

2022-05-01

Family Disruptions and Maternal Health in COVID Times

Donna Maldonado
University of Texas at El Paso

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.utep.edu/open_etd



Part of the [Latin American Languages and Societies Commons](#), [Latin American Studies Commons](#), [Psychiatric and Mental Health Commons](#), and the [Sociology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Maldonado, Donna, "Family Disruptions and Maternal Health in COVID Times" (2022). *Open Access Theses & Dissertations*. 3614.

https://scholarworks.utep.edu/open_etd/3614

This is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@UTEP. It has been accepted for inclusion in Open Access Theses & Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UTEP. For more information, please contact lweber@utep.edu.

FAMILY DISRUPTIONS AND MATERNAL
HEALTH IN COVID
TIMES

DONNA MALDONADO
Master's Program in Sociology

APPROVED:

Carina Heckert, Ph.D., Chair

Jeremy Slack, Ph.D.

Selfa A. Chew, Ph.D.

Stephen L. Crites, Jr., Ph.D.
Dean of the Graduate School

Copyright ©

by

Donna Maldonado

2022

Dedication

To Rachel Pyle

With love and admiration

and for every woman

that has gone through

motherhood

FAMILY DISRUPTIONS AND MATERNAL

HEALTH IN COVID

TIMES

by

DONNA MALDONADO

THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at El Paso

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of Sociology & Anthropology

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

May 2022

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge Dr. Carina Heckert who helped me every step of the way to reach this point of my academic life to include my undergraduate advising, continuing with graduate mentorship. I would also like to acknowledge the research team, especially Kimberly Anaya and Annamaria Solis for their assistance in transcribing interviews needed for my research. You are wonderful, and I could not have done this on time without your help.

I would like to acknowledge my committee and the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at UTEP. I would like to thank Dr. Slack and Dr. Chew for being on my committee and sharing their wisdom with me. Thank you, Dr. Chew, for encouraging me to continue with graduate school. Without your kind words I do not think I could have decided to continue. Thank you, Dr. Slack, for your patience and for sharing your knowledge and passion for the struggles of immigrants. I would like to thank Dr. Heckert for inviting me to participate in this research and for accepting being the chair of my committee. I will always cherish your mentorship, your kind words, and your patience.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge and thank my mother Rachel Pyle for her help and encouragement along the way.

Abstract

Prenatal and postpartum women of the border region of El Paso-Ciudad Juarez have been experiencing multiple forms of family disruption due to the twenty-month border closure in an attempt to contain the COVID pandemic, partners having to find jobs far away from home because of economic concerns, and fear of familial disruption due to the threat of deportation of partners or family members. The purpose of the study is to explore the perceived effects of these types of family disruptions and how they are shaping maternal health in COVID times. This project included the analysis of fifteen interviews with pregnant and postpartum women recruited through a clinical context as part of a larger ongoing study (September 2020-present) on emotional distress and maternal health in the border area. This study analyzed interviews in which family disruption during pregnancy was a salient theme. Pregnant and postpartum women reported an overlap of how various forms of family disruptions generated additional types of stressors and health concerns. The perceived effects of family disruptions experienced by pregnant and postpartum women and how they are shaping maternal health become even more visible through the sociological frameworks of legal violence, structural violence, and symbolic violence. The findings suggest that expectant mothers' health is affected by the perceived effects of family disruptions and the stressors that those disruptions represent. More research is needed to develop appropriate interventions to mitigate the effects of family disruptions.

Table of Contents

Dedication.....	iii
Acknowledgements.....	v
Abstract.....	vi
Table of Contents.....	vii
Introduction.....	1
Background.....	2
Immigration Policy and Deportation on the US-Mexico Border.....	2
The Effects of the COVID pandemic in the Border Region.....	4
Mental Health and Pregnancy.....	7
Family Definitions in Immigration Law.....	8
Latin American Definition of Family.....	9
Theoretical Framing.....	11
Methods.....	13
Participants and Recruitment.....	13
Research Design.....	14
Data Analysis.....	15
Positionality and My Role as a Researcher.....	16
Results.....	18
Mental Distress.....	19
Loss of Social Support.....	22
Economic Insecurities as Exacerbating Disruptions to Family Unity.....	25
Discussion.....	29
The Border Closure as Legal Violence.....	29
Structural Violence and Economic Insecurities.....	31
The Violence of Deportations and the Fear of Deportation.....	33

Limitations	37
Recommended Responses.....	38
Conclusion	39
References.....	40
Vita	42

Introduction

This is a qualitative study on the effects of disruptions to family unity for prenatal and postpartum women in the border region of Ciudad Juarez- El Paso. During the period of this research (September 2020-present), women have been experiencing multiple forms of disruption to their familial ties. First, due to the extended closure of the border, women in cross-border families have been cut off from family members during crucial times such as the birth of the child. The second form of disruption to family unity that expectant women in the study reported is partners having to find or accept jobs far away from home, such as in the oil fields, due to economic concerns exacerbated by the pandemic. The third type of family separation that mothers in the study have experienced is the deportation of a loved one. In many cases, the threat of deportation, and familial disruption and what it would entail, was a significant factor in shaping emotional wellbeing. The study will compare the perceived effects of these diverse types of disruption to family unity and how they are shaping maternal health in COVID times through the analysis of fifteen interviews with pregnant and postpartum women recruited through a clinical context in El Paso, Texas.

Background

To better understand the dynamics related to disruptions to family unity in the US-Mexico border region, it is necessary to understand immigration and border policies and how these policies have ripple effects even for US citizens due to their familial and community ties. These familial disruptions have implications for the wellbeing of pregnant and postpartum women.

Immigration Policy and Deportation on the US-Mexico Border

According to a 2014 study the sum of deportations between 1998 and 2012 was over 4.1 million. These numbers are the highest in the history of the United States (Golash-Boza, 2014). According to the ICE.GOV webpage under the annual report, during the 2020 fiscal year, ICE removed a total of 185,884 “aliens”. The 2021 report under the Biden administration is not yet available (ICE Annual Report, 2020). Deportations increased since 1997 because Congress passed two laws in 1996: The Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act (AEDPA) and the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) (Golash-Boza, 2014). These laws changed the rights of all foreign-born people in the USA, by eliminating judicial review of some deportation orders and requiring mandatory detention for some noncitizens. Further, the federal government added more funding to immigration enforcement. Moreover, these laws implemented the aggravated felony provision which dictates that aggravated felony cases do not require judicial review; therefore, people do not have the right for a judge to take into consideration the specifics of their case or their personal ties to the USA, such as marriage and children (Golash-Boza, 2014). In addition, after 9/11 the creation of Homeland Security gave

way to anti-immigrant sentiments. The increase of deportation since 1997 has affected particularly Latino immigrants (Golash-Boza, 2014). Furthermore, Golash and Boza (2014) found that “Latin American men are the primary targets of deportation insofar as Latinos are often racially profiled for “driving while brown” (Golash-Boza, 2014). Consequently, the deportation of men results in deportation of fathers and spouses. Often, men are the primary breadwinner in the family. As a result, even when deportation does not leave children homeless or in foster care, it leads the family left behind to poverty and harsh living conditions. Moreover, according to a 2013 study, there are an estimated 5.5 million children in the United States with unauthorized parents and 75% of these children are US-born citizens (Allen, Cisneros, & Tellez, 2013). Therefore, millions of children and their mother or father are at risk to experience the effects of deportation. There are now more undocumented immigrants living in the United States than there were African Americans living in the south during Jim Crow in the 1950s (Waters, 2015). The banishment of an undocumented family member may entail prolonged or perpetual separation from family and serious economic hardship (Stoian & Drumea, 2017). The result of the US handling crime via immigration law has not increased the deportation of aliens for terrorism. It only has increased the deportation of thousands of long-term residents for low-level crimes, resulting in separation of families (Stoian & Drumea, 2017).

There is a need to better understand the effects of deportation on families and especially the effects on pregnant partners affected by deportation. Anxiety, stress, isolation, poverty, and food insecurity can result from separating families. As I will discuss later, these are issues that can increase vulnerability to adverse birth outcomes. This reflects what Laura Enriquez calls *multigenerational punishment*, or the negative effects of deportation on family left behind (Enriquez, 2015). The concept of “multigenerational punishment can be used to scrutinize how

law is meant to control undocumented immigrants everyday lives” and how these immigration laws can also generate limitations in other people’s lives with different immigration statuses (Enriquez, 2015, p. 939).

Another source of suffering for undocumented families and children is poverty and food insecurity. For instance, 1996 welfare reform made the restrictions on public benefits for undocumented immigrants harder (Waters, 2015), resulting in harsher levels of poverty and food insecurity for those with a household member with undocumented status. Poverty is a risk factor for children’s overall wellbeing to include emotional, intellectual, and educational wellbeing (Waters, 2015). Other consequences of the fear of deportation are parents not driving their children to school for fear of committing a traffic infraction, family members not reporting domestic abuse or crime, losing opportunities for food and housing, and missed opportunities for planning for a better future (Fradkin, 2018).

Highlighting the relevance of exploring the ripple effects of deportations in El Paso is that Texas’ immigration enforcement is now considered to be one of the toughest in the United States. As of March 2017, 13 Texas counties, in rural areas, applied for the 287g provision which allows police and sheriffs to investigate for immigration status in partnership with ICE (Cardoso, Scott, Faulkner, & Lane, 2018).

The Effects of the COVID pandemic in the Border Region

According to USAFACTS, the immediate economic effects of the pandemics in the US included a 35% decrease in the GDP in 2020, which is the lowest growth rate since 1946. Almost twenty-five million Americans were receiving unemployment benefits by May 2020. This was the highest unemployment rate in the pandemic. There was a loss of 9.4 million jobs in 2020;

this number represents a 6.2% decrease from 2019, which is larger than the 3.7% seen from 2008 to 2009 during the Great Recession (USAFACTS, 2021). By the end of 2020, 74% of small businesses reported the negative effects of COVID-19 (USAFACTS, 2021). These negative effects on the economy led to the federal government putting into effect paycheck protection program loans to help businesses to keep their employees and ease the blow to the economy by keeping as many people employed as possible, even if businesses remained closed during the pandemic. The Trump Administration also implemented the stimulus check program or the American Rescue Plan and expanded the federal child tax credit from \$2000.00 to \$3600.00 per child (Meek, 2021), although undocumented immigrants were excluded from the stimulus checks. In El Paso, local authorities were trying to contain the outbreak by closing nonessential businesses. For example, in November 2020, county judge Ricardo Samaniego mandated a county-wide, two-week closure of all nonessential businesses (Mulcahy & Aguilar, 2020). The immediate economic effects had other long-term economic implications, such as the need for people to work out-of-town to find work with higher wages to support a growing family, especially if they have accrued debt during an unemployment period. This has at times created another source of stress to expectant mothers through the prolonged separation from partners who must find jobs far away from home due to economic concerns.

The pandemic was used as a justification to implement a 20-month closure of the US-Mexico border (March 2020-November 2021) to all nonessential travelers to control the virus. However, the public health value of closing the border has been brought into question. The local journalist Angela Kocherga reported that this policy claimed to contain the spread of COVID-19 yet showed inequalities at all levels in how the policy was implemented, and whom it affected directly (Kocherga, 2021). For instance, the border was closed to pedestrians and land travelers,

but if a non-U.S. citizen could afford to buy a plane ticket, they could fly into US land. Furthermore, U.S. travelers could take vacations in Mexico with no restrictions. Kocherga commented, “Fully vaccinated grandmothers from Juarez could not walk across the international bridge, but U.S. citizens were hopping on planes to enjoy vacations in Mexico” (Kocherga, 2021). Thus, Canadian, and Mexican nationals’ access to family members living in the United States was limited to their monetary ability to buy a plane ticket to visit relatives in the United States during the border closure. The border closure equals familial disruptions in border regions in any country, because of the borders’ social dynamics that have always existed between their cities. People in border communities have blended families and friends on both sides of the border, and the communities themselves depend on one another economically and culturally. Kocherga quoted UTEP social work professor Eva Moya as saying, “Decisions that are made on one side have a direct impact on the other side” (Kocherga, 2021). Furthermore, Moya explained that to understand border dynamics someone must understand that “Yes for many of us, we have one leg in one country and the other leg in the other country” (Kocherga, 2021). The border closure brought family separation in border areas, reflecting an extremely high “social cost.” Moya explains that this social cost can be measured in “missed birthdays, graduations, quinceañeras and funerals” (Kocherga, 2021). For women in this study, we can add to the social cost list missed births and missed support for mothers during the pregnancy and postpartum period. As an illustration of the cross-border support that grandmothers in particular typically provide, in an article published by *El Paso Times*, a Mexican grandmother narrates how she used to cross every Tuesday and Thursday from Ciudad Juarez to pick up her grandchildren from school, then spend some time with them and her daughter, or sometimes meet with other friends for breakfast and grocery shopping. This grandmother declared that she had not crossed to El

Paso since March 18, 2020. This grandmother remembers the exact date, the journalist explained, because “remembering exact dates is a sign of the trauma the restrictions exacted on border families” (Martinez & Villagran, 2021). Border residents experienced the border closure as an abrupt interruption of a lifetime of coming and going (Villagran, 2021). The border closure “whipped away half of our bi-national life” expressed journalist Lauren Villagran (Villagran, 2021). Villagran quoted a mental health professional as saying that the pain and the powerlessness due to the border closure was grief. When the border was closed for a week, there was a constant hope that it would reopen soon. After weeks and then months went by and the border did not reopen, border communities experienced a psychological response named “learned helplessness” (Villagran, 2021). We have learned about the individual cases of family disruption after the border closure through mothers in the study. In this study I will further interrogate the effects of the border closure through the narratives of pregnant and postpartum women who felt a sense of loss due to the extended separation from key members of their familial support networks.

Mental Health and Pregnancy

Deportation or the fear of deportation of oneself or close relative is associated with higher levels of stress-related illnesses (Fradkin, 2018). Of particular significance for this study is that a number of key birth outcomes, such as birth weight and gestational age at birth, are stress sensitive. One contributing factor is that the fetus reacts to the various levels of stress of the mother. As the due date approaches, the heart rate of the mother and fetus become even more synchronized through ‘somatic-cardiac coupling’ to get ready for birth (DiPietro, 2012). This synchronization, however, can be maladaptive if the mother is under elevated levels of stress.

For example, Fradkin explored the health effects of immigration and customs enforcement (ICE) raids and found that babies born of Latina mothers after an ICE raid had a 24% higher likelihood of low birth weight (LBW) than those babies born before the raid (Fradkin, 2018). Another study of immigration raids examined the stress related disorders in US-born Latino children and found higher levels of posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms among children of detained or deported parents than among those children with parents not detained or deported (Fradkin, 2018).

Several studies reveal how the ability to be a parent is challenged by stress of the limitations of the perceived personal and social resources available to deal with those challenges. This stress may affect parents' ability "to manage their emotions leading to outcomes such as lower life satisfaction, increased depression and anxiety, marital discord, and a higher likelihood of separation or divorce" (Cardoso, Scott, Faulkner, & Lane, 2018, p. 303). In other words, the stress from the many ways that families have been separated during the pandemic further compounds the stresses of normal everyday parenting. Expectant mothers under this context are left with mental and emotional devastation of losing a spouse to deportation, or to a faraway job, and in many cases without close family members to comfort and help them. This can exacerbate the risk for postpartum depression and create challenges in taking care of their family and a newborn.

Family Definitions in Immigration Law

The definition of family is subjective and has various meanings under different contexts. For example, the Merriam-Webster Dictionary explains that the word has evolved since it was first used. Now the word family has "many different senses, and at least one of these senses may signify different things to different people" (Merriam-Webster, 2022). Furthermore, family is a

culturally based idea, shaped by cultural experiences to include legal experiences (Hawthorne, 2007).

In immigration law the definition of family provided by the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) offers a limited definition of what is considered a family. INA has a traditional view of a family with parental roles that only involve two people, who are typically assumed to be the biological parents of the child. This creates a problem when it comes to immigration law since in many families parental roles are not so rigid. For example, artificial insemination cases challenge the ideas related to paternity and biology (Degtyareva, 2011). Moreover, immigration law is limiting in who qualifies as a family since it only considers immediate family. For instance, a child could be petitioned by a US citizen parent before the child is 21 years old. Furthermore, immigration law only focuses on a family that is unchanging that excludes other family types already present in the United States, even if individuals affectively view other people as family members (Degtyareva, 2011).

Latin American Definition of Family

Family is a culturally based idea shaped by experiences, making its meaning subjective (Hawthorne, 2007). For Latin American families, the meaning of family is rooted in the sense of family obligations, expectations, “and attitudes about the nature of family” (Burr & Mutcler, 1999, p. 674). Burr and Mutcler argue that these obligations, expectations, and attitudes about family “develop during the socialization process and include lifelong personal experiences as well as observations of relationships among members of each generation during the individual and family life course” (Burr & Mutcler, 1999, p. 674). An example of obligations in Latin American families is the duty for parents and children to give financial, and emotional support as

well as personal contact, share household resources, help with household chores, and give help with any day-to-day needs (Burr & Mutcler, 1999). Furthermore, Latin American families are responsible for providing one another emotional, affective, and psychological support (Burr & Mutcler, 1999). Economic class is also a factor when it comes to determine the type of support and help families give to each other. Middle class families exchange money and goods. Working class families choose to exchange in-kind support.

In Latino families the importance of family also includes the extended family. Moreover, the family membership is so important that “parenthood” is often seen as important as “partnerhood” (Skogrand, Hatch, & Singh, 2005, p. 1). A study with Latino couples with strong marriage and family ties explained that for Latinos, marriage and family were understood to be same. For example, couples in this study when asked about their marriage ignored the researchers’ question and explained the importance of the family (Skogrand, Hatch, & Singh, 2005). Furthermore, Latinos like large extended family links. There are prolonged visits and other interactions between extended family members when they live close to each other (Skogrand, Hatch, & Singh, 2005). An example of interactions and exchanges between extended Latino families is childcare, since it is easy to have a parent, an aunt or uncle, or grandparent to pick up children from school when parents are out working, or in the event one of the children needs to be picked up early from school because of sickness. Moreover, a study found that women that have access to a mother or mother-in-law or grandmother to help with childcare are 5.1 to 6.2 percent more likely to have a job than those who do not have access to family childcare help (Campton & Pollak, 2014). Other studies have shown that the force that ties intergenerational families is stronger among those living in metropolitan areas (Burr & Mutcler, 1999).

Theoretical Framing

Structural Violence, Legal Violence and Symbolic Violence

Theoretically, I will use the overlapping concepts of structural violence, legal violence, and symbolic violence. Structural Violence is a term coined by Johan Galtung in the 1960s and by liberation theologians (Farmer, Nizeye, Stulac, & Keshavjee, 2006). Structural violence attends to the ways that social structures and political economic forces “stop individuals, groups, and societies from reaching their full potential” (Farmer, Nizeye, Stulac, & Keshavjee, 2006, p. 15). Galtung (cited in Farmer, et al., 2006, p.15) explains that structural violence is the “avoidable impairment of fundamental human needs or... the impairment of human life, which lowers the actual degree to which someone is able to meet their needs below that which would otherwise be possible.” In other words, structural violence prevents people from reaching, and fulfilling their basic human needs for survival. Structural violence can be almost invisible since it is found in every day social structures “and it is normalized by stable institutions and regular experience” (Farmer, Nizeye, Stulac, & Keshavjee, 2006, p. 15). Structural violence is found in social inequalities, such as wealth, education, political power, and healthcare, marked by social injustice and oppression. Structural violence is not perpetuated by anyone, but by a system allowing the already mentioned disparities in society. For instance, no one dies directly by being poor, but the circumstances that the poor experience brings about health issues in different forms, to include physical, and mental issues resulting from the stress and lack of proper food or food insecurity, combined with the lack of resources for healthcare and access to medications, resulting in a shorter life expectancy (Menjivar & Abrego, 2012).

The term legal violence is closely related to structural violence. According to Cecilia Menjivar and Leisy Abrego, it is used to explain the “normalized but cumulative injurious effects

of the law” (Menjívar & Abrego, 2012, p. 1384). For example, legal violence helps to clarify and put into perspective how the criminalization in local, state, and federal laws is affecting lives of immigrants by excluding them from access to basic needs such as food and shelter without taxing their overall wellbeing. This type of violence is tightly related to structural violence, where immigrants are affected by the established laws that exclude them and prevent them from having social mobility.

Symbolic violence, as explained by Pierre Bourdieu, is when people adopt or accept the power that the system in control has over them and their lives. “The most intolerable conditions of existence can so often be perceived as acceptable and even natural” (Smith, 2007, p. 1). Another characteristic of symbolic violence, according to Bourdieu (cited in Smith 2007), is that people “unjustly blame themselves for their own suffering” but the part of real social oppression is still hidden. Expectant mothers in the study are experiencing all three types of violence in their daily lives. For instance, mothers that are experiencing family separation due to the border closure and/or deportation are experiencing legal violence in ways that can exacerbate structural violence. When expectant mothers experience family separation due to husbands working away for a better paying job, they are experiencing the result of structural violence. Furthermore, all cases of family separation are reflecting the effects of symbolic violence, as various sources of oppression they experience have become normalized and hidden.

Methods

For this project, I analyze a subset of interviews conducted as a part of a larger ongoing study on emotional distress and maternal health in the border region. The broader study will include a sample of approximately 200 women recruited from a clinical context and who completed a survey, consented to release their health records, and donated a sample of hair to test for cortisol levels (with cortisol being a key biomarker for stress). A subsample of 60 participants have participated in an in-depth semi-structured interview. Approximately ten participants will participate in multiple postpartum interviews. I originally looked into analyzing 19 interviews, but only 15 of the 19 interviews had experienced family disruptions to family unity. My project analyzes 15 interviews, as these are the interviews in which disruption to family unity during the pregnancy was a salient theme.

Participants and Recruitment

The participants of the study are women seeking prenatal care at Texas Tech University Health Science Center El Paso and deliver at the University Medical Center. The enrollment of participants for this study is still open and ongoing. Potential participants are first approached by a research assistant during one of their prenatal visits. If they consent to participate, they are asked to provide a hair sample and sign a HIPAA release form. Additionally, a member of the research team follows up to conduct the survey. Participants have the option to complete the survey over the phone or over the internet using a link. They receive a \$10 gift card for completing the survey and an additional \$10 gift card for providing a hair sample. The final question of the survey asks if the participant would be interested in a follow-up interview, and

those who are interested, are contacted by a member of the research team. Additionally, we are aiming to conduct multiple follow-up interviews with approximately 10 participants to achieve a broader understanding of their postpartum experiences. All research material is available in Spanish and English. Participants are compensated with a \$25.00 dollar gift card for every interview. For this project, I am not analyzing every interview, but instead, a subsample of 15 participants who during the interview reported family disruption as a salient source of stress. Since I am only analyzing interview data, below I focus on the interviewing methods and analysis of interview data and do not go into detail regarding other aspects of the study.

Research Design

The first round of interviews is semi-structured, meaning we are using an interview guide, but we allow the conversation to go in different directions based on what is emerging as important to each women's experience. Due to the constraints of the pandemic, most of the interviews have been either over the phone or video call. We have questions related to immigration concerns, for themselves or for any member of their family. We also ask for their views and thoughts about the current immigration policy. Plus, we ask questions about their household economic situation and whether they feel secure where they live. We also ask about any other sources of stress they might have, to provide more information related to any of the topics of interest. Moreover, we ask how they have been affected by the pandemic, and if they have family members in Mexico that they have not seen due to the border closure. Interviews typically last about an hour. Follow-up interviews are more open-ended and include a series of talking points related to their birth experience, immigration concerns, household resources, their overall sense of security, and their current sources of stress. Additionally, we develop

individualized talking points based on themes that emerged as salient during the first interview. Follow up interviews also typically last about an hour. All interviews are recorded and transcribed in the language in which they were conducted.

Data Analysis

Atlas.ti.8 qualitative data analysis software is being used to organize and code interview transcriptions. I used the grounded theory model to explain the interactions and experiences of expectant mothers and family separation (Harappa, 2021). The research team has created a codebook using inductive and deductive reasoning to develop codes. This codebook includes codes related to types of emotions women have experienced; health issues or concerns, especially as they relate to the birth; and types of stressors women have experienced such as food insecurity, economic concerns, interpersonal conflicts, and immigration-related concerns. I used this codebook in addition to adding my own codes. My coding was based on themes identified in the existing literature and patterns I have noticed in the interviews I conducted. I coded line by line and use memo notes to make connections as data and themes emerged.

The themes of interest for this paper are tensions related to family disruptions to family unity by deportation, extended border closure, and partners going to work away from home. I gave attention to how various forms of separation overlap with other types of stressors and health concerns. Of particular interest was the relationship between family separation and the types of emotions that women report and how they perceived their emotions as shaping their pregnancy, birth, and postpartum experience.

Positionality and My Role as a Researcher

As a researcher, I scheduled three interviews, conducted two interviews, transcribed nine interviews, plus, I analyzed nineteen interviews conducted by myself and other members of the research team. My participation in this research with expectant mothers was not only a learning experience in academic research, but it was a learning experience at the personal level, since I got to experience motherhood through the eyes and perceptions of the participants of the study. I can say that the experience was cathartic, as I am not a mother and I sometimes wondered how that experience could have been if I had decided to be a mother when I could. Through this research I got to experience not only what motherhood is or could have been for me, but I got to understand since I could the experience of many wonderful and brave women that chose to have the experience of motherhood not only once but several times in many cases. I got to better understand how motherhood changes the lives of women for the better in the sense that regardless of how difficult their situation could be, the fact that they have a baby to take care gave them strength to go on as best as they could. I had the privilege to see firsthand the beauty of the human spirit, of each and every of those women have and how it flourished in adversity filling me with respect, admiration, and a renewed gratefulness towards my mother and any other mother that I encounter or will encounter in my life. Because I chose not to be a mother at an early age, and my view about motherhood was only through the limited accounts of my friends and family, I was very curious to learn about motherhood as an outsider, from other women besides my friends and family who were trying to influence my views to convince me to have children or at least to rethink my decision before I turned 40. I am now way past 40, and as a Latina female with no children, I am always explaining people why I did not have children. This research on motherhood gave me maturity and clarity about my choice. This perspective helped

me analyze the data and view the participants in a more compassionate and humble way and understand the participants' reasons for being a mother and the strength that motherhood gave them.

Results

Table 1: Background of Participants

Pseudonym	Immigration Status	Type of Familial Disruption
1. Alma	US Citizen	Border Closure
2. Amanda	US Citizen	Border Closure and Fear of Immigration Process
3. Natalia	Adjusting Status	Fear of Immigration Process
4. Yolanda	Adjusting Status	Fear of Immigration Process
5. Maria	US Citizen	Sister and Uncle Deported
6. Luz	Husband in Progress	Border Closure and Fear of Immigration Process
7. Ana	US. Citizen	Husband Working Away and Sister, Grandfather and Mother Undocumented in the past
8. Flor	US. Citizen	Sister Deported
9. Carolina	Undocumented	Border Closure and Fear of Immigration Process
10. Patricia	Seeking Asylum	Fear of Immigration Process
11. Norma	Permanent Resident	Husband Working Away
12. Camila	Boyfriend in Progress	Border Closure, Immigration Process
13. Sonia	Adjusting Status	Fear of Immigration Process, Husband Working Away and Border Closure
14. Raquel	US. Citizen	Husband Working Away
15. Ivonne	Adjusting Status	Immigration Process of family Members

Of the fifteen interviews that I analyzed, eight reported fears of deportation, three had experienced the deportation of a family members in the past and all have reported fear of deportation or adverse consequences of the border closure. Several reported both. Eight women of the study were in immigration petition for themselves or for their partner. One woman along with her partner was in the process of seeking asylum. Six women reported being affected adversely by the border closure. Of these 15 interviews, three had the additional challenge of having their partners work out-of-town. Additional participants also reported having partners working out of town for financial reasons, but here I focus on that theme as it overlapped with other concerns related to immigration policy. The immigration status and types of familial disruptions each participant experienced is summarized in Table 1.

Three main salient themes related to disruptions to family unity that emerged from the interviews were mental distress, loss of social support, and economic concerns. Three subcategories came about during the interviews. These themes in many cases overlapped. For example, loss of social support and economic distress further exacerbated mental distress.

Mental Distress

Expectant mothers reported mental distress due to disruptions, or even threats of disruptions, to family unity. Although some women had experienced a family member being deported, negative emotions tied to fears of being deported or having a partner deported came through more strongly. As previously mentioned, many participants were in the process of petitioning for legal status for themselves or a partner. Women expressed fear of their immigration application being denied and receiving an order of deportation. Such is the case of Sonia, a 22-year-old woman who was seven months pregnant with her first child at the time of

her first interview. Sonia described a lack of understanding about the petition process, which contributed to anxiety during the process. She said, “But the truth is that I was very worried because when I got married, I honestly did not know anything about that process or anything nor did I know how much it cost or nothing.” When Sonia started to do research about the immigration process after she got married, she realized how expensive it was. Her husband asked her to choose an attorney to help them with the immigration process. This brought about another set of stressors for Sonia because now she was worried that an attorney could take their money and not help them with their process until the end. Sonia decided to choose a public notary recommended to her although she later felt further anxiety over this decision as the process proceeded. She explained, “People have told me that notaries don’t have the same knowledge as attorneys or that it is not the same, but because I was very worried then I told myself no more, enough I don’t want to stress because of that, I was just only thinking about that.”

Another source of stress for Sonia was her access to health care as an immigrant and fears that using publicly funded programs could be used to deny a residency petition. Sonia declared that she was afraid to ask for social help because she had heard that some programs could affect her immigration application. Sonia is referring to the 2018 plans under The Trump administration to count immigrants that receive non-cash services such as WIC and CHIP Perinatal as a “likely public charge.” CHIP Perinatal covers prenatal appointments and the delivery for women who do not qualify for Medicaid for Pregnant Women due to the residency requirements. Although the subsequent the 2019 guidelines made exceptions to the likely public charge rule for CHIP Perinatal, and the Biden administration reversed the likely public charge rule (Heckert & Mata, 2020), fears still lingered. Sonia made sure to confirm the help she was receiving like WIC and CHIP Perinatal would not affect her immigration petition process. Sonia

delayed starting prenatal care due to the wait in applying for CHIP Perinatal. The wait to receive healthcare was also a cause of stress for Sonia, since she wanted to know that everything was okay with her baby as her mother had several miscarriages and Sonia was afraid that the same could happen to her.

Carolina described more profound fears of deportation than Sonia described. This is primarily because Carolina was undocumented and did not yet have a path for becoming a resident. Carolina got extremely nervous every time she had encounters with Border Patrol officers. This includes appearing for a job interview at a restaurant where Border Patrol officers were dining. She described feeling panicked and knowing she could not work there, even though she desperately needed the money after losing most of her jobs cleaning houses during the early phase of the pandemic. Carolina had recently moved from San Antonio to El Paso and owes money to family members in San Antonio who lent her money to cross the border. She is constantly receiving text messages from them demanding payment for her debt. This situation traps Carolina in a limbo that is making her stress and her only comfort is to focus on her unborn child and endures every adversity that comes her way for what she perceives is the best for her baby's future. For example, Carolina wanted to go back to Mexico, but she could not since she felt that she would not be able to pay her debt if she would earn Mexican pesos. Moreover, Carolina mentioned in her first interview that she cried "a lot." Plus, for most of her pregnancy she was living with friends that live close to the border highway where Carolina constantly saw Border Patrol officers. Carolina is afraid of being deported, making the constant view of Border Patrol officers a reminder of the possibility of being deported. As we learned in multiple postpartum interviews, Carolina had preeclampsia, postpartum hemorrhage, and postpartum

depression. Preeclampsia, and postpartum depression in particular have well-established links to social stressors, which in Carolina's case, included a constant fear of deportation.

Loss of Social Support

Many women reported a loss of social support related to the US-Mexico border closure. The women in the study that were undergoing immigration petitions were even more affected by the border closure and the family separation that that the closure brought about, as most of their family members resided in Mexico and their own immigration status prevented them from being able to cross. This loss of social support further exacerbated the mental distress that many women were experiencing.

Returning to Sonia, she declared extremely early in her first interview within the first question to be precise how sad and depressed she was because of not being able to see her family. She said of her pregnancy. "Well okay at the beginning within the first three months I think I did feel uhm I don't know like I could say depressed." Sonia continued to explain what she thought was the cause of her depression: "Depression that's what I thought because I did feel like very sad at that time and even more because I was not with my family like I would like to be, like to enjoy the pregnancy close to my mom, my parents, my brothers, like that. Being far away is something that at the beginning kept me sad." Sonia was struggling to adapt to her new life as a married women living in a different country and now pregnant with her first child. Sonia was also struggling with the fact that she was an independent woman who just recently graduated form a university and was unable to work because of her immigration status. She had to deal with her own emotions and despair alone because she did not want to worry her husband and make him think that she was regretting being married to him. She explained:

“The truth is I didn’t tell anyone, about my depression I think that the only one that could tell was my husband, but I never told him openly. He would ask me what was happening, but I never told him I feel like this or that because I didn’t want him to feel bad, or that he would think that I was regretting having married him or something like that. So, what I use to do was just to go outside to the patio to sit in the grass or read. I talked over the phone with my mom, my sister, and my grandmother, but I never told them how I felt. I talked to them as a distraction only.”

Sonia was clearly missing her family. She became involved with a church and now is slowly adapting to her new life in the United States.

Carolina’s experience shows how the pandemic contributed to a loss of social support in indirect ways. As previously mentioned, Carolina came to El Paso to get away from family in San Antonio when she could not repay the money she borrowed after losing work during the pandemic. While this could be interpreted as an active decision to leave family, it was a decision constrained by her social circumstances. Further, with the move, she felt negatively impacted by the loss of familial support. At the time of the first interview, Carolina was living with friends who helped support her. She worried about how she could live with her friends after the birth, since babies tend to cry at night and Carolina felt uncomfortable bothering her friends with this situation. Carolina’s life was precarious at every level. She felt alone in the city. The father of her child only visited her, she was unemployed, and was pressured by people back in San Antonio to repay money owed. Carolina cried “a lot,” and her only focus and sense of joy was her unborn child. In Carolina’s postpartum interview, we found out that she has postpartum depression and she had preeclampsia, both of which are conditions known to be associated with social stressors. Late in the pregnancy she also decided to marry the father of the baby, feeling

like this arrangement could help her cope with other challenges in her life, especially economic concerns.

Amanda also felt that separation from family members contributed to various hardships. Amanda is a US. Citizen caught in an immigration limbo. Amanda was born with midwives in the 1990s. People born during this period with midwives have systematically had their citizenship questioned due to a small number of accusations of midwives signing fraudulent birth certificates (Sieff, 2018). When Amanda applied for a passport, she was asked to produce additional documentation of the circumstances of her birth. When she consulted a lawyer, she was told that to have her passport application approved. She would have to pay an attorney ten thousand dollars to fight the case. Amanda has decided that it is not worth it since she can get other legal documents. However, not having a passport prevents her from crossing to Juarez regularly. While she could hypothetically cross with other documents, she feared it will not go well. She stated, “Besides, you are always afraid that someday they will tell you that you know what you cannot use your ID nor your social security card.” Given that her family lives in Ciudad Juarez, and only have border crossing cards, Amanda’s experience shows how even US citizens were affected by the border closure. Her loss of familial support is particularly difficult, as she is a single parent of three and separated from her baby’s father during the pandemic lockdown. Amanda has been unemployed because she did not want to leave her newborn in day care to return to work, since her employer only gave her three weeks after her baby was born to return to work. Amanda’s family is in Mexico, and she wishes for her family to be able to come and help her with children. Amanda would be more comfortable leaving her newborn in the hands of a family member that would take care of her baby. She stated, “Obviously I would like to leave my baby with a family member, with my mom or my sisters, but they work over there in

Mexico, and I have no one here that I can trust and leave my baby with because they are going to be cautious with my baby and not put him at risk unlike a day care.” Amanda’s life would be easier if she had the support of one of her family members to come and help her with children because she could go back to work relieving her of financial stress. Instead, she was unable to work and survived by piecing together child support, payments from the Child Tax Credit, and public assistance programs. Moreover, Amanda had not seen her family members for over a year at the time of her first interview.

Mothers expressed their joy when they heard that the border was reopening. Camila is one of the fortunate mothers that gave birth after the border opened, which enabled her family to come after the birth. Camila was incredibly happy to hear that the border was reopening back in November 2021. She said, “My parents live in Juarez and because they’re not US citizens, and it was just a relief right now to know that they can now cross the border, right! But in the beginning, it was like, I’m sorry, like I’m sorry you’re not gonna be able to see the baby until later or so.” This example reflects the differences in birth and postpartum experiences that women had based on the timing of their births in relation to the closure and eventual reopening of the border. Further, Camila’s experience shows that even though her family could cross by the time of the birth, her pregnancy was marked by uncertainty.

Economic Insecurities as Exacerbating Disruptions to Family Unity

The pandemic brought about economic insecurities to the border city with the loss of countless jobs due to business closures. People were receiving unemployment checks and stimulus checks, but for growing families with new babies on their way that was not enough to cover all the expenses. Additionally, many of the women in the study and their partners, did not

qualify for unemployment or the stimulus checks, leaving them without a safety net for confronting the loss of income.

One response to loss of income was for partners to take jobs out-of-town, as was the case of Ana who was pregnant with her third child. In many cases, this response to economic crisis created other challenges, such as the loss of social support and emotional distress. Ana was sad and stressed because her husband works out of El Paso for two weeks at the time. Ana knows that she is going to struggle with her household chores and a newborn. Ana and her husband are constantly looking for a local suitable job for him so that he can be home and help Ana with the new baby and their other two kids. Both Ana and her husband are hoping for him to find a local job before the baby is born so that he can be there for the birth and to help Ana afterwards. However, they have not been able to find anything that pays as much as working out of town does. This has taken a toll on Ana's mental health. She is suffering from depression that she has had on and off and she had not been able to see her doctor to talk about her depression, since the pandemic Ana wanted to limit her doctor visits to what was necessary. Ana was stressed about her kids being with her all day in the house, only taking them to visit the grandparents and to the park. She explained, "It's been difficult with my husband away, but again, it's okay. I can stress about that, or I can stress about him having this other crappy job. That is okay." Ana was limited with what she could do with her kids for entertainment during the pandemic because of monetary concerns as well. Ana and her husband are careful with their money. They plan for meals when he is on the road, but unfortunately him being out of the house means that sometimes he must eat out at fast food restaurants or other types of restaurants and spend money that they do not have.

Norma is also experiencing the absence of her husband due to economic challenges. Norma's husband lost his job during the pandemic. Since they had their first child during the first

months of the pandemic, they were fearful of him taking a new job, yet still had economic demands. As a consequence, they borrowed a significant amount of money from family members. To repay these loans, Norma's husband took a job in the oil fields, even though she became pregnant again shortly after the birth of their first child. She explained "Yeah that does pay relatively well compared to other opportunities that are around. But it involves a sacrifice." She was finding it difficult to deal with the fact that she was alone dealing with two babies. Norma relies on friends for support when her husband is not around. Norma finds it difficult even to shower or rest especially now that her older daughter is not napping as much anymore.

Economic insecurities generated by the pandemic created challenges beyond partner's working out-of-town. Returning to Carolina in her post-partum interview she mentioned that she married her baby's father, and they were living together on the outskirts of El Paso. Carolina mentioned in her first and second interview that she cries a lot, in many cases because she is so worried about the money she owes. She reported postpartum depression and feeling uncomfortable that she had to be financially dependent on her husband, who was struggling to find decent employment. These financial insecurities exacerbated the already demanding situation that Carolina was in by owing money to people in San Antonio and her precarious immigration status.

Returning to Amanda, she has not been able to go back to work since the pandemic because she is a single mother of three and the job that she had before getting pregnant wanted her to go back to work three weeks after the baby was born making it extremely difficult for Amanda to want to leave her baby in a day care where she knows that the baby could contract COVID. Amanda survived on stimulus checks for parents that ended in January 2022. Amanda is also receiving WIC and food stamps and at the time of the postpartum interview, she just started

getting help to pay for her rent. Amanda is struggling financially and wishes that she could go back to work because she was earning more money than what she is getting with the social help available to her. She said, “I could say that it is an immense help for me, but it is not the same because I was making more money when I was working than now.” Additionally, she enjoyed working and the independence that it offered her. Thus, the pandemic constrained her ability to economically provide for her family in the ways that she would have liked.

Like Amanda, many mothers were hesitant to go back to work right after having their babies. They were fearful not only for their babies but for themselves and the rest of their families. Mothers were fearful to take their babies to day-care and they were fearful of the possibility of themselves going out to work bringing the virus back with them to their home.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to compare the perceived effects of family disruptions and how they are shaping maternal well-being in COVID times. The first family disruption identified is the twenty-month border closure separating El Paso from Juarez. The second family disruption identified is partners having to go to work far away from home. The third and last family disruption is deportation of a partner, themselves, or a close family member. In many cases, women reported a fear of deportation and the threat to family unity that it posed as significantly impacting their sense of well-being.

Eight mothers had overlapping experiences of two of the family disruptions. The most typical overlap happens when either the husband or wife is undergoing an immigration petition combined with families being split by the border closure. That meant that family members who lived in Juarez and are not US citizens or residents or had means to buy a plane ticket to cross over could not come to El Paso for twenty months. For those who had a precarious status or were in the process of adjusting their status, they could not go back to Mexico and reenter the US during the border closure. These mothers were cut short of the support that having a close family member like a mother or a sister at the birth of their child represents.

The Border Closure as Legal Violence

Congress has just about “carte blanche” to regulate immigration. It is because of this power that Congress can make decisions that affect immigrant families in a positive or negative way (Hawthorne, 2007). Furthermore, the immigration power stems from the doctrine of plenary power and state sovereignty, and at the same time these two concepts are the source of Congress’s power to “exclude people seeking admission into the United States” (Hawthorne,

2007). In March 2020 Congress decided to use its power to close the US-Mexico border to non-essential travelers in effort to contain the COVID pandemic, affecting countless mixed-status families on both sides of the border. “Although the plenary power doctrine does not give Congress unlimited power to regulate aliens [who have already entered], it can result in their exclusion under conditions which might otherwise be unconstitutional” (Hawthorne, 2007). During the 20-month border closure, pedestrians and land travelers could not enter the US, but US citizens could take vacations in Mexico with no restriction. Furthermore, the US border was open to noncitizens only if they had the means to buy a plane ticket to fly into US soil.

Families that were experiencing family disruptions by the border closure reflect clear examples of victims of legal violence overlapped with structural violence and symbolic violence. Legal violence was present in the lives of expectant mothers of the study since they were affected by local and state laws that prevented them from having the full experience of motherhood in company of their loved ones. The mental distress that mothers like Sonia experienced by being far away from her family in the midst of several already stressful situations, like her first pregnancy, moving to the US, and adjusting to married life gave Sonia mental anguish and what she calls “sadness like a depression.” Sonia was diagnosed with high blood pressure during her pregnancy and was prescribed 80 mg of aspirin daily Sonia narrated how her blood pressure was high and how her head “was pounding and I felt lousy.”

Legal violence was even more noticeable in mothers that were in the middle of an immigration process because not only their families on the other side of the border were trapped in the laws preventing border crossing, but the mothers on the US side of the border were excluded from basic needs such as the right to work and access better healthcare. This legal violence overlapped with structural violence in the sense that immigrant mothers were excluded

and prevented from having social mobility. Such was the case of Sonia and Carolina. Both were unable to work because their immigration processes were incomplete. The border closure piled on additional stress for expectant mothers of the study in a way that it is almost invisible giving way to symbolic violence. Sonia expressed clearly how she thought that she had to bear her despair and loneliness even to the point of hiding it from her husband because she did not want him to think that she was regretting their marriage. Furthermore, Sonia only talked to her mother, sister, and grandmother in Juarez over the phone saying it was just to “distract myself” and “I never told people how I was feeling.” Other mothers like Carolina dealt with their mental anguish of being alone in the city and dealing with all their problems alone without family support by, “Crying. I cry a lot.” Carolina declared in both interviews. Moreover, Carolina was diagnosed with preeclampsia and postpartum depression, reflecting the way that legal violence creates emotional distress that may be related to health outcomes. Structural violence, legal violence and symbolic violence were apparent in the lives of expectant mothers of the study. We must remember that structural violence is found in social inequalities hidden in social structures, like legal processes and laws that allows the social inequalities to happen, giving way to symbolic violence or the normalization, adoption and acceptance of the system in control even in “the most intolerable conditions of existence can so often be perceived as acceptable and even natural” (Smith, 2007, p. 1).

Structural Violence and Economic Insecurities

Being a parent is a titanic endeavor for both parents, especially for those tasked with being a parent when the only support of the partner is financial. For those with a partner working far away from home, it is comparable to being a single parent. The stress of parental duties is

exacerbated and multiplied under the added stress of suddenly finding themselves with a newborn and alone to deal with mental and emotional devastation that the void of their partner leaves behind. This task becomes even harder when mothers of the study reported that they had postpartum depression or other health issues brought about by the birth of their child or are going through other health issues related to their pregnancy such as preeclampsia or gestational diabetes. For instance, Ana was expecting her third child and her husband had to find a better job to support their growing family. Ana was stressed about their economic situation, and about how she would be able to deal with her newborn and her other two girls. Ana and her husband are hoping for him to find a local job that can pay the bills so that he can help Ana with the household chores and childcare, in addition for him to be at the birth of their new baby. The stress of being a parent with perceived limitations of personal and social resources to deal with life challenges can affect the parent's ability to deal with their emotions leading them to depression and anxiety that could lead to marital problems and/or divorce (Cardoso, Scott, Faulkner, & Lane, 2018).

Families like Ana's, Sonia's, and Norma's are all experiencing structural violence since they are experiencing the effects of a system that is oppressing them under the guise of the pandemic and lack of suitable jobs, pushing their families to undergo and bear family disruptions to normalize and accept their fate. This is a clear example of the normalization and conformity of their lives to symbolic violence brought about by structural violence that is represented in the economic inequality leading to lack of resources that force these families to look for better paying jobs far away from home. The invisible force and system oppressing them and forcing these families to separate to survive financially affects other aspects of their life. This includes lowering their overall life satisfaction, by cutting family joys like getting to know their newly

born babies with less stress for the mothers left behind and less stress for the fathers that go away to work. Structural violence is lowering their overall ability to “reach their full potential” (Farmer, Nizeye, Stulac, & Keshavjee, 2006) as families and as individuals since it is robbing them of family experiences, and it is creating additional stresses for both parents especially for pregnant mothers. These stressors have emotional and psychological consequences that could manifest in preeclampsia, gestational diabetes, and postpartum depression, limiting the mother’s ability to care for her family and newborn.

The Violence of Deportations and the Fear of Deportation

The fact that four of our participants of the study reported having experienced the deportation of a family member recently or during their childhood triggered in them a fear of what could go wrong. This led to a fear of deportation for themselves or their partner, or another family member. Moreover, the fact that none of the mothers of the study are facing the possibility of deportation of themselves or any of their family members, turned the third type of family disruption observed in the study into a fear of family disruption instead of an actual direct experience of deportation.

Amanda is not being threatened nor has received a letter of deportation and is in fact a US Citizen. Her fear is that since she was born in El Paso with a midwife, one day she could be targeted and accused of not really being a citizen. Furthermore, Amanda is concerned with the cost of an attorney to clarify her citizenship and dissipate any doubts of the veracity of her US citizenship so that she can get a passport to travel and most importantly to be at ease and free of the fear of a possible deportation threat, or immigration related legal problems. Amanda’s life has been affected, limited, and altered by legal violence, structural violence, and symbolic

violence in the sense that she has been limited and prevented from going to Juarez to visit her family who cannot come over to the United States because of the border closure. To illustrate, Amanda had not seen her family for over a year at the time of her first interview. With a passport, Amanda could easily have gone back and forth from Juarez to El Paso, as any other US citizen. Furthermore, Amanda's type of case has been targeted by the United States immigration system as possible fraud cases and alterations of official documents with "their citizenship suddenly thrown into question" (Sieff, 2018). Under this context, anyone born in a border city like El Paso could have their citizenship questioned under the guise of possible document fraud, and now having the legal, and financial burden of proving their citizenship to regain the sense of normalcy to their life, but after their life has been taxed by the established legal system and immigration system. Amanda also became a single parent during the lockdown. She had gestational diabetes and her baby struggled to be born because the umbilical cord was wrapped in his neck, and he was struggling to breath. Amanda underwent all these life events without the support of her family members since she could not go to Juarez, nor could they come to El Paso to visit and comfort her and help her. Amanda is now a single parent and is struggling with the idea of going back to work and leaving her newborn in daycare where he could contract COVID. Amanda wished that one of her family members could help her to take care of her newborn because she knows that at least "they will be careful while dealing with the baby." As a result, Amanda cannot work and is struggling financially. She is trying to get as much social help as possible to survive with her two children and a newborn.

Other mothers undergoing immigration petitions were aware before they started their immigration process of the possibility of a simple immigration process such as requesting a tourist visa could go wrong if perceived that they could be potential immigrants planning to

remain in the US unauthorized and become a “likely public charge” by asking for monetary support and other social help. Immigrant mothers are very much aware of the possibility of being perceived as a threat in that sense and get their tourist visa request denied. For instance, Natalia was denied her visa once and when she applied for the second time, she was already pregnant. Natalia was stressed about not being able to hide her pregnancy from INS officers as she did not want them to think that she was getting the visa to have her baby in the US and be denied the visa for a second time. Natalia is not under an actual threat of deportation and now the hospital is helping her to renew her visa so that she can stay in the US and help with the care of her husband who suffered a motorcycle accident that resulted in limited mobility. However, the fact that Natalia was afraid of what officers of the Immigration and Naturalization Services could think of her and her pregnancy points to the normalization, acceptance, and even adaptation of the legal violence and structural violence that she was subjected to, by having to hide her pregnancy and being stressed about being found out that she was carrying a baby in her belly, reducing her baby to being smuggled like controlled substances. Even feeling stress about it is the result of the effects of structural violence exacerbated by legal violence and hidden by symbolic violence. The immigration process by nature is a stressful process due to the legal documentation, the wait time, the uncertainty of the process, the fact that immigration laws constantly change and the doubts over if the right person is representing their case. All of these are sources of stress for anyone in the immigration process. Further, it resulted in differing effects seen on mothers depending on the severity of their immigration cases, their family situation, and their overall health. Mothers coped with their stress and stressors differently. Some mothers chose to focus on their babies making them the reason for enduring any adversity that they were facing with their

immigration process or the absence of an immigration process. Like Carolina, every time she explained a fear or adversity, she went back to say, “I am happy because I am pregnant.”

Other mothers in the study like Ana dealt with the everyday stress of being the only parent available in a calm and collected way, realizing that there is nothing that they could do at the time but “adjust their attitude about their situation.” Ana realized that the stress levels that she was under would be compounded once her new baby was born. Therefore, Ana and her husband were actively looking for a suitable job for him locally and they were hoping for him to find a job in town before the birth of their baby.

Limitations

The study is limited by the size of the sample. The number of participants who participated in an interview postpartum is also limited at this point, since postpartum interviews are still in progress. Additional postpartum follow up interviews will provide a broader understanding of the participants' overall health and outcomes of the birth process. Furthermore, the study only focused on women from a lower social economic status, and it would be interesting to learn how the stressors brought about by family disruptions affect expectant mothers of upper and middle classes for a point of comparison. For example, we know that people with the means to buy plane tickets to come to the United States could do so. Affluent people could take a plane in Juarez or even Chihuahua and land in El Paso since we have an international airport on both sides of the border.

Another limitation was the pandemic limiting the face-to-face interaction with the participants, which in some cases could have inspired more trust and rapport for participants to talk more openly about their experiences. This personal contact could also facilitate being able to read overall body language and nuances to add more data to the field notes.

Recommended Responses

The understanding of how the mental health of expectant mothers is affected by stress, family disruptions, and fears of adverse outcomes of immigration processes is important, given that key birth outcomes are stress sensitive. This shows a need for taking measures to ameliorate the impact of stressors. For example, taking yoga classes, walking in nature, or just sitting in the grass like Sonia does when she feels overwhelmed and sad are things that can be done on an individual-level. Unfortunately, with today's hectic lifestyle, extraordinarily few people are aware of what is happening to them or their body. The awareness of our own existence tends to disappear when anyone of us is going through a stressful situation. Knowing this and teaching this awareness to expectant mothers, and their health providers, could be a way to help mothers deal with the source of their stressors to ease the incidence or the possibilities of more traumatic effects of preeclampsia or gestational diabetes. Any effort that could help expectant mothers to be at ease and enjoy their pregnancies with minimum levels of stress could help to have positive birth outcomes for both mother and child.

There is room for more research about how expectant mothers deal with the stressors and adversities of their daily lives, and most importantly, if they are aware of the level of stress they are under and if they recognize when they need help to deal with those stressors. We know that economic concerns are a leading cause of expectant mothers not seeking help but how many of them believe that seeking help for mental distress is still taboo and why could be another interesting research topic as well.

Conclusion

This study adds to the existing qualitative research about maternal stress with a focus on the perceived effects of family disruptions brought about by the twenty-month closure of the US-Mexico border, partners going to work away from home, and fears of disruption brought about by deportation. Through this study we can further understand the perceived effects of these diverse types of family disruptions and how they are shaping maternal health in COVID times. By understanding these sources of stress for pregnant and postpartum women through the lens of sociological theories, we can better understand the visible and hidden sources of oppression that these women are subjected to. Furthermore, we can better understand how our immigration laws, local laws, and federal laws are contributing to suffering for pregnant and postpartum women in border regions, and how it is shaping their overall well-being and health.

The results suggest that pregnant and postpartum women in our border region are experiencing overlapping structural violence, legal violence, and symbolic violence. Further findings indicate that these women continue dealing with the different forms of violence well after their delivery date and in many cases like Sonia's, Amanda's, and Carolina's it will not stop until their immigration issues are resolved.

References

- Allen, B., Cisneros, E. M., & Tellez, A. (2013). *The Children Left Behind: The Impact of Parental Deportation on Mental Health*. Huntsville, Texas: The Department of Psychology, Sam Houston State University.
- Burr, J. A., & Mutcler, J. E. (1999). Race and Ethnic Variation in Norms of Filial Responsibility Among older Persons. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 674-687.
- Campton, J., & Pollak, R. A. (2014). Family Proximity, Childcare, and Women's Labor Force Attachments. *Journal of Urban Economics*, 72-90.
- Cardoso, B. J., Scott, J. L., Faulkner, M., & Lane, B. L. (2018). Parenting in the context of Deportation Risk. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 80: 301-316.
- Degtyareva, V. (2011). Defining Family in Immigration Law . *The Yale Law Journal*.
- DiPietro, J. A. (2012). Maternal Stress in Pregnancy: Considerations for Fetal Development. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, S3-S8.
- Enriquez, L. E. (2015). Multigenerational Punishment: Shared Experiences of Undocumented Immigration Status Within Mixed-Status Families . *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 939-953.
- Farmer, P., Nizeye, B., Stulac, S., & Keshavjee, S. (2006). Structural Violence and Clinical Medicine. *PLOS Medicine*, 15-16.
- Fradkin, C. (2018). Fear of Massive Deportations in the United States: Social Implications on Deprived Pediatric Communities. *Frontiers in Pediatrics*, 2296-2360.
- Golash-Boza, T. (2014). Targeting Latino Men: Mass Deportation From the USA, 1998-2012. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* , 1221-1228.
- Harappa. (2021, October 18). *Harappa* . Retrieved from Harappa education: <http://www.harappa.education.com>
- Hawthorne, M. L. (2007). Family Unity in Immigration Law: Broadening the Scope of "family". *Lewis & Clark Law Review*, 800-850.
- Heckert, C., & Mata, A. D. (2020). Stratified Access as Shaping Experiences of Maternal Healthcare in the US-Mexico Border Region. 1-29.
- ICE Annual Report. (2020, December 23). *ICE Annual Report*. Retrieved from U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement: <http://www.ice.gov>
- Kocherga, A. (2021, November 2). *After Almost 2 years apart, El Paso and Juarez prepare to be reunited* . Retrieved from EL Paso Matters Web site: <http://www.elpasomatters.org>
- Martinez, V., & Villagran, L. (2021, October 19). *Elpasotimes.com*. Retrieved from As pandemic : <http://www.elpasotimes.com>
- Meek, A. (2021, October 07). *How many stimulus checks have been sent so far-and did you miss any?* Retrieved from msn: <http://www.msn.com>
- Menjivar, C., & Abrego, L. J. (2012). Legal Violence: Immigration Law and the Lives of Central American Immigrants. *American Journal of Sociology*, 1380-1421.
- Merriam-Webster. (2022, April 7). *Merriam-Webster.com*. Retrieved April 7, 2022
- Mulcahy, S., & Aguilar, J. (2020, November 4). *Hospitals near capacity, and El Paso county has set up four temporary morgues* . Retrieved from The Texas Tribune: <http://www.texastribune.org>
- Sieff, K. (2018). US is Denying Passports to Americans along the border, Throwing their Citizenship into Question. *The Washington Post*.

- Skogrand, L., Hatch, D., & Singh, A. (2005). Understanding Latino Families, Implications for Family Education . *Family Resources, Utah State Univeristy*, 1-3.
- Smith, K. (2007, December 22). *Pierre Bourdieu-Challenging Symbolic Violence and the Naturalization of Power Relations* . Retrieved from E-International Relations: <http://www.e-internationalrelations.com>
- Stoian, I. A., & Drumea, M. (2017). The Economics of Criminal Deportation. *Economic Managemnet and Finacial Marketing*.
- USAFACTS. (2021). *How is sthe econpmy doing compared to pre-pandemic levels*. Retrieved from USAFACTS: <http://www.usafacts.org>
- Villagran, L. (2021, March 26). *Perspective: The U.S. shot the border. We made our binational relationship work.* . Retrieved from El Paso Times: <http://elpasotimes.com>
- Waters, M. C. (2015). *Human Rights for Undocumented Students and their Families* . Harvard University.

Vita

Donna Maldonado was born in El Paso, Texas. She obtained her associate degree of Liberal Arts from El Paso Community College in December 2016 after a twenty-two-year break from school. She received her bachelor's degree in Multidisciplinary Studies from The University of Texas at El Paso in December 2017. In the Spring of 2018, she began studying for her Master of Arts in Sociology at the University of Texas at El Paso. Her long-term goals are to continue to earn her PhD and to develop a non-profit organization to help immigrants in their petition process.