

Latinas and the U-Visa. Benefits and Challenges -- In the Women's Voices

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Background. Women, particularly vulnerable women are at an increased risk for gender-based violence including intimate partner violence (IPV). Women's lack of legal immigration status is often used as a tool of dominance and control of undocumented women. In the U.S., legislation and social policies such as the U.S. Violence against Women Act (VAWA 2000), and the Victim of Trafficking and Violence Prevention Act (TVPA 2000) have created the U-Visa to provide undocumented victims of certain crimes, including domestic violence with a special visa (U-Visa), and lawful immigration status if they are willing to assist authorities in investigating crimes. It provides women with work authorization and a social security number. The U-Visa allows for temporary legal status for up to 4 years through deferred action.

This study highlights the benefits and challenges of obtaining a U-Visa from the perspectives of service providers and Latina recipients of the U-Visa.

Methods. In this community-based participatory research study involving community leaders, service providers and academics, we collected qualitative data from 20 participants including 15 Latina U-Visa recipients and 5 service providers. Data were analyzed using NVivo software for key themes.

Results. Women recipients of the U-Visa were between the ages of 27 and 61 years, and the majority of women were in their 20s and 30s. All women lived in a metropolitan area in a Midwestern city and were originally from either Mexico or Guatemala. All but one had children. Findings highlight key benefits of the U-Visa including access to better jobs and housing, less fear and stress, improved mental health, less exploitation, freedom to travel, able to plan for the future, etc. Challenges include long wait-time for the visa, fear and anxiety about the outcomes of the visa application, inability to access public benefits while waiting, lack of job skills, lack of availability of bilingual counseling services, perceived stigma of disclosure of the visa, etc.

Recommendations. Recommendations include increase community awareness of IPV violence and the rights of women, increase community awareness of immigration relief for undocumented IPV survivors; increase community awareness of available support services for IPV survivors; improve access to bilingual counseling; provide better housing options while women await their U-Visa; provide other wrap-around supportive services such as transportation, childcare, ESL and GED classes, job/life skills (e.g., writing resume, job interviews, buying a car, improving financial literacy, assistance in finding a job, access to other legal services, etc.), conduct a needs assessment of supportive services for U-Visa applicants, policy evaluation of the impact of the U-Visa, increase yearly cap for U-Visas, and state waiver of the 5-year permanent-residency requirement before people can access public benefits such as Medicaid.

Conclusion. Social policies such as VAWA and TVPA help support vulnerable women who are victims of IPV. This information will help public health practitioners and policy makers better meet the needs of Latina survivors of intimate partner violence as they maintain positive health and rebuild their lives.

Quetzali, Well...I don't feel like a prisoner anymore...I feel like I am free even though I am not in my country but, I feel free.

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