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Bringing Voice and Visibility to Immigrant Youth

By Andrew Malekoff

“When I left my country, El Salvador, I came here because...I was poor and because I was being sought after by gangs...I went 12 days on this journey. I was hungry, cold and sometimes I lost my hope of ever getting to this country. When I came into the US, Immigration caught me in San Antonio, Texas. I was in jail for three days. The first day... I suffered a lot because my goal was to come here to work and take my family out of the poverty we were living in...I thought they were going to deport me, but they sent me to a house [in Texas] where I stayed for 18 days. Good people tended to me there...As my Godfather is a citizen [he filled out] some papers [to help me] get me out of there. After 18 days, they gave me the good news that in the morning I was going to New York. At that moment, I felt in my heart that there was a miracle. This is how I got here....” –Nassau County high school student (translated from Spanish)

The murder of Marcello Lucero in Suffolk County, Long Island in November 2008 represents a worst nightmare scenario for an immigrant family settling in the US. Lucero, an Ecuadorean immigrant, was allegedly killed after being stabbed by one member of a group of teenage boys who targeted Lucero for his ethnicity and immigrant status. According to FBI statistics there were 595 incidents of anti-Hispanic bias in 2007, with 830 victims reported by law enforcement agencies. That's a 40 percent rise from 2003, when there were 426 incidents involving 595 victims.

Less than one year prior to the taking of Lucero's life, a group of concerned citizens that shared a deep concern about the impact of immigration on children and youth joined together, under the auspices of North Shore Child and Family Guidance Center, to form what they refer to as a “study group on youth and immigration.” The group created a survey in Spanish and English to be completed by Nassau County teenagers that are immigrants to the US that would give voice to some of their needs and concerns and reveal perceptions of resource gaps that exist and supports that are needed to improve their lives. There were 614 questionnaires that were completed and returned between May and June 2008 in a range of communities across Nassau County.

A PAUCITY OF RESOURCES

With respect to felt needs and available resources, the results of the study suggest an investigation of policies that address the paucity of resources that the youth experience in areas such as support for post-secondary academic advancement and achievement, employment opportunities, and financial aid for immigrant families, to name a few. The message from the youth participating in this study is clearly that they would take advantage of good and easily accessible resources to assist them in improving their quality of life and academic and career aspirations.

SURVIVAL AND FUTURE ASPIRATION

“My experience in this country is limited because I’m only here 3 months...I see how little respect people from other countries get. In the schools the foreigners are ignored or given dirty looks. Not everyone is like that, there are some exceptions....” – Teenager, survey respondent

An open ended portion of the survey that asked respondents to write about “areas of deep concern” found that there are two broad themes that differentiate the young people’s reflections. First, there are responses that seem somewhat detached and, you might say, objectively reflective regarding such issues as human rights and equal protection under the law, for example. Second, there are responses that project a greater personal-emotional urgency regarding the stresses and strains of every day life, survival and future aspiration. It is among the latter group of responses that we see and feel an emotional quality of sadness, hopelessness and despair among immigrant teens.

NEXT STEPS

More work and exploration is needed to “get inside” the survey in a way that deepens our understanding of the emotional undertone. In the meantime, we can use this insight as a sign that there are young immigrants whose emotional lives are subject to the realities of what it feels like to be invisible and voiceless. The implications are that a segment of the children of immigrant families may be at risk for emotional problems and could benefit from preventive mental health screening and counseling. Identifying natural settings that can offer this level of support, such as schools, as well as referral sources for more serious emotional disturbances is essential.

This survey offered an opportunity to bring voice and visibility to these young people. Now it is our responsibility to listen, interact and respond.

(To my readers: A full report of the immigration and youth survey is available via email. Write to me at my email address – see above – if you are interested in a copy).