and that are safe for immigrants in their communities. For more information on expanding service arrays for immigrant and refugee families, see Information Gateway's [Immigration and Child Welfare: A Guide for Child Welfare Agencies](#).

**Family group decision-making.** Family group decision-making (FGDM) reflects the family-oriented values of many immigrant and refugee families and the traditional values of their cultures. The intent of FGDM

is to bring together immediate and extended family members, a trained facilitator, and others (e.g., community members, agency personnel) to develop a plan for child safety and well-being. The following strategies can be incorporated into FGDM to increase the cultural responsiveness of the practice (I. Alvarez, personal communication, May 15, 2022; Merkel-Holguin, 2015):

- Reassure family members that FGDM provides a safe space to discuss family needs without fear of risking detention or deportation and set a comfortable location that protects the family's privacy.
- Use a coordinator who represents or understands the cultural context of the family and who remains aware of his or her own biases.
- Appoint a translator with fluency in the family's preferred language and ensure that children are not asked to serve as interpreters for other family members.
- Allow the family to define their own group and recognize that children belong to a family and a kinship network.
- Maintain a simple conference format that allows the family members to hear the concerns of the child welfare agency and does not require them to share private information that is irrelevant to case planning.
- Position elders in culturally appropriate ways, which might include allowing them to facilitate FGDM sessions, invite additional participants, and teach the coordinator about cultural norms.
- Avoid facilitating meetings in a manner that elevates the role of the coordinator.

- Create a flexible process and schedule that accommodates cultural norms around conferencing and decision-making.

To learn more about this practice, visit Information Gateway's [Family Group Decision-Making](#) web section.

## TRAUMA-INFORMED CARE

Immigrant and refugee families may suffer from trauma-related issues for several reasons. Many experience trauma related to violence, unrest, or widespread poverty in their countries of origin (Desai et al., 2019). Some families face additional challenges during their immigration experience that can cause stress. For example, family members may need to immigrate separately. These families often face long periods of separation, and family members who were left behind may face continued exposure to the dangerous situations that prompted the family to emigrate. Sudden family separation due to the detention or deportation of a family member can also be incredibly traumatic for a child who may already be struggling with stressors related to immigration (Wessler, 2011).

Even when families are able to emigrate from harmful situations and reunite with separated loved ones, the impact of the traumas they suffer can continue to cause stress and conflict. They may also experience further trauma on arrival to the United States, particularly if they live in impoverished communities that lack resources or face racial discrimination (Desai et al., 2019; Murphey, 2016). For families in which some or all

members are unauthorized to live in the United States, there may ongoing tension associated with fears over deportation.

Child Trends published the report [Moving Beyond Trauma: Child Migrants and Refugees in the United States](#), which provides an indepth look at the various traumas often faced by immigrant and refugee children entering the country.

Trauma-informed systems and practices focus on strategies that take the impact of trauma on child development into consideration and strive to minimize its effects without causing additional trauma. To help immigrant and refugee families deal with trauma, child welfare professionals working at every stage of the service continuum should familiarize themselves with and implement evidence-based, trauma-informed practices. For example, one evidence-based treatment approach that can be implemented with traumatized immigrant and refugee children and families is Culturally Modified Trauma-Focused Treatment (CM-TFT), a type of cognitive behavioral therapy developed specifically for use with Hispanic and Latino<sup>1</sup> children. (For more information on CM-TFT, see the National Child Traumatic Stress Network factsheet [CM-TFT: Culturally Modified Trauma-Focused Treatment](#).)

It is important to note that cultural barriers may exist for some people in need of mental health assistance (Leong & Kalibatseva,

<sup>1</sup> When describing the work of other researchers and organizations, this bulletin uses the terms for racial and ethnic populations used in the original sources.

2011). Cultural barriers can come in many forms, such as perceived stigma, language differences, lack of awareness over service availability, and variations in conceptualizations of mental health. Taking a culturally sensitive approach to mental health management can help families overcome these barriers. A culturally sensitive approach can include asking individuals how they understand their own emotional needs, inquiring about any traditions or customs that may impact beliefs around treatment, and matching individuals with culturally appropriate services that meet their language needs.

To learn more about trauma-informed care, see Information Gateway's [The Importance of a Trauma-Informed Child Welfare System](#). For a collection of resources on providing trauma-informed care to refugee children, visit the [Resources](#) section of the Switchboard website.

## CONCLUSION

Immigrant and refugee families possess many strengths and skills that make them integral to the social fabric of the United States. However, like all families, they may sometimes need child welfare services. It is important for child welfare professionals to be aware of the particular challenges faced by immigrant and refugee families, such as language barriers, access to culturally responsive and specific services, citizenship status, and issues related to immigration and trauma. By implementing promising practices for immigrant and refugee families, child welfare caseworkers can help ensure that all children, youth, and families have access to the services and supports they need to thrive.

## REFERENCES

- American Bar Association. (2017). *Immigrant caregivers: The implications of immigration status on foster care licensure*. [https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/administrative/child\\_law/Immig-FosterLicensing-June%202017.authcheckdam.pdf](https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/administrative/child_law/Immig-FosterLicensing-June%202017.authcheckdam.pdf)
- Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2021). *Who are children in immigrant families?* <https://www.aecf.org/blog/who-are-the-children-in-immigrant-families>
- California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare. (2020). *Working with immigrant families*. <https://www.cebc4cw.org/files/CEBCWorkingWithImmigrantFamilies.pdf>
- Calzada, E., & Suarez-Balcazar, Y. (2014). *Enhancing cultural competence in social services agencies: A promising approach to serving diverse children and families*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/report/enhancing-cultural-competence-social-service-agencies-promising-approach-serving>
- Casey Family Programs. (2020). *How can child protection agencies support families and children who lack lawful immigration status?* <https://www.casey.org/media/20.07-QFF-SF-Immigration-and-child-protection.pdf>

- Congressional Research Service. (2021). *Citizenship and immigration statuses of the U.S. foreign-born population*. Library of Congress. <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/homesec/IF11806.pdf>
- Cooper, C. R., & Christy, E. (2017). *Promising practices when working with immigrant kinship caregivers*. American Bar Association. [https://www.americanbar.org/groups/public\\_interest/child\\_law/resources/child\\_law\\_practiceonline/child\\_law\\_practice/vol-36/july-aug-2017/promising-practices-when-working-with-immigrant-kinship-caregive/](https://www.americanbar.org/groups/public_interest/child_law/resources/child_law_practiceonline/child_law_practice/vol-36/july-aug-2017/promising-practices-when-working-with-immigrant-kinship-caregive/)
- Desai, N., Adamson, M., Allwood, M., Baetz, C., Cardeli, E., Issa, O., & Ford, J. (2019). *Primer for juvenile court judges: A trauma-informed approach to judicial decision-making for newcomer immigrant youth in juvenile justice proceedings*. National Child Traumatic Stress Network. <https://www.nctsn.org/resources/primer-juvenile-court-judges-trauma-informed-approach-judicial-decision-making-newcomer>
- Epstein, H. R. (2017). *Kinship care is better for children and families*. American Bar Association, Center on Children and the Law. [https://www.americanbar.org/groups/public\\_interest/child\\_law/resources/child\\_law\\_practiceonline/child\\_law\\_practice/vol-36/july-aug-2017/kinship-care-is-better-for-children-and-families/](https://www.americanbar.org/groups/public_interest/child_law/resources/child_law_practiceonline/child_law_practice/vol-36/july-aug-2017/kinship-care-is-better-for-children-and-families/)
- Greenberg, M., Capps, R., Kalweit, A., Grishkin, J., & Flagg, A. (2019). *Immigrant families and child welfare systems: Emerging needs and promising policies*. Migration Policy Institute. <https://cimmcw.org/wp-content/uploads/ImmigrantFamiliesChildWelfare-Final.pdf>
- Hutchinson, M., & Dorsett, P. (2012). What does the literature say about resilience in refugee people? Implications for practice. *Journal of Social Inclusion*, 3(2), 55–78. <https://doi.org/10.36251/josi.55>
- Leong, F. T. L. & Kalibatseva, Z. (2011). Cross-cultural barriers to mental health services in the United States. *Cerebrum*, 2011, 5. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3574791/>
- Merkel-Holguin, L. (2015, Winter). Family group decision making as a culturally responsive child welfare practice. CW360. <https://cascw.umn.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/CW360-Winter2015.pdf>
- Murphey, D. (2016). *Moving beyond trauma: Child migrants and refugees in the United States*. Child Trends. <https://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Moving-Beyond-Trauma-Report-FINAL.pdf>
- Prandini, R., Adamson, M., & Desai, N. (2019). *Strengthening child welfare practice for immigrant children & families: A toolkit for child welfare professionals in California*. Immigrant Legal Resource Center. <https://www.ilrc.org/strengthening-child-welfare-practice-immigrant-children-families-toolkit-child-welfare-professionals>
- Shields, M. K., & Behrman, R. E. (2004). Children of immigrant families: Analysis and recommendations. *The Future of Children*, 14(2), 4–15. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1602791>



Villarreal, R. Q., Jozef, G., & Ecclesiastre, W. M. (2021). *Our voices, our policy: Recommendations of immigrant parents*. Next 100. <https://thenext100.org/our-voices-our-policy-recommendations-of-immigrant-parents/>

Wessler, S. F. (2011). *Shattered families: The perilous intersection of immigration enforcement and the child welfare system*. Applied Research Center. <https://www.raceforward.org/research/reports/shattered-families>

#### SUGGESTED CITATION:

Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2022). *Working with immigrant and refugee families: A guide for child welfare caseworkers*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau. <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/immigration-caseworkers/>

#### SHARE YOUR FEEDBACK WITH US.



Scan the QR code to take a short survey about this publication.



U.S. Department of Health and Human Services  
Administration for Children and Families  
Administration on Children, Youth and Families  
Children's Bureau



This material may be freely reproduced and distributed. However, when doing so, please credit Child Welfare Information Gateway. This publication is available online at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/immigration-caseworkers/>.