

# A Qualitative Examination of Work, Families, and Schools in Low-Income Latinx Communities During Strict Immigration Enforcement



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*Education policy and the role of schools are a neglected part of the welfare state. Yet schools may be important sites for understanding how policy, work, and families intersect in immigrant households. Drawing on thirty interviews from seventeen households, this article highlights the experiences of families with young children during a time of increased national hostility toward immigrants. Given that immigrant families are often excluded from more traditional forms of social insurance, findings reveal the central role of fathers both inside and outside the home. Parental involvement, defined as parents' interactions with their children's education both inside and outside the home, was structured by English-dominant schooling environments. In Phoenix, parental involvement was uniquely shaped by a punitive immigration context at father's work and in children's schools. We discuss the implications of our findings on the intergenerational transmission of disadvantage and advance policy recommendations to support foreign- and U.S.-born children's educational success.*

**Keywords:** Latinx experience, Mexican immigrant fathers, parental involvement, home-school relations, immigration enforcement

Mexican immigrant parents traverse the Mexico-U.S. border in search of a better future for themselves and their families. The lives they envision become imperiled if they encounter a hostile context that jeopardizes their children's futures. Although immigration policy has historically focused on keeping undocumented immigrants from entering the country, in re-

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cent years, the focus has shifted to making life more difficult for those who have stayed. In Mexican immigrant communities, immigration policy and its changing enforcement can destabilize communities and disrupt children's education. This article examines families in San Antonio, Texas, and Phoenix, Arizona, when national deportations were at an all-time high in 2011 and 2012. In Phoenix, federal, state, and local immigration partnerships distinctly shaped family's experiences at work, home, and school.

Recent estimates suggest that a quarter of children in the U.S. have an immigrant parent, and the majority are U.S. citizens (Annie E. Casey Foundation 2019). However, many legal immigrant parents and their U.S.-born children are not eligible to receive public assistance (Acevedo-Garcia et al. 2021). Although low-income and foreign-born Latinx men have high labor-force participation rates (Joshi et al. 2022, this issue), during the COVID-19 pandemic, poverty rates increased most sharply for Latinx children in immigrant families: from 36 percent to 43 percent (Gelatt, Capps, and Fix 2021). Yet education policy and the role of schools are a neglected tools in the fight against childhood poverty (Garfinkel, Rainwater, and Smeeding 2010). Given the role of schools to support children's futures, examining factors that impinge on immigrant families' relationships with their children's schools takes on greater significance.

Although the central role of Mexican immigrant mothers in their children's education has been researched, the role of fathers is less understood (Rivera and Lavan 2012; Durand 2011). This selective focus neglects how parents might work together to support their children's development.

Drawing on thirty in-depth interviews with parents from seventeen Mexican immigrant households in low-income communities in San Antonio, Texas, and Phoenix, Arizona, we examine parents' experiences with work and family at a time of strict immigration enforcement. Findings suggest that fathers' work inside and outside the home created both stability and instability for the family. However, Phoenix was a more hostile policy context for Mexican immigrants than San Antonio. At the same

time, parents in both cities described English-dominant schooling contexts that shaped household dynamics and family relations.

## BACKGROUND

Social systems intersect and structure children's educational achievement. Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological model is premised on the idea that both distal and proximate factors influence children's development (1994). This framework emphasizes the interrelationships between individuals at the micro level and their environments at the macro level (Bronfenbrenner 1994). The model sheds light on factors that influence educational risk (Johnson 1994), the experiences of immigrant families (Paat 2013), and family well-being in the COVID era (Prime, Wade, and Brown 2020). Bronfenbrenner's model calls attention to the idea that family members' lives and destinies are linked.

## Immigration Policy

Federal, state, and local policies have increasingly targeted Mexican immigrants, the largest foreign-born group in the county, affecting their ability to live and work in the United States (Budiman 2020). For example, immigrant families and their U.S.-born children are excluded from important social safety supports that buffer the effects of poverty (Acevedo-Garcia et al. 2021). At the same time, Section 287(g) of the U.S. Immigration and Nationality Act promotes partnerships between Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and local law enforcement officials that request them. Once 287(g) partnerships are established, ICE can formally train and supervise local immigration enforcement activities (Wong 2012). Since its inception, the 287(g) Program has experienced varying levels of partnership interest. Counties with 287(g) partnerships are found to have higher levels of community instability and household mobility (Dee and Murphy 2020).

The Great Recession and its associated economic downturn ushered in a wave of state-level immigration policies (Ybarra, Sanchez, and Sanchez 2016). Data collection for this study was contextualized by ICE arrests reaching a high of 232,796 in 2009 (Kandel 2016) and

federal funding for 287(g) peaking at \$68 million in fiscal years 2010 through 2013 (American Immigration Council 2021). Despite the U.S. Supreme Court case *Trump v. State of Hawaii et al.* that ended President Donald Trump's "zero tolerance" and family separation policies, ICE's deputy director recently wrote that "ICE continues to use 287(g) partnerships to assist state and local agencies in ensuring the safety of their communities while working to expand the program consistent with EO 13768, Enhancing Public Safety in the Interior of the United States" (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement 2019).<sup>1</sup>

Former Maricopa County Sheriff Joe Arpaio's change from "tough on drugs sheriff" to "ruthless immigration enforcer" was brought about by powers granted through the 287(g) program (Sterling and Joffe-Block 2021, 90). In 2007, ICE trained more than 150 Maricopa County sheriff officers. Sheriff Arpaio relentlessly pursued immigrants until abuse, racial profiling, and civil rights lawsuits ended the partnership between ICE and the Maricopa County's Sheriff's Office in December 2011. This termination did not halt Arpaio's efforts, however (Sterling and Joffe-Block 2021). In 2010, the year before this study began, Arizona enacted Senate Bill 1070 (SB 1070), the first law in the country that made it a state crime to be an undocumented immigrant (Campbell 2011; Santos, Menjívar, and Godfrey 2013).

Built on the enforcement mechanism authorized through the 287(g) program, SB 1070 deputized sheriffs to enforce federal immigration laws. SB 1070 had four key provisions. First, police could demand and investigate an individual's documentation status, referred to as the "show your papers" provision. Second, police could arrest individuals without a warrant on the presumption of their being undocumented. Third, not carrying federal registration papers indicating one's authorization status in the United States became a crime. Fourth, it also became a state crime for an unauthorized immigrant to seek or accept work in Arizona (Campbell 2011). In June 2012, coinciding with

the end of data collection for this study, the Supreme Court struck down all provisions of SB 1070 except for the first "show your papers" provision.

Although Phoenix was a hot spot for immigrant deportation during this study, immigration policy partnerships were not uniform across geographical contexts. Data from San Antonio's ICE field office suggest a less punitive approach to immigration enforcement: of the sixty-eight thousand immigrants who were deported from Texas in 2012, almost 70 percent were convicted criminals or repeat immigration violators; the remaining 30 percent were recent border entrants (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement 2012). In this study, we examine a national policy context hostile toward immigrants. Using a socioecological framework, we examine how variations in state and local immigration policies structured parents' broader set of social relations and environmental influences; we focus on implications for children's development.

### Work and Home

Immigration policies and their strict enforcement have changed the nature and experience of work for Mexican immigrant households: first, by restricting employment and criminalizing those without valid documents; second, by using workplace raids to deport workers. Work restrictions constrain immigrants' access to employment by making it a crime to work without proper documents and imposing fines on companies that hire unauthorized workers (Mayorkas 2021). The end of legal employment for undocumented workers, however, enables employers to more easily exploit their labor. For example, Elizabeth Fussell (2011) finds that in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, when demand for low-skill construction workers to clean and rebuild the damaged city was high, Latinx day laborers were subjected to wage theft by unscrupulous employers who knew they would not report the theft to authorities. Ruth Gomberg-Muñoz (2012) similarly describes em-

1. Donald J. Trump, *President of the United States, et al., Petitioners v. Hawaii, et al.* 585 U.S. \_\_\_; 138 S. Ct. 2392; 201 L. Ed. 2d 775 (2018).

ployers who prefer undocumented workers because of their exploitability. She cites one employer who stated, “if the immigrant employees had papers, they might not be such hard workers” (347). She also explains how after worksite raids, employers struggled to replace undocumented laborers with those willing to endure the same working conditions. For example, when a poultry-processing plant in Georgia lost two-thirds of its workforce in an immigration raid, local African American workers expressed concerns about dangerous work conditions and questionable labor practices, leading the plant to fill the positions with prison workers, Hmong refugees, and the homeless. The result of criminalizing immigrant labor has resulted in a downward trend in wages and higher unemployment rates for undocumented and documented Mexican immigrants (Massey, Durand, and Pren 2016; Joyner 2018).

The second way punitive immigration policies intersect with work and family life is through family separation. Between 2010 and 2013, Jodi Berger Cardoso and colleagues (2018, 301) estimated that “300,000 parents of U.S. citizen children were deported.” As Jennifer Green (2019) points out in her study of mixed-status families in an era of mass deportation, mundane routines such as driving to the grocery store or going to work could result in deportation and fathers being separated from their families. Fathers are more likely to work outside the home in dual-headed Mexican immigrant households, putting them at greater risk of deportation (Dreby 2015; Gallo 2017). As the primary wage earners, fathers’ loss of employment may also shape various aspects of family life for their families. For example, uneven ICE enforcement in some communities may force fathers to seek other employment opportunities, causing families to leave together or remain separated (Ayón and Becerra 2013). For Mexican immigrant fathers, workplace restrictions not only threaten forced return to their country of origin, but also separation of the family unit (Cardoso et al. 2018).

Although the role of Mexican immigrant fathers within the home is less understood than that of mothers, fathers’ experiences with work

outside the home may manifestly shape aspects of life inside it. Thus a contribution of the current study is understanding how strict immigration enforcement shapes parenting roles and practices in underresourced, structurally disadvantaged communities.

### Home and Schools

As families buffer the distal effects of immigration policy on their communities, schools play a critical role in providing social support services, regardless of a family’s documentation status. During the COVID-19 pandemic, 2020 Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act stimulus payments were not available to undocumented immigrants, lawful permanent residents, and U.S. citizens in immigrant families (Acevedo-Garcia et al. 2021). In response to the growing numbers of food-insecure families when schools closed due to the pandemic, the U.S. Department of Agriculture announced that it would make meals freely available to all students for the 2021–2022 academic year through the National Food Lunch Program (2021). Schools also address the health and well-being of their students in other ways. For example, school-based health centers, funded through the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, provide a range of health-care services to families, including primary medical care, dental and oral care, and health education. To increase vaccination rates for COVID-19, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2022) provided guidance to district administrators for hosting vaccination clinics to tackle disparities in vaccination rates.

As schools increasingly provide critical supports for low-income and immigrant families, strong family-school relations are central to maximizing students’ potential. Parents’ involvement in their children’s education inside and outside the home is associated with positive learning behaviors, higher test scores, and improved literacy skills (Durand 2011; Machen, Wilson, and Notar 2005). At the same time, building and maintaining strong family-school relations may be especially challenging in low-income, Mexican immigrant families because of language barriers and parents’ worries about their immigration status. Although for many

Mexican immigrant families, schools embody the hopes and aspirations for their children's futures (Green 2019), parents' involvement may reflect the broader constraints of their environment.

Because research on parenting practices and children's educational success focuses on mothers, fathers' role remains underexamined. The current literature suggests that Mexican immigrant fathers' involvement may be unique because of their multiple jobs, fear of deportation, greater English-language skills, and gender stereotypes about their role inside and outside the home (Chrispeels and Rivero 2001; Chrispeels and González 2004; Feliciano 2008). Drawing on a nationally representative sample of Latinx parents, Veronica Terriquez (2013) finds that Latinx fathers' participation in school-based events varies as a function of their immigration status and English-language proficiency: Spanish-dominant fathers and more recent immigrants were less likely to be involved in school-based activities. Additionally, Robert Moreno and Susan Chuang (2012) report that although Latinx fathers hold strong beliefs regarding their children's school participation, these beliefs are not reflected in their level of involvement at school. However, qualitative studies have pushed back on the narrative that fathers are uninvolved in their children's education; rather, teachers overlook or misinterpret fathers' participation and provide few avenues for deepening their engagement (Quiñones and Kiyama 2014; Gallo 2017).

Building and maintaining strong family-school relations is especially important in low-income, immigrant communities. However, research suggests that linguistically diverse parents are often excluded from their children's education (Carreón, Drake, and Barton 2005; Peña 2000; Ramirez 2003). Although state education agencies and school districts are mandated to support English-language learners and their parents, the U.S. Department of Justice reports numerous compliance issues (Lhamon and Gupta 2015, 39). Thus, the role of language on the formation of home-school relations among Mexican immigrant households warrants further study. Here we examine how

immigration policy structures family life inside and outside the home.

## METHODS

This article emerged from an examination of how parents' relationships formed and developed at home, in schools, and within their communities (see Rangel, Shoji, and Gamoran 2020). Parents were selected for interviews from a broader pool of more than three thousand first-grade families and fifty-two Title I schools participating in a cluster-randomized controlled trial that examined the effects of parents' school-based relationships on children's early educational outcomes in low-income, predominantly Latinx schools. Overall results from the randomized controlled trial yielded null effects (Gamoran et al. 2021).

To recruit families, we made cold calls from lists of parents at eight study schools who consented to participate in the randomized control trial. We aimed to interview four families in each school. Families in one school in Phoenix were oversampled because of unique circumstances that warranted further exploration. Thus, our final interview sample consisted of fifty-seven parents from thirty-four families. We restrict our sample for this article to thirty parents from seventeen families in which at least one parent was born in Mexico.

## Procedures

The article draws on interview data and field notes collected by the first author and another researcher from March 2011 to May 2012. With rare exceptions, all interviews occurred at the family's residence on a weekday evening. Before every interview, the researchers purchased food at a local restaurant and shared the meal with the entire family. The interviews were conducted in English or Spanish, according to parent preference, and lasted between 60 and 150 minutes. Total time spent in each household was between two and four hours. The interviews were recorded, professionally transcribed, and translated when necessary.

Across the seventeen immigrant households, thirteen couples (five in San Antonio and eight in Phoenix) were interviewed. Four interviews were with mothers only, one of whom was

divorced. When two parents were present, interviews with mothers and fathers were conducted separately and simultaneously to capture parents' individual accounts of their experiences with their children's schooling. Interviews were conducted jointly when only one parent was present.

### Analytic Approach

The analysis of the interview data proceeded in multiple stages. First, the second author and a research assistant open-coded all thirty interviews and wrote summaries outlining maternal and paternal involvement. During this process, the first and second authors met weekly to discuss thematic findings within the context of families' broader policy environment. Second, the interviews were indexed based on levels of parental involvement. Third, the second author and a research assistant coded the indexed data using NVivo 11 qualitative software. Analytic codes identified emerging factors that structured parental involvement. For example, after we created an index of parents who described intervening in a school-based issue, themes of distrust and fears of deportation emerged as salient. Last, parents' experiences with various domains of work, family, and community were contextualized based on the differing political environments in Phoenix and San Antonio (see table 1).

### FINDINGS

In ecological systems theory, the mesosystem is where multiple microsystems intersect (Bronfenbrenner 1994). In Phoenix, strict immigration enforcement throughout the community intersected with parents' ability to find work and participate in their children's schooling. In contrast to San Antonio, where strict immigration enforcement was largely absent, the effects of these policies reached into the home as parents adapted to the climate of fear and instability that pervaded their community. Despite differing levels of immigration enforcement in San Antonio and Phoenix, inadequate language supports structured Spanish-dominant parental school involvement in both cities.

In Phoenix, families' experiences with hos-

tile immigration policy in their community provided a backdrop for schools' academic performance. In the best performing school in the sample, 26 percent of third-grade students were proficient in math and 32 percent were proficient in reading. In the lowest-performing school, 15 percent of third-grade students were proficient in both math and reading. In San Antonio, performance was marginally better: 56 and 39 percent of third-grade students were proficient in math and reading, respectively; in the lowest-performing school, 24 percent were proficient in math and 22 percent in reading.

Drawing on survey data collected from families and schools in the randomized control trial ( $N = 573$ ), average parental involvement scale was compiled across ten items. Parents were asked to rate their level of involvement from 1 to 5, where 1 is "Never" and 5 is "11 or more times." Surveys included items such as "I helped my child with homework," "I went to a school program," "I asked my child to tell me about school," and so on. Across the eight schools, average parent involvement was 3.6, suggesting that involvement was neither high nor low. Among Mexican immigrant households in the interview sample, the average was higher (3.75). Some families reported scores of 5 across all items; the lowest average was 2.10. Principals were also surveyed and asked the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the statement "Parents are actively involved in the school's programs," 1 being "strongly disagree" and 4 being "strongly agree." The average across the eight schools was 2.875, suggesting that they mostly agreed that parents were involved at the school. Schools' academic performance and the parental involvement scale provide context for parents' descriptions of how immigration policy served as *de facto* family, labor, and education policy.

### Immigration Policy as *de Facto* Family Policy

Bronfenbrenner (1994) suggests that the macrosystem represents the cultural context in which families are embedded and serves as a blueprint within a given society. For this study, we consider federal and state-level immigration policy as the blueprint for the way immigrant

**Table 1.** Interview Participant Characteristics

Interview Participants, Father <sup>a</sup>	Children <sup>b</sup>	City	Employment Status
Devorah Baron, Ruben Baron	Alfredo (target child), Isaac (younger son), Jonathan (older son), Lizabeth (older sister)	Phoenix	Both parents worked outside the home
Martha Berber-Gomez, Diego Berber	Brian (target child), Marvin (age 4), Jose (Age 3)	Phoenix	Father worked outside the home
Juanita Chavez, father not available	Miriam (target child), Chayo (1st grade)	Phoenix	Both parents worked outside the home
Vanessa Contreras, Jorge Contreras	Giselle (target child)	Phoenix	Father worked outside the home
Glena Gomez, Armando Gomez	Brenda (target child), Jatzia (age 7), Deysi (age 11), Jose (age 16), Gloisa (Cousin-Age 8)	Phoenix	Father worked outside the home
Mama Logro, father not available	Chiquillo (target child), MiEnano (1st grade), MiCuestro (older cousin)	Phoenix	Father worked outside the home
Alma Lopez, Pancho Lopez	Noemi (target child), Enrique (son), Lilia (daughter)	Phoenix	Father worked outside the home
Andrea Prieto, Jesus Prieto	Fernando (target child), Lalo (kindergarten), Nancy (age 2), Arthur (age >1)	Phoenix	Father worked outside the home
Mayte Sandoval, Rudy Sandoval	Ramon (target child), Joel (age 7), Javier (8th grade), Blanca (11th grade)	Phoenix	Both parents worked outside the home
Olivia Uroza, Leo Uroza	Margarita (target child), Poncho (4th grade), Eduardo (age 15), Rosario (age 16)	Phoenix	Both parents worked outside the home
Miriam Villegeas	Leonardo (target child, Gabriela (age 10, Martina age 12)	Phoenix	Father worked outside the home
Maria Vinas, father not available	Maria (target child), Adriana (Age 3)	Phoenix	Mom worked outside the home
Clarisa Fernández, Vicente Fernández	Mary (target child), Rosie (2nd grade), Emmy (Age 15), Eliza (Age 15)	San Antonio	Father worked outside the home
Pilar García, Roberto García	Esmeralda (target child), Rosa (Age 9), Jose Garcia (Age 3)	San Antonio	Father worked outside the home
Katie Gonglez, Rene Gonglez	Linda (target child), Cindy (Age 4)	San Antonio	Father worked outside the home
Kanna De León, Fred De León	Barney (target child), Pancho (Age 12)	San Antonio	Father worked outside the home
Sonia Molina, Marcos Molina	Marcos (target child)	San Antonio	Father worked outside the home

Source: Authors' tabulation.

<sup>a</sup>All names are parent-selected pseudonyms.

<sup>b</sup>Children living in the home at the time of interview and relative to focal child (second or third grader).

families experience life within their communities. At the time of data collection (2011–2012), national deportations were at an all-time high (Suro, Suárez-Orozco, and Canizales 2015).

San Antonio and Phoenix are separated by 982 miles, and the political environment in each city made it feel even farther. In San Antonio, state-level policies did not single out immigrant households and none of the parents expressed fears of deportation. However, in Phoenix, billboards and radio announcements promoting Arpaio's "illegal alien hotline" asked community members to call and report the location of suspected undocumented immigrants. Arizona's attitude toward immigrants was clear: almost every parent we interviewed described a personal experience with deportation, whether family members, friends, or neighbors.

SB 1070 was part of Arizona's broader policy effort targeting Mexican immigrants. Local law enforcement frequently conducted status checks without cause. One consequence of the measure was that parents were constantly afraid of deportation because failure to carry proof of residency was cause for arrest. As an undocumented mother in Phoenix said, "Since the law was established, in almost every community, everybody is afraid of it. Many people were deported" (translated). Another father explained how even social relationships with undocumented immigrants could result in arrest: "Let's say you want to get water, you go to the store, and the police stop you, and you tell him, 'Here is my license' You show your I.D., and they say, 'Arizona I.D.' If you do not have it, who has the problem? I do, because if I have a person in my car who does not have an I.D., that is breaking the law here, and you could go to jail" (translated). In Phoenix, parents frequently discussed how SB 1070 created a climate of fear within their communities.

At the time of the study, the policy context in Phoenix was distinct from that in San Antonio. Unlike Sheriff Joe Arpaio's Maricopa County, Bexar County did not have a 287(g) partnership (Sterling and Joffe-Block 2021). One father from Phoenix who had recently traveled through San Antonio described the differences between the cities: "A year ago, I passed by San

Antonio. You don't see immigration [ICE officials] everywhere. In Arizona, you drive a little bit, and wow. Here you drive, and before you hit the road, immigration stops you, 'Let me see your I.D.' There you drive, and they are nowhere to be found. They used to say that the law was much stricter in Texas. To tell you the truth, the law is stricter here [in Phoenix]" (translated). To better understand this contrast, we asked parents in San Antonio about the news of mass deportations in Phoenix. One immigrant father responded, "Texans are calmer and more tranquil. I know people who have been expelled, but not because they are Mexican, because of drugs or something like that. I have not been to Phoenix, but it seems more difficult. Here in San Antonio, it's good, you can go wherever you want at any time, and it is okay" (translated). Relative to their counterparts in Maricopa County, immigrant families in Bexar County mentioned fewer interactions with law enforcement. Follow-up survey data from the randomized control trial revealed that four of the twelve Phoenix families had moved and dropped out of the study relative to one of five families from San Antonio. In Phoenix and San Antonio, immigration policy functioned as de facto family policy by structuring families' experiences in their communities. Fears of deportation, social distrust, and worries of family separation restructured the lives of many families who had called Phoenix home.

### **Immigration Policy as de Facto Labor Policy**

In ecological systems theory, the mesosystem is where multiple microsystems intersect (Bronfenbrenner 1994). Strict immigration enforcement in Phoenix targeted immigrant families by restricting fathers' access to work. Unlike in San Antonio, immigration policy punished employers and employees alike. As the economy faltered, families left the state in search of income for their family.

In Arizona, SB 1070 made it illegal to work without proper documentation and penalized businesses that knowingly hired unauthorized workers by suspending or revoking their business license. Parents suggested that SB 1070 caused many workers to lose their jobs. Workplace raids were a defining feature of Sheriff

Arpaio's regime. As one immigrant father explained, "He [Arpaio] does his raids, he goes to big businesses where many people are working. They just arrive without letting anybody know. They arrive and take people out, people who have worked there for many years but do not have documents. They are working like many people who come from Mexico" (translated).

Employers were also required to use E-Verify, a federal website from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and the Social Security Administration that would make it more difficult for workers to submit fake social security numbers. By comparing workers' employment authorization forms with federal databases, the system can verify employees' identification photos by matching the one in the system (Orrenius and Zavodny 2015, 5). These work restrictions were consequential for undocumented immigrant parents. One father explained:

There are jobs, but you can't apply without a social security number. I have a cousin who does not work and lives in Mexico, so I told him, 'Let me borrow your social security number. I will work, and you do the taxes.' Before, you were able to do it, but now you can't. The thing is that they have E-Verify or something like that. So, when they started all of that [enforcement], we [those without valid work permits] could not do anything about it. Many people lost their jobs for the same reason, they did not have work permits. (translated)

Another father described how E-Verify not only affected workers but also their employers: "Before, a business could get a job and finish it in a few months. Why? Because there were people to work. Now, they have to hire documented workers, but where are they? They are not around anymore. There are still some without papers, but if the sheriff shows up [at the work-site], he fines the company and takes all the Mexicans that do not have papers. Legal papers do not make a worker. Papers do not do jobs. Jobs are done by people who want to work" (translated).

As a result, employers continued to hire undocumented workers despite the potential consequences. We asked one immigrant mother,

who worked at a recycling plant, whether her employer was aware of her status. She responded, "The boss knows everything. He knows we have someone else's papers, and he said that he would pay the fine for all of us. He is making a lot of money; why not?" (translated). As parents experienced limited work opportunities and the increased policing of job sites, Arpaio's workplace raids became synonymous with immigration policy.

Fear of deportation at work was a consistent theme in the data and restructured the lives of many families who had called Phoenix home for more than a decade. Community instability ensued as families left the state to look for work. One mother explained: "You had to be legal, or you would not survive in this place. The problem was work. So, the laws affected the employers because they were afraid of hiring people without papers. People say, 'You can live here,' but if you do not have a job, you cannot pay for anything. The first thing you lose when you do not work is the ability to pay rent and utilities, so you have to move" (translated). The decision to leave Phoenix, however, was not an easy one. An undocumented immigrant mother explained the dilemma: "Many people moved away when they lost their jobs. My husband didn't lose his job, but we would not be here if he had lost it. But for many people, their children were born here and have lived here for more than 16 years; they had to go back [to Mexico] because they lost their home" (translated). Although families had raised their children and bought homes in the community, as families decided to leave the state searching for work opportunities, long-standing community relationships fractured.

Decisions to leave Arizona were incredibly complicated in mixed-status homes where one household member was undocumented. Parents discussed contingency plans with friends and family if they were picked up in a raid. One documented father explained: "Many families have made me in charge of their children. If, one day, something happens—if they get deported—someone will bring their children to me. Otherwise, the government takes them and gives them up for adoption. Can you imagine how sad it would be that another family adopted your children because you did not have

papers and were deported to Mexico?" (translated).

In contrast with San Antonio, where strict immigration enforcement was largely absent, 287(g) partnerships and Senate Bill 1070 led to fears of deportation, social distrust, and worries of family separation. Labor shortages caused by employees moving or being deported presented employers a choice: either follow the law and their businesses might suffer or break the law and pay a fine. For fathers able to maintain a source of income, families adapted to the uncertainty of deportation as punitive immigration policies reverberated through Mexican immigrant communities, regardless of documentation status.

### **Immigration Policy as de Facto Education Policy**

Bronfenbrenner describes the critical role of microsystems like the household in affecting children's development. In the context of Mexican immigrant households, we considered how macro- and meso-level factors influence mothers' and fathers' role within the home. In Phoenix, strict enforcement at parents' workplaces affected key domains of their children's lives, suggesting that immigration policy serves as de facto education policy.

Parents' fears of deportation and family separation were central in their children's lives. As one father described it, children were "worried they would not see their fathers again" (translated). As parents left the community to protect their children from the broader hostile context in which families lived, instability in schools directly ensued. Parents reported that school enrollment dropped dramatically. One mother explained: "[The school] sent me an application asking if I planned to return the following school year. I said no but because I was moving [to a new school], but many wrote no because they were returning to Mexico. In the last month of school, many students left. We were getting papers from the school telling us how we needed to talk to our children so the change would not be so hard" (translated). When we asked her about the impact of SB 1070 on home-school relations, she replied, "[SB 1070] affects the family's mood and relationship with the school because children saw that their par-

ents were worried. Parents were worried because they did not have jobs; spouses were fighting. At the same time, the children were afraid because of what they heard on TV. They were going to school crying, and they were fearful of going to school. That affected our children." Although many children of immigrant parents are U.S. citizens, parents reported that the emotional toll of deportation was often felt in schools.

Parents who remained in Arizona were distrustful of their children's schools and worried that schools might report their documentation status to law enforcement. One mother described this distrust: "Right now, we heard that parents with kids starting school this year would need to present legal documents. So, there will be another exodus of people leaving the state. I remember that at the beginning [when SB 1070 passed], I did not want to go to school. My children were born here, but the school never told us, 'Calm down, nothing is going to happen to you.' Now, the excuse they are saying [when registering children for school] is that they want to verify the address, but they are saying we need legal documentation" (translated). Due to the hostile policy environment in the community, the task of registering children for school, a standard process to ensure that children live within the catchment zone, caused this mother to believe her children's school had ulterior motives. She suggests that schools, rather than addressing her concerns about documentation status, did little to support immigrant families.

In addition, Proposition 203, a ballot initiative passed in the early 2000s, mandated English-only instruction (Wright 2005). One mother described the impact of this law on students: "Both of my children were in the Head Start program. At that time, it was a bilingual program, but in Arizona, they approved a law where they only teach English in schools. Before, it was not like that. I think it is bad for the children who are just arriving from Mexico or any other country because they start school not understanding anything. It is also bad because they do not speak to [the students] in Spanish, but [the students] do not understand English" (translated). Despite recent efforts to overturn the law in response to declining educational

outcomes for English-language learners, Arizona remains the only state in the country with educational language mandates (Wright 2005).

To better understand the context of parents' experiences, the first author visited an ELL classroom in Phoenix to observe parent-teacher conferences. In this district, parent-teacher conferences occurred in groups rather than one-on-one meetings. The author met the school interpreter informally before the conference and discovered that she was from the Midwest and neither a native-Spanish speaker nor a trained interpreter. Once the conference began, the teacher presented the students' academic progress to parents on a graph. She explained that although the grade standard was ninety to one hundred words a minute by the end of the year, some students were reading only six to eight words a minute. The teacher spoke for several minutes before looking to the interpreter to highlight the main points in a few seconds. At the end of the presentation, the teacher asked whether there were any questions. Through the interpreter, one parent asked whether the teacher could send reading homework in Spanish so that she could help her child at home. Exasperated by the question, the teacher exclaimed, "No, that would be way too much work!" The interpreter translated these remarks back to parents: "No, that is not possible."

Observations of parent-teacher relations and interviews with parents in this Phoenix classroom suggest that parental involvement was structured by language barriers as well as the teacher's prejudice against Spanish-dominant parents. One bilingual mother described how this teacher had reprimanded her son for being late because of a doctor's appointment. When the child knew he would be late the following day because they needed to pick up his prescription, he told his mother he was afraid his teacher would yell at him again. The mother assured her son that she would talk to the teacher. She recounted her exchange: "I went, and I told her, if you have questions or if you want to know exactly what is going on, you have my number, or you can have the office call me. Her response was, 'well, now, it's nice to know that you speak English and that I can communicate with you.'" When we followed up

by asking how she felt about the teacher's comments, she explained that the interaction made her feel "horrible" because "I have an advantage that most parents do not have just because I know the language."

SB 1070 and Proposition 203 structured home-school relations in Phoenix, but parents in both cities reported that language barriers shaped their involvement in their children's educations. Guidance from the U.S. Departments of Justice and Education on the provision of translators and interpreters requires that "SEAs [state educational agencies] and school districts must provide language assistance to LEP [limited English proficiency] parents" and that "school districts should ensure that interpreters and translators are trained on the role of an interpreter and translator" (Lhamon and Gupta 2015, 38–39). However, parents viewed interpreters at the school as ineffective and unreliable. One mother shared her concerns: "when you are speaking through an interpreter, they do not tell the teachers the same things we say, they [the interpreters] fix it up a little bit" (translated). Underscoring this observation, one father noted that school translators would "only repeat what you say like a machine" (translated). Although the extent to which greater parental involvement in their children's education would have improved students' educational performance is unclear, immigrant parents' autonomy to decide their level of involvement was removed when schools did not provide adequate language support.

In our discussions with parents about how relationships formed and developed in their communities, mothers frequently discussed how language barriers structured home-school relations. Through our interviews, we learned that fathers' English-language skills, often learned from work outside the home, were leveraged by mothers to help with educational responsibilities. Primarily, mothers reported that fathers' language abilities facilitated home-school relations. For example, one mother explained how she had grown accustomed to not communicating with her son's teachers: "every year when my son begins school, I ask him, 'does your teacher speak Spanish?' 'No, she does not speak Spanish?' It is better if I stay quiet and tell my husband that he has to go and

get involved” (translated). Similarly, another mother reported that she had strong relationships with a translator at school, which lessened the need for her husband’s English-language skills.

Exacerbating issues with translators, parents also reported concerns about the effectiveness of their children’s teachers and the inadequacy of their children’s schools. When his child was at risk of being held back a grade, one father explained that his wife “did not want to deal with the teacher” and asked that he intervene on her behalf. Fathers also intervened in school matters of their own accord. One father described his dismay when he reviewed his son’s workbook and found several incomplete pages. After consulting with relatives who had children in the same school, the father confronted the teacher about the unfinished work and ultimately decided to enroll his son in a charter school.

Fathers also helped when homework was sent home in English. One mother explained how her husband was always helping their daughter: “Mario speaks English, so if it is not something that I have to read, I can help her, but if she has to read, and it requires too much English, I tell [my husband], ‘Mario, she needs your help.’ He is always helping her. That is why I don’t have a problem. If he did not speak English, then that would be a problem” (translated). Similarly, after coming across a problem that he thought was too difficult for his seven-year-old son, another father described marking “a large circle around it, so the teacher would see it,” noting, “if [a parent] doesn’t speak English, they won’t notice [the difficulty of the assignment]” (translated). As parents viewed interpreters at the school as ineffective and unreliable, fathers were a vital family resource given the schools’ inability to support Spanish-dominant parents’ linguistic needs.

For families in Phoenix and San Antonio, mothers and fathers worked together to ensure their children’s basic educational needs were met. Fathers’ language skills facilitated home-school relations and were a key resource for their wives and children given schools’ failure to support Spanish-dominant parents and their children. Fathers intervened when educational issues arose, sent correspondences to

teachers, and helped with homework. In Phoenix, strict immigration enforcement intersected with children’s home environment. Excluding Spanish-speaking parents from full participation in their children’s schooling limited parents’ abilities to support their children as they struggled emotionally and academically. Other than sending notes home asking parents to discuss the impacts of immigration on their children, the ambiguity around deportation risks structured home-school relations: parents distrusted teachers and feared that schools would expose their undocumented status. As families withdrew their children en masse, schools were unaware of the dangers families faced in their daily lives. Schools represent essential sites of social mobility and social resources for low-income adolescents and their families. However, immigration policy can become de facto education policy for children attending schools that fail to buffer the effects of the punitive immigration environment and language barriers.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this article, we examine how strict immigration enforcement policies shaped work and family life inside and outside the home in San Antonio, Texas, and Phoenix. Drawing on interview data, we highlight how punitive federal and state immigration policies structure community relations through work and school and how these broader influences reach into the home. This analysis provides insights into the intersections between work and school in an age of increased political hostility toward immigrant families. Mexican immigrant fathers’ role in family life has been overlooked, and these findings shed light on the unique ways in which father’s work contributed to children’s development both inside and outside the home.

Our findings point to several broad conclusions. First, coordination among federal, state, and local law enforcement officials suggests that immigration policy serves as de facto family policy, structuring families’ experiences in their communities. Although immigration enforcement has long been under the federal government’s purview, 287(g) program partnerships have caused state-level immigration

enforcement to change dramatically under different presidential administrations. During the Barack Obama administration, Maricopa County Sheriff Joe Arpaio's name became synonymous with worksite immigration raids and deportations for families in Phoenix. The vestiges of anti-immigrant rhetoric and punitive policies in Phoenix during our study can be seen in other state-level policies, such as Alabama's HB 56 (Mohl 2016).

Although families reported vastly different immigration contexts in San Antonio than in Phoenix, Texas has adopted a similarly punitive approach in more recent years. After Donald Trump's election to the presidency in 2016, Texas enacted Senate Bill 4, making it a crime for local officials or public colleges and universities to serve as "sanctuary cities" or refuse to work with ICE (Salas-Chacon 2017; Lasch et al. 2018). During the Joe Biden administration, Texas has also fought against executive action to end workplace immigration raids and deportation of undocumented immigrants by suing the federal government for not enforcing federal immigration law.<sup>2</sup>

Second, our work shows how immigration policy functioned as labor policy in Arizona. Immigration policy limited work opportunities, fomented social distrust, and exacerbated deportation fears. Work authorization documents were more stringently checked, and worksite immigration raids were a key enforcement mechanism. Experiences with deportation threats and limited work opportunities were largely experienced through fathers. As fathers sought other work opportunities and feared deportation, communities fractured. For those who stayed in Phoenix, commonplace activities like registering for school heightened families' deportation fears.

Third, our data show how immigration also functioned as de facto education policy. Although immigration policies did not explicitly target children, children were not spared from its effects. In Phoenix, parents described vanishing classmates and children crying in school because they feared losing their fathers. In both cities, parents' efforts to ensure their children's basic educational needs were met were

constrained by inadequate language supports. Parallel to Sarah Halpern-Meekin and Adam Talkington's findings (2022, this issue), our results show that families responded to these constraints by relying on fathers to play prominent roles at home and in schools.

Although advancing federal immigration reform should be a priority, educational policies need to focus on improving trust and communication between parents and schools rather than punishing children for their parents' immigration status (Bryk and Schneider 2002, 130). Results also suggest school districts must enforce adherence to mandated language access policies. To hold schools accountable, districts should provide parents with information to contact the Office of Civil Rights at the Department of Education to report violations. Districts would, of course, need to clarify that reporting violations would have no impact on parents, whether documented or undocumented.

That forces beyond their desired level of involvement shaped immigrant parents' participation in schools have implications beyond their children's education. Although the active enforcement of strict immigration policies has subsided under the Biden administration, their effects are likely to persist for generations. Scholars have recently called for expanding the adverse childhood experiences framework, which considers how childhood trauma shapes later life outcomes, to include the threat of deportation and deprivation resulting from strict immigration enforcement (Barajas-Gonzalez et al. 2021). Although moving to another state may have offered temporary protection from deportation threats, as the editors note in their introduction to this issue, low-income workers are suffering on a national scale: job opportunities for low-skilled workers have diminished, labor-force participation has declined for those with low educational attainment, and wages have stagnated (see Carlson, Wimer, and Haskins 2022, this issue).

Finally, our study is not without limitations. Although our data succinctly capture the experiences of Mexican immigrant households from mothers' and fathers' perspectives, we

2. *State of Texas v. USA*, 515 F.Supp.3d 327 (2021).

cannot generalize to other populations or other communities. Policies identified in the study are not exhaustive, and factors not mentioned by parents may also have shaped their involvement. In addition, most of the families we interviewed were dual-headed, a typical household structure among working-class and poor Mexican immigrant families, but atypical for most low-income families, which tend to be single-headed households. Thus future research should consider the experiences of single-headed Mexican immigrant households.

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