



How Removal of Immigrant Fathers Harms the Sexual Health and Wellbeing of Their Daughters

Kate Coleman-Minahan, University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus

Goleen Samari, University of Southern California

U.S.-born Mariela, now 31, described her Mexican immigrant father as “an awesome dad.” But he was deported when she was 11 years old, just beginning her adolescent years. After her mother remarried, Mariela described her new stepfather as strict. “He wouldn’t let us talk to our dad so it was hard because at that point, I was already like 12 or 13. And obviously my dad to me was everything.” She continued, “My mom and my stepdad were kind of strict with me. I think that’s one of the reasons that I kind of got married early was not just because, obviously because I love my husband, but I also wanted to get out of the house.” By age 14, Mariela was sneaking out and had sex for the first time. She married at 15 and was pregnant by 17.

Our research explores the quality of father-daughter relationships among Mexican-origin immigrant families and examines how relationships between fathers and daughters influence early sexual initiation. We analyzed data about 398 Mexican-origin young women in the 1994-2008 National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health, and from face-to-face interviews with 21 Mexican-origin women recruited by immigrant-serving organizations. Families are multigenerational and immigration policies that keep families intact can improve the health of both children and parents. Social policies that keep families together and economic policies that give families access to safe and productive employment have direct implications for children and adolescents. The exploitation of immigrants and policies that cause family separation undermine the sexual and reproductive health of adolescents.

Father-Daughter Relationships among Mexican Immigrants

Daughters who participated in our interviews usually described relationships with their fathers in positive terms – and a number of participants referred to themselves as “daddy’s little girl.” Fathers were described as sacrificing for the family by working hard for long hours. They were said to be engaged in their daughters’ education, providing love and affection. Like relationships in all families regardless of ethnicity and immigration status, these relationships included moments of frustration and disappointment. Yet, with their own words, daughters refuted stereotypes that paint Mexican immigrant fathers as sexist and emotionally unavailable.

The minority of daughters who reported emotionally distant or hostile relationships frequently described fathers who worked long grueling hours and faced economic exploitation at their jobs. “Survival parenting” may be more profound among immigrant families who lack resources such as housing subsidies and food stamps, and work in jobs where they deal with wage theft, mandatory and unpaid overtime, and exposure to occupational hazards. Such working conditions drain time and energy that immigrant parents might otherwise spend with their children.

Family Separations Increase the Risk of Early Sexual Initiation

Although the U.S. teen birth rate has been decreasing, Latina adolescents have the highest birth rates in the country. Early sexual initiation increases the risk of teen pregnancies and births, and adolescents in low-income families and those who are separated from a parent are at higher risk for early sexual initiation. Regardless of family income, race, or ethnicity, all adolescents need supportive family environments to support their growth and sexual health decision-making.

Notably, our study finds that positive relationships between fathers and daughters are associated with a later age of the daughter's sexual initiation. Characteristics of good father-daughter relationships – sacrificing for the family, encouraging academic success, and providing emotional support – may help adolescents delay sex. We also find that separating fathers from daughters increases the risk of early sexual initiation. Prior studies have documented that supportive fathers can protect against risky sexual behavior, even when fathers do not live with their children. But these studies only include U.S.-born families and do not consider the extra strain for fathers and daughters who are separated by national borders. Close relationships are difficult to maintain when children cannot regularly see their parent.

Deportations of supportive fathers without criminal records are on the rise. Will this lead to more risky sexual behavior and sexually transmitted infections and teen births? One of our participants was born in Mexico, migrated to the U.S. when she was three, and is now a U.S. citizen with a degree in political science. When asked what she thought of the high Latina teen birth rate she replied, "...more than anything else, I think it starts with the family. And for those girls who don't have that... usually the males get deported before the females, the dads get deported. So what's going to happen with these girls? Is that going to make... [adolescent births] triple?"

Improving Father-Daughter Relationships and Adolescent Health

Immigration reforms such as the DREAM Act that promote family reunification can improve adolescent health, including reducing risky sexual behaviors in three ways:

- Protecting parents from deportation means that families stay intact – and fewer separations of parents from their children means lower risks to the health and wellbeing of children and adolescents.
- Fewer families will live in fear if there are legislated protections for undocumented parents and children. Fear of deportation has negative health consequences for children and adolescents, because fear increases anxiety and depression and may lead to poor school performance.
- Immigration reform that allows and promotes legal employment can prevent workplace exploitation, including wage theft or exposure to occupational hazards. Healthy parents with more time at home can better parent their children.

Strong families are valued by Americans regardless of political party. Immigration reform that protects families – not just children – is crucial to the wellbeing of young people and parents. In turn, strong families reinforce America's social fabric and boost the economy for everyone.

Read more in Kate Coleman-Minahan and Goleen Samari, "He Supported Me 100%": Mexican-Immigrant Fathers, Daughters, and Adolescent Sexual Health" *Ethnicity & Health* 23 (2018).