



# **Liminality and Mental Wellbeing among Non-Status Immigrants in Toronto**

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Qualitative Aspects of Stress, Stigma,  
Social Support and Social Control



# **Research on Healthcare for the Undocumented and Uninsured: Systems, Policies, Practices and Consequences**

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# Research question



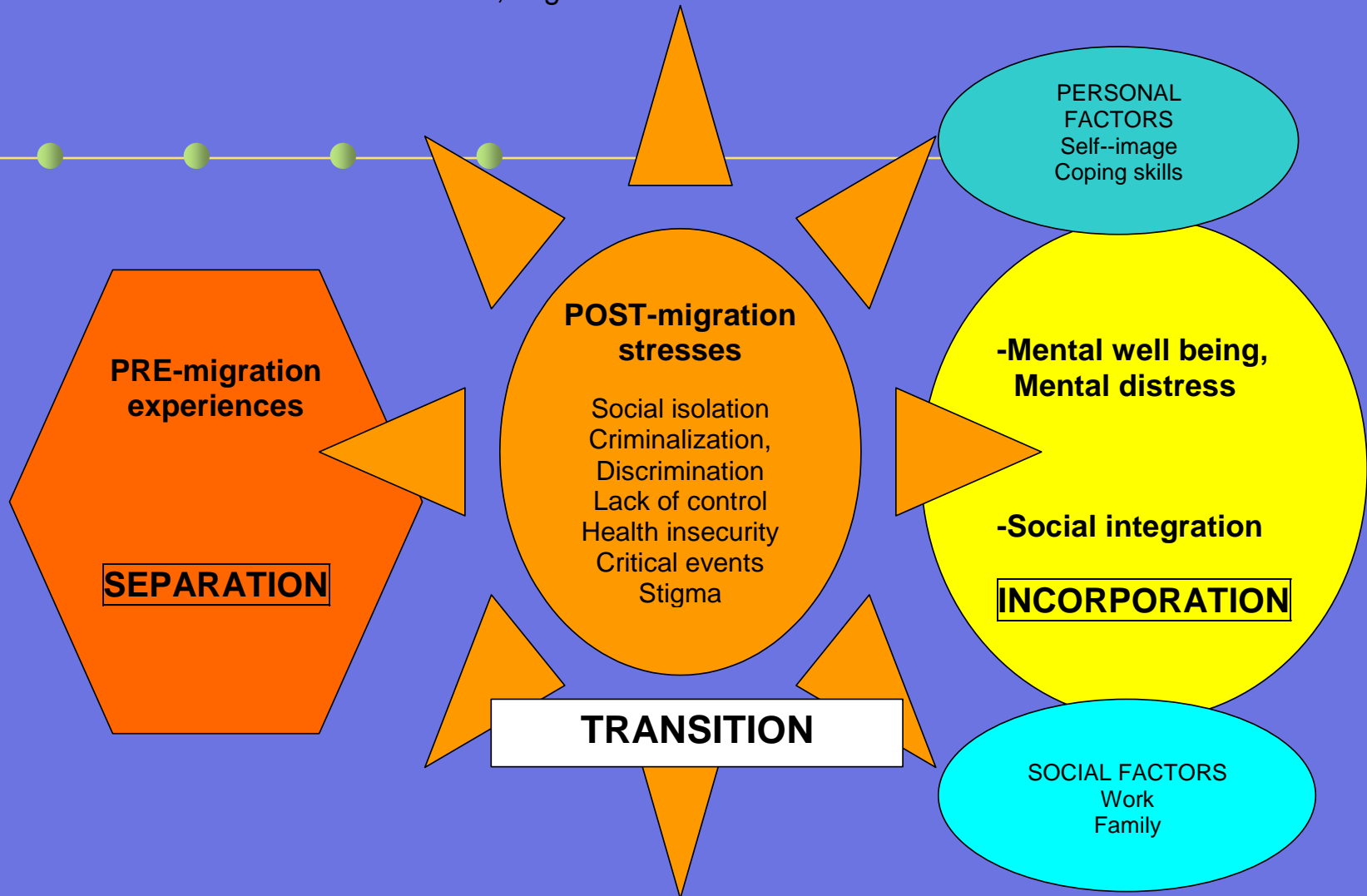
How does living without legal status affect mental well being and social integration?

# Theoretical models

- Interactive paradigm of immigrant and refugee health (Beiser 2005)
- Anthropological paradigm of liminality as applied to the migration experience (Chavez 2003)

# Liminality and mental wellbeing among non-status immigrants:

Qualitative elements of stress, stigma and social control



# Study methods

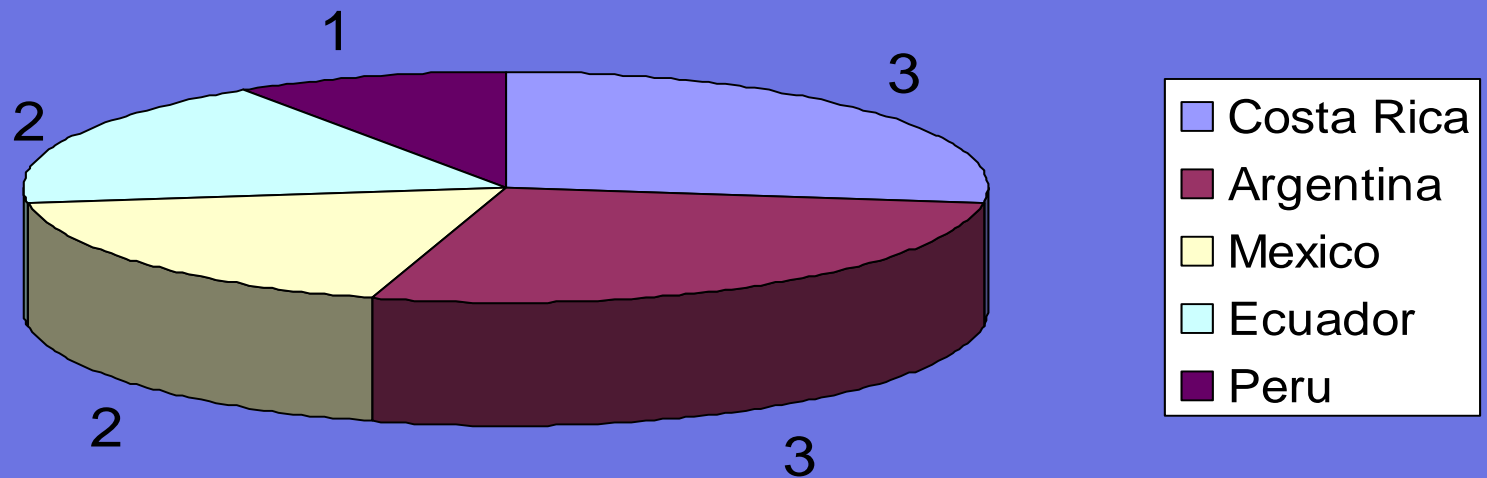
- Partnership with Access Alliance  
Multicultural Community Health Centre
- Grounded theory approach
- Purposive sample
- 5 key informants and 11 migrants  
interviewed in-depth

# Participants

- 8 women, 3 men
- Spanish-speaking Latin American clients of the Community Health Centre
- 10 of these had arrived in Canada after 2000.
- 8 had 2 or more children under age 18 in the household.

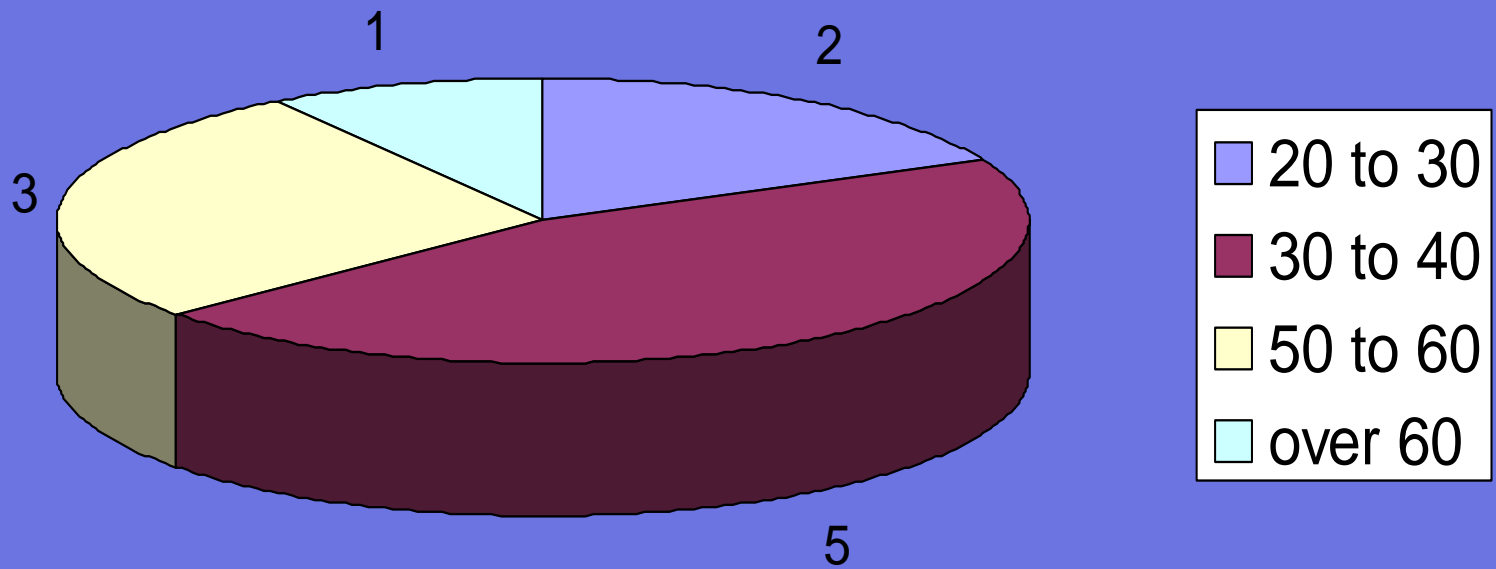
# Study sample demographics

Country of Origin

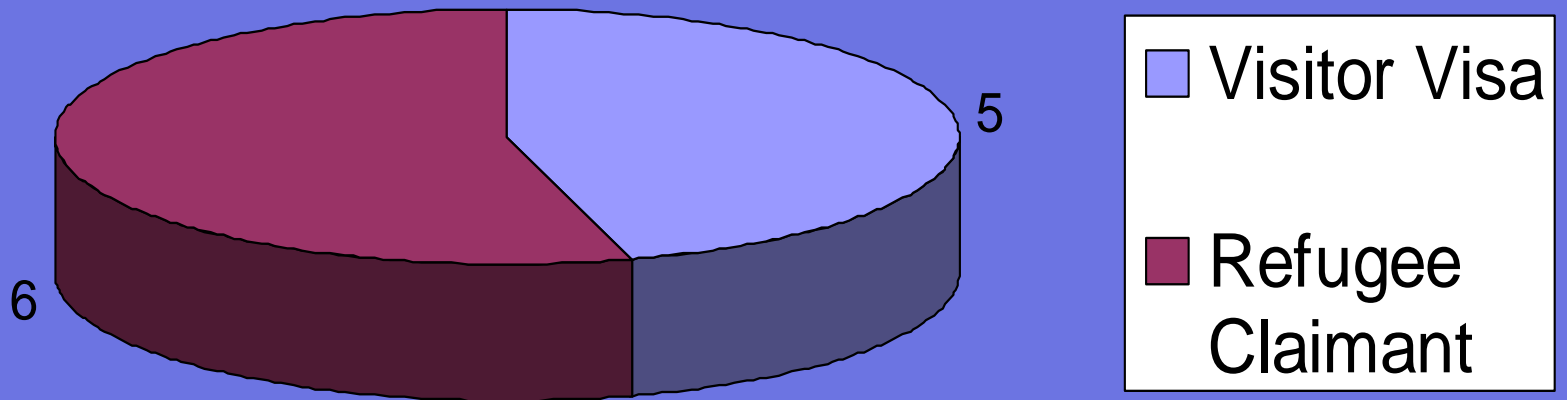




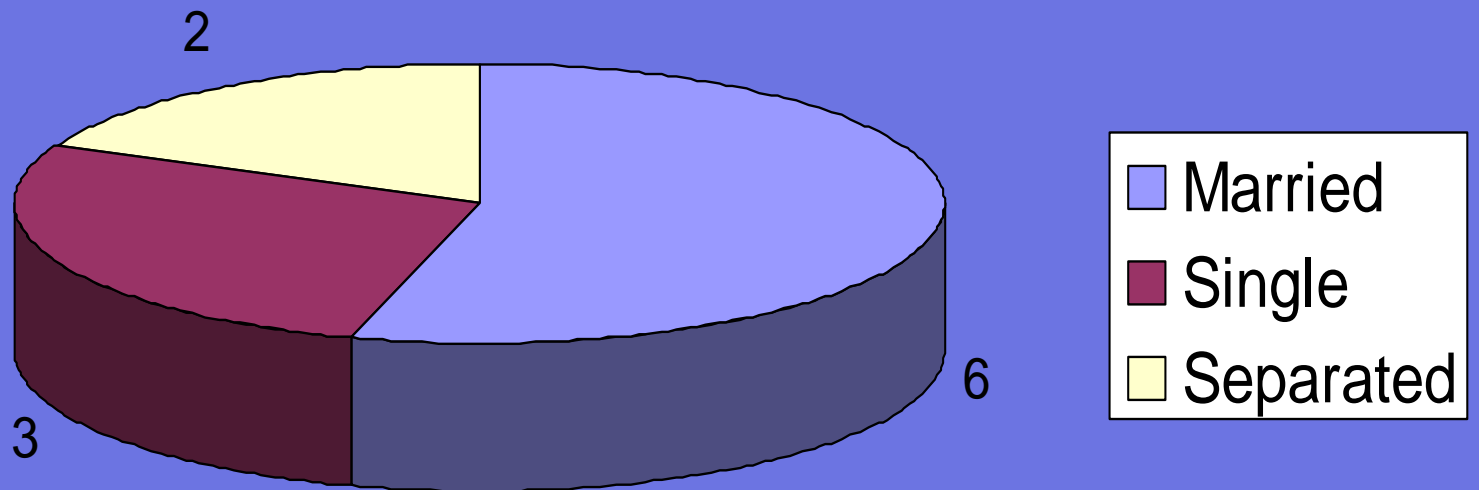
# Age Range



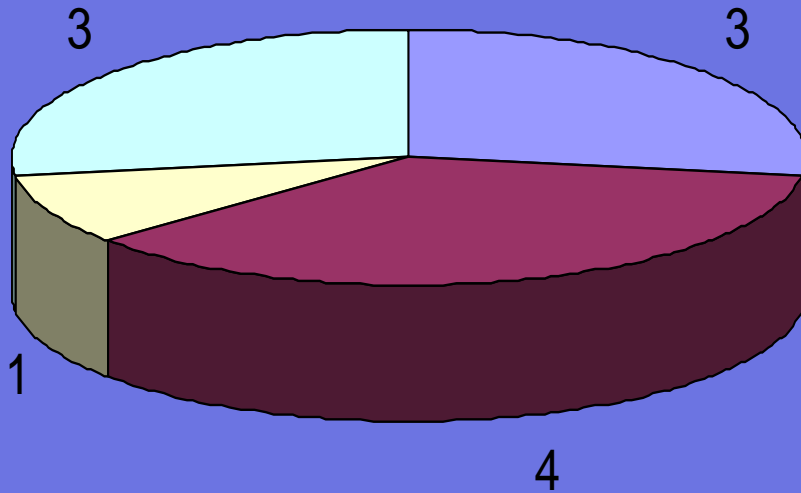
## Status on Arrival



# Marital Status

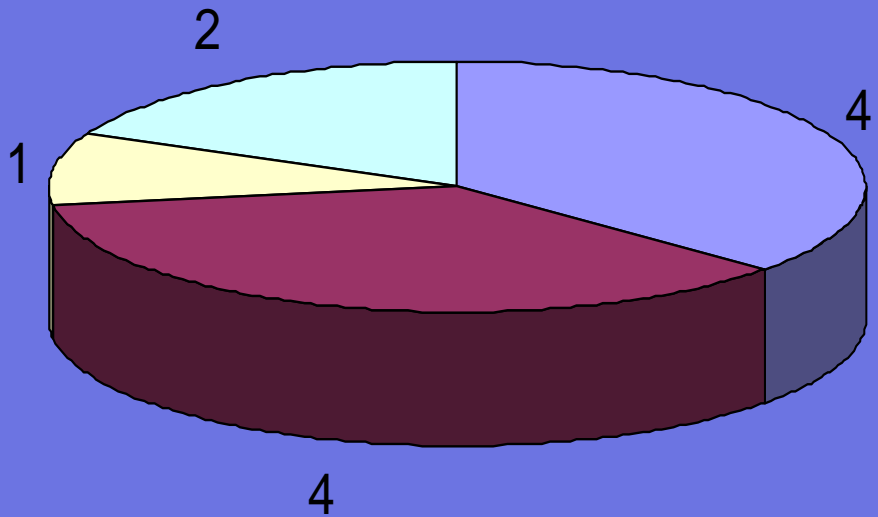


# Education

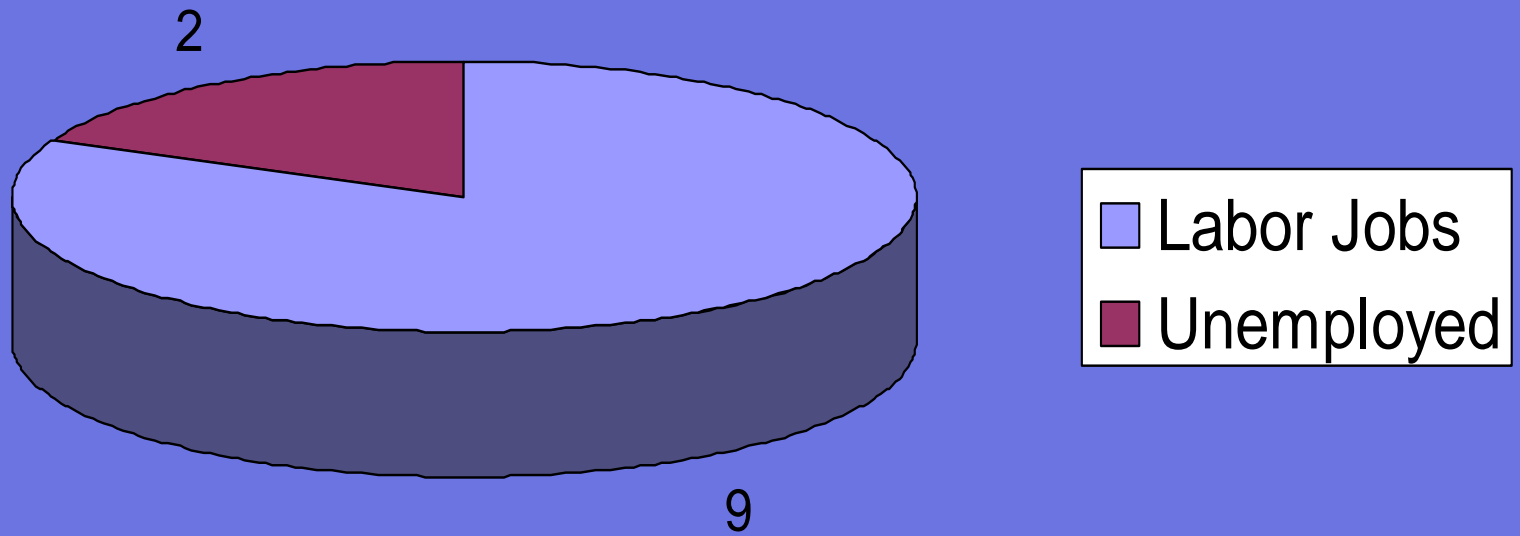


- Less than Secondary
- Secondary
- Professional Degree
- University

# Occupations in Home Countries



# Occupations in Canada



# Study findings

Contrary to common assumptions:

- Primary reason for coming to Canada not economic gain, but *personal security*
- All participants entered Canada legally, had attempted to follow correct immigration procedures, and were waiting for immigration decisions.

## Personal Security as Reason for Forced Migration

“My brother had some problems with the police, and I had some problems with terrorists. Coming to Canada wasn’t in my plans. My parents had already come a year before I came [sponsored by her brother]. ...When they came I was having a good life. I was working and I was safe (pause).... It’s hard for me tell you about my story. ...It was all, everything sudden. I *had* to come.”



# Personal security for women

“For me arriving in Canada was arriving to a place which is completely different regarding women’s protection. ...There’s a BIG difference, because in Mexico it’s very difficult to listen to a woman, to be heard by the authorities. There they talk a lot about the women murdered in Tijuana. ... the murder of woman is very frequent, almost daily. They appear in the morning dead. ... And not only because of murders, but also because of domestic violence. Women stay quiet down there because they’re not listened to.”

# Psychosocial Health Findings

- Signs of *emotional distress* from chronic stress, trauma, depression, and family separation, and of developing stress-related illnesses such as diabetes
- Beyond individual health effects, the greatest impact of 'being non-status' was on the *family*, especially increased stress for *children*.

## Psychosocial stress: Fear and isolation

*How is your own health? How do you feel?*

[deep sigh] "...The worry is about whether or not I'll have to go back. That's why I start having a lot of headaches and also the worry about what's going to happen to my children. I'm very closed on these private matters.....It's like starting all over again, to talk about it all over again, and I want the past to be in the past.....Sometimes I feel like I don't have the right to feel sick. "

## Psychosocial stress: Family separation

Because I'm far away from my family, the last couple of months, I had depression.... *[She begins to cry.]*  
That's what I think it is. There was a time when I only wanted to sleep. Once I forgot about my son [at school]. ... It's hard for me. I'm sorry ... I've never been for such a long time away from my family. But also, I wasn't going to risk either my son's or my life.

# Chronic psychosocial stress

*How do you think living without papers, without regular immigration status, affects you?*


It affects us all the time, because when I go to work for any reason I could be arrested or stopped by the police. .... I don't have the right to work.... You wake up and you're always stressed out, because you fear that something could happen to you... If not for the stress of being illegal, we would be very happy here.

# Sense of lack of control

My wife applied as a refugee claimant and she was accepted, so I put all my documents with hers.... [The judge] told me that he would accept me as a refugee claimant and afterwards, he said no, and then he changed again. He said yes and no, and he never decided. ...It's as if you had a trial and the first time they tell you that you're innocent. And you have a second trial and they tell you no, you're guilty. .... I don't understand it either, how it works. For this reason this is my status: No status.

# Predictors of mental distress

- **Stressors**— like those for other forced migrants, but lack of legal status further restricts access to health services
- **Stigma**--sense of discrimination, balanced by sense of moral justice → *positive self-identity* actively contributes resistance to criminalization

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- **Lack of social Support**—sense of isolation, except for some family support, selective social ties and sense of “imagined community” → *partial* social integration
  - **Social Control**—lack of control over legal process, yet altruism is expressed by need to protect and providing for *others* (family, neighbours) → confers *self-esteem and sense of agency*



# Highlights

- Emotional stress is significant
  - Need to raise awareness
  - Need to have safe mental health services
- Resiliency factors are present  
e.g. dignity of work, altruism, spirituality
- “Mixed status” families and special needs of mothers and children

# References

- Simich, L. (forthcoming, 2010) Liminality and Mental wellbeing among non-status immigrant women in Toronto. In D. Spitzer (Ed.), Engendering Migrant Health: Canadian Perspectives, Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Simich, L. Wu, F. and Nerad, S. (2007) Status and Health Security: An Exploratory Study among Irregular Immigrants in Toronto, Canadian Journal of Public Health, Vol. 98, No. 5 (September/October), pp. 369-373.
- Simich, L. (2006) Hidden Meanings of Health Security: Migration Experiences and Systemic Barriers to Mental Wellbeing among Non-status Migrants, International Journal of Migration, Health and Social Care, 2(3/4):16-27.