



Institute for Community Health

Building sustainable community health, together

A collaboration of the Cambridge Health Alliance, Mount Auburn Hospital, and Partners Healthcare

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ICH boosts research on immigrant health

It has been well-documented that immigrants do not have adequate access to health care services. At best, they are receiving inconsistent care – and without the protections of health insurance, the cost of even a single hospitalization can bring many into debt. With sustained funding, ICH can be instrumental in gathering data that will help to develop innovative approaches that could yield solutions to this complex problem.

“Immigrants are resilient; after all, they got themselves here,” says Karen Hacker, M.D. MPH, Executive Director of the Institute for Community Health. And “it’s a good thing they are” she says, since in holding down often 3-4 jobs, this population often does not have time to make health care a priority.

Immigrants often have multiple health issues, and one issue often triggers another problem. For instance, a person who is diabetic and has a cleaning job may have inconsistent access to healthy food while on the job. “They won’t be able to keep their blood sugar in check,” says Hacker. Tight schedules and multiple jobs also make planning and cooking healthy meals more difficult, and workers may face additional health challenges on the job such as increased physical strain from lifting equipment or increased exposure to toxins in cleaning fluids.

Mental health is becoming another important factor in the immigrant health puzzle. Depression rears its head with many recent immigrants or their adolescent children as they cope with job instability, absence of family members for social support, and a lack of guidance on how to adapt to life in a new culture. Further, prescribing medicine alone often doesn’t address the myriad of factors contributing to the depression, says Hacker of a teenage immigrant patient who showed signs of depression. If a teen who has grown up in the U.S. loses her parents to deportation and joins them abroad, she doesn’t know anyone in her parents’ home country. If she stays in the U.S., she faces joblessness and lack of support for future steps toward stability, such as college. Health care needs to address this holistically, rather than compartmentalize health needs from social needs.

It might seem that documented immigrants’ health care isn’t affected, but that’s not always the case. Often documented immigrants still report feeling “profiled,” says Hacker. For example, she says even the treatment

of immigrants by local police forces can influence the tone and health of a community. In addition, deportation of one family member can create upheaval for a family. Stress related to role changes when grandparents become primary caregivers, or when children lose their siblings who are undocumented, is not uncommon for many “mixed status” families.



Photo by Gig Harmon, included in the February 2010 presentation of results from the "Impact of Immigration Enforcement on Immigrant Health" project. This project was completed through one of ICH's local partnerships to address immigrant health needs.

Many of these challenges culminate in immigrants having low utilization of health services, even when they are needed. They may avoid visits for flu shots, or to manage serious illnesses. As stated by one community partner who works with immigrant groups, many immigrant patients “tend not to go to a doctor until something’s very serious, because they’re just afraid that they’re not going to get help and if they get the help, they can’t afford it.” Immigrants thus often end up using the emergency room once health problems have already progressed, says Hacker, instead of taking advantage of primary care to prevent major health problems.

ICH envisions that sustained funding would enable us to work with community institutions to improve health care for immigrant populations. “There’s no straight shot,” Hacker says – but if health care providers understand more about the whole picture of their patients’ lives, patients will receive more effective care. Research by organizations such as ICH can provide a fuller picture of the needs of diverse immigrant populations. With better data, schools, primary care providers, and public health systems can all do a better job of protecting the health of vulnerable populations.