

## Understanding Violence Within Recently Immigrated Hispanic Couples

Hispanics comprised 16.3% (50.5 million) of the total U.S. population in 2010, with a projected rise to 29% by the middle of this century. In the past decade, the Hispanic population has accounted for over half (56%) of the nation's growth. This rapid growth is largely attributed to births (58% of the Hispanic population increase between 2000 and 2010 came from births); however, immigration continues to add to the overall increase. As this growth continues, special attention must be given to understanding best practice models and interventions for newly immigrated Hispanic couples, especially those who may be experiencing intimate partner violence (IPV).

The preventative approach of healthy marriage and relationship education (MRE) programs, and the interest shown by Hispanic families in utilizing this programming, makes it necessary for practitioners to understand Hispanic culture in order to address a variety of issues. Although research focused on Hispanics is limited, family-centered prevention models that integrate key cultural themes are being utilized more frequently when working with Hispanics who have recently immigrated to the United States. These couples are adjusting to a new culture, a process that can greatly strain a relationship. This Tip Sheet provides background information about cultural issues that may help MRE practitioners understand why Hispanic immigrants in a violent intimate partner relationship may not seek help, and what they can do if they are working with these couples.



There are several concepts vital to understanding the Hispanic culture.<sup>1</sup> For example, central to the coping ability of many Hispanics is the surrender to and sometimes the glorification of “suffering.” Suffering may be attributed to bad luck or punishment for past wrongdoings. Bearing pain with dignity and showing minimal discomfort, known in Spanish as *aguantar*, is valued among many Hispanic populations. Instead of complaining, suffering may be expressed as anger (at self or others), victimization, and disempowerment. Furthermore, many Hispanics believe in the concept of fatalism. This refers to the belief that a person does not control his or her destiny. Instead of life circumstances being determined by their own efforts, many Hispanics believe that luck, fate, political forces, or other external factors determine their future. Viewing suffering as the victim's fate and believing the

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1. This Tip Sheet speaks to general cultural concepts. Hispanics are a culturally and religiously diverse population in the United States and providers are encouraged to learn about the country of origin and the cultural norms within it.

future is not in their control may contribute to an increased acceptance of violence within the couple relationship.

Another concept to understand is *familismo*. This refers to family loyalty, obedience, respect of authority figures, helpfulness, generosity, responsibility, hard work, and sacrifice for the family. In this way, family members may influence the couple's decision making. *Familismo* may protect families against violence when the extended family views violent behavior as a betrayal of the whole family and assumes a strong stance against it. In other families, violence is accepted and normalized and attempts to change patterns or end a violent relationship may be seen as being disloyal to the family.

Coupled with the stresses of immigration, these concepts create potential for intimate partner violence to become escalated for the following reasons:

**Isolation.** Many immigrants coming to the United States have lost an established support network of friends and family. They may experience feelings of isolation and separation, which in turn, can lead to frustration. This frustration may manifest

itself as violence between the couple. Additionally, isolation can be exploited as a control tactic. For example, participation in new opportunities at work, church, or English as Second Language (ESL) classes might be prohibited in an effort by one partner to maintain power and control in the relationship.

**Lack of knowledge and culturally appropriate services.** Newly immigrated Hispanics may be unaware of what is considered to be IPV in the United States, what their legal rights are, and what social service agencies and resources are available in the community. Furthermore, language barriers and/or a lack of culturally appropriate services (i.e., bilingual/bicultural staff from domestic violence programs/shelters) may prevent individuals from accessing needed services.

**Fear.** For newly immigrated Hispanics, a variety of fears may be at play that can deter them from accessing support services and/or cause them to remain in a dangerous relationship. The following fears are common and can be used by perpetrators of family violence to manipulate their partner.

Fears	Common forms of manipulation
Deportation (of the individual or of extended family members, children, etc.) and/or separation from children	Destroying or hiding passports/visas and threatening to contact immigration authorities and/or taking children to the partner's country of origin
Not being able to sufficiently provide financially for the family	Withholding financial support intended for family members in the country of origin
Lack of credibility with authorities and in legal or financial matters because of cultural/language barriers and/or immigration status	A more acculturated partner requiring an individual to sign English language legal documents he/she may not understand

It is recommended that MRE practitioners consult with a domestic violence (DV) provider who has experience with newly immigrated Hispanic couples to create a DV protocol specific to this population's needs. Having an understanding of various themes within the Hispanic culture and being aware of common challenges recent immigrants may face can help healthy marriage education practitioners more effectively understand the issue of family violence within the couples and families they serve.

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