

The Cost of Invisibility: The Psychosocial Impact of Falling Out of Status





Terminology

In this research, I make 3 different categories of people living with precarious immigration status.

1. **Non-Status immigrants:**

- Those that live in Canada without permanent residence status, yet still have a temporary permit that allows them to be *visible* in society
- Includes: refugee claimants, temporary workers, LCP, refugee claimants still in the refugee system, those under a sponsorship process



2. People with no immigration papers:

- People who are living without an immigration permit. They live in hiding and without the knowledge of the Canadian authorities. Includes those that were smuggled into Canada.

3. People that have fallen out of status:

- People who had a temporary permit that expired. They are living in hiding with or without the knowledge of the Canadian authorities. Includes all those classified as non-status including those who overstayed a tourist visa and a deportation order after their refugee case was denied.



Purpose of research

1. To study the psychosocial impact of falling out of status for those that overstayed a deportation order after their refugee case was denied.
2. To find out what are the most important determinants of health for them
3. To investigate gender differences

Main question: How was your and your family's social and mental wellbeing impacted after overstaying a deportation order?



Methodology

A qualitative research using a triangulation of data sources:

1. Semi-structured interviews with 5 women and 5 men of Latin American descent. All of them had at least one family member living with them.
2. A journal of my experiences working as a social worker / therapist with this population
3. Literature from different sources: academic, news articles, reports, internet resources, etc.



Theoretical Framework

- The social determinants of health framework;
- Focusing primarily on social and mental wellbeing



Illegalization and Criminalization: from visibility to invisibility

Results:

- Their immigration status has changed from legal to “illegal;” to them it means the experience from persons to “non-persons,” from visibility to “invisibility.”
- They have been deprived of their rights, entitlements, and access to the determinants of health. Instead, they have to hide because now they are hunted by the Canadian State.
- Participants have no legal access to public services including health care; fear of deportation prevents them from seeking services.
- They cannot work legally: They work for cash and move from job to job trying to make ends meet.
- No public protections: They are vulnerable to violence and exploitation by employers, landlords, immigration consultants, friends and family. There is no recourse without the risk of deportation.
- Women are vulnerable to all these abuses with the addition of partner abuse.



Fear and danger

- Fear of being apprehended and deported. (Immigration raids torment and traumatize families. Many saw friend and family members deported)
- Fear that something terrible can happen at any time. This means many losses: losing family and friends; losing their possessions; the loss of safety and opportunities for their children, etc.
- Danger, fear of deportation, and powerlessness engender the conditions for traumatic experiences.
- These conditions result in high levels of anxiety, hypervigilance, “paranoia”, anger, irritability, frustration, guilt, constant worrying, despair, feelings of uselessness, desire to run away, and depression.



Powerlessness

Suspended lives: Lack of status and the possibility of deportation highly compromises people's ability to assert control over their lives.

- There is much uncertainty about the future as they have **little control** over it. "One aspires, but you know one cannot do it" (Dorian)
- Inability to make plans as a family and as individuals (examples: to buy furniture, kitchen utensils, plan a vacation, buy a house, plan their children's education, study for a career, have a business).
- Inability to visit family, burry family members, fulfill family obligations, children loose the opportunity to grow up with extended family.
- Inability to defend oneself, one's family and others in need, to speak out and assert one's rights.
- They are at the mercy of people and the system
- They feel stuck and without options, unable to develop intellectually, or financially (debts, job insecurity, low income, extra expenses, and their inability to save money curtails their options).



Fear-based behaviours as survival (safety) strategies

People make themselves invisible

- Fear and worrying colours their every actions (what they do, who they relate to, how they gather resources, how they protect themselves).
- As soon as they overstay a deportation order people move, usually to smaller and less safe housing, quit their jobs, and look for cash jobs, move their kids to other schools, abandon friendships, and other contacts.
- Every time there is perceived danger of being detected and deported, people do the above mentioned all over again.
- They need to lie about many things in order to be safe (name, address, immigration status, etc.).
- They avoid going to the mall, driving, going out at night
- They avoid going to some public places where there are concentrations of people.
- They avoid some neighbourhoods
- They avoid any situation that might lead to trouble including some people.
- They pay their bills on time
- They literally run away when they perceive trouble (e.g., when there is an accident and the police is on its way)

Undocumented stress and Family Life



- Parents are out working longer hours
- Isolation
- Atmosphere of fear and anxiety
- Family outdoor activities greatly decrease
- Church activities increase for some
- Irritability and aggression increase: women and children are more vulnerable
- More arguments at home btw parents, and btw parents and kids
- Family fun activities almost disappear
- In some cases, this type of adversity brings family members closer together. In other cases, it makes living together extremely difficult



What keeps them from falling apart

- Resilience: People find spaces where they are visible. These spaces include church, home, community agencies, and the union.
- Love for children and family motivates them to continue the struggle for a better future
- faith in God
- The support of their family, and (in many cases) the support of their church
- Hope that one day they will be vindicated for all the suffering they endured and finally get their permanent immigration status.



Status Is a Determinant of Health

- "Status is the most important thing because it includes everything" (Daniela)
- Immigration status is both a determinant of health, and the entry point determinant that makes access to the other determinants of health possible.



Policy

Adopt a DADT policy in order to provide services without fear and to accomplish the following:

- Provide safety by the police: This will ensure victims of crime are truly protected
- Prevent exploitation by providing full accessibility to the justice system
- Provide accessibility to city services: health care, including mental health services, community services and programs, EI, social assistance, etc.,.

Other policies

- Employment authorization: Access to work permits and work contracts
- Provide an effective path to regularization

Summary



- Falling out of status and overstaying a deportation order severely impact people's social and mental health.
- The illegalization and criminalization of those that fall out of status strips them of their human rights entitlements. They have no access to public services, protections, and the determinants of health. Instead, they need to hide from the authorities.
- Danger, fear of deportation, and powerlessness engender trauma generating conditions. These conditions result in high levels of anxiety, hypervigilance, anger, irritability, frustration, guilt, constant worrying, despair, feeling useless, and depression.
- Family life changes: isolation, more arguments, sometimes aggression, especially towards women and children, family fun activities greatly decrease. Some families become more united and others almost fall apart.
- Fear based behaviours function as survival strategies (avoiding trouble of any kind, lying about their status and their names, avoiding certain people and places, and paying their bills)
- Resilience: people find spaces where they can be visible (church, community agencies, the Union, home). Their faith and love for their family motivates them to continue the struggle for a better future.
- Immigration status is both a determinant of health, and the entry point determinant that makes access to the other determinants of health possible.