Why Should They Worry? Lower Levels of Mental Health Distress Among Non-citizen Immigrants

Introduction

This aim of this study is explore why non-citizen immigrants have fewer indicators of mental health distress than either naturalized or native-born citizens. This study attempts to include unauthorized immigrants and extend the study of immigrant mental health. Non-citizen immigrants in the United States consist of two main groups: legally admitted immigrants and unauthorized immigrants. Both legally admitted and unauthorized immigrants are large groups in the U.S., and a large portion of California's population, the state upon which this research focuses. For example, 3.54 legal permanent residents (U.S. Office of Immigration Statistics) and 2.7 million unauthorized immigrants (Pew Hispanic Center 2008) resided in California in 2007. However, the experience of the millions of unauthorized immigrants differs vastly from the experiences of legally admitted immigrants. Legally admitted immigrants are allowed by law to attend school and/or work, to move about freely within the country, and to leave and re-enter the country as their visa permits. They live lives similar to the lives of naturalized and native-born citizens, though they are prohibited from certain activities such as voting in federal elections. Unauthorized immigrants, on the other hand, live in the shadows of society – entering the United States or overstaying their visa surreptitiously, unauthorized to work or receive public services. They are often pushed to live in low-income neighborhoods, frequently change jobs and residences, and constantly worry about being caught and sent back to their country-of-origin or worse, be incarcerated for breaking the law, either of which results in a lack of income for their families and often results in the separation of spouses, parents, and children. In contrast,

naturalized and native-born citizens have full access to all public services, work permits, and freedom of movement and political participation. Given these vast differences between these three groups, non-citizen immigrants (both legal and unauthorized), naturalized citizens and native-born citizens, why do non-citizens have lower levels of mental distress than the other two groups? Theoretical perspectives such as the immigrant health paradox and competing theories will be explored.

Method

This study uses the 2007 California Health Interview Survey (CHIS) and a combined score of mental health distress using the Kessler 6 (K6) psychological distress measurement embedded in the survey. Respondents answered six questions, such as "How often did you feel nervous in the past 30 days? How often have you felt depressed in the past 30 days?", indicated that they felt that way: not at all, a little of the time, some of the time, most of the time, or all of the time. The level of distress was regressed on socio-economic controls (mentioned in the results section) with U.S. born citizens serving as the baseline and binary variables indicating status as a naturalized citizen or non-citizen.

Although I would prefer to capture the distress levels of unauthorized immigrants, the population is difficult to find and not included in many surveys. Fortunately, the California Health Interview Survey includes unauthorized immigrants, though individual indicators of unauthorized status have been removed. Therefore, I have combined unauthorized and legally admitted immigrants into one category, the non-citizen category, even though this will not show an accurate picture of the distress experienced by either legally admitted immigrants or unauthorized immigrants.

Results

Despite controlling for age, education, poverty levels, race/ethnicity, years in the U.S., physical health and employment, and English skills among others, non-citizens indicate lower levels of mental health distress than either U.S. born citizens or naturalized citizens.

Conclusions

Though non-citizens are more disadvantaged than native-born and naturalized citizens, they indicate the lowest levels of mental distress. This suggests several possibilities. First, results show that despite more precarious legal positions for non-citizens in the U.S., they consider their day-to-day lives as less stressful than other groups do. In the U.S. they may be saving money and sending it to their families, and spending money on items that they want. In comparison to their home country and the lack of economic opportunities, life in the U.S. and the prestige that success in the U.S. brings, though marred by worries of being caught and sent back home, may on a day-to-day basis be less stressful for unauthorized immigrants. Likewise, legally admitted residents may compare their situation to living in their country-of-origin and be happier for the economic opportunities in the U.S. On the other hand, it is also possible that the K6 measurement is not an appropriate measure for the immigrant or minority population (though Kessler et. al 2003 find the measure to be adequate for the general U.S. population). On the other hand, it is possible that non-citizens are selected for better mental health; those who are unable to cope return to their country-of-origin. I am still exploring the results and their theoretical implications.