ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: RECONCEPTUALIZING RESILIENCE: TRAJECTORIES OF GROWTH AND FAMILY SUPPORT FOR CENTRAL AMERICAN IMMIGRANT YOUTH

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Latino immigrant youth are the fastest-growing segment of the Latino population in the United States. Despite facing profound traumatic experiences related to migration, including family separation, socio-economic instability, and legal precarity, many demonstrate remarkable mechanisms of growth, and resilience. This study explores the ways in which Latino immigrant youth from Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala navigate these adversities and the strategies they employ to thrive in the U.S. context. Using a grounded theory approach, this study draws on 34 in-depth semi-structured interviews with Latino immigrant youth (ages 15–26), conducted between 2019 and 2024. Framed within life course theory, the analysis theorizes how resilience unfolds as a dynamic process shaped by migration-related disruptions and contextual enablers. Findings reveal two distinct post-migration trajectories: a *thriving trajectory,* characterized by determination, agency, and giving back behaviors, and a *navigating trajectory*, in which youth continuously struggle against structural and interpersonal barriers but persist in their efforts to move forward. Across both trajectories, participants identified key enablers to thriving at the individual, relational, and community levels, highlighting the role of both family and non-family sources of support. Additionally, this study critically examines *familismo,* a widely regarded protective factor among Latino communities. While *familismo* is often idealized as a source of cohesion and emotional support, findings reveal a significant *familismo* gap, wherein migration-induced separations and reunifications often disrupt family bonds, leaving some relationships fractured beyond repair. The concept of *linked lives,* central to life course theory, further underscores how the experiences of immigrant youth are deeply intertwined with those of their family members, yet these connections do not always translate into sustained support post-migration. Ultimately, this study argues that resilience among Central American immigrant youth should be understood as an ongoing process rather than a static outcome. A more nuanced, individualized conceptualization of resilience is necessary to accurately capture the ways in which these youth navigate adversity. The findings have significant implications for policy, program development, and intervention efforts aimed at safeguarding immigrant youth from the harmful effects of restrictive immigration policies. A youth-centered strengths-based approach that acknowledges their lived experiences and support needs is essential in fostering pathways to stability and psychological well-being.

RECONCEPTUALIZING RESILIENCE: TRAJECTORIES OF GROWTH AND FAMILY SUPPORT FOR CENTRAL AMERICAN IMMIGRANT YOUTH

by

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Dedication

To God, my guiding light and source of hope.

† To my mother, my pillar of strength; to my husband, André, my unwavering support; to my daughter, Eva, and the little one on the way, my greatest motivation; and to my father, my role model in every way. With all my love and gratitude.

To all Latino immigrants who are suffering with unheard voices, this is for you.

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To my family, † To my mother, who is no longer here but continues to fill my heart with strength, I miss you and love you beyond words. I promise I will keep going because of you. To my husband, André, thank you for walking this journey with me, through every high and low. Your love and unfailing support have been my rock. Together, we both left our comfort zones in Quito, Ecuador, seeking new opportunities and challenges in a foreign land. Every step we have taken has been filled with growth, courage, and resilience. I am incredibly proud of what we have achieved together, and I am deeply grateful for the strength you have brought into our lives. Thank you for the beautiful family we have built together, for our little Eva, and for the baby on the way—our everything, our reason to keep moving forward. To my father, thank you for always believing in me and for raising me with the values of kindness, generosity, and service. Your example showed me that true success lies in helping others, and you inspired me to pursue a career in the social sciences, following in your footsteps. Your resilience, especially after our tremendous loss, has been nothing short of inspiring. I am deeply grateful for your strength and wisdom. You have shown me the power of perseverance and the importance of staying true to our values, no matter the challenges we face. To my siblings, thank you for your love.

Finally, to my hometown, Quito, Ecuador, though I no longer live there, it will always be home. It holds a special place in my heart, and I hope to return one day to contribute to the community that shaped me.

And to all Latino immigrants whose voices go unheard. May your struggles, thriving, and dreams be seen, valued, and heard.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Latinos[1] are the nation's largest ethnic minority group, containing 19% of the total population (Funk & Lopez, 2022). Data indicate that almost a third of the Latino population in the United States (U.S.) is younger than 18 (Patten, 2016), and more than half of the three million immigrant children in the U.S. are of Latin America or Caribbean origin (Acosta & De La Cruz, 2011; Funk & Lopez, 2022). Immigrant populations in the U.S. are distinguished by a range of migration and socioeconomic statuses (Noe-Bustamante, 2019). The majority of undocumented immigrant youths and young adults in the U.S. are exposed to exploitative work conditions and long hour shifts in abusive and unsafe settings, earning low-wages due to their lack of familiarity with the U.S. culture, lack of English proficiency and undocumented status (Canizales, 2022). Most undocumented immigrants live under fear and stress, including threats of deportation and family separation (Garcini et al., 2016). Among children and adolescents, implications of stress can include failure to meet developmental milestones, increased risk for unhealthy behaviors (e.g., substance use), and unsafe practices (e.g., gang involvement, criminal activity) (Beato-Fernández et al., 2007; Broderick & Jennings, 2012; Hughes et al., 2017).

Over the last seven years, the humanity of the Trump Administration's actions, especially the 2017 "zero tolerance" policy on immigration, have been called into question. This policy separated thousands of immigrant children from their parents as they crossed the border into the U.S., prosecuting the adults for illegal entry and taking their children into federal custody (U.S.

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[1] The term 'Latino' is used in this study in alignment with the terminology preferred by our community partner. While various terms such as Latinx, Latine, and Hispanic are also used in academic and public discourse, 'Latino' reflects the language and self-identification used by the community this research engages with.

Department of Justice, 2018). President Biden's Administration took quick action to disassemble this policy in 2021, but its ramifications and consequences are still affecting families. The ongoing debate about immigration and the effects of immigration policies on the health and well-being of immigrant youth and families, underlines the need for a deeper understanding of the factors that influence resilience and well-being of this group of our society.

The diverse and varying nature of the Latino population in the U.S. has made it difficult for researchers to describe the health of this population and presents important challenges in listing potential health disparities within this group (Romero & Umaña-Taylor, 2018). Research has consistently shown that Latinos in the U.S. are significantly disadvantaged in relation to income, education, opportunities for employment, access to health care, and discrimination (Isasi, Rastogi, & Molina, 2016). All these factors are vital drivers of health disparities, systemic differences among disadvantaged groups across different health outcomes (Braveman et al., 2011). Some studies have found that newly arrived immigrants are more likely to have poorer health outcomes than non-Latino Whites (Cervantes & Menjívar, 2020), but other studies have found that Latino immigrants have a health advantage over non-Latino Whites (Cheong & Massey, 2019; Hamilton, Hale, & Savinar, 2019). Similarly, several studies have found better health outcomes for Latino immigrants than for subsequent generations of Latino Americans (Markides & Rote. 2015; Fernandez, García-Pérez & Orozco-Aleman, 2023). This phenomenon of finding better health outcomes, despite worse social determinants of health (income, education, etc.) is commonly called the Hispanic immigrant health paradox, and has been a subject of research that has confounded researchers and driven exploration of additional contextual factors (e.g., cultural, family, and sociopolitical) that influence immigrant health over time (Markides & Coreil, 1986).

In particular, the mental health of Latino immigrants remains less well explored, especially among youth, and research to date has presented mixed results. Some studies have shown that growing up in poverty with exposure to high levels of stress and trauma is directly associated with worse mental health outcomes such as depression and anxiety (Dube et al., 2018), and higher probabilities of engaging in delinquency and criminal behavior (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2019) for Black and Latino youth. Other studies (e.g., Muñoz, Yumiseva, Lewin, et al., 2023) have shown that Latino immigrant youth have a wide collection of resources that enables them to move past trauma in ways that are growthful. The internal resources identified were social support, a strong and hopeful sense of oneself, and aiming to give back to other newcomer immigrants in the U.S. Despite facing adversity, many undocumented immigrants are extremely resilient.

Resilience is a term that has been broadly studied in the social sciences. Researchers such as Ann Masten and Norman Garmezy (1970) have described and analyzed resilience as the interplay of protective factors (e.g., self-esteem, coping mechanisms) and risk factors (e.g., influences that increase the probability of negative outcomes) in ways that enable an individual to have a positive outcome despite adversity. Particularly in child development research, resilience has been defined as the mechanism that enables children to “bounce back” from adverse circumstances (Murphy, 1974), or return to baseline following adversity. Emerging definitions of resilience include those that consider resilience as a process, focusing on explaining how this process of moving to positive functioning following adversity operates, rather than just identifying and recognizing risk and protective factors (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000). With this conceptualization, resilience is the process an individual undergoes to respond to stressful situations (Stanciu, 2021), and the beneficial result that arises after the event.

Increasingly, researchers, practitioners, and theorists are focusing on strength-based conceptualizations of risk and resilience that consider stress, trauma, and suffering not solely as a problem, but also as an opportunity to intervene, grow and thrive (Evans & Reid, 2013; Morgan-Consoli et al., 2011). The term *thriving* has been recently used to describe the phenomenon of being better off and gaining experience as a result of an adverse situation (Morgan-Consoli et al., 2020). *Posttraumatic growth* is another more recent term that specifically describes the psychological changes experienced as a consequence of trauma that challenges one's beliefs and leads to an adaptation to a new reality (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004a). This study explores the unique processes that Latino immigrant youth undergo to move from challenging and traumatic experiences to a more growthful path. In addition, this study aims to describe the mechanisms of support used by immigrant youth as anchors that promote growth and thriving. Importantly, this study uses qualitative methods to listen to the youth's own voices, which are typically silenced and hidden, in order to understand their perspectives on what has facilitated their growth.

An important component of support that is discussed in research with the Latino population is *familismo*, a social construct encompassing family-oriented values and cultural characteristics that put family above all else (Padilla & Villalobos, 2007). A related construct is family support, which has been identified as the relational foundation for developmental processes such as emotion regulation (Thompson & Meyer, 2007), attachment (Sroufe & Fleeson, 2015), and cognitive processing (Bögels & Brechman-Toussaint, 2006). For Latino families, families are the first context of socialization, and parents are the most important agents of reference in relation to values, beliefs, and social norms (Calzada et al., 2012). Many times, the terms *familismo* and family support overlap, but family support represents a manifestation of *familismo* as it is defined as the received assistance that an individual gets from family members (Thoits, 2011).

Immigration alters family dynamics as members migrate at different points in time or not at all. Typically, in Central American families, parents migrate first to the U.S. to provide a better life for their children who stay in their home country in the care of other family members (Burton & Hardaway, 2012). Another context of family separation occurs when youth leave their home countries in Central America due to increased political, domestic, and community violence (Kaltman, Hurtado de Mendoza, Gonzales et al., 2011) leaving their family members behind. In both settings, family support becomes a challenge, and the source of communication and support occurs across borders by transnational practices such as sending remittances or talking through texts or video calls (Roy & Yumiseva, 2021). Much desired reunifications are normally filled with complexity as the reconnection between family members does not happen organically, and in some cases, it does not happen at all. Thus, sources of support are compromised, and youth may have their parent(s) physically present but may not perceive them as a source of support. If this is the case, immigrant youth look for other sources of support inside and outside the family, making the conceptualization of family support a very complex process to study in the context of immigration through their own testimony.

The issue of family support and its role in shaping growth may be particularly salient during adolescence. Adolescence involves a set of developmental transitions characterized by the intensification of learning capacity, reasoning, and the emergency of personal identity and self

(Newman & Newman, 2016). This developmental stage is a sensitive period in which development is influenced by the social environment (e.g., nutrition, trauma, toxic exposures), among other social factors such as the influence of parents, family members, caregivers, peers, mentors, and structural disadvantage like racism and discrimination (Fuhrmann et al., 2015). These social determinants shape adolescent's life trajectories in multiple ways, they reduce access to opportunities and services for less privileged youth and expose them to risks and stresses that unfavorably affect their development (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2019). During this developmental stage it is vital to intervene and consider the deep impact that an unequal social distribution of risks and resources can have on youth, privileging some and leaving others disadvantaged, as is often the case for immigrant youth (Steinberg, 2014). Failing to address disparities during adolescence allows less than optimal development of the nation's human capital and the economic and social costs that entails, which include reduced productivity, lost wages and employment, worse physical and mental health, increased criminal justice environment, discrimination (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2019).

Therefore, strength-based interventions during this stage can promote immigrant youth's development in several areas, especially those related to their mental health, and foster their adaptation and productivity in ways that enhance their growth and thriving in the U.S. Focusing on growth and thriving for immigrant youth who have suffered adversities can be empowering for many youth, especially during adolescence or early adulthood where identity formation takes place (Morgan-Consoli et al., 2023).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of the complex and dynamic process of resilience as it uniquely applies to immigrant youth from Central America. The study aims to reconceptualize resilience in a more nuanced and culturally relevant manner, considering the specific time and context of this population. Additionally, this study will explore and analyze the role of family support in either promoting or inhibiting the resilience process experienced by Latino immigrant youth over time.

Research Aims

The aims of this study emerged from a long-term partnership with our community partner, a well-established and trusted community organization that serves Latino youth and their families. The collaboration with our community partner has focused on making its service delivery more trauma-informed, culturally appropriate, and responsive, with a methodology grounded in resilience and strengths, rather than solely validating negative and traumatic experiences. The idea to conduct interviews stemmed from our community partner's interest in developing trauma-informed services that are healing for youth, with an emphasis on incorporating their own voices. To fulfill this purpose, this study will investigate the following three research aims:

1. To expand our understanding of *resilience* as it applies to Central American immigrant youth and propose a new conceptualization of the dynamic process of moving beyond adversity.
2. To similarly expand our understanding of family support and the role it plays in the trajectories of growth of Central American immigrant youth.

3. To understand contexts that support positive trajectories of growth for Central American immigrant youth post-migration.

This study places immigrant youth from Central America at the center of the investigation into their ongoing processes of growth after migration, addressing the need for more research on the meaning and progression of resilience for this population. Furthermore, this study identifies and expands upon the factors that shape these processes, with a particular focus on the role that family support plays in overcoming adversity. The findings will make a valuable contribution to our understanding of Latino immigrant resilience, mental health, and family dynamics. By examining the research aims, this study will provide important insights to guide the development of culturally responsive interventions and more informed treatment protocols for Latino immigrants, particularly adolescents and young adults, in diverse settings such as organizations serving Latino communities, healthcare facilities, faith-based organizations, workplaces, and more.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter presents the bases for the proposed research project by deeply exploring the current literature on the topic of resilience and growth among Latino immigrant youth, as well as the theoretical framework guiding the current study. First, it describes and critiques the concept of resilience and how it has been operationalized for the Latino population specifically. Next, a review of the literature on family support as a process that is complex and evolving in the life trajectory, and on the developmental stage of adolescence, a phase of growth and maturation, as a turning point in the life trajectory of immigrant youth. Finally, the study's guiding theoretical framework is described and applied to the understanding of the life trajectories of Latino immigrant youth, an understudied topic to date.

Demographics of the Latino Immigrant Population in the United States

According to the U.S. Census Bureau data, there are approximately 62.1 million Latino individuals in the U.S., accounting for 19 percent of the total population, making this group the nation's second-largest racial and ethnic group and the second-fastest growing (Krogstad & Noe-Bustamante, 2019; Funk & Lopez, 2022). Estimates suggest that about a third of Latinos in the U.S. are under the age of 18, representing a quarter of all children in the country (Patten, 2016; U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). Latinos make up approximately 60 percent of the undocumented population, a disproportionately large group compared to Asian and European immigrants (Krogstad & Noe-Bustamante, 2019; Funk & Lopez, 2022). Many Latino immigrants migrate to escape violence, oppression, poverty, persecution, political instability, or human trafficking in their home countries (Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2015).

The majority of unaccompanied immigrant minors detained at the U.S. border are Latino adolescents from Central America (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2020;

Haddal, 2007), specifically from the Northern Triangle—an integrated region comprising El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. These countries are among the poorest and most dangerous in the world, with the highest rates of homicides, gang-related violence, criminal activity, corruption, economic instability, and poverty in the region (Cantor, 2014; Haddal, 2007). The U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) reported an increase in encounters with unaccompanied children from Central America at the Southwest Border since 2020. In Fiscal Year 2021 through February, approximately 29,792 unaccompanied youth crossed the border; 2,942 of these children were under the age of 12, and 26,850 were aged 12-17 (CBP, 2021).

Family separations in the U.S. were widely publicized as a consequence of the Trump Administration's “Zero Tolerance” policy, which mandated the prosecution of all adults crossing the border without documentation. As a result, approximately 5,300 children were forcibly separated from their parents or guardians (Congressional Research Service, 2021). Despite subsequent reunifications in some cases, these children experienced trauma from family separation and increased fear of future separations (Congressional Research Service, 2021).

Resilience

Despite the numerous adversities faced by many Latino immigrants before, during, and after migration, many are thriving (e.g., Parra-Cardona et al., 2006; Stephens, Stein, & Landrine, 2010; Gramlich, 2017; Morgan-Consoli, Torres, Unzueta et al., 2023). This phenomenon has led researchers to examine what enables so many immigrants to overcome adversity, leading to an exploration of resilience. The term "resilience" is derived from the Latin *resilio*, meaning to jump or recoil (Michallet, 2010). In the Middle Ages, resilience referred to freeing or releasing oneself (Michallet, 2010). However, the modern concept of resilience was not widely used until 1984 (Stanciu, 2021). Before this, researchers primarily focused on the concepts of vulnerability

(Cyrulnik et al., 2001) and fragility factors to study suffering (Anaut, 2003). In recent decades, resilience has been defined as the ability to recover quickly from change, illness, or misfortune (Dyer & McGuiness, 1996) and has been directly associated with coping mechanisms (Cyrulnik et al., 2001).

History of Resilience

Over the years, many researchers and theorists have offered definitions of resilience. In engineering, resilience is used to describe the capacity of a material to return to its original shape after experiencing stress or pressure (de Bruijne et al., 2010). Petrova-Dimitrova (2017) defined resilience as the ability to recover and gain strength from disaster, while Kinman and Grant (2011) described it as the ability to cope with difficult situations without suffering negative effects. Sturgeon and Zautra (2013) defined resilience as the absence of vulnerability, and Luthar, Cicchetti, and Becker (2000) viewed it as a dynamic process of positive adaptation when faced with adversity. Another perspective sees resilience as the return to normal functioning, supported by protective factors, after encountering stress-inducing events (Lee, Cheung, & Kwong, 2012).

Murray and Zautra (2012) offered a multifaceted definition of resilience from three perspectives: (1) resilience as recovery, the most common conceptualization in the literature, referring to the ability to return to a previous state of functioning after a stressor; (2) resilience as support, where individuals maintain their goals, values, and forward momentum despite stressors; and (3) resilience as growth, which involves gaining self-insight through overcoming challenges. Braverman (2001) argued that resilience research has generally focused on identifying and recognizing protective factors rather than explaining how they function. The process of change, according to Braverman, is best understood through an individual's personal history of growth, as revealed through their direct testimony.

Resilience has been extensively studied in the fields of psychiatry, clinical psychology, and human development over the past 30 years (Masten & Obradovic, 2006). Emmy Werner was one of the first scientists to investigate resilience in the 1970s, studying children and adolescents in Kauai, Hawaii, who grew up with alcoholic parents or parents with severe mental disorders. Her findings revealed that two-thirds of these children exhibited positive behavior in later years, earning them the label of "resilient children." In the 1970s, Norman Garmezy and Ann Masten conducted longitudinal research on American children living in stressful circumstances, examining indicators of resilience such as academic success, classroom behavior, and interpersonal skills. In 1996, they developed the concept of protective factors—child-centered, family-based, and social-protective environments—that gave rise to the concepts of resilience and protection.

Protective factors are qualities that help individuals overcome adversity throughout life. These include self-esteem, intellect, coping skills, and competence (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). Conversely, risk factors are influences that increase the likelihood of negative outcomes (Coie et al., 1993). The examination of risk factors led to a more nuanced understanding of resilience (Masten & Obradovic, 2006). Masten and Garmezy concluded that resilience results from the interplay between risk and protective factors, even in the face of developmental threats (Masten et al., 1999). In child development literature, resilience has often been described as the ability of children to "bounce back" from adversity (Murphy, 1974). In the early 2000s, Masten examined the relationships between correlates and predictors of resilience, such as the influence of regulatory processes including affect, behavior, and arousal (2004). Her research indicated that adaptive behavior in youth correlated with high executive functioning, positive emotional regulation, attachment, and peer relationships (Masten, 2006). Social support, community resources, and family and environmental factors were also identified as crucial attributes in distinguishing resilient from maladapted youth (Masten, 2004).

Resilience in the Latino Population

Studies of immigrant youth have focused on the specific risks and exposures that impact their mental and physical health (Cleary, Snead, Dietz-Chavez, et al., 2017). For Latino immigrant children and adolescents, language differences, along with challenges such as educational access, documentation status, and state and local policies, have been highlighted as factors that affect their capacity for resilience (Diaz-Strong & Gonzales, 2023). However, much of this research has concentrated on younger children, with limited exploration of age-group differences. To date, little is known about how Latino immigrant youth transition from experiencing adversity and the psychological distress it may cause to a more resilient process of growth.

The study of risk factors associated with migration is crucial because children of immigrants are frequently exposed to significant disadvantage and adversity (Castro et al., 2007; Berger Cardoso & Thompson, 2010). Many unaccompanied immigrant youth from Central America were forced to migrate to escape violence in their home countries (Lustig, Kia-Keating, Knight, et al., 2004). During migration, many face exposure to violence (Halvorsen, 2002), and post-migration, they often struggle with stays in detention centers, unstable living conditions, the complexities of reunification with parents or family members who immigrated years earlier, acculturation challenges, and other traumatic experiences that contribute to poor mental health (Roy & Yumiseva, 2021; 32, 38).

Earlier research on children in immigrant families suggests that they are more likely to face significant difficulties accessing healthcare, insurance (Capps et al., 2004), mental health services (Kataoka, Zhang, & Wells, 2002), and education (Rumbaut, 2005). In the absence of protective factors to buffer these negative impacts, children and youth in immigrant families may face substantial threats to successful adaptation and development (Garcia Coll & Magnuson, 2005). However, many immigrant youth display remarkable resilience. For example, Janie, Underwood, and Ranweiler (2016) found that unaccompanied immigrant youth had concrete goals, felt able to initiate a process of stabilization in the host country, and were able to achieve stability in their new environment. Previous research on protective factors used by Latino immigrants to promote resilience and facilitate coping in the face of adversity has shown that individuals can buffer the negative effects of challenging environments, which promotes functioning in both the immigrant individual and their social interactions (Shonkoff & Meisels, 2011).

Despite these promising findings on resilience among Latino immigrants, further research is needed to understand what resilience means and how it unfolds in this population. More investigation is required to identify the factors that explain the ongoing processes behind individuals' positive adaptation and growth. The Hispanic immigrant health paradox, the idea that Latino immigrants, compared to native-born individuals, show advantages across a wide range of health outcomes despite economic disadvantages and adverse living circumstances (Markides & Rote, 2015; Fernandez, García-Pérez, & Orozco-Aleman, 2023), can be expanded by examining the different contextual factors affecting Latino immigrant youth from Central America. Studies have shown that newly arrived undocumented immigrants are more likely to experience poorer health compared to U.S.-born immigrants (Cervantes & Menjívar, 2020).

Other studies report no association (Rhodes, Mann, & Simán, 2015) or even a health advantage for newly arrived undocumented immigrants (Cheong & Massey, 2019; Hamilton, Hale, & Savinar, 2019). Given these mixed results, the immigrant health paradox remains a poorly understood phenomenon, necessitating further research to examine immigrant health over time as a complex phenomenon influenced by cultural, family, and sociopolitical factors.

Protective Factors for Latino Youth and Families

Factors that promote resilience among Latino individuals have been widely identified and discussed. For example, a systematic review of the literature by Cardoso and Thomson (2010) identified four broad domains of protective factors for Latino families: individual characteristics, family support, cultural support, and cultural factors. A more recent qualitative study by Arce, Kumar, Kuperminc, and collaborators (2020) identified family support, social support, faith, and community engagement as protective factors for Latino individuals. These domains are crucial for understanding resilience among Latino individuals, especially considering the stressors they face with immigration, acculturation, discrimination, and living with social disadvantages. Three domains, *familismo*, social support, and religiosity/spirituality—will be briefly discussed below to help contextualize protective factors for Latino individuals.

Latinos are a heterogeneous and diverse group, distinguished by varying national origins, migration statuses, and socioeconomic backgrounds (Noe-Bustamante, 2019). However, this cultural group is characterized by a shared emphasis on strong family-oriented values (Baca Zinn & Wells, 2000; Calzada et al., 2014). The term *familismo* refers to a broad set of cultural characteristics, such as loyalty, respect, solidarity, and interdependence, within both nuclear and extended kin networks (Padilla & Villalobos, 2007). Scholars have described *familismo* as the belief that one's attitudes and behaviors should reflect on the family, that family members should be treated with respect as primary referents, and that one should bring honor to the family (Lugo Steidel & Contreras, 2003; Knight et al., 2010). Research on *familismo* typically describes two dimensions: the first is the belief that family members should support one another and maintain close emotional connections (Vega, 1990), and the second concerns the values and attitudes regarding the obligations to help family both presently and in the future. This includes providing care for young or elderly family members, offering financial assistance or shelter, and prioritizing time with family (Fuligni et al., 1999; Knight et al., 2010).

Several studies have highlighted social support from friends, community members, and significant others as an important protective factor for the Latino population (Perreira & Ornelas, 2013; Kiang et al., 2010; Goodman et al., 2017). In these studies, social support is operationalized in terms of relationships with friends or significant others (Ai, Pappas, & Simonsen, 2014), whether the individual has someone to help them in times of need, and the presence of others to share events and activities with (Kiang et al., 2010). Social support is a strong predictor of mental health outcomes in Latino immigrants; it has been shown to reduce the risk of anxiety and depression (Kiang et al., 2010) and moderate the relationship between acculturative stress and mental health outcomes (Panchang et al., 2016). Qualitative studies have found that Latino immigrants feel connected when they have people around to help solve problems, particularly when they share the same national origin and language (Goodman et al., 2017) or spiritual beliefs (Lusk & Chavez Baray, 2017).

Although the terms religiosity and spirituality are often used interchangeably (Rew & Wong, 2006), researchers recognize their conceptual distinctions. Religiosity refers to beliefs, rituals, traditions, and practices related to God, Allah, HaShem, or any other higher power. These elements influence mental health through mechanisms such as prayer, scripture, fostering relationships via church services, and the love of serving others (Koenig, 2012). Religion is believed to provide a sense of purpose by allocating meaning to difficult life circumstances and offering coping strategies in the face of adversity (Koenig, 2012). Spirituality, in contrast, encompasses aspects beyond religious affiliation. It involves deriving peace and comfort from faith, feelings of connectedness with God, and an ongoing search for meaning, purpose, and transcendence (Dew et al., 2008; Hill & Pargament, 2008). Overall, greater spirituality and religiosity have been associated with better mental health and lower levels of psychopathology among Caucasian adolescents (Dew et al., 2008).

Religious attendance has been linked to social support (Aranda, 2008) and self-reported mental health (Ai et al., 2015), and inversely associated with depression (Aranda, 2008), anxiety (Aranda, 2008), acculturative stress (Sanchez et al., 2012), and substance abuse (Aranda, 2008; Alegria et al., 2007). Pearce, Jones, Schwab-Stone, and collaborators (2003) found that private religious practices, such as prayer and daily spiritual experiences, moderated the relationship between community violence exposure and conduct problems among Latino urban adolescents. Previous research (e.g., Davis et al., 2003) has shown that spirituality can help youth in low-income contexts—who are more likely to engage in high-risk behaviors—by providing a sense of purpose and meaning, thus decreasing anxiety.

In the context of resilience, little is known about the role of religion and spirituality in overcoming adversity and past traumas, particularly for Latino immigrant youth. One of the few studies on this topic suggested that religion or spirituality, along with family support and *familismo*, helps Latino youth cope with adversity (Morgan-Consoli, Ayala, Gonzales, et al., 2011). In this study, religious beliefs were not significant predictors of resilience, but qualitative interviews revealed that religion or spirituality helped participants overcome their problems

(Morgan-Consoli et al., 2011). In more recent work, Morgan-Consoli and colleagues (2015) found that spirituality was not directly associated with resilience but was linked to thriving in a sample of 121 Latino youth. These findings suggest that spirituality may contribute to growth beyond resilience, but more voices from Latino youth are needed to better understand the underlying mechanisms of such growth, as well as the commonalities and differences between the concepts of resilience and growth.

New Dimensions of Resilience

The majority of research on resilience has focused on identifying a number of risk factors for Latino immigrants (e.g., family separation). The role of protective factors, as well as the dynamic processes behind these factors, has been understudied. However, newer conceptualizations of resilience are emerging in the field. These are discussed below.

Emerging Definitions of Resilience

Emerging definitions of resilience focus on the individual's process or processes to respond to unpleasant or stressful situations (Stanciu, 2021) and on the result of this process, the positive and beneficial effect that emerges from experiencing stressful events (Lee, Cheung, & Kwong, 2012). Mental health research has begun to shift from a deficit model to a strength-based model, focusing on recognizing and building strengths in the individual (Luthar; 2006; Southwick et al., 2014), and considering vulnerability, trauma, and suffering not as a problem, but instead as an opportunity to intervene (Evans & Reid, 2013), grow and thrive (Morgan-Consoli et al., 2011).

However, quantitative research has largely operationalized resilience as a static outcome variable, derived from scores on survey instruments, rather than as a dynamic process that explores the complex and varied interactions between risk and protective factors (Rudzinski et al., 2017). There remains a need to study the concept of resilience as an ongoing and complex process, rather than a binary outcome, to understand both the exposure to risk and the manifestations of positive adjustment despite experiences of adversity and trauma (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000). The concept of resilience resists exact definition precisely because it includes a spectrum of dynamic interactions and engagements (Brassett et al., 2013; Pugh, 2014) that need to be understood with nuance and complexity, and that should be conceptualized in related but specific ways across time and across different individual and socio ecological contexts. Moreover, resilience as a process should capture the individual's potential for growth after adversity from the individual's own testimony and show the opportunity of psychological change post-migration.

Posttraumatic Growth and Thriving

Despite suffering numerous potentially traumatic events, many Latinos exhibit significant strength and are able to persevere and even thrive (Tummala-Narra & Sathasivam-Rueckert, 2015). One new concept that has emerged from recent research exploring the range of human responses to trauma, and the ways in which psychological development is shaped by these responses, is posttraumatic growth (PTG) (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995). PTG refers to positive psychological change experienced as a result of the struggle with a traumatic situation that challenges one's beliefs and place in the world. Trauma itself cannot generate growth, but an individual's struggle and adaptation to a new reality after trauma can lead to development of new personal strengths and lead to positive outcomes (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004a).

PTG has been described as a process in which a person achieves positive intrapersonal changes (i.e. appreciation of life, changes in priorities, increased sense of connection to a higher power) and interpersonal changes (i.e. greater connection to others, increased intimacy and expressiveness) (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004a). The ability to describe traumatic events and to utilize them as moments of such change is itself evidence of coping and moving past early trauma (van der Kolk, 2014). Past studies have identified intrinsic religiousness, making meaning, social support, severity of the traumatic event or stressful situation, and recent positive life events following the traumatic experience to be precursors of PTG (Boals, Steward, & Schuettler, 2010; Park, Cohen, & Murch, 1996). Intrinsic religiousness, for example, provides a framework to understand and make meaning of the traumatic experience (Park et al., 1996). On the other hand, making meaning is more likely to lead to PTG when a traumatic or highly stressful event shakes the foundations of one's core beliefs, goals, and subjective sense of meaningfulness, as can happen when migrating to a new country or fleeing to seek safety. Thus, individuals can engage in a meaning making process where they may re-examine their core beliefs and goals to make sense of their experiences following trauma (Park, 2010).

A qualitative study conducted by Muñoz, Yumiseva, and collaborators (2023) found that Latino immigrant youth have a range of internal resources which enabled them to move beyond the traumatic experiences they endured before, during, and after migration, in ways that are growthful. The internal resources identified were: deep connections to others, a sense of one's self as strong and hopeful, and living a meaningful life by giving back to others in the community, particularly undocumented newcomers in the U.S.

A concept closely related to PTG and resilience that has been examined in the research literature is thriving, or the process of being better off after an adversity (Morgan Consoli et al., 2011). Like PTG, thriving has been characterized as the growth a person gained in response to an adverse experience or series of events (O'Leary & Ickovics, 1995). This concept goes beyond the return to baseline performance (e.g. resilience), it surpasses it (Carver, 1998) and it is related to making meaning post adversity (Parry & Chesler, 2005). One of the few studies with Latino immigrant youth (e.g., Benson & Scales, 2009) showed that factors related to developmental assets, such as caring for community, academic success, recognition of diversity, and health lifestyles are contributors to the thriving process, although this process has not been widely studied and not well understood in the Latino population, nor in adolescents. Another study on thriving in Latino immigrant youth conducted by Morgan-Consoli and colleagues (2023) found that Latino undergraduate students perceived ethnic discrimination in their daily lives and were able to find ways to grow from such experiences. Moreover, the authors concluded that this growth helped foster a stronger sense of ethnic identity and belonging for Latino students, fueling their interest in taking action.

These concepts of resilience, PTG, and thriving are all interrelated. However, they are also unique from one another in certain ways. Resilience can be defined as a getting-through process that brings the individual "back to baseline", PTG represents the process of moving past trauma, and thriving is defined as being "better off" after adversity and making meaning of it. The psychological change experienced as a result of a traumatic or adverse event represents the process of growth that this study is interested in looking at. Specifically, the evolving process(es) of getting through an adverse event and making meaning of it to ultimately grow and thrive. The fact of doing well in one culture may look different in another; therefore this process of change should be studied within the context of the Latino culture based on immigrant youth's voices of their testimony of growth. Qualitative research has been called for expanding the boundaries of these concepts considering individuals' own processes and trajectories as there is little extant research that explores this phenomenon. Knowledge gained from research on the growth experienced as a result of adversity can serve a unique and important purpose in the field of resilience in the Latino population as researchers will be in a better position to support strengths and create opportunities for intervention.

Family Support

Family support has been considered the relational foundation for several developmental domains such as emotion regulation (Thompson & Meyer, 2007), attachment (Sroufe et al., 2014), and cognitive processing (Bögels & Brechman-Toussaint, 2006). Families are the first and foremost context of socialization of children and adolescents as they are exposed to cultural practices with their parents, siblings, and other extended family members (García Coll et al., 1996; Rogoff, 2003). Typically for Latino families, parents are the most important agents in their children's socialization in relation to values, beliefs, and social norms (Calzada et al., 2012). Family support can be considered a manifestation of *familismo,* as it emerges as an example of the intersection of family, culture, and adjustment. However, not all immigrant children and adolescents have the same quality of family support. Immigration alters family dynamics as some family members are left behind in their home country, others migrated first but the reunification is oftentimes a challenge, all while trying to navigate through the new country looking for opportunities. In this section the concepts of family support and *familismo* will be defined and discussed in relation to immigration.

Social Support, *Familismo*, and Family Support

Social support can be defined as the perceived or received assistance that an individual has from other people (Thoits, 2011), the belief that a person is cared for and loved, esteemed, and an active member of a network (Cobb, 1976). It has also been considered a well-established protective factor for mental health and life satisfaction (Morelli, Lee, Arnn, & Zaki, 2015), and a multidimensional construct that encompasses different types of assistance; informational, emotional, and instrumental or tangible (Munson, Brown, Spencer et al., 2014). Informational support refers to the provision of facts or advice that helps an individual solve problems, (e.g., feedback about the person’s interpretation of a situation and guidance for future steps) (Cohen & McKay, 1984; Weiss, 1974). Emotional support refers to all demonstrations of love and caring, esteem and value, encouragement, trust from others, and sympathy (Huse, 1981; Thoits, 2011). Tangible support consists of supplying material support and the provision of physical and material resources (House, 1981; Thoits, 2011) and it is provided through support with daily-living activities and financial aid. Support may be received, this means the support offered in times of need, and it can also be perceived, one’s potential access to social support (Uchino, 2009). Knowing who one is to others provides a purpose and meaning in life from relationships, a concept known as *materring*, the belief that one is an object of another person’s attention, one is important to that person, and the individual depends on one for fulfillment of certain needs (Thoits, 2011). Past research has found that family interactions (e.g., caring, affection, and positive involvement) sets the basis for supportive relational schemas (Flaherty & Richman, 1986) and for developing perceived support later in life (Mallinckrodt, 1992; Shaw et al., 2004).

The receipt of various kinds of social support depends on the size and cohesiveness of the individual's social network and the relationship amongst the network (Barrera, 1986; Lin, Ye, & Ensel, 1999). A variety of research has shown a significant relationship between social support and mental health outcomes (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Turner & Brown, 2010). For example, individuals that receive social support from family and friends during stressful or traumatic experiences show lower rates of depression (e.g., Lakey & Cronin, 2008). Specifically for the Latino population, one study found that social support was an important mitigating factor in buffering the negative physical and mental effects of stress for Latino male day laborers in San Diego, CA. (Salgado, Castañeda, Talavera et al., 2014).

Quantitative studies using cross-sectional data have found that social support from peers, teachers, and family mattered for academic engagement in immigrant Latino youth (Garcia-Reid et a., 20015). One of the few longitudinal studies with Latino youth found that social support from an adult or teachers in fourth grade predicted increased academic engagement in eighth grade (Green et al., 2008). Taken together, research suggests that social support from family, peers, mentors, and teachers play a role in an individual's development, but different methodologies are needed to identify the specific contribution of the different sources of support of Latino immigrant youth. Social support may look different for some youth as a consequence of migration, some may have support from family members in the form of emotional or tangible support either in person or across borders, and others may have support from other sources outside of the family. What is important is that immigrant youth feel and perceive they have sources of support available to them and that they do matter.

Familismo has been conceptualized as having both attitudinal and behavioral components (Calzada et al., 2012; Stein et al., 2014). Attitudinal *familismo* describes the collection of beliefs that prioritize family above individual needs, and that centers family as a source of attachment and support, and loyalty and obligation (Fuligni et al., 1999; Lugo Steidel & Contreras, 2003). Behavioral *familismo* refers to all actions that reflect these beliefs and values. In adolescents it may include compliance and obedience to parents, time spent on household tasks or sibling caregiving, and behaviors that reflect positively on the family (Stein et al., 2014). Most research about *familismo* has looked at the attitudinal dimension of this construct, it certainly includes a sense of perceived support from family (Marin, 1992; Marin & Gamba, 2003). Received and perceived support from family, or family support, is a vital component of this value.

Family support, the type of social support that comes from families, is characteristic of the Latino population, a collectivist culture that places an increased focus on the family (Triandis, 1989; Arevalo et al., 2016). Psychologists have identified it as a cultural factor that influences a young individual’s habits, behaviors, and life changes (Pastrana, 2015). Most research done on Latino youth has focused on the analysis of family support in relation to educational outcomes, substance abuse and health (e.g. Bers & Galowich, 2002), but few studies have looked at the complexity of family support and its impact on an individual’s life trajectory in the context of migration, and in relation to growth and thriving. There is a gap in the literature on how family dynamics change over time as a result of migration, how nuanced family relationships become, and how family support varies because of previous separations and reunifications while trying to maintain bonds across borders.

Past research on *familismo* has shown positive associations between *familismo* and family relationships based on the idea that family values may foster harmonious, cohesive, and supportive family relationships (Campos et al., 2008; Stein et al., 2014). For example, Lac et al., (2011) found that stronger *familismo* values among Latino high school students were concurrently associated with higher levels of communication with parents and family cohesion. Another study found that Mexican-origin adolescents’ *familismo* value was directly associated with increases in sibling closeness over the transition to young adulthood (Killoren et al., 2015). Kuhlberg et al., (2010) reported evidence that stronger *familismo* values were associated concurrently with lower levels of parent-adolescent conflict among Latino youth. Further, among young Latino adults primarily from Mexico, *familismo* was negatively related to perceived family conflict (Bostean, 2012), and among Mexican adolescents, *familismo* was related to less sibling negativity and conflict concurrently (Updegraff et al., 2005).

Stein and colleagues (2014) emphasized the importance of distinguishing family support and *familismo*, both conceptually and in measurement. *Familismo* represents a broad core value that emphasizes family support as a way of promoting *familismo*. In contrast, family support is the type of social support that comes from family members. These two concepts are not necessarily competing, but the challenge is to critically differentiate and distinguish the two in the context of migration, in order to better understand the ways in which migration refines, alters, and complicates family support. Immigrant youth may have strong family values (*familismo*), but may lack perceived and tangible support from family members because of contextual and interpersonal challenges. As a result, youth may look for other sources of support outside their family boundaries.

Stein and colleagues (2014) also implied that attention should be paid to individual and contextual factors, and to the developmental process that may shape the associations between *familismo* and psychological functioning among Latinos. The vast majority of research on *familismo* has taken place with U.S.-born Latinos from Mexico and it is possible that the social construct of *familismo* and the strength of its association with family relationships differ across Latinos coming from different countries and regions (Ibanez, 2002; Losada et al., 2006), facing different circumstances of migration, and living different family dynamics and structures.
Social support in the Latino population often comes from families, although it can be argued that these functions can be supplied by external group members as well. While there is vast literature exploring social support and showing that Latino families are capable of providing support, more research is needed to identify and describe these different forms of social support within

families, to develop a more nuanced and dynamic understanding of what support means in the context of migration, especially when youth and parents migrate at different points in time, and to explain its effects on psychological trajectories for youth.

Family Separation and Reunification

The conceptualization of family support in the context of migration is very complex. There are two scenarios in which Central American immigrant youth are separated from their parents due to migration. In the first scenario, the most common one, parent(s) migrate to the U.S. first to provide a better and safer life for their children, leaving them behind in the care of family members (Burton & Hardaway, 2012; Dreby, 2006; Safa, 2005). Parents in this situation commonly send remittances and maintain long-distance relationships through technological networks (Trask, 2013; Roy & Yumiseva, 2021). Phone calls, videos, and chats via Internet provide an option to communicate and “stay together” regardless of the physical distance (Waldinger, 2013). It is often the case that years later children of immigrant parents migrate to reunite with their parents. The second scenario occurs when parents encourage their child(ren) to leave their home country in order to escape political instability, gang violence, or deep poverty. In this case, it is the young immigrants who work to help their families financially by sending remittances (Roy & Yumiseva, 2021). In both scenarios, family support becomes a challenge. Immigrant youth may have tangible support in the form of financial remittances sent by their parent(s) but they may not have emotional support, as is the case of many youth whose parent(s) migrated but were not able to maintain a close relationship with them. It can also be the case that youth migrate leaving a parent(s) behind and lacking tangible support, but are able to maintain their family bonds across borders via texting or video calls which provides them with emotional support.

Adolescents who have experienced significant separation from a parent are at an increased risk for anxiety, depression, behavioral problems, lack of social interactions and school networks, symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, and complication in their relationship with parents (Allen, Cisneros, & Tellez, 2015; Zayas, et. al., 2015; Gulbas et al., 2016; Hesse, & Steele, 2017; Conway et al., 2021). Parreñas (2005) posited that, because the care of children is generally a maternal role, children of migrant mothers struggle with greater feelings of abandonment more than children of migrant fathers, and may resist accepting their mother's relocation.

Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1980) posits that parent-child separation may result in disruptions of attachment, first from the parent(s) who migrates or from the caregiver to whom the child has become attached after the parent(s) departure (Dreby, 2007; Suarez-Orozco et al., 2002). Secure attachment to a primary caregiver is necessary for healthy psychological development, and disruptions of attachment relationships can have important consequences for emotional and relational development (Bowlby, 1980; Bretherton, 1992). Even once children are reunified with their mothers, emotional connection remains very complex (Patel, et. al., 2021). Parents may have difficulty with discipline when adolescents resist their parent's decisions, or young children might not feel an emotional connection with parents who might be perceived as "strangers" (Dreby, 2007).

Children and adolescents who migrate to reunify with a parent may also be coping with the recent loss of separating from caregivers in their home countries (Muller et al., 2019; Patel et al., 2016; Suárez-Orozco, Bang, & Kim, 2011). Such relational challenges can be particularly difficult when parents view the prior prolonged separation as a sacrifice made for the family as a way of providing better opportunities (Schapiro, Kools, Wiss, & Brindis, 2013; Suarez Orozco, et al., 2002). When children of immigrant parents finally migrate to reunite with a parent(s) a shift in sources of support occurs, complicating family support. Oftentimes reunifications are filled with complexity as the reconnection does not happen automatically, - in some cases does not happen at all-, and as a consequence, sources of support are compromised, youth may have their parent(s) physically present but may not perceive them as a source of emotional nor tangible support. Other family members, formerly providers of emotional support, are now in the home country and therefore youth start looking for other sources of support inside and outside the family. Reunified families face numerous challenges in reestablishing roles and routines and moving beyond disconnection (Schapiro et al., 2013). In these families, the context of separation and reunification complicates family support and opens the door to an endless number of possibilities of connections and disconnections, making the conceptualization of family support as a concept and as a source of support for Latino immigrant youth a very complex process. Therefore, this construct of family support should be examined in a more nuanced way for this specific group of youth in order to better understand its potential as a promoter or inhibitor of growth.

The Intersection of Development and Structural Inequity

Adolescence spans from the onset of puberty to the beginning of adulthood. It is a formative period marked by significant changes in cognition, emotion, and interpersonal behavior, accompanied by the most extensive neurobiological transitions since infancy, particularly in physical and brain development (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2019). This period, often referred to as “the teenage years,” is characterized by the maturation of the body, an intensification of the capacity for learning, and the emergence of personal identity (Newman & Newman, 2016).

Adolescence is a sensitive developmental stage in which growth is strongly influenced by the environment, including physical factors such as nutrition, trauma, and toxic exposures, as well as social factors like the influence of parents, family members, caregivers, peers, mentors, and structural disadvantages such as racism, bias, and discrimination (Fuhrmann et al., 2015). These potent social determinants significantly shape adolescents' life trajectories. Not only do they limit access to opportunities and services for more privileged youth, but they also expose less privileged youth to risks and stresses that adversely affect both the body and brain during these critical developmental periods (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2019).

For example, the rates of child and adolescent poverty are disproportionately higher for Black and Latino youth in the U.S., as growing up in poverty is linked to worse physical and mental health, as well as increased engagement in risky behaviors, delinquency, and criminal activity (NASEM, 2019). Parental income and wealth are strong predictors of child and adolescent outcomes, with limited family resources associated with poorer adolescent mental health and lower IQ scores (Hackman et al., 2010). This connection between parental income and child mental health can be explained by the fact that exposure to high levels of stress negatively impacts a child's developing brain, and families living below the poverty line with limited resources experience more stress than others (Blair & Raver, 2016). Exposure to violence and trauma during adolescence can also trigger harmful stress responses, which have been negatively associated with future adult health, including increased risks of cardiovascular disease, asthma, hypertension, and diabetes (Dowler et al., 2009; Herringa, 2017). Additionally, such exposure is linked to mental health outcomes, including depression and anxiety (Dube et al., 2018). Black and Latino adolescents are more likely to witness violence in their neighborhoods due to residential segregation and disadvantage, resulting in behavioral health disparities driven by feelings of hopelessness and depression (White & Borrell, 2011).

For these reasons, it is essential to consider the deep impact of an unequal social distribution of risks and resources, which privileges some youth while disadvantaging others (Steinberg, 2014), as is the case with immigrant youth. These disparities affect developmental trajectories and are predictive of significant disparities in adult economic and social outcomes. Failing to address these disparities during adolescence leads to suboptimal development of the nation's human capital, which, in turn, generates economic and social costs, including reduced productivity, lost wages and employment opportunities, poorer physical and mental health, an increased criminal justice burden, and heightened discrimination (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2019).

Adolescence presents a developmental period full of potential for change and growth. However, for immigrant youth, particularly those separated from family members or other support systems, this opportunity may be more challenging. Understanding what resilience and growth mean and how they evolve for this group is key to intervening during this critical period and improving the conditions that disadvantage immigrant youth. Life experiences of immigrant youth differ significantly depending on the timing of their migration to the U.S. Immigrants who arrive during childhood attend school in the U.S., which allows them to develop language, roles, and identities alongside U.S.-born peers, cultivating feelings of belonging. Their aspirations and expectations are more rooted in U.S. culture than those of immigrants who arrive later in life (Abrego, 2006; Gonzales, 2011, 2016).

Adolescent arrivals face different challenges than their peers who arrive at younger ages (Diaz-Strong & Gonzales, 2023). Upon arrival in the U.S., they must navigate a new culture, including unfamiliar social systems and institutions, and are often forced to assume adult-like responsibilities to support themselves and their families through remittances (Roy & Yumiseva, 2020; Canizales, 2022). In addition, adolescent immigrants must learn a new language and culture while navigating legal exclusion, which forces them to make life-altering decisions about school, work, and social relationships (Diaz-Strong & Gonzales, 2023). They are frequently confronted with social exclusions that prevent them from driving, working legally, and accessing college financial aid and other benefits. Many are unaware of these limitations until they reach critical milestones, leading to confusion, frustration, and vulnerability (Diaz-Strong & Gonzales, 2023).

While immigrant youth share common experiences related to adolescence, their context is significantly different from their peers who have not undergone the same migration challenges. Immigrant youth face a unique combination of struggles and barriers that extend beyond the typical developmental challenges of adolescence. While the patterns of adolescence, such as the search for identity and the push for independence, remain similar, the context for immigrant youth is marked by additional pressures related to migration, cultural adaptation, legal exclusion, and economic responsibilities. These added complexities shape the adolescent experience in ways that are distinct from those of their U.S.-born counterparts. The tremendous challenges of enduring difficult migration journeys, adapting to life in the U.S. post-migration, and navigating crucial transitions to adulthood harm the well-being of immigrant youth (Diaz-Strong & Gonzales, 2023). Almost two-thirds of recently arrived youth report exposure to trauma (Cleary et al., 2018). Upon arrival in the U.S., the majority of immigrant youth enter the labor force, financially supporting themselves and their families back home. Their youth, lack of English proficiency, and undocumented status expose them to exploitative working conditions, including long hours, unsafe and abusive environments, low wages, and wage theft (Canizales, 2022; Chavez et al., 2021). Consequently, feelings of vulnerability during the adolescent and adult transitions are common, as these youths assume adult roles and bear heavy caretaking responsibilities during their teenage years (Diaz-Strong, 2022; Martinez, 2019). Performing these roles out of necessity, they may feel ill-prepared for such responsibilities and regret the lack of support and guidance available to them (Diaz-Strong, 2022).

The brain and its circuitry are widely understood to continue maturing from the onset of puberty through an individual's mid-20s (Lenroot & Giedd, 2006). New concepts, such as "emerging adulthood" (Arnett, 2000, 2004), describe a delayed onset of adulthood for 18- to 29-year-olds in industrialized societies. This life stage, characterized by exploration and instability, has been widely debated, as its relevance may not apply universally across different contexts. For instance, Kloep and Hendry (2010) argued that the concept of emerging adulthood doesn't fully capture all patterns of behavior, particularly for individuals who cannot afford the luxury of "taking time to grow up" or "settle down," such as those facing challenges like family separation due to migration or struggling to find employment. This concept is more applicable to affluent, middle- and higher-income classes and does not encompass the experiences of ethnic minorities, including immigrants, low-income families, and individuals with disabilities (Kloep & Hendry, 2011).

The pubertal, neurobiological, cognitive, and psychosocial changes during adolescence mark this period as one of great opportunity for flourishing and thriving (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2019). However, for Latino immigrant youth, these opportunities may be complicated by delayed or disrupted changes due to factors like immigration status, acculturation, and the instability of family support. Expanding our understanding of the various roles family support plays in the lives of immigrant youth is essential to comprehending the complexity of their family dynamics and creating interventions that foster their development. Much of the research on Latino immigrants has focused on children or adults, and this study seeks to fill the gap by examining the role of family support during the critical, yet understudied, developmental stages of adolescence and young adulthood.

Theoretical Framework

This study examined the pathways of Central American immigrant youth as they navigate their lived experiences after migration, grounded in the foundations of life course theory (Elder, 1991). Life course theory emphasizes the impact of social and structural factors experienced throughout an individual's life within a socio-historical context (Elder, Johnson, & Crosnoe, 2003). Scholars have applied life course theory to the study of immigrant health (e.g., Acevedo-Garcia et al., 2012) and legal status (e.g., de Oca, Garcia, Saenz, & Guillen, 2011; Torres & Young, 2016). As I examine how the psychological growth of Central American immigrant youth is shaped by life course events and relationships, I will integrate constructs from other theoretical models, including the Family Resilience Model and the Integrative Model for the Study of Minority Children, to complement the life course theoretical framework of this study.

Growth

In life course theory, the concept of *human agency* refers to how individuals construct their life trajectory through the decisions they make and the actions they take, shaped by the opportunities and constraints of their historical context (Elder, Johnson, & Crosnoe, 2003). Agency denotes the active role individuals play in determining their outcomes, though these decisions are influenced by life relationships and circumstances (Roy & Settersten, 2022). While researchers working within the life course tradition have made agency more explicit in their work, its application has been inconsistent across the field (Marshall, 2005; Hitlin & Johnson, 2015). Recent research, including the work of Hitlin and Kirkpatrick (2015), calls for a reconceptualization of agency, viewing it not as a universal capacity but as an individual capacity for meaningful action across situations and the life course. Hitlin and Kirkpatrick argue that individuals are active agents who appraise life conditions with emotional valence about the future. This study aims to expand our understanding of growth and change, going beyond a focus solely on individual decisions and structural resources.

The concept of agency has often been conflated with other concepts like resilience or motivation (Laub & Sampson, 2005), as many individuals demonstrate capacities for self-direction, chance, psychological traits, and planfulness. However, I argue that resilience and growth for Central American immigrant youth are not merely driven by motivation or an agentic, universal capacity. Instead, resilience and growth are dynamic, evolving processes that develop over time. As Mirowsky and Ross (2007) suggested, resilience is a resource individuals develop, one that varies across experiences, social strata, and the life course. While social structures influence individuals, they do not fully determine their actions. Rather, it is the processes of meaning-making and reframing negative events over time that shape a person's future pathways after adversity.

This study aims to offer a new approach to understanding resilience as a process of growth for this specific group of Central American youth. As Elder (1985) posited, adaptation to life events is crucial because the same event or transition can lead to different trajectories depending on how individuals adapt, a concept I will explore further in the following sections.

Change Over Time

Elder (1985) defined a trajectory or life pathway as a sequence of linked states within a defined range of behavior or experience, and the continuation of these states enacted over time. A transition is a discrete life change in state or social role that forms part of life trajectories (Elder, 1985). It represents movements along an individual's trajectory within socially constructed timetables, meaning that a significant portion of the population experiences these transitions, and society expects individuals to undergo them at certain points (Hareven & Masaoka, 1988). Migration, as a life event, represents a turning point—a key concept defined as a disruption or deflection in an individual's trajectory (Wheaton & Gotlib, 1997). Turning points are often characterized by an "event" or series of "events" that are crucial to a life's history. Typically, these events are not dramatic, unusual, or single discrete occurrences, but they mark a clear change in direction (Wheaton & Gotlib, 1997).

In discussions of turning points and life changes, the term *knifing off* is commonly used to describe the notion of "starting over" and seeking a "new me" by finding or creating a "change of scenery" (Maruna & Roy, 2007). Although this concept originates from criminology, its roots can be traced back to Elder (1998), who described how transitions into new environments can assist in breaking a difficult life path. In other words, individuals may break a cycle of cumulative disadvantage by *knifing off* their unwanted past, which may be either structurally induced by environmental conditions or freely chosen by those who decide to change on their own (Elder & Shanahan, 2006; Maruna & Roy, 2007).

For some individuals, turning points can be abrupt, radical changes that separate the past from the future (Elder et al., 1991). A turning point occurs when an event or situation alters an individual's trajectory in a specific domain (e.g., psychological development, relationships, health), changing its destination. For immigrant youth, arriving in the U.S. marks a turning point that reshapes their developmental trajectory, influencing their transition into adulthood. Immigration, as an event, serves as a deflection-point in time, marking a "before" and "after," sending immigrant youth’s lives in new directions during the complex developmental transition into adulthood. Since little is known about the trajectories and transitions of Central American youth after migration, qualitative approaches can shed light on how these life course concepts evolve over time and how this process of change manifests for this group of youth.

For an event to alter a trajectory in one or more areas of development, the change must be more than temporary and may involve one or more of the following possibilities: (1) stability of a new direction across life transitions; (2) resistance to efforts to re-establish the prior trajectory; (3) transformation of identity to accommodate the new trajectory; and (4) evidence of a role commitment implied by the new direction (Wheaton & Gotlib, 1997). In line with previous research, this study will treat migration as a turning point—a process that unfolds over time and impacts multiple domains of psychological development and growth, rather than as a single event. Migration meets several of the criteria outlined above: it is stable across life transitions from adolescence to adulthood, it resists efforts to re-establish the previous trajectory by *knifing off* the past and reinterpreting lived experiences, it involves a transformation of identity as part of the growth process, and it evidences a new role commitment shaped by the new direction.

Taken together, the concepts of trajectory, transitions, turning points, and *knifing off* are essential for framing the research questions of this study, particularly aims one and two. These aims focus on understanding change over time, psychological trajectories, meaning-making, and individual development as an ongoing process of variation and transformation. This conceptualization provides a framework for understanding how turning points can redirect trajectories during the transition to adulthood, as immigrant youth in this study navigate the complexities of adolescence and the transition to adulthood. This group experiences both transitions and turning points that can either stimulate or hinder growth, depending on the processes of meaning-making they undergo and the mechanisms they use to navigate the challenges they face during and after migration.

Context

The social context of a given historical time and place shapes the developmental trajectories of immigrant youth. An individual's life course is embedded in and influenced by the historical time and place they experience over their lifetime (Elder, 1998). The size, distribution, and health-related factors of the migrant population are historically and geographically contingent, resulting from a convergence of demographic, economic, political, and social factors in receiving contexts (Massey, Durand, & Pren, 2014). In the context of this study, migration rates from Central America, particularly from El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala, are increasing as youth either migrate unaccompanied to reunite with parents who migrated earlier or to flee their homeland due to poverty, violence, lack of opportunities, and political instability in the region (Massey et al., 2014). Many Central American immigrants currently entering and settling in the U.S.—including a large number of unaccompanied minors, holding a variety of legal statuses (Robinson, 2015; Torres & Young, 2016)—form a cohort of people whose experiences offer a precise historical context that should be carefully studied.

Many of the interviews for this study were conducted starting in 2019, during the Trump Administration's "zero tolerance" policy. This policy allowed the U.S. government to separate thousands of children from their parents while prosecuting the adults who crossed the border illegally, with the children taken into federal custody (U.S. Department of Justice, 2018). Fortunately, the Biden Administration took swift action to dismantle this policy in 2021.

However, its ramifications continue to influence the life choices of undocumented immigrant youth.

Time and Change

Locating individuals in time, age, cohort, and generation is essential for studying families and understanding how individual agency is shaped by cultural and political factors (Roy & Settersten, 2022). Age represents the developmental period in the life course; cohort refers to a group of people born at the same time in history and is measured across families; generation represents the position within the extended family and is measured within families; and timing in life refers to the developmental impact of a succession of life transitions or events contingent on when they occur in an individual's life trajectory (Elder, 1998). The concepts of historical time and place prompt us to think about lives and development not only over time but across changing contexts, as individuals are moved from one country to another through the long journey of migration within a relatively short period. These historical changes have different implications for people at various life stages, as they bring unique resources to confront situations and adapt to new conditions.

As Elder (1998) emphasized, the developmental impact of a succession of transitions or events is contingent on when they occur in an individual's life. Socially defined roles and transitions depend on their contextual placement relative to other role trajectories. For immigrant youth, the meaning of certain roles and transitions should be understood differently and not merely in comparison to other groups, such as their White peers. The sequence of timing for this group of youth may differ from that of other young people. For instance, some markers of adulthood (e.g., securing a full-time job) might be delayed for Latino immigrant youth due to their living conditions. Whether transitions occur early or late, their timing is influenced by an individual’s trajectory, process of meaning-making, and social support. Research on variations in the age boundaries of particular life course phases is beginning to accumulate, but little is still known about its variation across social classes and racial/ethnic groups (Elder, Johnson, & Crosnoe, 2003; Jones et al., 2019).

Linked Lives

The concept of linked lives provided a theoretical foundation for examining how an individual’s life was influenced by and, in turn, influenced the lives of others (Elder Jr., 1998; Gee et al., 2012). This concept referred to lives that were interdependent, shaped by social and historical factors, and expressed through a network of shared relationships (Bengtson & Allen, 2009; Roy & Settersten, 2022). Within this framework, the family, as the fundamental social unit, was defined as a microsocial group operating within a broader macrosocial context. It was composed of individuals with a shared history who interacted within ever-changing social environments across time and space (Bengtson & Allen, 2009). The experiences of one family member had direct implications for others, contributing to a range of life course outcomes over time.

For migrant families, these interconnections often faced extraordinary obstacles, including separation and reunification due to migration, as well as shifts in family dynamics. Families, regardless of their socioeconomic status or resources, had to navigate the complexities of maintaining relationships across borders, particularly as these relationships evolved over time (Roy & Settersten, 2022). Understanding immigrant families required an examination of the nature of family relationships, the dynamics between individuals, and how these connections were created, maintained, and redefined throughout the life course. Many families in this study experienced separation due to migration, which introduced intergenerational effects—ways in which an individual’s life trajectory was shaped by previous generations and, in turn, influenced future generations (Kane, 2015; Serbin & Karp, 2004).

My analysis applied Roy and Settersten’s (2022) conceptualization of linked lives within the family life course framework, emphasizing the interconnected experiences of family members, where one individual's actions and trajectories influence the entire family unit. This construct comprises five dimensions: configuration, content, time, environment, and valence. *Configuration* considers who constitutes the interdependent family relationships, extending beyond dyadic ties (e.g., parent-child) to more complex relational networks shaped by migration. *Content* examines what is exchanged or transferred within these linkages, as migration restructures family interdependencies and shared meanings. *Time* situates individuals within historical, generational, and life-course contexts, revealing how agency is shaped by cultural and political forces. *Environment* encompasses the social and physical conditions in which family connections unfold, evolving as individuals adapt to new settings. Finally, *valence* captures the quality of these linkages, which cannot be understood as static but must be examined across time, particularly in families navigating migration’s disruptions.

Despite physical distance due to migration, families remained connected through shared meanings, values, and beliefs that were deeply embedded in their cultural contexts (Roy & Settersten, 2022). However, when migration disrupted traditional family roles, alternative sources of social support, such as peers, romantic partners, mentors, community members, and institutions, became increasingly important in fulfilling emotional and social needs (Rhodes et al., 2015). Among Latino immigrant families, *familismo* underscored the significance of family history and closeness, yet migration across borders frequently strained these connections. Parenting at a distance, as well as the psychological absence of family members even after reunification, complicated family bonds and redefined family roles in ways that often challenged the resilience of immigrant youth.

This study focused on conceptualizing the processes of growth and change for immigrant youth from Central America, rather than solely examining the structures and resources available (or unavailable) to them. Much of the existing research had not addressed change over time or conceptualized these phenomena as dynamic processes. Instead, it often relied on quantitative data and resilience scales measured at a single point in time. A broader range of conceptual and methodological approaches was needed to study life patterns within the context of migration and shifting political policies, as these factors shaped family and community contexts over time. These processes should be examined within a life course framework that emphasized time, context, and process, considering factors that pushed individuals off their intended trajectories, those that brought them back, and those that promoted long-term growth.

Adjacent Frameworks

Over the past decade, life course theory has gained prominence among public health researchers. As Pies and Kotelchuck (2014) noted, there has been a shift toward focusing on "the importance of early experiences and their influence on health longitudinally." According to the life course health development (LCHD) model (Halfon & Hochstein, 2000), development results from multiple factors operating within nested genetic, biological, behavioral, social, and economic contexts. This framework was designed to explain how health trajectories evolve over an individual's lifetime, shaped by cumulative risk and protective factors.

For this study, the additions proposed by Moser Jones and Roy (2017) to the LCHD model will be incorporated into the theoretical framework. These additions include two key concepts: (1) individual health development occurs within the context of family health, which is nested within community and societal development, spanning historical and generational time, and (2) the social determinants of health influence individual, family, and community health trajectories, generating greater health equity or inequity over time. Family, community, social, and physical contexts are shaped by historical actors and institutions, which are in turn influenced by ideologies and interests (Moser Jones & Roy, 2017). This perspective shifts the focus from the individual to an individual-in-context, nested within broader family and societal health trajectories. It also integrates individual health trajectories into family and community trajectories, considers historical context, and distinguishes between a cohort and a generation to better understand variations in individuals' experiences and trajectories (Moser Jones & Roy, 2017). This focus on family and individual health is central to this study, as it provides insight into how individual health unfolds over time as a result of intergenerational migration, particularly regarding its impact on immigrant youth’s mental health. Incorporating these additions will enable the creation of a broad conceptual framework that considers factors influencing both life trajectories and health development outcomes over the life course.

Feinberg and colleagues (2021) proposed a heuristic framework, the family health development (FHD) model, for analyzing dynamic interactions between individuals, family relationships, and environmental factors that shape health trajectories. This framework situates the individual’s life course within intergenerational relationships influenced by individual, relational, and external factors (Smith, DeGrace, Ciro et al., 2017). The FHD model includes four domains: (1) family structure, (2) family processes, (3) cognitions, and (4) behaviors. The family structure domain encompasses family composition, roles, and responsibilities, defining them as structural factors that change over historical time. Families are tasked with supporting their members, providing emotional and physical care, and facilitating access to services, among other responsibilities. These supports require resources such as time, energy, and money.

The processes domain refers to the ongoing strategies families use to achieve goals, including decision-making, communication, and conflict resolution. A key aspect of this domain is the family's role in providing care for children, preparing them to live meaningful and healthy lives within their social context. Poor communication skills and negative communication patterns can lead families from disagreement to conflict over time. The cognitions domain addresses how families think and feel about themselves in their roles, identities, and relationships. The behaviors domain focuses on the concrete aspects of family life, including how family structures are expressed, lifestyle behaviors, and preventive and promotive health behaviors.

The value of the FHD model lies in its ability to conceptualize the family and environment as integral to health opportunities and risks throughout the life course. For immigrant youth, this model emphasizes the importance of family dynamics and their direct influence on health development and behavior. The four domains of the FHD model offer a framework for understanding how families can either inhibit or promote health development, as well as inform interventions, treatment, and prevention strategies for health conditions, including mental health.

Other Relevant Theories

The Family Resilience Model (FRM) and Garcia-Coll's integrative model for the study of minority children are two supplemental frameworks that contribute to understanding resilience as a process of growth in young Central American immigrants. Each model adds critical aspects to a broad life course approach for this study. The FRM posits that families possess strengths that can be identified, developed, and mobilized to prevent or reduce the severity of risks and promote positive adaptation to significant challenges (McCubbin & McCubbin, 1998; Walsh, 1998). Using this model, resilience is understood as a dynamic process over time rather than a static quality of families responding to risk, with outcomes ranging from a return to the family's previous level of functioning to experiencing post-traumatic growth (Hawley & DeHaan, 1996; Walsh, 1998). Family risk is defined as the specific stressors that increase the likelihood of negative outcomes (Rutter, 1987). Protection is a key construct of the model, referring to factors that build resilience capacity so that when risk is present, it can mitigate negative outcomes (McCubbin & McCubbin, 1998). Family vulnerabilities are factors that increase the potential for adversities related to risk (McCubbin & McCubbin, 1998), while family adaptation refers to the short- and long-term positive or negative outcomes resulting from risk (McCubbin & Patterson, 1983). This model contributes to this study by defining resilience as a process, rather than a mere outcome.

Garcia-Coll's (1996) integrative model for the study of minority children offers a framework for understanding the development of minority children in the U.S. It emphasizes key factors for understanding the growth and development of individual children and their families, particularly in populations of color. This model incorporates constructs unique to these populations, which contribute variance to their developmental processes, and also considers fundamental constructs applicable to other populations, taking into account social conditions that position individuals within the social hierarchy (e.g., race, social class, ethnicity, and gender). Garcia-Coll and collaborators hypothesize the effects of racism on children of color and how segregated contexts inhibit or promote their development. Regarding resilience, this model posits that children are not simply passive recipients of their experiences; rather, they influence family processes and contribute to their socialization through interactions within their systems of influence. This study integrates Garcia-Coll’s model by considering the unique environmental factors that shape the developmental processes of Latino children and adolescents.

These models provide valuable supplements to life course theory in understanding the complexity of growth in immigrant youth from Central America. Life course theory, first, facilitated the study of Central American immigrant youth’s life trajectories across different developmental domains (e.g., psychological development) over time, linking childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood with a focus on the processes of growth. Second, it provided a framework for analyzing variations in transitions and turning points along a life trajectory, particularly considering the role of family support in promoting or inhibiting growth. Third, life course theory expanded the understanding of resilience as a dynamic process of growth, incorporating the social context (time and place) of this population, making the theory more relevant and appropriate. In doing so, the focus shifts from merely studying risk (as in the FRM) to a more strengths-based approach that emphasizes growth over time, not just at specific moments in life, based on culturally specific adaptations for this group of Central American immigrant youth.

Fourth, emerging models using life course principles conceptualized resilience as a process, considering individual health development within the context of family health, nested within societal development over historical time and place. However, these models do not fully capture resilience as a process of growth, an area that this study aims to critically expand. Furthermore, Garcia-Coll’s model addresses the population of color, specifically Latino immigrant youth, and adds depth to the understanding of the social context in which Latino adolescents develop in the U.S., considering social factors such as race, social class, ethnicity, and gender.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter provides an overview of the methodological approach. It describes participant recruitment procedures and selection of study participants. It also discusses data collection and data management techniques, as well as the plan for data analysis. Finally, the strategies used to ensure quality and trustworthiness of the data will be explained.

Methodological Approach

A qualitative approach will be employed to gain a deeper understanding of the processes of growth and to propose a new conceptualization of the dynamic processes that Central American immigrant youth undergo as they move beyond psychological distress. Qualitative methods are well-suited for capturing the nuanced interactions between process, context, and meaning in an individual's experience (Roy et al., 2015) and for exploring these phenomena across diverse settings (Daly, 2007). This methodological approach will enable an in-depth examination of the processes Central American immigrant youth engage in after arriving in the U.S., particularly as they navigate significant disadvantages and limited opportunities, expressed in their own words.

In-depth interviews serve as the primary data collection method. By centering the voices of Central American immigrant youth, this study will capture their lived experiences and psychological trajectories, shedding light on how they construct meaning from their challenges and growth. The ultimate goal is to develop a conceptual framework for the dynamic growth processes these youth undergo post-migration and to expand the understanding of family support's role in shaping these processes.

To facilitate conceptual development, I employed a grounded theory approach (LaRossa, 2005; Charmaz, 2006) to reconceptualize resilience as it applies to Central American immigrant youth. Additionally, this study deepened the understanding of family support, exploring its diverse functions in shaping their psychological development and life trajectories. Finally, meaning-making refers to the ongoing process by which individuals interpret their own actions and those of others, continuously constructing and reconstructing their lived reality (Daly, 2007). Bruner (1990) emphasized that living within a cultural community extends beyond shared values, beliefs, and norms; it also involves personal interpretive processes that shape each individual's understanding of reality. Similarly, Becker (1994) argued that meaning-making can be understood through metaphor, as people draw on concepts such as order and chaos, limbo, life and death, rebirth, and transformation to make sense of disruption. Periods of chaos and limbo often precede efforts to restore order and continuity, guided by a cultural model that shapes responses to upheaval. In this process, metaphor serves as a critical tool, enabling individuals to reconstruct continuity and reestablish connections to social and cultural structures. The restoration of continuity after disruption emerges as a complex cultural phenomenon. Thus, meaning-making is deeply rooted in personal experiences but is also shaped by broader cultural narratives and interpretive frameworks.

Institutional Review Board

This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the University of Maryland, College Park (IRB #1772880-6). As part of the approval process, a copy of the interview protocol, participant consent form, Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) completion report, and all other required documents were submitted through the IRB portal. The initial approval was granted on July 29, 2021, with the most recent approval issued on June 28, 2023.

Community-Based Participatory Research and Community Partner

Community-based participatory research (CBPR) is a collaborative research approach that actively involves all partners throughout the research process. As Wallerstein and Duran (2006) suggest, CBPR begins with a research topic of importance to the community and fosters partnerships in which academic and community members learn from one another. The goal is to integrate knowledge and action for long-term social change. Over the past decade, organizations such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Office of Minority Health, and various institutes within the National Institutes of Health have increasingly prioritized CBPR approaches, issuing calls for proposals that integrate education and social action to improve health outcomes and reduce disparities (Wallerstein & Duran, 2006).

For this study, data were collected from Latino youth from Central America participating in programs at our community partner's facilities, a community-based organization that serves more than 3,000 in-school and out-of-school Latino youth (ages 8–25) and their families living in poverty. This community organization has developed youth development programs that focus on social-emotional skill-building, academic support, workforce development, behavioral health, fitness and recreational activities, and family education and engagement. The organization's mission is to empower Latino youth, its programming emphasizes resilience, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.

Initially, faculty from the Department of Family Science in the School of Public Health at the University of Maryland (UMD) collaborated with our community partner in collecting data about youth's experiences of trauma and resilience in this unique group of adolescents and young people. Since 2018, the University of Maryland's research team has collaborated with our community partner to inform the development of culturally responsive programming tailored to the needs of the youth they serve. Since joining the Family Science PhD program in 2019, I have been an active member of this partnership, contributing to various CBPR projects through recruitment, data collection, analysis, and administrative coordination.

Data Collection Procedure

This study involved two waves of data collection, both utilizing a semi-structured interview protocol designed to elicit a detailed understanding of the migration experiences of Central American youth. The first wave took place between 2019 and 2020, before I joined the project, during which our community partner's staff conducted 20 in-depth interviews. Although our community partner facilitated the interviews, the protocol was developed by researchers at UMD to ensure methodological consistency (see Appendix A). The interviews explored participants' migration journeys, challenges before, during, and after migration, and their sources of support. Sample questions included: *Tell me about your life when you were a child until the time you decided to come to the U.S.*, and *Tell me about your migration experience*.

The second wave of data collection began in 2021 when I, along with a new research team, conducted an additional 18 in-depth interviews using an updated interview protocol (see Appendix B). This revision expanded the focus on growth and mental health, capturing the evolving experiences and perspectives of Central American immigrant youth over time. Participants were asked about their coping mechanisms, available support systems, and perceptions of the future (e.g., *When you were going through a hard time, what helped you overcome that difficult time?* and *What is your vision? What are your goals for life? Do you see changes over time in how you cope with difficulties?*).

For both waves, our community partner was responsible for recruitment, identifying eligible participants and referring them to our research team for scheduling and data collection.

This two-wave approach provided a more comprehensive understanding of the migration experiences of Central American youth, incorporating perspectives from different time periods and research teams while maintaining methodological consistency.

Once interest in participation was received and eligibility criteria were confirmed by our community partner staff, youth were contacted via text message or email to schedule a date, time, and location that was quiet, private, and convenient for both the interviewer and the interviewee. Interviews took place at a private location within our community partner's facilities, at a partner high school, or via teleconference using Zoom. Before the interview, participants were presented with the purpose of the study and were reminded that the information collected would be used for research purposes only, that their responses would remain confidential, and that their participation was voluntary and could be discontinued at any time without penalty or consequence. Participants were also informed that data collected would be aggregated, and extra care would be taken to ensure anonymity so that no participants' identities could be identified.

Prior to starting the interview, participants were asked for their permission to audio record the conversation. Once approval was granted, the recording application on the interviewer's cell phone or computer was activated, and the interview began. Once again, participants were reminded that their identities and responses would remain confidential, that their participation was voluntary, and that they could end the interview at any time. Finally, participants were informed that they would receive compensation in the form of a gift card for their participation.

Each interview was scheduled to last approximately 60 minutes. At the end of the interview, participants were asked if they had any questions or thoughts they wanted to share that they felt were relevant. After all questions had been addressed, participants were thanked for their time, and the recording device was turned off. The recording from each interview was uploaded to a secure, cloud-based UMD Box account, which was accessible only to the research team.

In total, the research team transcribed, translated, and analyzed 38 interviews. All interviews were conducted in Spanish and were transcribed and translated into English by a private transcription service. Preliminary analyses were conducted using the translated and de-identified English transcripts. Notes from interviews were taken in the form of memos. During the coding process, researchers wrote memos to elaborate on their reflections, connect with the data, notate new literature and ideas to explore, and develop preliminary conclusions.

Sample

Recruitment

Recruitment of participants was conducted by our community partner's staff during various events hosted for Latino immigrant youth. All participants were enrolled in our community partner's programs. For wave 2 of data collection, participants were referred to UMD, by our community partner, who identified eligible individuals and connected them to our research team. Announcements regarding the study were made during data collection sessions and focus groups for ongoing research projects at our community partner's facilities. Once potential participants were identified, they were contacted by the principal investigator to schedule interviews at a mutually convenient date and time. A demographics table summarizing key characteristics of the participants, including their age, country of origin, education level, and length of time in the U.S., is provided in Table 1.

Sample Size

It was difficult to estimate the total sample size required to capture the variation in the resilience and growth processes applied by Central American immigrant youth post-migration, as well as the variety of roles family support plays during this pivotal period of development. Based on guidelines from several scholars, qualitative sample sizes can be determined to reach theoretical saturation, which is the point when experiences or concepts emerging from the data are fully understood and their dimensions and conceptual properties are exhausted (LaRossa, 2005). Qualitative analyses are less focused on frequency and more on the quality of experiences that enable researchers to describe the phenomenon and explain its nuances (Morse, 1998; Roy et al., 2015). Knowing the number of individuals interviewed does not, by itself, provide insight into the quality of the data obtained (Roy et al., 2015). Therefore, I aimed to ground my theoretical conceptualization in enough data to show variation, identify consistent themes, and adequately address the proposed research aims. As a result, the final sample size for this study was 34 in-depth interviews. Some interviews were not included in the final sample because the participants were not from Honduras, El Salvador, or Guatemala, which were the focus of the study.

Sampling Richness

The units of observation, defined by Sedgwick (2014) as the “who” or “what” for which data are collected, for this study were Central American immigrant youth who were recruited and interviewed. The units of analysis, or the “who” or “what” for which information is analyzed and conclusions are made (Sedgwick, 2014), were Central American immigrant youth’s life trajectories in psychological development and the sources of support they relied on to overcome adversities. To generate valid conclusions in family research, units of analysis and units of observation should be in sync to yield high-quality information based on the depth of information gathered via multiple informants on the unit of analysis (Roy et al., 2015).

Sample Demographics

To be eligible for participation, youth had to self-identify as Latino, have migrated to the U.S. from Central America (specifically from El Salvador, Guatemala, or Honduras), live within the designated recruitment area, and be enrolled in one of our community partner’s intervention programs. There was no specific age requirement for eligibility. The final sample consisted of 34 in-depth interviews, 16 of which were with males and 18 with females. The age range of participants was 15 to 26, with a mean age of 19.5 years. The mean age at migration was 15.9 years, and the average time spent in the U.S. was 3.6 years. Ten participants were from Honduras, 15 from El Salvador, and nine from Guatemala. Of these, 17 had migrated leaving their families behind in their home countries, 14 had been left under the care of relatives because one or both parents had migrated, and three had migrated with their mothers. A summary of participant demographics is provided in Table 1.

Data Management

Confidentiality was a concern since interviews were recorded and later transcribed and translated with the assistance of third-party services. To alleviate this risk, methods to protect privacy were implemented, including informed consent for the study. Interviews were conducted in private, secure locations, and pseudonyms were used to protect participants' identities. Additionally, a confidentiality agreement was secured with the transcription service. Only the research team (principal investigator, dissertation chair(s), and graduate research assistants) had access to the interview data. All electronic data records (recording files, transcribed interviews, and Dedoose qualitative data analysis software) were stored securely in a cloud-based platform, UMD Box. All recorded data was, and will be, destroyed or erased when no longer necessary for the study.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using a grounded theory approach to thematic coding, employing a scheme of open, axial, and selective coding (LaRossa, 2005; Charmaz, 2003). Grounded theory is a method for developing substantive theory grounded in data that are carefully collected and analyzed (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Hardesty et al., 2022). In the field of family research, grounded theory has explored meaning, action, and context, posing questions such as: How is meaning made? How are meaning and actions linked to social context? (Hardesty et al., 2022). Grounded theories in family science aim to explain how social and family processes are shaped through social interactions in specific settings. A grounded theory approach is particularly useful when the goal is to create substantive, topic-specific theory and transition from descriptive data analysis to theoretical statements that generate new knowledge (Wertz et al., 2011; Hardesty et al., 2022).

Open coding

The first phase of coding involved reviewing existing literature to develop initial sensitizing concepts, which are background ideas that inform the overall research problem and guide the coding process (van den Hoonard, 1997; Charmaz, 2003). These concepts served as a starting point for data analysis, helping to identify patterns and variations within segments of the interview transcripts and facilitating the creation of new emergent codes that captured actions and processes unique to this sample (Bowen, 2006; Charmaz, 2003; Daly, 2007). Together, the sensitizing concepts from the literature complemented new emergent codes derived from the interviews themselves. Several sensitizing concepts emerged from the literature review and aligned with the proposed research aims, including resilience, resilience as a process of growth, change, thriving, family support, and social support, *familismo*.

During this phase, indicators were created in the data linked to these concepts, and attention was given to identifying which category segments of the data belonged to (Charmaz, 2008; Glaser, 1978). In accordance with Charmaz (2008), the principal investigator and the research team wrote memos to document their thoughts, interpretations, and negotiations during data analysis.

Axial coding

LaRossa (2005) described open coding as analysis that dives deeply into each case within the data set, while axial coding involves analysis that spans across all cases. Axial coding was defined as the constant comparison of segments within specific coding categories to identify unique patterns and variations across participants. This stage involved making linkages in the data regarding how segments of data interacted, capturing the variation both within and between each participant’s experiences. In this stage, the connections between codes and categories were examined, which included correlating sensitizing concepts and emergent concepts identified during open coding and deriving meaning from those connections (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; LaRossa, 2005). As a result, interrelated processes were more clearly identified, and higher-order categories integrating concepts were created (LaRossa, 2005). At this stage, connections between emerging themes and constructs of life course theory were also drawn.

Selective Coding

This phase involved highlighting key elements and salient features (Strauss, 1987) to tell a story, some with shared characteristics and others with unique experiences for each participant's process. Ultimately, main themes were selected to generate theoretical and conceptual frameworks that were theoretically saturated within the data and centrally relevant (LaRossa, 2005). As LaRossa (2005) stated, once a core theme was identified, it should be imposed onto the data in a way that made inconsistencies in the story stand out, highlighting a truer representation of what the data captured and creating a clear, understandable, and compelling story.

Data Quality

A variety of methods were employed to enhance the rigor of the study and to improve the trustworthiness of the data, research design, and findings (Krefting, 1991; Cope, 2014; Roy et al., 2015). To assess the trustworthiness of data quality, I adopted Guba’s (1981) model based on four indicators for qualitative research: credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Guba, 1981; Krefting, 1991).

Credibility

As Sandelowski (1986) suggested, a study is credible when it presents accurate descriptions or interpretations of human experience that people who share that experience would immediately recognize. The researcher’s role became one of representing the reality shared by participants as adequately as possible (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Thus, credibility was the most important criterion for the assessment of qualitative research (Krefting, 1991). Credibility was most precisely related to the quantitative concept of validity and the accuracy with which findings reflected the data (Krefting, 1991). Credible data required adequate submersion in the research setting, and such prolonged engagement allowed for increased rapport, intimate familiarity, discovery of hidden facts, and opportunities to confirm participants' perspectives (Krefting, 1991, p. 176).

To ensure the credibility of these data and of the inferences drawn from it, the research team validated participants' experiences and remained careful to avoid interruptions or leading participants' narratives (Few, Stephens, & Rouse-Arnette, 2004). By doing so, internal consistency was demonstrated in participants' responses based on the truth value of the data and the reliability of the findings in relation to the research design and its context (Krefting, 1991).

One potential threat to credibility was social desirability. This phenomenon could occur if participants felt compelled to give socially acceptable responses to the interview prompts, rather than truthfully sharing their lived experiences (Krefting, 1991). Central American immigrant youth's unique experiences of growth were critical to this study, thus establishing rapport, demonstrating true values of the data, fostering intimacy in the setting, and being sensitive to the participants' realities were pivotal in allowing their stories to unfold (Hall & Stevens, 1991; Long & Johnson, 2000). In this study, participants were allowed to choose the location of their interviews to ensure comfort and intimacy with the setting.

Comfort between the participant and the interviewer stemmed from shared experiences of being Latino and sharing common core values, beliefs, language, among other factors. All interviewers self-identified as Latino and were native Spanish speakers. However, participants may have been hesitant to share intimate information about their lived experiences if commonalities between them and the interviewer existed due to differences in age, social class, sexual orientation, or gender (Few, Stephens, & Rouse-Arnette, 2003).

Lastly, to increase credibility, the principal investigator engaged in regular consultations, which were held weekly with the dissertation chairs who had expertise in qualitative research.

Throughout the data collection and data analysis processes, informal debriefing sessions with the chairs and other members of the committee were also held to discuss emerging categories and themes, and to make adjustments to the research strategy as needed.

Dependability

In qualitative research, consistency of findings was defined as dependability (Krefting, 1991). To ensure consistency, the exact methods of data gathering, analysis, and interpretation were carefully described to provide information on how repeatable the study might be with the same subjects or in a similar context (Kielhofner, 1982). By doing so, it allowed other researchers to clearly follow the trail used by the principal investigator in the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Additionally, the research team took breaks after the initial coding and returned after some time to recode the data and compare results (Krefting, 1991). The dissertation chairs, who were methodological experts, checked the research plan and data analysis to ensure dependability.

Confirmability

All of the interviews were conducted in the participants' first language, and translation and transcription were handled by a professional service. The coding and analysis phase was directed by experienced qualitative researchers who supervised each pair of coders, which enhanced the confirmability of the data (Krefting, 1999). Coding discrepancies were discussed weekly in research meetings. This data quality strategy allowed for transferability judgments and comparison by researchers with other Latino immigrant family samples (Krefting, 1991).

Transferability

It was difficult, if not impossible, to generalize about other communities using the data from this specific sample. However, the findings could be “transferred,” or fit into contexts or locations other than the original study context (Krefting, 1991). For this study, the transferability of data meant creating the means to assess the goodness of fit of the research methods to populations of Latino immigrants outside the DC Metro area or to Latino adult immigrants coming from countries outside El Salvador, Guatemala, or Honduras.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity represented the ways in which a researcher monitored and understood their methodological and ethical role in the research outcome (Daly, 2007; Mullings, 1999). The collaborative research team changed throughout the past couple of years as graduate students graduated and staff at our community partner also changed. However, the two principal investigators remained in charge of the team, and I had been consistently part of the research team since 2019. Currently, the research team is composed of five graduate students from UMD who were in charge of conducting the interviews, and one collaborator who was responsible for contacting the participants and compensating them after an interview. The research team offered a diversity of perspectives, as three members were bilingual Latina immigrants. One of the interviewers was a former staff member at our community partner organization, with eleven years of experience working with Latino immigrant youth. Although highly knowledgeable, they were not the direct case manager of any participants and were not involved in the services the youth received. The other members of the team were researchers who had worked for many years in partnership with our community partner on projects serving Latino immigrant families.

As the principal investigator of this study, my shared experiences as a Latina immigrant granted me a “status” that may have influenced the rapport I developed with participants and set a foundation for building trust and dialogue (Johnson-Bailey, 2004; Mullings, 1999), as well as more intimate knowledge and eased interactions with participants (Few, Stephens, & Rouse-

Arnette, 2004; Mullings, 1999). However, I did not anticipate that interviewees would perceive me as a cultural insider. Gaining insider status may have been hampered by differences in class, sexual orientation, age, and other factors, since my life trajectory differed from that of the youth in this study. I came from a city that was unlike the places where the youth in this study were coming from, and my migration history was different as well—my life trajectory led me to choose when to migrate to the U.S. and under different conditions. In addition, I did not rely solely on any shared traits or identities to promote rapport. I was aware that my life experiences, viewpoints, and values may have differed from those of the participants (Few, Stephens, & Rouse-Arnette, 2004).

Chapter 4: Expanding our Conceptualization of Resilience

Resilience, as a construct, has been widely studied across various populations, yet its conceptualization remains highly nuanced, particularly within specific cultural contexts. This chapter argues that resilience is not a static measure, but rather is a dynamic, ongoing process over time, especially within the context of Central American immigrant youth in the U.S. To lay the groundwork for this discussion, I first summarize the theoretical perspectives on resilience presented in the literature review, focusing on its historical context, previous definitions, and application within the Latino population, particularly Central American immigrant youth. Second, I critique traditional definitions of resilience, such as bouncing back, and the notion that resilience is solely an individual attribute. Finally, I propose a new conceptualization of resilience as a process of growth that can lead to two possible trajectories for Latino immigrant youth: a path of thriving or a path of navigating.

While resilience has often been treated by researchers as a uniform outcome, it is imperative to recognize that for Latino youth in the U.S., resilience must be understood through the lens of their unique social and cultural realities. Specifically, this chapter argues that resilience for Central American immigrant youth is intricately linked to their pre- and post-migration experiences with adversity, as well as the transition points in their migration journey during the critical developmental stage of adolescence and emerging adulthood. This process-oriented perspective acknowledges their ability to confront, navigate, and ultimately overcome the psychological sequelae of the difficulties and traumas associated with migration. Moreover, the developmental trajectories of Central American immigrant youth are distinct from those of other youth populations, necessitating a tailored approach to understanding their resilience. By framing resilience as a process of growth, this study aims to provide a more comprehensive and culturally sensitive understanding of the adaptive strategies employed by Latino immigrant youth as they strive to achieve stability and growth in their new environment.

The Study of Resilience

Emerging definitions of resilience emphasize a shift from a deficit model to a strength-based model in mental health research. This new perspective views vulnerability and trauma not merely as problems to be solved but as opportunities for growth and intervention (Luthar, 2006; Southwick et al., 2014; Evans & Reid, 2013). Traditionally, resilience has been treated as a static outcome measured through surveys, reducing a dynamic and ongoing process to a simplistic binary outcome (Rudzinski et al., 2017). Resilience, a concept derived from the Latin term *resilio*, initially meant to jump or step back (Michallet, 2010). In engineering, for example, it describes a material's ability to return to its original shape after stress (de Bruijne et al., 2010). In developmental psychology, resilience is described as a return to normal functioning with the support of protective factors after stress (Lee, Cheung, & Kwong, 2012). Becker (2000) characterized it as a dynamic process of positive adaptation in adverse contexts, and Murphy (1974) defined resilience as the mechanism that enables individuals to “bounce back” from adversity.

The concept of “bouncing back” has been further elaborated and it represents the foundation of the view of resilience as a dynamic process. As Clark (2021) argues, various factors affect the degree of bounce, including surface defects, meaning that bouncing does not tell the entire story. Those surface defects may represent events that act as transitions and turning points in an individual’s life, such as previous trauma, migration, family separation and reunification, exposure to violence, abuse, and other systemic events, which add layers of complexity to the individual’s life trajectory. To capture such complexity, the reconceptualization of the concept of resilience should be about moving beyond adversity, as supported by Scott (2013) and Fitzgerald and Lupton (2015), accounting for the change and transformation into a new state, but not returning to baseline.

Resilience as “Bouncing Back”

One of the main issues of categorizing resilience as merely “bouncing back” is the underlying assumption that this is something positive and desirable (Nuteveli et al., 2008). Based on my data, such an assumption is weak on three key grounds, which represent a *critique to the term resilience* for this specific population. First, it is central to ask the question, bouncing back to what? The interviewees in the sample extensively described the reasons for migration and the social context they were living in either Guatemala, Honduras, or El Salvador. In general terms, immigrant youth articulated their social and living conditions in terms of extreme poverty, limited access to essential services, and/or exposure to gang-related violence and criminal activities. They also reported experiencing lack of opportunities for attaining quality education and stable employment, which they attributed to pervasive corruption and economic instability in their communities. For example, Marce, a male youth from Guatemala who is 19 and migrated three years ago when he was 16 explains,

> My village is little, there are several houses, several children. I can’t say that it’s a rich village. It would be like a few houses in a mountain. There’s an elementary school that it’s not that bad, but it didn’t even have electricity. […] Even though we’re poor there, we always harvest corn and beans to invest in agriculture to get money for the year, the profit. The problem is that we weren’t making money because the harvests decreased because of the president who made the economy go down. So, we almost weren’t able to work the land anymore, so my brother and I decided to come here. I could have a better

> future here because there, you can’t do anything, so we decided to come here. I could help my family more, because I know how you suffer there.

Many immigrant youth also shared the harrowing experiences of their hometowns, often describing them as perilous environments dominated by criminal activities. Sandra, a female youth who is 18 from Honduras and migrated one year ago, recalled the constant presence of danger and its impact on her mental well-being, “It was ugly. It would be full of bad people and drug dealers. I don’t know how to say it. There were bad people there. It obviously made me feel traumatized and scared”. Beatriz, another female from El Salvador who is 21 and migrated four years ago added, “I decided to come because, the year that I left El Salvador the country was in a terrible state. My cousin was killed, which is the real reason why I left. It was horrible. Gangs shot him just a few blocks from my house”.

These narratives underscore the profound challenges faced by immigrant youth in their hometowns, revealing the deep-seated fear and instability that permeate their daily lives and illustrating the harsh realities they endured before migrating. Recovering from familiar challenges like poverty and hunger can instill a sense of confidence in their ability to handle adversity, yet these youth remain acutely aware that their lives could be different, that there is something more beyond their current circumstances. This awareness drives their determination to seek better opportunities despite the risks and uncertainties they know they will face.

Second, the vast majority of interviewees spoke about their “determination”. For them, determination was not just about enduring hardship, it was a driving force that compelled them to migrate. This determination was like an itch, pushing them to decide to leave either because their parent(s) were sending for them or because they wanted to pursue a better future and provide economic support to their families. Edwin, an 18 year old male from Honduras who migrated five years ago at the age of 13, detailed his sadness, fear, and enthusiasm for the new life that was waiting for him: “that day I felt that I left a part of me; leaving my grandparents, my younger sister, and my friends, thinking that I grew up there, I was less happy, but I wanted to fight for my dreams, and having to leave broke my heart, but I was determined.”

Determination emerged as a key term reflected in the narratives of the interviewees, marking a significant transition and turning point in their life trajectories. Despite the traumatic, detrimental, and negative experiences associated with migrating, the outcome, reaching the U.S., was perceived as worth all the hardships. All of the interviewees described in detail their migration journey, from the moment they decided to migrate to their arrival in the area. Marce, who previously shared the perilous living conditions of his native Guatemala, shared,

> Migrating was dangerous. It was a traumatic trip for me and my brother. I think it was traumatizing to see so many people coming, you don't know if you're going to make it alive, you don't know if you're going to eat the next day; it was very difficult. For me it was an experience I would never want to live again. I was in charge of my brother. There was one time I didn't have food for both of us and I had to give my food to my brother; my brother didn't have a coat and I had to give him my coat so he could tuck himself in. I would not want my brother or myself to go through that experience again.

Marce was determined to care for his brother, and this determination gave him the courage to overcome the adversities they faced while crossing the border. Additionally, Marce was resolved to come to the U.S. and start a new life with his brother, feeling a deep sense of responsibility for him. Florence, a 20 year-old male from El Salvador who migrated seven years ago also described the long migration journey from his hometown, but starts by underlining the determination he felt when saying goodbye to his loved ones, “It was very hard to be honest. I was leaving everything behind, all the people I knew, my family and friends. But you always have to be confident and determined in the decisions you make. At that time, I was not as open minded." He also shared the distressing details of his journey, describing the dangerous and uncertain path he took to reach the U.S.,

> The trip took about 20 days. When I left El Salvador, I lived in the center of the country, so I had to take a bus to the other end of the country, the border of my country and Guatemala. At the border, I had to cross with an inflatable boat. It's dangerous because the current is high. Thanks to God, nothing happened. Once I crossed Guatemala, we were transported by car. In Guatemala it was a little more dangerous because of all the surveillance. But everything went fine. I went to a lot of strange places. I learned about different things and cultures. Every time I crossed a different border, we got a new person from that country leading us. Between Guatemala and Mexico, we couldn't get out of the car because they are watching for migrants crossing and drug trafficking. There were times I had to hide to assimilate. When I was in Mexico, I was with a mother and her daughter and had to act like she was my mother. There was a lot of danger, sometimes people would jump on buses to rob people.

This powerful sense of determination highlights the hope these youth carried with them on their arduous journeys to a new life and better opportunities. The stories described above highlight a crucial point: reverting to a prior state may sometimes represent a significant regression in an individual's developmental trajectory. Returning to pre-migration functioning, especially after the traumatic migration journey, can be viewed as a step backward in their process of growth, remaining in a state of responding to the systemic injustices and inequalities faced in the Northern Triangle. In the context of Central American immigrant youth, this argument suggests that striving to return to a pre-migration state might overlook the competencies and strengths gained from their experiences, their desire for change, and their potential for more meaningful growth and adaptation as a result.

Third, resilience is a process rather than an outcome, and as Waller (2001) stated, it is in a continual state of flux. The testimonies provided by immigrant youth in this sample reveal that their resilience is not fixed but rather shifts, fluctuates, and varies in response to their experiences. Adversity, particularly the hardship associated with migration and crossing the southern border, often undertaken unaccompanied, plays a pivotal role in shaping these fluctuations. As Adjuković (2015) concluded, crises and disasters do not merely challenge existing resilience, they actively transform it. Maggie, a 21-year-old female from El Salvador who migrated four years ago, shares her thoughts on becoming stronger and more determined to succeed by believing in herself and her ability to achieve her goals:

> I think that there are a lot more opportunities here in this country than there are in my country and we should take advantage of and not waste time. I am here to get my GED for a better future, to be an example to others. You can achieve the things you strive to achieve. You need to believe that. And you have to say, “I am going to do it, I am going to do it, I am strong and I am going to succeed” even if you have to push yourself, despite how hard it is.

For these youth, the migration journey is a profound turning point, signifying a period of significant personal transformation and a clear demarcation between their past and present selves. This transformation reinforces the argument that resilience is not merely about returning to a previous state of normalcy to the lives they once knew, but involves actively adapting to and integrating the impacts of severe challenges into one’s life trajectory in order to grow. Thus, the concept of resilience in the context of Central American immigrant youth must account for the transformative effects of their experiences, acknowledging that their resilience is continually redefined by the adversities they encounter.

The Limitations of Resilience as an Individual Construct

While resilience may enable immigrant youth to overcome hardship and improve quality of life, it is crucial to recognize that this process cannot be disentangled from the broader systemic and structural issues that shape their lived experiences. There is a common tendency to place the responsibility for resilience solely on the individual, without acknowledging the need for change in the broader context to support individuals’ capacity and potential for growth. The data in my sample demonstrate that resilience, while enabling youth to overcome adversity and achieve growth, must be understood within the framework of both systemic challenges and pre-existing traumas that perpetuate inequality and limit access to opportunities. This intricate process highlights the inadequacy of a simplistic 'bouncing back' narrative and underscores the multifaceted nature of resilience in the context of immigration. By situating the responsibility for resilience exclusively within the individual, there is a risk of obscuring the structural factors that contribute to their hardships or limit their resilience, effectively excusing and normalizing the inequalities that sustain these challenges. Moreover, resilience’s positive connotation could arguably mask the difficulties and challenges involved in the process of growing and moving forward post-adversity for Central American immigrant youth.

Structural Barriers

Immigrant youth from Central America encounter a multitude of structural barriers that significantly hinder their ability to succeed. These barriers include educational inequities, economic challenges, immigration status, discrimination and racism, language, limited access to healthcare, and insufficient social support, among others. Immigration laws and policies create significant consequences for undocumented individuals, or those from mixed status families, by producing legal vulnerability, which exposes them to educational, economic, and social harm (Hagan et al., 2024). Youth with insecure statuses, whether lacking legal status or holding temporary protections like DACA, face increasing marginalization, stigma, and the challenges of living in illegality, all of which contribute to significant mental health and well-being issues (Gonzales 2013).

For undocumented immigrant youth, these challenges are compounded by pervasive racism, xenophobia, discrimination, and restrictive immigration policies, which manifest across various contexts, including federal, state, local, and educational institutions (Rodriguez, 2019). The educational system in the U.S. often fails to adequately serve immigrant youth, placing them in low-performing and segregated schools, despite the protections offered by the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001; Gándara, 2016). These schools frequently lack the resources and support necessary to foster academic success, particularly for newly arrived undocumented immigrants, who must navigate the complexities of adapting to new social and cultural environments, learning English, and acquiring new academic skills (Potochnick, 2018). The consistent labeling of undocumented individuals as “alien” or “illegal” within legislation further exacerbates feelings of fear, anxiety, and marginalization, contributing to the "othering" of this population (Rodriguez & Monreal, 2017). Consequently, students may experience heightened stress and discomfort when discussing their immigration status with school personnel, perceiving it as too risky (Menjivar & Abrego, 2012; Kam et al., 2018).

Poverty represents another critical structural barrier, with Latino children disproportionately affected. Over 30% of Latino children live in poverty, a rate significantly higher than the national average and notably greater than the poverty rates observed among non-Hispanic White children (9.2%) (Thiede et al., 2021). This economic hardship exacerbates the challenges faced by Latino immigrant youth, limiting their access to essential resources and opportunities for upward mobility. Healthcare access is another area of concern, as undocumented immigrants often face significant barriers to obtaining health services, leading to pronounced health disparities within the Latino population. These barriers contribute to a higher prevalence of conditions such as hypertension, depression, post-traumatic stress, and social isolation among undocumented immigrants compared to their documented counterparts (Martinez et al., 2015).

Furthermore, Latino immigrant youth must grapple with the demands of learning a new language and culture while simultaneously navigating legal exclusion and making life-altering decisions regarding education, employment, and social relationships (Diaz-Strong & Gonzales, 2023). For some youth, this challenge is intensified by the need to learn English in addition to their native dialects. Language barriers not only limit educational opportunities but also restrict employment prospects, particularly for undocumented youth, who are often relegated to exploitative work environments. These environments are characterized by long hours, unsafe and abusive working conditions, low wages, and instances of wage theft (Canizales, 2022; Chavez et al., 2021). The combination of youthfulness, lack of English proficiency, and undocumented status exacerbates feelings of vulnerability, especially during the transition from adolescence to adulthood, when many take on significant caretaking responsibilities (Diaz-Strong, 2022; Martinez, 2019).

It is crucial to recognize that these structural barriers intersect during a pivotal developmental period—adolescence—when immigrant youth are transitioning to adulthood. Adolescence is typically a time of significant growth and change, offering opportunities for positive development. However, for immigrant youth who face considerable adversity, particularly those separated from family members or other support systems, this period is fraught with additional challenges that may impede their ability to thrive. Moreover, labeling individuals from marginalized backgrounds, Latino immigrants for example, as resilient can carry unintended implications. It may implicitly suggest that their perseverance is unexpected or extraordinary, thereby diminishing their experiences and reinforcing the notion that failure is the normative outcome for those facing such adversities. This perspective necessitates a shift in understanding resilience, one that encompasses both the individual's agency and the contextual barriers that shape their journey.

Despite the adversities faced by many immigrant youth, this period represents a significant opportunity for growth and transformation, as adolescents have a unique ability to make meaning from their experiences and leverage this for positive change. During adolescence, Central American immigrant youth who have crossed the border and faced numerous challenges are actively engaged in making sense of these experiences as part of moving forward with their lives. This developmental period is marked by significant cognitive changes, as their brains continue to mature, allowing for greater abstraction and complexity in thought. As they encounter new information and incorporate it into their existing cognitive schemas, they develop the capacity to reframe past adversities in ways that foster resilience and growth, often filtering out the negative aspects to extract meaning that supports their personal development and growth. Vanessa, a 18-year-old female from Honduras who migrated 1.5 years ago, reflects on how she was able to extract meaning from her past experiences in a way that enables her to help others, serving as a method of healing from her past experiences,

> I was able to eliminate something that really hurt me and it is not easy. Other people have experienced harder things than you and in your head, you think, “If this person had to experience that, how come you can’t overcome what you are going through?” It makes you see the world in a different way. You experienced something but it was not as hard as what another person had to go through. So, I think it helps you heal a lot because what you experienced seems insignificant compared to what other people had to go through. And if that person was able to advance, why won’t you be able to do it?

Additionally, adolescence is a crucial time for identity formation (e.g., Klimstra et al., 2010). During this stage, youth are intensely focused on understanding who they are, exploring their values, and defining their place in the world. This developmental task of identity exploration is uniquely enhanced by their migration experiences, as the hardships and growth required in their journey contribute to shaping a nuanced understanding of themselves and their aspirations. The combination of cognitive growth and life experience allows these youth to actively find meaning in their past, using it to construct a sense of identity that aligns with who they are and who they aspire to become. These processes of meaning making and identity formation are vital as they navigate the challenges of immigration. Vanessa elaborates on the groups she is leading to support other immigrant youth in finding meaning in their past and sharing their own experiences as a form of healing. She explains,

> I’m helping other children and youth. Currently, I’m organizing a group to help other children and youth open themselves and speak about certain things so that they can be encouraged. I’m trying to socialize to be able to feel supported and so that they can have

> support too. We meet during school breaks and we speak about important issues. Each person’s opinion is respected. And the nicest thing is that what you speak there stays there.

Neglecting to address disparities during adolescence hinders the optimal development of the nation's human capital, leading to significant economic and social costs, such as diminished productivity, lost wages and employment opportunities, poorer physical and mental health, increased involvement with the criminal justice system, and heightened discrimination (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2019). Framing their successes only as internal resilience limits our appreciation of the role of context in both inhibiting and promoting growth that comes during adolescence, and limits our collective responsibility to change those structural forces to promote equitable opportunity.

Pre-migration Trauma

In exploring the challenges of resilience among immigrant youth, it is essential to recognize that structural barriers are not the sole impediments to growth. Existing internal trauma also plays a significant role in complicating the process of resilience. Pre-existing traumas, originating from factors such as gender discrimination, poverty, lack of education, social norms, violence, and domestic violence, frequently resurface for individuals contending with broader structural issues. These internal struggles, rooted in past experiences, can significantly hinder their ability to advance and grow. Many interviewees reported finding it particularly challenging to progress due to a range of unresolved issues from their past. This difficulty obstructed their ability to make sense of their experiences, which is a critical component of coping with adversity and trauma. The youth in this sample recounted experiences of violence, poverty, and neglect, and these adverse experiences are central to their process of growth, either as catalysts for personal development or as obstacles to overcome. Brian, a 25 year-old male from Guatemala who migrated five years ago shared about the trauma and resentment he holds against his abusive father,

> My father said, I want to know if you're learning, otherwise, I will take you out of school. He took a belt and said, if you can't read well then, I'm going to hit you. With the fear that he was going to hit me, I started to read, and my eyes filled with tears. He grabbed my hand and started to hit me. He took me as if I were an animal. He hit me so much that I couldn't talk. My mom arrived and said to him "and you think you're going to kill him because he can't read?

Brian retained the trauma of his father's violence for many years, with resentment acting as a significant emotional barrier. Upon migrating to the U.S., therapy provided him with a space to confront these experiences and process the pain and resentment they caused. Through this process, and influenced by his church's teachings on forgiveness, Brian came to understand the importance of releasing resentment, particularly toward family members. Forgiving his father was not about excusing the violence but about freeing himself from its hold, allowing him to heal and move forward. This emotional release was instrumental in his ability to refocus on personal growth and pursue his goals with renewed determination.

Isabel, a 20-year-old female from Honduras, shared the traumatic experiences she lived by the side of her ex-partner, the father of her 4-year-old daughter who migrated with her.

> I had my baby at 16 years old, and I left my partner when my daughter was about eight months old. After I left, he started threatening me again. That was the worst thing that happened to me. I mean my child's dad would threaten me and yes, he would hit me when I was living with him but these other gang members put a gun to my head,

> threatened me, and one of them abused me. They asked me if I wanted to be an informant, or they would kill me and my family and that's where everything started. So, the one that was surveilling and getting information from me started abusing me. He made me do things I didn't want to do.

Isabel’s narrative reveals the profound impact of compounded trauma, as she endured both intimate partner violence and coercion by gang members, which severely hindered her ability to reclaim control over her life. The persistent fear and threats against her and her family created significant barriers to her process of growth, making it difficult to envision a path forward. Despite these obstacles, Isabel’s decision to migrate demonstrates her extraordinary determination and commitment to securing a safer future for herself and her child. While she continues to grapple with the effects of her trauma, her participation in therapy marks a critical step in transforming these experiences into a foundation for healing and growth.

However, violence is not exclusively perpetrated by male figures, it can also come from other family members who believe they must assert authority. Manuela, a 19-year-old from Honduras who migrated two years ago, described the distressing experience of living with her aunt for several years after her parents moved to the U.S., leaving Manuela and her sister under her aunt's care,

> Well, my mom left when I was 6 or 7 years old to this country, so my sister and I lived with an aunt for like 11 years. I was physically and emotionally abused throughout my entire childhood, my aunt that I lived with mistreated me a lot. And it was not until my mom found out that’s when she decided to move us from that house to my grandmother’s place. I went to high school and got up to 11th grade, I think. We were only there for about 2 years and then we came here.

Manuela's experience also underscores the deep impact of trauma, as the absence of her parents due to migration left her vulnerable to prolonged physical and emotional abuse by her caregiver. The lack of her parent's presence, a key source of protection and emotional support, further hindered her ability to navigate these adversities during critical developmental years. This dual burden of parental absence and abuse created significant barriers to her personal growth and emotional well-being. However, through therapy, Manuela is beginning to process these traumas, gradually working toward healing and reclaiming her way forward.

The journeys of Brian, Isabel, and Manuela illustrate the transformative process of moving from trauma to growth. Their decision to confront their pain was driven by the recognition that living with unprocessed trauma was halting their development and preventing them from moving forward. Unable to bear the emotional burden any longer, they sought out resources to facilitate healing, with therapy and church consistently emerging as pivotal sources of support. These spaces provided them with the tools to let go of resentment, begin to forgive, and reframe their experiences as opportunities for growth. It is essential to emphasize that the concept of bouncing back or placing resilience solely on the individual does not fully capture the complexity of resilience, particularly for immigrant youth who often grapple with unresolved pre-migration trauma at very young ages. This is central to my argument about the inadequacy of traditional notions of resilience, which often depict it as an automatic or linear process.

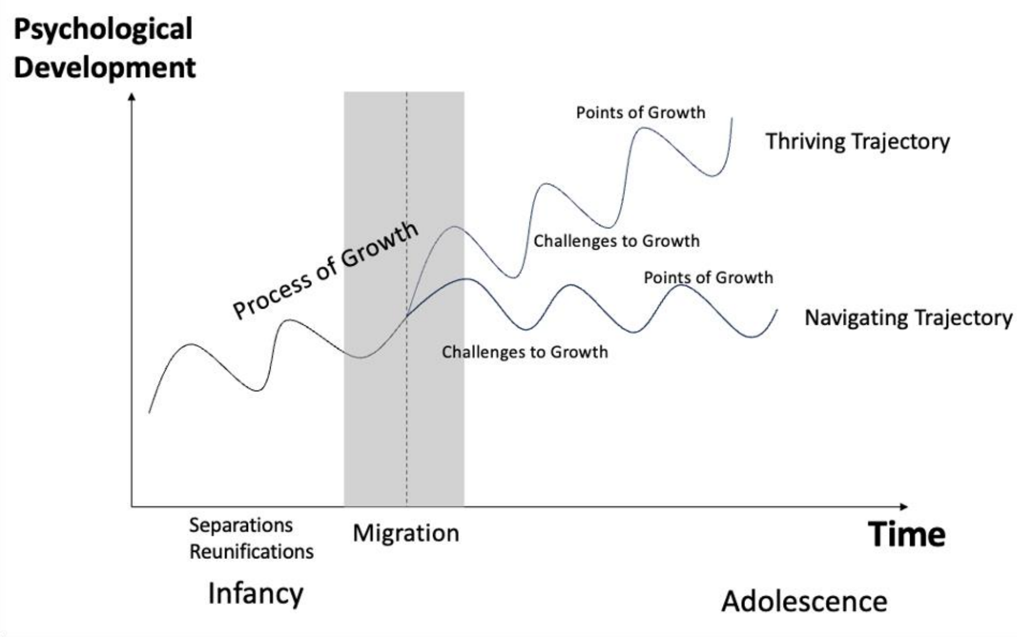
In conclusion, the concept of 'bouncing back' and the definition of resilience as an individual construct present several issues and limitations, especially when applied to Central American immigrant youth. These limitations emphasize the need for a more nuanced understanding of resilience that accurately reflects the experiences of this population. The prevalent belief in the inherent resilience of Central American youth, despite facing significant adversities, calls for a reexamination of how resilience is conceptualized. To address these challenges, it is beneficial to view resilience as a process that exists along a continuum. Therefore, resilience for Central American immigrant youth necessitates a new conceptual framework, which will be elaborated upon in the following section.

Resilience as a Process of Growth: Thriving vs. Navigating

Instead of understanding resilience as a linear return to baseline after adversity, I am proposing a reconceptualization of resilience as an ongoing, non-linear process of growth over time. This process involves unique trajectories through which Central American immigrant youth gain valuable insights by navigating and overcoming stressors. Growth is shaped by complex, context-specific factors and is influenced by evolving circumstances, rather than following a straightforward path. Viewing resilience as a process of personal development illuminates how individuals transform challenges into opportunities for growth while considering the contextual factors previously discussed. For some Central American immigrant youth, this growth leads to a life trajectory characterized by *thriving*, defined as an ongoing phenomenon of becoming better off and gaining valuable experience from adversity (Morgan-Consoli et al., 2020). Thriving surpasses the notion of merely returning to baseline and is linked to finding meaning after adversity, as argued by Carver (1998) and Parry and Chesler (2005), and it typically involves developmental assets such as community care, altruism, academic achievement, appreciation of diversity, and healthy lifestyles. In this sample, I identified additional aspects of resilience that contribute to thriving, including the capacity to derive meaning from past experiences and traumatic events, the significance of fostering and maintaining healthy relationships, psychological growth, and a sense of optimism. Despite its significance, the concept of *thriving* has been underexplored, particularly among Central American immigrant adolescents, with most research focusing on younger children in this population.

Shifting to a more population-specific concept of resilience, thriving for this group of youths is not as broad a concept as resilience. As Morgan-Consoli (2015; 2020; 2023) has consistently stated, thriving is an emerging and evolving concept for Latino immigrant youth, and this study's data support its relevance. Thus, in this study, I propose two trajectories (Figure 1): (1) a thriving trajectory and (2) a navigating trajectory, both with *points of growth and challenges to growth*, representing the challenges youth face in this nonlinear and dynamic life path. These trajectories illustrate how youth navigate challenges and difficult times to move forward, take off, and ultimately thrive.

Figure 2. Model


Psychological Development
Points of Growth
Thriving Trajectory
Process of Growth
Challenges to Growth
Points of Growth
Navigating Trajectory
Challenges to Growth
Separations
Reunifications
Migration
Time
Infancy
Adolescence

Thriving Trajectory

The thriving trajectory represents a dynamic path marked by numerous challenges, yet these youth have been able to cope with and grow from their difficulties with determination and purposeful actions. They actively confront and overcome barriers such as past trauma, resentment, and significant roadblocks, transforming their experiences into opportunities for growth. Unlike those still navigating their circumstances, these youth take advantage of the resources and opportunities available to them, whether abundant or limited, and utilize them to their fullest potential. Their ability to maximize these resources reflects a clear objective and a steadfast commitment to achieving their goals.

Youth on this trajectory demonstrate a remarkable sense of agency and growth. They are not merely surviving but thriving by engaging in meaningful actions that align with their aspirations and values. For example, many send money home to support their families, ensuring that their success extends to their loved ones. Others participate in community work, using their experiences to inspire and uplift those around them. These actions signify a deliberate and strategic approach to life, showcasing their determination to make a positive impact despite the adversity they have faced. Their journey is not linear or free of setbacks, but their ability to push forward with clarity and purpose sets them apart as individuals who are actively shaping their future and contributing to their communities.

These trajectories of growth will be illustrated through the experiences of two youth from the sample, Grant and Kevin. Grant, a 23-year-old male from Honduras, migrated to the U.S. at the age of 20.5. Grant was raised primarily by his mother and maternal grandmother. His biological father was absent and had another family. Grant's early years were marked by significant challenges to growth, as well as numerous family transitions, separations, and reunifications. His mother relocated to another city in Honduras for work, leaving Grant in the care of his maternal grandmother. Several years later, his mother married his stepfather, whom Grant regards as his father, and who migrated to the U.S. when Grant was nine years old. Grant was also very close to his maternal grandmother, who cared for him during his childhood while his mother worked in a different city and visited only on weekends. Grant recalls their bond fondly, "because I was the son she never had, her kids were all grown and I was the only one she took care of. Also, since she's a diabetic, we did not buy sugar and drank our coffee bitter. I would drink it bitter to support her and told her it was super tasty."

Grant described the challenging living conditions in his hometown and the limited opportunities for personal growth, which served as the catalyst for his decision to migrate. This pivotal moment not only marked a transition in his trajectory but also represented a significant point of growth, reflecting his determination and commitment to moving forward. As Grant explains,

> People there did not know but when my dad asked if I wanted to come to the U.S. I did not think about it twice and I said I am going! I am from the most dangerous city in the country and in the world. And in the situation I was in, working but not earning enough, trying to go to the University at night, because that's always been something I have wanted but, it was very difficult. So I went to the university at night, and when the opportunity to come here came, I said I am going!

Grant migrated to the U.S. through the southern border and shared the negative experiences while crossing the border with the help of a *coyote:*

> It was like a 45-day trip. I first passed from Honduras to Guatemala and then to Mexico. We were there for like 8 days. Every part was a challenge. We had to hide from police. Transported by buses and trucks so you wouldn't get noticed and brought back. I was there for 25 days. Locked up in a tiny room, they would feed us and give us something to drink. We could not leave. And if we left, we could leave one at a time, for 5 minutes.

> We had access to showers but with the same clothes because that's all we had. So 25 days later, they moved us. We were close to the border. That night we crossed the river and touched American territory. After that we walked like 5 hours to get to a town in Texas. There in Texas, we stayed for another 8 days. From there we walked for about 24 hours to another town. Immigration police tried to get me. But I ran. [...] The police dog smelled my foot and I ran in another direction. Of the 27 that were there, only 3, me included, were able to get through without immigration catching us.

Navigating through such extreme conditions while migrating illustrates the profound trauma that individuals often experience. The treacherous journey, denoted by prolonged periods of confinement, constant vigilance, evasion of authorities, and intense physical and emotional strain, embodies profound adversity. Yet, despite these challenges, the decision to cross the border undocumented is fueled by an unwavering determination to escape deprivation, overcome systemic inequalities, and pursue a better life. This process is not merely a struggle but a testament to strength, signifying a crucial point of growth. The ultimate goal of reaching the U.S., despite the challenges faced, reflects a transformative journey where enduring adversity becomes a key step towards achieving greater opportunities and overcoming structural barriers that prompted migration.

As a gay man, Grant's decision to migrate was also driven by a profound desire to live openly and authentically. Seeking the freedom to express his sexuality and be true to himself, Grant saw the move to the U.S. as a point or opportunity for growth, a chance to escape the constraints and stigma he faced at home. Coming out, despite the difficulties, was an event he believed would lead to thriving and living freely. Once in the U.S., he came out and sought to reunite with his stepfather, envisioning a life where he could fully embrace his identity. Grant's parents divorced, and he lost contact with both of them after coming out to them. While his mother eventually resumed communication, his stepfather remained distant and angry. This strained family dynamic accentuated Grant's need for a fresh start and a supportive environment,

> I had to leave my house. I had to tell my dad that my sexual orientation is not the correct one. I confessed to my parents that I like men, I am gay. So, my mom and dad had a lot of problems after that. Including the fact that it started their divorce. Right now, they are completing their paperwork for the divorce. And my dad even left the house. My mom went 5 months without talking to me. My dad did the same. I was alone. I can’t say I was in the street because I had a place to stay. But I did not have anyone. The rest of the family I have here is my dad’s brother, but it's not the same as my parents and siblings. So, then I decided to move, and started living with the person I was in a relationship with. So, my dad and mom started having problems from the time I told them.

Once in the U.S. and without contact with his parents, Grant found support in a romantic partner. Alongside this relationship, his strong faith in God has been instrumental in helping him move forward and embrace his life trajectory. Grant reflects on his faith, noting that, despite Catholic teachings that may view homosexuality as contrary to religious doctrine, he feels that religion is deeply personal. He believes that God, who he feels has never abandoned him, offers unconditional support regardless of one's sexual orientation. As Grant shares, “In my religion, which is Catholic, they say that homosexuality is prohibited by God. But sometimes I feel like that has nothing to do with religion. God does not care about your orientation. God is going to listen to whatever you need. [...] I am grateful to God for every single thing that has happened in my life.”

Grant’s life trajectory represents a dynamic and evolving path, characterized by both significant challenges to growth and crucial points of growth. These experiences have enabled him to take off in the U.S. and ultimately thrive, despite enduring previous trauma, navigating family separations, concealing his sexual identity, and overcoming numerous roadblocks. Reflecting on his journey, Grant embraces his lived experiences with no regrets. His hard work has led him to compile his papers for legalizing his migration status in the U.S., while he continues to live with his partner and support his mother financially from afar by sending her money, as an act of giving back. He says,

> I am 100% proud of myself. Why myself? Because I have gone through so much and I think to myself, how did I get through that? So, it’s something that makes me proud of myself. Thanks to my hard work and family support, I am the one who has dedicated the time and energy to be the person I want to be. It's not that I feel negative about the future, it's just that because I am currently going through a legal process that could result in alleviating problems, my life would be easier if I could travel to my country to visit my mom. You feel more motivated when you have more opportunities.

Kevin, a 20-year-old male who migrated three years ago by himself from Honduras shared his process of growth in detail. His father abandoned his mother when he discovered she was pregnant, leaving Kevin to be raised by his mother and maternal grandparents. At the age of eight he and his mother attempted to migrate to the U.S. but were detained in Mexico. After their release, his mother met a partner and decided to stay in Mexico. Eventually, she sent for her other children, but Kevin, who was nine at the time, had been there since the beginning. Kevin described the harsh living conditions, emphasizing the violence he endured,

> I had a different life in Mexico. It wasn't good either because I went to live with my mom. At the beginning, everything was nice, but then my mom married a man who didn't treat her well. When it was in his favor to treat her well, he would. You would see hitting, yelling, things like that. I received all of that as well. I didn't have that good of a childhood.

Kevin also disclosed the physical punishments he received from his grandmother. His mother's frequent absences while working in Honduras meant that Kevin was primarily raised by his maternal grandparents, who were like parents to him. The violence he both witnessed and experienced during this time represented significant adversity, shaping his early experiences and contributing to pre-migration trauma. However, this same violence also became a catalyst for his decision to migrate, marking a potential point of growth and a turning point in his pursuit of a new beginning,

> I had a closer relationship with my grandfather because he has always loved us and he has always said that we are his adoration. With my grandmother as well but she's a bit more closed in expressing feelings. Sometimes she would hit us for no reason. She would hit me, more than anything. And since I was little, she also taught me to work, and I am grateful for that. It helped me a little bit for her to hit me and tell me that I didn't have to be going out, but in any case, I wanted to go out and play with my friends and all of that, but I couldn't. I couldn't even go out to swim in the river because she would go get me.

Once reunited with his mother and living in Mexico, Kevin continued to be a victim of domestic violence, including his stepfather's physical and psychological abuse toward his mother.

> Many times, we would leave the house, my stepfather would make us leave. He would kick us out of the house, even if it was raining, even if it was cold, and there we were

> outside, waiting. And that's why I decided to look for something better for my mom so that my siblings wouldn't have to go through that, because my brother, the middle one, came to live a bit. My stepfather wanted to put me into an orphanage when I was nine. My mother didn't want to. She just cried.

The violence Kevin experienced and witnessed fueled his determination to migrate and carve out a different path for himself. He aspired to lead a life distinct from that of his stepfather, marking a turning point in his journey. At age 14, he moved in with a friend and his family, who offered much-needed support. This move represented a significant point of growth, reflecting Kevin's determination to transform his life and pursue a trajectory of thriving. His early desire to escape a tumultuous environment and build a better future underscores his commitment to positive change.

At the age of 17, Kevin migrated to the U.S. through the southern border with the assistance of a *coyote* and shared the harrowing experiences he faced during the crossing. His decision to migrate was driven by a desire to distance himself from his abusive stepfather and support his mother in leaving that toxic relationship. This migration process marked a significant turn in his life trajectory, symbolizing a crucial point of growth. The act of migrating itself demonstrated his strength and determination to escape the abusive structures that had constrained him,

> I lived close by there in Mexico, by the river, so I just crossed. I went with a small group. There were five of us, and they went with me. I looked at everything on the map there and I arrived at where the train tracks are in Texas and I turned the light on because it was dark, and a border patrol was going by and I yelled at them and they stopped. [...] They put us in a van, and they took us to McAllen. I only had one copy with me of my

> birth certificate. They asked me more questions, just who was going to receive me, their phone number, the name of my mother, my father. They asked for my birth certificate and that was it, and they sent me to the icebox.

Kevin described his time in the "icebox," the English term for what is known in Spanish as *la hielera*, a shared cell kept at frigid temperatures where U.S. authorities detain immigrants for several days. Those who have experienced *la hielera* often recount the harsh conditions, including the extreme cold and lack of basic services. After a few days under these conditions, Kevin was released and transferred to a shelter, where he was treated kindly. After a couple of weeks, he boarded a plane from Texas to Washington, D.C., to reunite with his aunt, with whom he still lives. Despite the many adverse events he endured and witnessed, Kevin remained resolute in his determination to move forward and grow, making meaning of his migration journey as a catalyst for change in his life,

> I still have the plane ticket saved. I have a lot of souvenirs saved, things they gave me in the shelter. I haven't thrown anything away, because one day I will have to tell my children and my grandchildren. The souvenirs represent life change, a change of a new life, a better future. A new experience, more than anything. It is something positive because if I was in another country, maybe it wouldn't be the same as what it's like now.

Throughout the interview, he repeatedly emphasized his desire to make a difference, break the cycle, grow, and transcend his past. His determination to escape the abusive structures that had constrained him and to pursue a new path illuminates his commitment to turning his life trajectory toward positive change and personal growth. He reflects on his lived experiences,

> Well, I think that for me, what helped me to be like that was everything that I went through. Everything that I went through helped me because, as they say, if something bad

> doesn't happen to you, you stay the same. When something bad happens to you, or you have an experienced you didn't want to go through, you change your mentality, and you don't let anyone bring you down – you don't want to let anyone bring you down, or you want to help the world, or I try to be the best I can for you, and what is that word? To love yourself more, think a bit more about yourself, because that's what it's about.

Now, his mother is back in Honduras after leaving her abusive partner, and with Kevin's help, she was able to return. His stepfather is in jail for domestic violence charges. Kevin's growth is not static, it has been a process of continual change shaped by adversity, which he has chosen to interpret as opportunities for change and transformation. He is currently working full-time in a restaurant despite his undocumented status, also taking on construction jobs and seeking additional employment opportunities. He is near completion of his GED program and is able to send money to his mother. He shared his reflections on this journey,

> I don't know if you want to call it being egotistical, or narcissistic, like they call it now, but thinking about yourself before thinking about someone else, is the best thing that could happen to someone. Because when you only want to think about others and others don't think about you, they drain you. They drain your energy, your will, and then you don't know what to do, and that's when depression starts, when people eat you up. It's okay to help others, but also, put yourself first [...] I never gave up, even though things were the worst, honestly, because they were experiences that I wouldn't wish upon anyone, but you try to find strength from wherever you can, to be brave.

The strength Kevin draws upon to persevere stems from his deep desire to make meaning of his adversities, transforming them into opportunities for positive change. This strength fuels his resolve to fight for himself, prioritize his well-being, and focus on thriving. His trajectory of thriving illustrates a transformative path; he now feels productive and empowered, embodying the opposite of his stepfather's negative influence. Committed to giving back, Kevin aims to support and uplift people in his community.

Navigating Trajectory

The navigating trajectory represents a path still in progress, characterized by an ongoing process of striving and gradual movement toward growth. Youth on this trajectory are actively working through their challenges and taking incremental steps toward achieving their goals, but they are not yet fully on the path to thriving. They remain deeply engaged in addressing the complexities of their circumstances, and while they possess ideals and aspirations similar to those in the thriving trajectory, they are "stalled" in a phase of struggle. This struggle is not rooted in a lack of determination or aspiration but rather in the significant challenges of navigating barriers such as legal status, poverty, limited access to healthcare, and scarce support networks, which hinder a clear transition to thriving. For many, this phase is marked by a state of flux, where they are still navigating their limited options and resources without a solidified or sustainable path forward.

Youth in this trajectory often experience oscillations between growth and struggle, marked by moments of advancement followed by setbacks. These youth may still be stuck in the weight of their challenges, such as fresh emotional wounds from past traumas, caregiving responsibilities, or adjusting to life in a new country. While they are striving to build a foundation for future growth, they often prioritize immediate survival and emotional stability over long-term aspirations. This ongoing process of testing options, adapting to circumstances, and coping with setbacks means that their journey is not defined by steady progress but by ongoing efforts to navigate and overcome obstacles. Despite these challenges, their persistent efforts reflect a determination to carve out a better future, driven by the hope and potential to transition thriving as circumstances gradually shift in their favor. The navigating trajectory, then, embodies the growth and enduring persistence of youth who, despite being entrenched in adversity, continue to push forward toward the possibility of eventual thriving.

The navigating trajectory will be illustrated through the experiences of two youth from the sample, Karen and Allan. Karen, a 19-year-old female, migrated from El Salvador two years ago at the age of 17. Both of her parents migrated when she was just three years old, leaving her in the care of her loving grandparents. Despite the support and affection, she received from them, the separation from her parents marked a significant challenge to growth in her life trajectory. This event, occurring at such a young age, created a before and after in her life, deeply influencing her emotional development and sense of stability,

> My childhood was okay but at the same time not so much because I didn't have my parents. They immigrated to the U.S. when I was 3 years old. There’s 3 of us, my older brother, me, my little sister, we were kids. That affected us a lot because when there was an important holiday, we saw our friends with their parents, and we didn't have our parents close by, so it was difficult. Luckily, we did have our grandparents who fortunately are still here. Thanks to them everything was different because they were always there for us, they supported us in everything.

Karen reflects on her hometown, an island that, prior to her migration journey, was plagued by delinquency and threats. Karen shares, “There on the island I studied up to 9th grade, but I didn't finish because of delinquency, I couldn't go to school. That's why I think we are here; we came because of security”. Her parents initially wanted her brother to migrate first due to these dangers, and although he attempted to do so, he was unable to cross the border due to security concerns and a heart condition. As a result, he remained in Mexico for three years before he could finally cross. Karen’s migration journey was also filled with challenges, adversity, and negative experiences. She shared her journey in detail,

> That day I felt that I left a part of me; leaving my grandparents, my younger sister, and my friends, thinking that I grew up there, I was less happy. I wanted to fight for my dreams, and having to leave made me feel sad, it broke my heart. In the early morning, we left for Guatemala. We moved by water in some parts; strange places, very lonely, it was scary. I did not sleep much. The next morning, we traveled by bus to the border with Mexico. We suffered from hunger; a cereal I ate made me throw up. Then there were many federal agents that would not let us pass, they wanted to catch us, but they were mafia, not federal agents, and they kidnapped us, and took us to a very lonely place. They kept us there and said that if we didn't pay we weren't going anywhere. One of our guides paid and we were liberated. When I was in Chiapas a man wanted to go over the top with me; he wanted me to go into the bathroom with him.

This traumatic experience made Karen reconsider her situation, longing to return to her hometown and the familiarity of life with her grandparents. Despite these feelings, she remained patient and determined, believing that the hardship she endured would ultimately be worth it, and would mark a point of growth. During her journey, Karen faced the additional challenge of resisting abuse, as men attempted to take advantage of her vulnerability as a young female. She stood firm and advocated for herself, demonstrating her strength. This ordeal marked a significant challenge to growth in Karen’s life trajectory.

After 14 years of separation, Karen finally reunited with her parents in the U.S. However, this reunification has been fraught with challenges and complexities (as discussed in Chapter 6).

She openly expressed that she does not yet trust her parents, as they remain strangers to her. Initially, Karen struggled significantly to adapt to life in the U.S., finding the environment entirely unfamiliar and the system challenging to navigate. Having never lived with her parents before, since they left when she was very young, this adjustment was way more difficulty than the anticipated,

> My parents asked, "What's wrong with you?" And I don't say anything to them. When I got here, I didn't want to be here, I wanted to leave. [...] I was kind of depressed, I was very bad, I wanted to go back, I did things that were not right; I never used drugs, no, but I started to cut myself, I cut my throat once because I couldn't find a way out, and I didn't trust my parents. Then I went to school; I came for a week I think, or a day, and then I stopped coming because I was desperate. I could not be with a group of people because I felt desperate because of everything I had lived through, every morning I thought, "Do I get up or not?" It's fighting against what the mind says. So, I didn't know what to do, I wanted to leave, I told my grandmother, I call her Mami, I told her to buy me a flight to leave, that I didn't want to be here. I argued a lot with my parents, I had a very bad relationship because they did not understand me. I just wanted to leave. I didn't sleep all night, I slept during the day.

Karen described her life trajectory with her grandparents as a happy one, but upon migrating, she encountered several very significant challenges. The weight of her previous trauma, combined with the unfamiliar environment and lack of a support system, began to overwhelm her. Unable to resist these mounting negative experiences, she felt trapped and hopeless, ultimately hurting herself as she struggled to find a way out. In a moment of despair, Karen even contemplated ending her life. However, despite these profound challenges, she later experienced a pivotal shift in her thinking and is now actively working toward transformation. As she describes it,

> One day I woke up and I said that I didn't want that life; I wanted to be well and happy and that I would find the means for me to be well since my parents didn't understand me and there were many problems. I think it is not fair to be in a sad life. I stopped studying and then kind of my mind changed, and I said, "I want to leave this; I want this to change." It's very difficult because it's not an overnight change. One day I went to the doctor, I was still a minor, I had a general check-up, and they asked me a lot of questions and I answered honestly. Then the nurse came in and asked me if I knew what I was talking about, I said yes because – One time I came to school and I wanted to jump off the bleachers. I wanted the suffering to end, so, that day I thought of throwing myself down, I looked down. I answered them with the truth. My mom never sought me out to a psychologist or anything like that, the people at the clinic sought me out to a psychologist, I told my mom that they had to reach out to me, I didn't tell her why, but it was because I had cut myself. That day everything changed for the better.

Karen is not currently thriving. She continues to face challenges as she moves forward, embodying a navigating trajectory where she experiences both strengths and maladaptive responses to these challenges. She is unable to work, has not finished school, and is neither earning money nor pursuing her education at the moment. She has experienced significant mental health concerns. Despite these setbacks, she remains determined, eager to reach her goals and experience more points of growth. While actively working toward her aspirations, the complexity of her circumstances has delayed this process. Karen is navigating significant challenges, such as getting to know her parents, adapting to the U.S. education system, seeking a social support network, and learning a new language, all of which have compounded the difficulties in her journey.

Allan is an 18-year-old male from El Salvador who migrated to the U.S. four years ago at the age of 14. Raised primarily by his mother and maternal grandparents, Allan never knew his biological father. He has two younger sisters. His journey to the U.S. marks a significant transition in his life, moving from a familiar environment with strong family support to navigating the complexities of a new country and culture. He described his life in El Salvador prior to migrating,

> I thought I had everything although you always need more. I have memories of living at my grandmother's house. The area was “hot”. I just went to school and from school home. I did not go out, I was very isolated. My mom had me that way. Here is where I came to explore. When we decided to come here it was a surprise because we were scared of the journey. But then later I told my mom, “wow another country” I would really want to get to know it. Maybe I motivated my mom so much that she changed her mind and said yes. So the year that we were supposed to come, we did not come. Because my mom was scared but the coyote also was paid and never showed up. He stole our money. We had to wait another two years.

Allan described his relationship with his grandparents as deeply loving and fulfilling, characterized by affection and happiness. He expressed this sentiment by saying, "They deserve everything. Because for them I would do anything. My grandmother more than anything." While his mother worked full-time and was less present, his grandmother played a central role in his upbringing, providing significant emotional support and stability. This strong bond with his grandparents marked a pivotal source of growth in Allan's life trajectory. His main motivation for his future in the U.S. is to reunite with his grandmother, whom he misses dearly. Her presence remains a driving force behind his aspirations and efforts to build a new life in the U.S.,

> For her, I want to work and bring her here. For her I want to have a house and bring her here. I speak to her by phone. [...]I ask how she’s doing. Sometimes she calls but I can’t answer if I’m at work and busy. So, its affected me somewhat. I miss her a lot. I wish I could see her and give her a hug and tell her how much I miss her and how I wished she had been here during some moments.

Due to the challenging conditions in El Salvador and pervasive structural inequalities, Allan, his mother, and his two sisters decided to migrate. The decision to leave was precipitated by the tragic death of Allan’s uncle, who was killed by gang members. Allan’s uncle had previously migrated to the U.S. but was deported and, upon returning to El Salvador, became involved with gangs. Allan recalled, "He was a gang member. They were threatening him in El Salvador, so they killed him. Then gangs started to threaten us so that’s why we came." Their decision to migrate was made abruptly, leading to an unplanned and disorganized journey. Allan did not have the chance to say goodbye to his grandparents before leaving. He shared his migration journey from the start,

> I did not get a chance to say goodbye to my grandmother because that day she was not able to get there and that has stuck with me. When I was in the car to cross over to Guatemala, I was dealing with that and maybe that affected me, I started to throw up. We stayed two weeks in Guatemala, where they told us we had been there too long, and we needed to move to Mexico. We passed a river between Guatemala and Mexico. [...] Then the coyote told us we needed to get on the train. We were scared of the unknown dangers; we got on the train after hours and we paid for a “bodega”. In the morning it was hot.

> Anyone could die from the heat. And at night it was cold. We couldn't handle the cold. We were there for 3-4 days. Then we crossed the river by boat and from there the coyote said, just walk 2 to 3 minutes and someone will be waiting for you.

Allan described the migration journey as long and exhausting, highlighting how they were eventually apprehended by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). He also recounted the distressing experience of spending four months in a detention center after his younger sister was separated from them due to their mother being unable to find her papers.

> Once we crossed, "La Migra" (ICE), an officer was there to take us, we were asking for asylum. So, when la migra grabbed us, we told them we were just immigrants. We got in the car, and they placed us in something like cells, yes, cells. It's cold there, ouff its cold! They gave us blankets, well they are not even blankets, they are like aluminum. We were there for like 2 days. Then they separated us. My youngest sister, my mom forgot her papers and they thought that she was not her daughter. So, they separated her from us, they took her somewhere else. That hurt us a lot. It was a time in my life that hurt a lot to see my mom crying so they would not take her from her. [...] We sent her papers in and we got her back. We were separated from our little sister for about 4 to 5 months. I felt it was a lot longer. After 4 months of being in Texas at the house where immigrants stay, immigration let us go. It's a house in Texas where only immigrants arrive. When we got our sister back, we told our uncles that we wanted to leave to Maryland. They bought us our flights and within a week we had to leave and say bye to everyone. It hurt to say goodbye because I had gotten used to the area.

After migrating to the U.S., Allan's relationship with his mother began to deteriorate. He reflected on their bond in El Salvador as close and supportive: "We were really united. She used to tell me I was her favorite child. She would say it quietly, like ‘shhh,’ and we both laughed. I liked that about her. She always encouraged me in school, saying, ‘Keep going, you can do it.’” However, their relationship shifted post-migration. Allan felt increasingly isolated, missing the care and support he once received from his mother, while also seeking more independence as he felt she was becoming increasingly controlling. The tension between them grew as Allan struggled to adapt to life in the U.S., particularly as a teenager trying to fit into the established norms of school,

> I would tell my mom, no, do whatever you have to do, find another job, but I want my own room. And that's where the conflicts started. She says that when I got here to the U.S is when I blew up, when I became rebellious and changed. And maybe it was like that. I think it was the change in environment, my friends, everything. Everything makes you change here.

Following the conflicts with his mother, Allan began experimenting with recreational drugs, which eventually led to his expulsion from school after being caught using them. This expulsion marked a point of regression in his life trajectory, rather than progressing in his new environment in the U.S., he found himself falling further behind.

> When I started to consume a lot of drugs it was no longer recreational. I was doing it every day. And I noticed that it brought me a lot of problems. For example, I couldn’t focus on anything. Not my work, family. I just preferred being alone. In my room on my phone, alone. I did not go out at all. I was really isolated. And I said no, I cannot live this. So I stopped, I could not live like that. So yeah, I stopped doing that like two years ago. I think it was fine although sometimes I feel like smoking because sometimes you get stressed out.

After these incidents, Allan decided to move out of his mother’s house and began attending workshops at our community partner. With our community partner’s help he got a job and is now focused on getting his life back on track, working hard to eventually thrive. He is also enrolled in a GED program to complete his education. Reflecting on his expulsion from high school, Allan expressed deep regret: “I feel like I’ve lost a lot of friends because I got expelled. I really regret leaving school.”

Looking ahead, Allan is hopeful about his future, aspiring to start a business and carry on his family’s last name with pride. Post-migration, Allan has encountered numerous challenges, from strained relationships with his mother to the struggles of adapting to a new environment. He continues to work on rebuilding his life, not by simply returning to a pre-migration baseline, but by navigating his available options and recovering from the difficult experiences he’s endured. His journey reflects a process of growth, where progress is not linear but shaped by moments of both regression and recovery. Despite these setbacks, Allan remains determined and optimistic about his future. He is committed to not only stabilizing his current situation but also gaining new points of growth, striving toward thriving. His story illustrates the complex process of growth as a continuous, as a dynamic navigating trajectory,

> I want to carry my last name with grandeur. I told my mom that when I have my own business, I am going to name it by my last name. So, I try to carry my name with pride. When I work and it's going tough but just because of my last name and being part of my family, that brings me pride.

In conclusion, focusing on resilience as a process of growth allows for the description of trajectories that are ongoing and dynamic over time. This dissertation specifically uses the term "thriving" to illustrate resilience as a process for Central American immigrant youth, emphasizing their capacity to adapt and flourish despite adversity. This approach highlights the process of being better off and finding meaning, representing a new and emerging concept.

Chapter 5: Enablers to Thriving

In the preceding chapter, resilience was explored as a dynamic process of growth, illustrating how Central American immigrant youth navigate their development through points of growth and challenges to growth. This chapter builds upon enablers of thriving, key factors that facilitate positive outcomes and foster growth. This chapter will also highlight how enablers serve as pivotal mechanisms through which Central American immigrant youth transform challenges into opportunities for growth and thriving.

Youth in the sample described their sources of support that have helped them not only adapt to the U.S. post-migration but have also provided an invaluable push to move forward to thriving. Such sources of support are events, feelings, or people that have inspired, moved, and pushed immigrant youth toward thriving. The process of growth does not happen in isolation, as Berkes and Ross (2013) stated, but in a social context of broader systems that are part of their everyday lives and shape their trajectories. These sources of support, or *enablers* to thriving, are a fundamental part of the youth's dynamic trajectory of growth. Enablers are also specific to every individual, but based on the interviews conducted, several constant and consistent enablers, or points of growth, at the individual, relational, and community levels, have been identified in the data. This chapter will explain, describe, and discuss each type of enabler and its role in fostering thriving.

Individual Level Enablers

The individual level enablers are some kind of an inward facilitator or catalyst that allows youth to move forward. The majority of youths in this sample described hope and optimism, gratitude, and making meaning as the most influential internal promoters of psychological growth.

Hope and Optimism

Hope is one of the main internal enablers that is consistent throughout the life trajectory of immigrant youths. Hope goes hand in hand with a sense of determination, the driving force or itch that compelled them to move forward, as described in the previous chapter. Many of the youths in the sample described a strong and persistent hope for the future, an inspiration to reach their goals (e.g., graduating from high school, getting a job and fully paying for expenses and debt, learning English, finishing college and having a profession). For example, Betty, a female who is 19 from Guatemala who migrated at the age of 13 shares her hopefulness for the future,

> My main dream has been to study, help others as much as I can. I would love to help others, that’s my thought. I want to be a nurse and help others, continue my studies, have a family. One thing that I'm proud of is that I study, and I have my thoughts like I do now in the future...how do I say, like I do not want my hard work to be in vain, you know?

Like Betty, many of the youth had clear goals and aspirations and their determination provided a sense of direction and purpose. Marce also shared his hopefulness for the future: “While others think that they don’t have a future, I think that I have it, and if I don’t have it, I’m going to create it”. He went on to reflect on the source of inspiration for his hope:

> And what I’ve lived hasn’t been easy, so, I said, I’m going to take the best advantage of time. I’m going to finish studying and then I’ll get a job, and study something, and do more in my life than before, so I can help my family. […] That’s what I want the most.

> There's nothing else that can buy the happiness of a happy face, a smile from someone that you haven't seen in a long time. So, in the future, I want to go visit my family.

Many of these youth express hope for achieving things that were once not even an option but are now a possibility and are determined to move forward despite difficulties. They are aware of the effects that their adversities have had on their lives and are motivated by these adversities to move forward and find strength from them. Vanessa shared:

> My goal is to learn English. I want to go to the workshops to learn how to socialize because it's something that I'm not familiar with. I need to open myself up to tell more things about myself because I'm not a person who shares everything. I have many things to say but I don't say them. I can't express what I have experienced during migrating because I try to bury all that. It's like I can't put it in words. I also want to obtain a university degree and become a nurse.

Kevin also shares an optimism for the future that acknowledges past trauma and adversity but emphasizes growth and learning from these experiences,

> I'm still there because I know that there are better things that are on their way for me, so I'm still waiting. I'm taking it step by step because the stairs aren't small. You have to take one step, one stair at a time to make it to the top. Because nothing is easy. When it's easy, it's not a good thing. Good things are always hard, with anything, work, school, anything. Easy things don't mean that it's a good thing. Hard things do because you get it with sweat, with love, with passion, and you want to get it because you feel that you want it, you really want to have it. I think that's everything.

Karen also discussed how hardship has increased her hope and motivation, “I feel proud that I got out of the lowest place I was when I didn't want to do anything for my life, and now I kind of have clear goals and something I want to fight for; that I'm not at the bottom anymore.”

Hope and optimism, while key enablers of thriving, must be understood as complex forces in the lives of immigrant youth. These qualities serve as critical sources of internal individual support, driving youth forward in both thriving and navigating trajectories. However, the role of hope must be critically examined within the structural and systemic barriers that youth face. While hope propels youth to persevere in the face of adversity, it often operates in tension with barriers, such as limited access to resources, economic instability, and discrimination that threaten to undermine their goals and aspirations. Thus, hope functions as both an empowering force and, at times, a precarious force, one that can sustain youth through hardship, yet may also be fragile when confronted with systemic barriers. In this light, hope becomes not only an individual resource but a reflection of the broader structural conditions that either enable or hinder its fulfillment. Despite these challenges, youth’s ability to maintain a positive perspective demonstrates growth, underscoring hope’s role as a fundamental mechanism through which they navigate the complexities of their migration experiences.

Gratitude

Another significant enabler for thriving in this sample is gratitude, particularly towards God. Gratitude serves not only as a personal source of strength but also as a framework through which these youth reinterpret their challenges, viewing them as part of a broader, meaningful journey. This sense of spiritual grounding fosters growth, helping them cope with adversity while maintaining a sense of purpose and direction. Brian, who previously shared the traumatic events of violence he experienced at the hands of his father also shared his indestructible faith, "I feel closer to God. But the hard part was when I started to miss my family back home. I would go into a deep sadness. I didn't do bad things to cope, God had my back". Martin, who is 24 from Guatemala explained that God is his main source of support, and said, "I'm Christian and well, you try to be a good person for God." Maggie, who shared the trauma of violence she faced when her mother migrated leaving her under the care of her aunt, explained that her faith helped her give new meaning to the abuse she suffered,

> But God has changed me and helped me understand that just because someone did something to me doesn't mean I'm going to treat them or anyone else badly. I don't want to have resentment or hate in my heart. So, my mom had to work. I am grateful she worked although I did not get a lot of time with her. But I know she did it for me.

Not all of the youth in this sample felt faith or a relationship with God as a purely good and simple source of support. Grant explained how he believes that God is not the same thing as religion. Because of the challenges posed by his religious community's stance on homosexuality, Grant emphasized that his connection with God is not defined by institutional rules but by a deeply personal belief in divine support and guidance. For Grant, faith in God is not contingent on adherence to specific religious teachings but is a source of comfort and strength. He explains his thoughts on God,

> In my religion, which is Catholic, they say that homosexuality is prohibited by God. But sometimes I feel like that has nothing to do with religion. Religion is something very personal. If you believe in God, he does not care about your sexual orientation. God is with you. God is going to listen to whatever you need. It's not like because if someone is

> a certain way, he is not going to help. Religion is carried within, in each person. I have stopped going to Church since I got here. But I am grateful to God.

Grant’s experiences of rejection when he disclosed his identity as a gay man created more complexity in his personal relationship to his faith. However, his trust in God’s support similarly enabled him to find spirituality as a source of growth. Kevin also reflected on God: “God always makes it so I get back up in good spirits, with strength, always smiling at everyone. God makes it so that my mind forgets that I have all of those feelings. And to know that I do everything for a better life for my family, more than anything”.

In addition to their faith, many youth described their gratitude in terms of a strong desire to give back to others. This drive begins with a thought and determination, which then transforms into tangible and achievable actions. Karen, who previously discussed the challenges of adapting to the U.S. after migration, exemplifies this by expressing her wish to help others. She reflects, "I've always wanted to help people. I see a video or something, and I think, 'I want to be like this person who helps those in need.' Sometimes I think, 'I'm eating well, and so many people can't.' So, I would like to help." Others described a sense of solidarity between Latinos. Jefri, who is 21 and migrated from El Salvador seven years ago, discovered his talent for electrical work, and he wants to use his abilities and skills to give back and help others from his community,

> I have learned a lot and I know that I am good at it. I will get my license to operate as an electrician. I would have liked to be a lawyer, but things didn’t turn out that way. […] I would like to help the Latinx community and hire Latinx workers or maybe have a school of electricity. I feel that we, as Latinx, have a lot of talent and potential, but we just need

> help and more information. […] I am convinced that we have to go one step at the time. I am doing baby steps right now and I have a clear goal in life that I will make it happen.

Jefri's statement illustrates a commitment not only to personal growth but also to community empowerment, demonstrating how his evolving career aspirations and clear goal setting serve as a roadmap for both his own success and the advancement of others within the Latino community.

Gratitude, much like hope, functions as a powerful enabler, providing both spiritual and emotional support during their migration journeys. Expressing gratitude, particularly towards God, allows youth to make sense of their hardships, framing their struggles as part of a meaningful plan. This spiritual connection not only helps them endure adversity but also sustains their optimism for the future. Gratitude serves as a grounding force, helping them stay determined and focused on their goals, while reinforcing their desire to give back to their families and communities. Importantly, gratitude, along with hope, plays a crucial role in motivating youth to move beyond a navigating trajectory towards actively seeking to thrive. Despite the structural barriers they face, youth who exhibit gratitude demonstrate a capacity to navigate challenges with a sense of purpose, seeing themselves as agents of positive change. This mindset fosters growth and drives their efforts to thrive, even as they acknowledge the complexities of their circumstances.

Making Meaning

Interviewees in the sample also explained how they moved on, or are in the process of moving on, from negative past experiences to growth and thriving by *making meaning*, or the ongoing process by which individuals interpret their own actions and those of others, continuously constructing and reconstructing their lived reality (Daly, 2007). One way in which some youth made meaning of past hardships is by forgiving those who had hurt them and working to understand why they behaved the way they did. Many of the youth felt resentment, mostly towards parents for migrating and leaving them behind in the care of relatives, or for being violent, closed minded, or negligent. Some youth also held resentment towards other family members or romantic partners who abused them and took advantage of their situation. However, as youth transitioned into adulthood, many came to understand their experiences with their loved ones in a more compassionate way. With time, many described experiencing a shift in their perception of their relationships. Maggie described the way in which she came to a more nuanced understanding of her mother for abandoning her when she migrated, and tried to transform their relationship,

> But God has changed me and helped me understand that just because someone did something to me doesn't mean I'm going to treat them or anyone else badly. I don't want to have resentment or hate in my heart. So, my mom had to work. I am grateful she worked although I did not get a lot of time with her. But I know she did it for me. […] I started to go to church by myself, without family, I don’t really have a lot of family, like others have. [..] Time passed and I learned more and more about God. I used to feel resentment towards my mom because I didn't grow up with my dad. I thought it was her fault. God taught me that you don't need so much from people to get ahead in life, to continue struggling in life. Because sooner or later everything will end in life. Things will pass.”

Another example of forgiveness is Brian, who recounted the violence from his father. He managed to forgive his father and reconcile with the negative emotions that had previously prevented him from finding peace,

> Resentment and hate that I felt for my dad didn’t allow me to live. So, I started to go to church and to pay attention to a sermon that said to not blame your parents for the way they behave because we do know their up bringing they had as children and for lack of love, compassion, and confidence. So, to me, that didn’t let me live. I called my dad and asked him to forgive me for saying that I hated him for everything he did. But I wanted him to also ask for forgiveness. He said that he had already forgotten about that, and we can just leave that in the past, and that hurt because some much that he affected me, and he forgot.

Despite their parents' behaviors, Brian and Maggie were able to forgive them, and understand more about their motives, in order to achieve emotional peace.

The dynamic process of making meaning takes time, coming to terms with past experiences and transforming negative events into meaningful moments that redirect their life trajectory toward growth and ultimately thriving. Finding meaning or purpose in adversity, seeing the positives that can come from hardship, was a source of strength and identity for some of the youth. Allison is a 22-year-old female from Guatemala, who migrated five years ago at the age of 17. She described her experience of making meaning from the hard things she went through:

> It's not until just recently now that I am working and making my own money. Now I'm starting to fly a little more. I could say that despite how difficult the situation may be,

> there's no excuse to not overcome it. Someone who wants it and asks God for the will and strength, will do it. So, I think the people that make excuses and say they feel bad, do not take the time to think that there are people somewhere else facing much more difficult situations. Or people that are in much worse situations. Everything that happens in this world is to teach us and help shape us for the better. What happened to me made me the kind of person that has goodness, I advocate for everyone, and I try to help as much as I can. Because when I needed it, they were with me.

This process of making meaning and forgiveness plays a crucial role in both navigating and thriving trajectories. As they mature, many youth in the sample described how they began to view their past traumas through a more compassionate and empathetic lens, leading to emotional healing. This shift in perspective not only allowed them to let go of the resentment that once weighed heavily on them, but also helped foster reconciliation and a renewed sense of connection with family members. The act of forgiving, whether their parents, relatives, or others who caused harm, became a transformative enabler that empowered these youth to move forward. By making sense of their hardships and previous traumas, they were able to break free from the emotional burden of their past, paving the way for personal growth to ultimately thrive, and building healthier relationships. This nuanced understanding of their past illustrates the dynamic nature of the healing process and the role of making meaning as a key enabler for those who are working on this process in both navigating and thriving trajectories.

Relational Level Enablers

In the process of thriving, some enablers can temporarily halt or redirect youth from their trajectory. But eventually, these enablers can help them grow. A clear example of this are three young females, Beatriz, Lorena, and Isabel from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, respectively. Beatriz migrated four years ago, and Lorena and Isabel migrated two years ago. They are all young mothers. Beatriz lives with her daughter, her partner, and her parents, whom she reunified with after 10 years of separation. She became pregnant at the age of 19 and dropped out of high school. Her partner works and is also from El Salvador. He left because of the insecurity in their hometown. Lorena migrated to be together with her boyfriend, the father of her two-year old daughter. She is no longer in a romantic relationship with him, but he is supportive and takes care of the baby. She wants to finish high school and get the ESOL certificate (English for Speakers of Other Languages) so that she can work because she needs money. Isabel migrated leaving her parents behind in Honduras because she was a victim of domestic violence in her hometown at the hands of her ex-partner, the father of her 4-year-old daughter, who drank a lot, beat her, and threatened her. She shared her current feelings "I suffered a lot. I was diagnosed with depression, like the doctor said, I need to feel like I matter. […] I'm proud of doing what I'm doing and knowing I am getting ahead in life for myself and my daughter".

These three young immigrants all migrated in search of better opportunities, and despite the difficulties, they remain positive and determined to move forward for their children. While becoming a parent at such a young age can be a potential setback or challenge, these young women are determined to pause their expected milestones and wait until their children start school to finish high school and find full-time employment. Their hopes for the future are similar. Beatriz said, "Really what I want is to finish school, and have a career. More than anything I want to have documents so that I can work and have a good salary. And I want my daughter to be a better person and accomplish everything I have not." And Lorena added:

> I want my daughter to go to school, get a diploma, to study something that could benefit her so that she can have her future and not depend on anyone. […] I am proud that I haven't given up despite all the challenges I have faced. I work hard to give everything I can to my daughter. To not give up.

In all three of these cases, being a mother, and the relationships with their children, fueled their motivation to work hard, to provide a good life for themselves and their children.

Just a few of the youth in the sample described their family support as part of their path to thriving. There are a lot of cases in which family support, especially parental support, is not present because of difficulties in having, or maintaining, relationships that have been touched by migration. In the next chapter the topic of family support will be discussed in detail. John, an 18-year-old male from El Salvador, described the emotional support his parents provide from their home country, particularly when he feels unmotivated or experiences homesickness,

> I call my mom, my dad and I feel more supported, and it helps me, the support that they can give me is saying, "Keep going. Keep going. You can do it." My dad always says, "Go to school. It's good. Keep going. You can do it." But I always tell my dad that I'm going to earn money and send them little by little. He says, "No, save it. You're going to need it to study and for this and that. That will come later." So, I get more motivated, and I try harder.

In the absence of support from families, youths in the sample turned to other sources of support including friends, mentors, romantic partners, teachers, and high school principals, as enablers of thriving. Nicole, a female who is 18 from Honduras, described how she grew from the pain she felt when her grandparents passed in Honduras and she decided to migrate to the U.S.,

> When I started coming to school here, I was here but I really wasn't. It was like, "Don't look at me." Because I would always cover myself completely. And people have told me that I've changed during my time here. I would always wear my sweater, a hat, and my mask, and you could only see my eyes. I would be completely covered. I was very shy. I didn't talk to many people here. So, I think that the fact that I didn't get along with many people, and at the same time I felt out of place, and things like that – that made me feel depressed. I would come home and lock myself up in my room. I couldn't sleep. Sometimes I would cry. I couldn't stand it anymore. Now I have friends, they are my best friends. So, I think that meeting them liberated me from that depression. So, I would tell them what I was going through, and they would provide support. And it's like I started going out with them. I started having fun and so on. I feel that meeting them helped me a lot.

Nicole described how her friends, initially distant, have become one of her main sources of support. They are people she sees daily, representing an important and meaningful relationship in her life.

Romantic partners also represent a source of support. Karina, a 25-year-old immigrant from El Salvador described her boyfriend as her biggest support,

> I am single but I have a boyfriend. He gives me strength; he encourages me to learn English and complete my schoolwork. He supports me. At the beginning we didn't have a

> lot of time to be together because I was working full time. I met him at church, he also goes to church.

For Grant, his biggest source of support is his partner, who has been there in the absence of his parents, who decided not to talk to him anymore since he revealed he was gay,

> When I am with my partner, I would forget about everything. I think he was the support I needed in that moment. He has supported me a lot. Until this day, he still does. We are going to get married last month but because of my status, I was told to wait and see how this process rolls out. I have faith in God that everything will go well. But if anything happens, then I should get married. And because people say that people get married for other purposes, I would tell that person that I would not do that but rather because I love that person.

Having a romantic partner or committing to sharing one's life trajectory with someone is a significant milestone, especially during the developmental stage of adolescence. Starting a relationship with a significant other represents a conscious decision and commitment to mutual support. For some of the youth in the sample, their partner is a source of support, someone who enables them to thrive, motivates them, and wants to see them grow. However, in some cases leaving a romantic relationship is a sign of growth. For example, Isabel, who suffered domestic violence at the hands of her ex-partner. She decided to leave the person who was hurting her and, though it has been a slow process, she is working through it and gradually finding her way. Luis also let go of a romantic partner who was not supporting his personal growth. Though she was an important source of support for him, and the separation was hard, he was determined to thrive and recognized that maintaining the relationship would hinder his progress. He describes this situation,

> Well, I knew her since she was 14 years old. She didn't go to school, so she couldn't write or read, so since I knew her, I took it to heart that I was going to get her ahead, that I was going to get her out of where she was and I took it to heart, I even succeeded. Then she got used to the idea of all me, and all me, all me. So that's why it bored me, and I am one of those people that I like to progress. […] Then I started to get upset because I said, I am a very busy person, I am with a person who is not, she is the opposite of me. So that's when I started to say no, this person is not me, but believe me that since I left her, she has been in depression.

In cases where family or any other form of social support, particularly from parents, was absent due to the strain of migration and disrupted relationships, youth sought other alternative sources of support to enable their growth and thriving. These external enablers, such as friends, mentors, romantic partners, teachers, and high school principals, filled the critical void left by family absence, and offered both emotional and practical guidance. For some youth, especially those who became parents themselves, these alternative support networks became essential in navigating their dual roles as students and caregivers. These relationships not only offered guidance but also empowered them to build a stable foundation for their own children, reinforcing the importance of broader community ties in fostering thriving. This shift highlights the adaptability and resourcefulness of youth in forging new support networks, reinforcing the idea that thriving can be fostered through relationships beyond the immediate family. The next chapter will delve into the nuanced role of family support, examining how its presence, or lack of, shapes the developmental trajectories of immigrant youth.

Community Level Enablers

The majority of youth in the sample highlighted the critical support they have received from community-based organizations across the area, with particular emphasis on the work of our community partner, an organization dedicated to promoting the development of Latino immigrant youth. Community services, such as those provided by our community partner, serve as critical enablers of thriving by facilitating opportunities for points of growth, moments of personal, social, and emotional development. These organizations operate as multilevel enablers, promoting both relational level support through interpersonal relationships and addressing individual level needs through services such as mental health counseling, academic assistance, and legal guidance.

Jefri sought help from our community partner and shared his thoughts about his experience, particularly how one of his mentors recommended our community partner:

> I talked to my High School's principal, and she said that she perceives me as anxious and with having high blood pressure. She wanted to help me, and she recommended an organization. So that's when I started to go to that organization when I was 16, I stopped going because I was working and I was tired, but then I decided to return. I did therapy in this organization at the beginning, but I thought it was childish. The second time I returned I was older, so things were different. They helped me find a scholarship in Montgomery College to study building maintenance. I really liked to go to this organization for therapy, it helped me a lot. I realized that I have a new life, and I learned to face problems in a calm manner. Also, I learned meditation. […] Therapy helps a lot to

> find alternatives to solve problems. You can be *machista* in two ways, when you are violent or when you don't feel like you need help. I had that type of machismo, the one related to not asking for help or advice.

Teachers and therapists also play a critical role in providing emotional guidance and encouragement, often becoming the primary sources of motivation and stability. For many youth, these figures offer essential advice, encouragement, and a sense of belonging, helping them stay focused on their education and mental well-being. Kevin shares,

> With my teachers, I feel a lot more comfortable, and I always try to tell them everything and for them to give me advice or something. And they always do it to motivate me more to continue studying and continue going to school and try not to miss that much. I also have a therapist. I don't have any reason to deny that. I have a therapist, so she listens to me. She always says to me, "Don't miss the next session." Yes, she's always there for me and I appreciate the teachers because they put me first on the list to have the meetings with the therapist. So, yes.

Luis, a young male from Guatemala who is 20 and migrated almost three years ago, stated that his main sources of support are his mother, who is in Guatemala, and one of his high school's counselors post migration,

> Miss L., she is like the counselor. She is a very good person. I tell her, you are my second mom, and she takes me as a son, so she gives me advice, she talks to me. Same is Miss Lindsey. She talks to me too. She is another of the people who also, I can count on for support and practically the whole school, because, as I told you, when I arrived and they

> look at me like that, all bad, they ask what do you have? The major part, for the most part I was unnoticed, but they both noticed me.

Our community partner and its various programs have significantly supported many youth in the sample, offering more than just therapy. The mental health programs have been particularly beneficial, providing accessibility for those who study or work during the day. Nicole highlighted the impact of these programs, stating, “Their programs have also helped me a lot. And one of the things that I have also told my two best friends, and many other people is that being part of the mental health group also helped me a lot.” These resources, alongside peer support, have been instrumental in fostering resilience and well-being among the youth. The comprehensive support provided by our community partner's programs accentuates the importance of accessible mental health resources in empowering youth to overcome challenges and ultimately thrive.

It is not only the services provided by our community partner but also the relational enablers that youth develop through their connections with counselors and mentors. In several high schools across the area, our community partner runs School-Based Wellness Centers that provide a continuum of programs and services. These include extracurricular opportunities, mentoring and case management, mental health counseling, and on-site health screenings and care. John, an 18-year-old male from El Salvador, shared his experience, “Typically I speak with my counselor. Sometimes I go to the Wellness Center, because sometimes I feel bored, or alone. I go and I talk to Daniela, one of the community counselors and I feel accompanied”. John also described the support from our community partner Wellness Center: “Ms. Daniela, you can ask her anything, and she will answer. She worries a lot about me. I hadn’t found anyone like her. She has inspired me and has taught me how to deal with things.”

Maggie also explained how our community partner’s community services helped her,

> I was desperate trying to find a place to get the GED and could not find anything. Then I learned about an organization. I called and they told me they could help me with finding employment. They also told me I could do whatever I want there. They would help me study and they tell me that if I did want to go to college, I had to get my GED. It's really a blessing from God. I applied and a person from the organization called to let me know that I got accepted and when could I start.

Grant also went to our community partner to get legal advice, “I told the community partner I am illegal, I came here illegally. I was scared because I had only been here for a year, but I decided to submit my paperwork. Thanks to God, I was able to get my work permit through political asylum”. Prior to reaching out to our community partner, Grant was also in touch with another community organization serving Latino immigrants, who unfortunately closed their doors, but who offered legal advice to undocumented immigrants.

Another community-level enabler is the church. Churches and faith-based organizations play a significant role in promoting youth development by facilitating mentor-mentee relationships, providing opportunities for social connection, and offering mental health interventions, among other services. These organizations serve as pillars within the community, facilitating points of growth. The relationships and programs they foster encourage personal and social development, serving as catalysts for positive change in the lives of youth. Karina shared how attending church and getting involved with their services helped her develop new skills,

> Since I was little I liked to go to church. A friend of mine invited me to church. At the beginning it was hard to go because I didn't have a car, so she would pick me up. During the first year I was assigned as a coordinator. I was a coordinator for 3 years. It was good because my free time was not free anymore, I was busy. I used to be shy, but this position has helped me to develop new skills such as public speaking.

Maggie also commented about her church, "It's a Christian church. It's not just about going to church. I go because I want to be an example to others and a testimony, if God changed my life, then he can change others too. I do have friends there, and I met my boyfriend there too".
Karen found much needed social support at her local church, where she attends weekly and finds considerable comfort. She shared: "I love to go to Church. I joined the youth program. I go every Sunday from 12-4pm. I can talk freely, if we feel lonely, we find support there. There is always somebody to support us and to accompany us." Karina also shared how building a sense of community through her church enabled her to purchase a car by participating in *tandas*, a common and informal savings practice within Latino communities,

> I drive now because of *las tandas*, I don't know if you know what that is, it's to save money. You get a number. It could be like 25 numbers and every week you give like $100. So, if you get the number 10, then you get it soon, but you have to continue paying until the 25 finish. It's like a savings account. I got that, and that's how I was able to save to get my car. This system is very reliable. There were 25 people participating.

Enablers of thriving are dynamic and subject to change, operating across multiple levels to support youth development. Community level organizations, such as our community partner and other organizations, or the church and faith-based organizations, act as both relational enablers by fostering meaningful relationships and individual enablers by empowering youth through the services they provide. These organizations play an important role in bridging connections between immigrant youth and resources, whether by offering services or facilitating social support and relationships. The interaction between individual, relational, and community level enablers is intertwined, with each reinforcing the other.

The core element driving the effectiveness of these enablers is the relationships that Central American youth form with the staff and individuals within these organizations. These relationships go beyond mere service provision, becoming a “catalyst” that transforms services into enablers of thriving. It is through these connections that youth feel valued, capable of success, and worthy of investment. Importantly, these social relationships, while significant, are not limited to family ties. Rather, they encompass a broader spectrum of support systems that play an essential role in youth development.

In conclusion, enablers to thriving play a critical role in helping Central American youth navigate past trauma and adversity, creating pathways for new opportunities and personal growth. These enablers not only foster points of growth but also buffer the impact of the challenges to growth, serving as essential mechanisms that guide youth toward thriving, despite the challenges they face. By recognizing and addressing these enablers, we can more effectively support Central American immigrant youth in overcoming obstacles and reaching their full potential.

Chapter 6: Family Support

Conceptualizing thriving as a process not only helps identify whether Central American immigrant youth are thriving but also deepens our understanding of the factors contributing to their thriving as a form of growth. Enablers to thriving, discussed in the previous chapter, act as distinct mechanisms that provide support post-migration and foster growth for Central American immigrant youth in the U.S. However, families, particularly families of origin, are relational-level enablers of thriving that require further exploration in the context of migration. Families are often conceptualized as structures of support, but from a critical perspective, such support must be reconsidered in light of the complex realities faced by Central American immigrant youth as a result of migration. Support is challenged by the complicated dynamics of family relationships within immigrant families, who may not be as supportive as is often assumed. In this way, the study calls for a reexamination of the core concept of *familismo* that is frequently utilized in Latino family research.

Therefore, the aim of this chapter is to shift the focus of research in this field from general family support to a more rigorous exploration of family relationships. To do this I will use the concept of *linked lives* as framed by the family life course framework (Roy & Settersten, 2022) and analyze the complexities and nuances of family relationships following separations and reunifications due to migration.

Familismo **and Family Support**

Latino families are often distinguished by a strong emphasis on family connections, support, and loyalty, prioritizing the needs and interests of the family over those of the individual

(Lugo Steidel & Contreras, 2003). This core cultural value is conceptualized as *familismo*. It fosters a profound sense of belonging and obligation among family members, promoting cohesive relationships that provide both emotional and practical support (Stein et al., 2014). *Familismo* encompasses both attitudinal and behavioral components (Calzada et al., 2012; Stein et al., 2014). The attitudinal aspect refers to deeply held cultural values that emphasize family as a central source of attachment, support, loyalty, and obligation—often prioritizing collective well-being over individual pursuits (Fuligni et al., 1999; Lugo Steidel & Contreras, 2003). In contrast, the behavioral dimension includes concrete expressions of these values, such as showing deference to parents, contributing to household tasks, caring for siblings, and engaging in actions that uphold the family's unity and reputation (Stein et al., 2014).

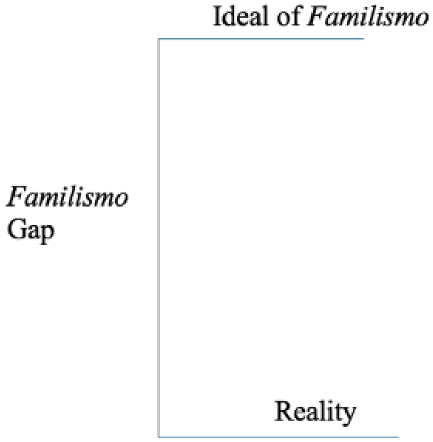
Migration, however, complicates these ideals, particularly from the perspective of adolescents who experience parental separation. Although migration may reflect an attitudinal commitment to *familismo*, with parents leaving their countries to secure better opportunities and resources for their children, the resulting distance often disrupts expectations of closeness, care, and presence. From the youth's standpoint, these separations may feel like a rupture in family bonds, highlighting a painful contradiction: acts meant to preserve family well-being can simultaneously create emotional voids. This tension reveals that *familismo* is not a fixed construct, but rather one that is shaped by context, time, and relational position. Parents and youth may interpret the same actions differently, what is intended as sacrifice by the parent may be experienced as loss or abandonment by the child. The lived experiences of youth navigating transnational family life thus call for a more dynamic understanding of *familismo*, one that accounts for the emotional complexity, structural forces, and intergenerational perspectives that influence how family bonds are maintained or strained across borders.

Family support, a core expression of *familismo* and a critical form of social support in Latino communities, plays a pivotal role in shaping youths' behaviors, transitions, and overall development (Triandis, 1989; Arevalo et al., 2016; Pastrana, 2015). While prior research has often examined family support in relation to educational outcomes, health, and risk behaviors (Bers & Galowich, 2002), few studies have explored how it evolves within migratory contexts. This study addresses that gap by centering the voices of Central American immigrant youth and examining how family relationships shift over time. By moving beyond static definitions, I explore the fluid, often contradictory nature of family ties and how they adapt in response to changing circumstances and the lived realities of migration.

Complexity of ***Familismo***

García Coll and colleagues (1996) argue that for Latino families, the family unit serves as the primary and most crucial environment for the socialization of children and adolescents. Through interactions with parents, siblings, and extended family members, youth are introduced to cultural practices. However, data from this study reveal that the cultural principle of *familismo,* which emphasizes strong family bonds and mutual support, is often challenged by the realities of migration. The physical absence of family members, typically undertaken as an act of responsibility and care to secure a better future, can unintentionally shift family dynamics and priorities. When combined with the development of new relationships or life circumstances, these absences often result in a reconfiguration of traditional roles, leading to strained or disrupted connections within the family. This reorganization of family roles and relationships underscores a critical tension: the ideal of *familismo*, which places family as the central unified support system, clashes with the practical experiences of migration, separation, and its impact on family cohesion. Most immigrant youth in this sample experienced a significant gap between the ideal of *familismo* and their actual experiences. Figure 2 illustrates the "*familismo* gap," contrasting the ideal of *familismo*, depicted in the top bar, as a core value of Latino culture, with the reality faced by immigrants navigating changes in family dynamics due to migration.

Figure 2. *Familismo* Gap



This phenomenon mirrors the interplay articulated by MacLeod (2009) between the aspirations and ambitions of youth and the attainable expectations shaped by their sociocultural conditions and family support. While the analysis of this gap varies for each participant, a common trend emerged from the data: a significant divergence between the ideal of *familismo* and the harsh realities shaped by family separations (when parents migrate, leaving their children behind in their country of origin, or when adolescents migrate, leaving family behind) and family reunifications (when parents return temporarily or permanently to the country of origin, or when children migrate to reunite with their parents). These experiences, often marked by trauma, complicate anticipated reunifications. Due to lost bonds and lack of connection, these reunifications rarely occur seamlessly and therefore deviate from the principles of *familismo*.

Although families may uphold the value of *familismo*, their actions are often shaped by the difficult social and structural realities of their home communities in Central America. In contexts marked by poverty, violence, and scarce opportunities, parents and youth frequently make the painful decision to migrate, motivated by the desire to provide a better life for their families. This act of migration, though aligned with the attitudinal dimension of *familismo*, prioritizing family well-being, often results in prolonged separations that challenge the very ideals of family unity and closeness. These choices, made under pressure and with limited foresight into the long-term consequences, can inadvertently strain or fracture family bonds. Many of the youth in this study described navigating disrupted relationships as they pursued brighter futures, revealing the emotional complexities of migration and the evolving meaning of *familismo* in transnational family life.

Family Relationships

The life course concept of *linked lives*, which has gained significant attention from family researchers (Marshall & Bengtson, 2011), warrants a deeper analysis and reexamination in the context of migration for Central American immigrants. Traditional studies of family support often focus on static "types of social support," overlooking the evolving and interdependent nature of family dynamics shaped by migration. My analysis seeks to explore these dynamics through the lens of Roy and Settersten's (2022) conceptualization of linked lives within the family life course framework. In this context, linked lives refer to how family members' experiences are interconnected, with the actions and trajectories of one member affecting the entire family unit. This idea is central to the *familismo* gap, as family roles and relationships across borders create a growing disconnection. The physical absence of family members hinders closeness and affection, which are essential for nurturing these bonds. This absence is deeply tied to the concept of ambiguous loss, the profound sense of loss and sadness that arises when separation is unresolved or lacks closure (Boss, 2010). Limited communication, often due to inconsistent internet access, further obstructs regular contact, making it harder to maintain emotional connections. Without these interactions, family members struggle to fulfill their roles in supporting one another, challenging the core values of *familismo* and weakening the foundation of these cultural ideals. The construct of linked lives has five dimensions: configuration, content, valence, environment, and time, all of which can be used to structure our conceptualization of the *familismo* gap.

The first dimension of *configuration* addresses the foundational question of *who* constitutes the family members involved in interdependent relationships. Traditional research often focuses on dyadic relationships (e.g., parent-child, mother-father relationships), while ignoring other relational configurations, dyadic, triadic, or more complex relationships, that evolve over time and are influenced by the broader social context of migration. In the case of immigrant families, many relationships extend across borders, with family members maintaining connectedness through various transnational practices that extend beyond physical spaces and are facilitated by technological platforms like WhatsApp, FaceTime, and other social media networks (Roy & Yumiseva, 2021). As a result, immigrant families develop unique configurations that deviate from traditional family structures, with members distributed across different countries, yet remaining interconnected despite physical absence.

In this sample, we found that Central American immigrant youth who travel to reunite with their parents in the U.S. often encounter family configurations that are far removed from the ideals of *familismo*. Upon arrival, they may find their parents together with new additions to the family, such as new romantic partners, stepparents, or step siblings, or their parents may no longer be together at all. Once the mother, the father, or both, migrate, children typically stay in the care of grandparents or other family members, oftentimes called “other mothers", most commonly grandparents and aunts or uncles. Youth described recognizing their grandparents as “mom” and “dad” and developing a strained relationship with their biological parents. Florence, a 20-year-old male from El Salvador, explained the relationship he had with his grandmother as, “a connection that I never had with my mom because she left when I was 4 years old, and we never had that mom-child relationship”. Manuela, a 19-year-old from Guatemala also described her relationship with her grandparents:

> I was raised by my grandparents. I feel that they are my parents. I call them “mom” and “dad”. My “dad” was dedicated to the livestock in the fields. But comparing myself to other families was hard because I knew my grandparents were not my real parents. Knowing that my mom was not with me because she left me when I was 3 years old was tough.

For many of these youth, the pain of separation from their parent(s) was further intensified by the loss of other important figures, such as the death of grandparents or leaving behind maternal figures to reunite with their biological parents in the U.S. The altered family dynamics and physical separation from original family structures mark a significant departure from the traditional values of *familismo*, further widening the divide between idealized family roles and actual experiences.

The second dimension of *content* refers to *what* transpires or is transferred in linkages. In the context of migration, family relationships evolve into complex and dynamic interdependencies, sometimes carrying shared meaning. As Central American immigrant families adapt to migration, individuals often seek to reconnect with relatives or form new relationships with others outside the family, particularly those living in the U.S. These new connections can become valuable sources of support (Walsh, 2006). Friends often take on the role of family or become a primary source of support when immediate family members are not physically or emotionally present. Jimmy, a 15-year-old male from El Salvador who migrated four years ago, reflects on this dynamic,

> I have found trust in my best friend. She knows my entire life. And we both come from the same place, El Salvador. If someone asks her about something of mine, she’s going to answer. She worries a lot about me. I hadn’t found anyone like her. Also my other friends from school are good, they support me. They tell me nice things. They tell me that I look good. They support me. I even have a friend who is like me, and he has inspired me, and he has taught me how to deal with things.

The third dimension of *time*, which locates individuals in time, age, cohort, and generation, is essential for studying families and understanding how individual agency is shaped by cultural factors and political forces (Roy & Settersten, 2022). In this study, the concept of time is particularly relevant in tracing the long view of interdependence, how linkages within families are created, maintained, and recreated, especially during childhood and adolescence.

The cohort, defined as individuals born around the same historical period, holds significance in the study of Latino immigrant youth from Central America. These youth not only share similar lived experiences due to their migration journeys but also belong to a specific post-migration cohort within the area.

Historical time plays a critical role in this context, as migration decisions often stem from instability and unfavorable living conditions in Central America. For many, migration is a result of poverty, violence, or other socio-political challenges that push youth to migrate or force parents to migrate while leaving children behind. The historical context of poverty and instability in Central America has shaped the migration patterns and the lived experiences of this cohort, further deepening the understanding of family relationships and interdependencies within immigrant communities. In addition, the contemporary historical period of rising anti-immigrant sentiment in the U.S. plays a crucial role in shaping the stressors facing immigrant families.

Families often navigate the constant threat of deportation, which creates fear and instability in their daily lives. Many youth have shared firsthand experiences of living with the fear of deportation or witnessing a loved one being deported. Lorena, for instance, recounted her father's deportation, "My dad arrived when I was 8 years old. Two years later he was deported because he was illegal, and they detained him. I do not really remember. He came here because of the opportunities and even more when my mom got pregnant with my younger sister, but he was deported". Alan also shared his experience of having friends who were deported because in order to survive they had to get involved with criminal activity,

> I had some friends who were not doing things right. I met them fooling around in school. I liked them a lot and I got closer to them. I think it was a bad idea that I became close to

> them with all the problems. Of all the friends I had, many are now missing. Some were deported and others have been killed. Some are alive but I do not know anything about them because how could we communicate from one place to another. And some that are here started to work and do other things. But from that big group, there are few that remain. I now live with fear of being deported, I don't want to.

Additionally, the lack of access to essential services and exploitation in employment, because of lack of legal documentation, further compounds the challenges these families face, making it even harder for them to thrive. Several of the youth in the sample shared their experiences of exploitation due to their undocumented status, which prevents them from legally working in the U.S. Despite this, they have found opportunities to work, though often under less-than-ideal conditions. Karina, for example, recounts how she was exploited in her first job but felt she had no choice but to accept the conditions because of her undocumented status,

> Prior to COVID-19 I was working Monday-Saturday all day, from 7am-9pm. I worked cleaning houses all day. I was very tired all the time. I liked that job because there was no harassment, you do not deal with drunk people as I deal with in my current job working at a restaurant. A friend of mine helped me to get the job because I newly arrived in the US. The payment was not good, it was $350 per week, like $5 per hour, and I was working from 6am-7-8pm. It was a long commute; I took a bus and the metro. I had no time to study. I was working nearly 60 hours per week.

These overlapping historical and socio-political dynamics not only affect individual families but also reinforce systemic barriers that hinder their full integration and success in their new environment.

Furthermore, the developmental time of adolescence is crucial to consider, as many Central American immigrant youth are navigating this formative period, marked by significant changes in cognition, emotion, and social behavior. These shifts occur alongside the most substantial neurobiological development since infancy, particularly regarding physical and brain maturation (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2019). This stage is characterized by bodily maturation, heightened learning capacity, and the formation of personal identity (Newman & Newman, 2016). However, the process of identity formation is uniquely shaped by the experiences of immigrant youth, diverging from the developmental trajectories of non-immigrant youth. While non-immigrant youth typically follow an expected developmental path, immigrant youth often assume adult responsibilities at an earlier age, caring for themselves and navigating the complexities of migration and adaptation. Melanie, for example, reflects on shouldering responsibilities during her childhood that were unusual for her age. These experiences, including managing household tasks, later played a crucial role in easing her adjustment to life in the U.S.,

> I think I'm like this because of the way I was raised, in my home there were rules, my mom was very strict and angry. She's not a friend. She was my mom. The person who is going to discipline me and teach me. She taught me to be independent. I had to clean and cook if I wanted to eat, and I had to do chores in the house since I was a kid. When I got here it wasn't difficult to adapt because I have been independent since I was little. I've cooked and had to do everything that I needed.

Another example is Beatriz, a mother to a young daughter who earns income by providing childcare for other children. Before migrating, while living in El Salvador, she took on caregiving responsibilities to support herself financially, including caring for her cousin during their adolescence,

> Well, it's not easy, I guess it has been too hard. When I was in El Salvador I used to help my aunt with her baby and I learned how to change diapers and make bottles. And well here, I have my younger sisters and the kids I took care of so that's helped a lot. And being a mother too, my daughter is a lot of responsibility. I have to take care of her and ensure she is well behaved and all of that.

This shift disrupts the traditional family dynamics and relational interdependencies central to *familismo*, deepening the emotional distance and weakening the sense of family unity.

The fourth *environment* dimension refers to the social and physical contexts in which family linkages are enacted. Family members' interactions are shaped by their living situations, and these interactions evolve as individuals adapt, or attempt to adapt, to changing environments. In this study, family relationships are challenged by the social environments shaped by migration, as these relationships inevitably change and evolve over time according to the circumstances. Among the youth in this sample, two primary environments of family separation due to migration emerged, both of which challenge the core principles of *familismo*. In these cases, parents and their children are neither physically present to provide care, engage in shared activities, or maintain close emotional bonds.

Seventeen out of the 34 youth in the sample chose to migrate, leaving their parents behind in their home countries. Their parents encouraged this decision to help them escape political instability, gang violence, and/or deep poverty, social conditions that significantly impact family life (Roy & Settersten, 2022). Among these young immigrants, five reunited with their fathers, who had migrated earlier, and attempted to rebuild previously broken or distant relationships. The majority of these youth left their loved ones behind to provide financial support to their families, reflecting a key principle of *familismo*: the importance of offering financial assistance to family members in need. However, this reality complicates the notion of proximity and emotional connection, as the ideals of family closeness are challenged by the necessity of migration. Allison explained,

> I decided to migrate because my mom worked too much. She works every day and has a headache all the time. Having to be there meant that she had to work more. So, when I got the opportunity, I thought that I would be able to help her, by having to work less. It's a lot what she's done for my brothers and me. She worked at night, so she would leave at 7 at night and come home at 7 in the morning. I would stay home alone with my brothers while she worked. We noticed she was getting sick and needed to remove the workload. My brother came first, and then I did. Between both of us, we try to help.

Despite missing her mother, Allison aimed to send money back and alleviate her mother’s workload.

The other environmental context arises when parents migrate to the U.S. without their children, guided by the *familismo*-driven ideal of providing a better and safer life for their families. This was the case for 14 of the 34 youth in the sample, whose parents sought to support their families by working across borders, sending remittances, and maintaining long-distance relationships through technological networks. In this environment, the core principles of *familismo* are also challenged, as the act of leaving children, even in the care of extended family, disrupts the emphasis on physical closeness and emotional connection. These immigrant families navigate the tension between their expectations of reunification and the realities of changes that happened during long periods of separation. Florence described this situation,

> My mom left to the U.S. when I was 4 years old in hopes of a better future since my father did not provide financially, he was in jail. So, we never had a mom-child relationship but I always had sentiments towards my mom. I lived with my grandmother; I was with her from the time I was 4 until I was 13 years old. I always got along well with her. I had a connection with her that I never had with my mom.

Typically, parents who migrated previously to the U.S. later arranged for their children's migration many years later, in order to get them away from dangerous situations or to provide them with more opportunities. In most cases, they paid a *coyote*, or for only one of our participants a plane ticket, to help their child leave the instability or danger of the home country. Maggie spoke about the separations she faced in her home country before her mother decided to migrate to the U.S.,

> I saw my mom monthly. She worked with an aunt of hers selling things. Also did housekeeping and cooking. I saw her monthly and was so happy, she would bring me food. We were very poor, very very very poor. There were days that we got to eat and there were days we did not. I told my mom I wanted to work and when she asked why I told her I did not want to go to school anymore but it was because I wanted to help her.

Often, when parent(s) migrate, leaving their children behind in the care of other mothers, things go well, and the child is well cared for, as expected by *familismo* principles. Sometimes, however, this arrangement does not work well, and creates additional traumas, challenging the values of *familismo*. Two youth in our sample reported suffering abuse during their upbringing because of the absence of their parents. Manuela, who shared her trauma in Chapter 4, and Maggie who described the physical abuse she suffered from her cousins when living in her grandmother's house after her mother migrated,

> I've learned a lot since I was little, there was a time when I wasn't really raised by my mom because she had to work and be a mom and dad to me and my other siblings. She had to work to feed us, she was a single mom. When I was little, I suffered a lot, my cousins would beat up on me a lot. I've suffered a lot.

Lastly, three youth in the sample; Alan, Yara, and Avis, reported migrating together with their mothers. Alan and his mother migrated one year ago because they could no longer endure the insecurity and violence in their hometown, which made them very scared. Yara migrated with her mother three years ago to reunite with Yara's grandmother, who had migrated over 20 years earlier. They hired a *coyote* in Mexico and initially arrived in Georgia, where Yara's grandmother lived. However, Yara's mother later started a relationship with a man in Maryland, prompting their move there. Avis migrated with her mother, who had not been present in her life since she worked as a maid and lived elsewhere. After many years of absence, Avis's mother decided to migrate to reunite with her husband and son, who had migrated earlier. Consequently, Avis and her mother migrated with the help of a *coyote* four years ago.

In all these situations, family relationships pose a challenge that creates a gap between the *familismo* ideal that many of these young people are socialized into, and the reality of their experiences of separations, conflict, and ambivalence in these relationships. Living in this gap, their most common experiences are not provision of support but failure of expected support. Immigrant youth might receive financial remittances from their parent(s) but lack emotional support if their parent(s) who migrated could not maintain a close relationship. Conversely, some youth migrate and leave their parent(s) behind, lacking tangible support, but they manage to keep family bonds strong through texting or video calls, providing them with emotional support.

The last dimension of *valence*, referring to the quality of the linkages or the “charge” (often positive or negative emotions; see below) that exists "between" family members, cannot be fully captured as a static reflection at a single point in time. Rather, it must be understood through its development across the life course, particularly in families impacted by migration. This dynamic aspect of family relationships is often overlooked in migration research. Valence encompasses a wide spectrum of lived experiences that shape family interactions, which can be positive, negative, ambivalent, fractured, reconstructed, reactivated, or even irreparably broken. The physical and psychological presence or absence of family members plays a crucial role in determining the valence of these relationships. In this sample, the valence of family bonds has been shaped by migration, with relationships evolving over time. Some bonds have been reconstructed and strengthened, while others have been irreparably broken. In the study of immigrant families, understanding the dynamics of family relationships requires considering how connections are created, maintained, and redefined throughout the life course.

The cultural value of *familismo* is repeatedly tested by the migration process, as families strive to uphold their bonds despite physical and psychological distances. This challenge often leads to a broadening of the *familismo* gap, where the ideals of family cohesion conflicts with the realities of parenting from afar. This study examines these dynamics in depth, focusing on the fluid and evolving nature of family relationships, as will be discussed in the following section.

Complexity of *Familismo* Across Borders

The youth in this study expressed a range of complex emotions, the valence of linked lives, associated with their experiences of separation and reunification with family members. Feelings of despair, sadness, disappointment, abandonment, anger, resentment, uncertainty, and loss were commonly reported throughout the interviews and will be described in detail. These emotional challenges are particularly salient in light of the core principles of *familismo*. Migration disrupts this ideal, as family members often face the challenge of balancing economic necessity with the deep need to remain connected across borders.

Separations

For many youths, the experience of separation was not a single event. Grant, for example, explained the several family disruptions he experienced throughout his life, especially after his mother migrated domestically. He was raised by his grandmother in his former small town after his mother moved to a big city and married his stepfather. After seven years of being apart from his mother, Grant left his grandmother and moved to the big city to reunite with his mother, soon after his stepfather migrated to the U.S. At age of 14, he then moved to a different city where he lived by himself while he completed his education. He described this separation as “very hard”.

Ultimately, at the age of 20 he migrated to the U.S., reuniting with his stepfather, but facing another separation from his mother and grandmother as they both stayed in their native Honduras. He described his feelings of despair when he said goodbye to his mother when he migrated leaving her behind,

> I decided to come. It was very hard because you know when you are leaving but not knowing when and if you are returning. I told my mom; I do not want you to cry.

> Because if you cry in the moment I am leaving, I am not going to leave. My mom in the moment was really strong, she did not cry. But then told me that the minute she returned home she started to cry.

Melanie, a 19-year-old female from El Salvador who migrated six years earlier to reunite with her parents described the feelings and unanswered questions she had towards her mother after 11 years of separation,

> I think her leaving me has always been hard and it has affected me. She said it was for a better future and stuff like that. But sometimes it's complicated, I just don't understand, so she left to be here. I do not know, it's complicated. I don’t get it. I don't see the difference between being here and being there. […] Yes, I feel very abandoned.

Allison described feeling the depths of pain when she first arrived in the U.S. to reunite with her father and stepmother after 15 years of separation while leaving her mother behind in her hometown. She was very close to her mother after her father migrated, and the idea of not seeing her again was devastating. She also shared how she regretted coming to the U.S. and the struggles she went through as part of the adaptation process, “High school was not easy. I missed my mom a lot. I was desperate to leave because I just could not adapt. […] I did not like the food. I just could not adapt.”

For many youths who left their parent(s) behind in their hometowns and migrated to the U.S., the challenges of adjusting to a new environment are compounded by the weight of responsibility they feel towards their families. While the process of migration presents its own set of difficulties, these youth are driven by a deep sense of obligation to support their loved ones back home. Sending remittances becomes a significant aspect of their lives, as they work tirelessly to provide financial assistance to families who rely on their contributions. This dual experience of personal struggle and family duty highlights the emotional and economic complexities these youth face as they navigate life in a new country while maintaining connections to their origins. Kevin reflected on his role as provider,

> I work in Chipotle. Before that I worked in electricity, but it was working at very high heights, more than 200 feet high. And I work on the weekends selling fruits and vegetables. [...] Thanks to that I send money regularly to my mom. I just sent my grandfather money once and it was because, I don't remember if it was his birthday or if it was Christmas, I don't remember why it was, but I sent him money. And I sent money to my grandmother as well and my great grandmother. So, I haven't been able to send them a lot and not that often because I don't have a lot of work. But I have to provide for them.

Brian also shared how he sends money from his work as a cashier at a local supermarket,

> I am one of four children and the one that sends the most money. Each month I send money, and I am in touch with my parents. Because I know how important they are to me and not being able to see them and to know they are just getting older. And basically, they are alone. My sisters are married, and they are alone. So I am the one who sends money.

Youths who have migrated to the U.S. are also finding ways to stay connected with their families using technology. This form of communication allows them to preserve and nurture their bonds across borders. Despite the challenges of migration and separation, these virtual interactions provide a sense of presence due to their unique configuration, enabling youth to remain present in their family's lives even while being physically absent. Kevin maintains a close connection with his family members by sending pictures of himself and receiving photos of his brother's beloved daughter, his niece: "My niece doesn't know a lot about me, but my sister-in-law always talks to her about me. They send me pictures all the time. I wish that she was here close by. If she was here close by, my God, that little girl would be the most spoiled".

Luis also stays connected with his mother and father, who he left behind in Guatemala, through WhatsApp,

> I call almost about 3, 4 times a day. I have WhatsApp with her because, I don't know, with her I have a super communication. Unlike with my dad, it's very different because with him I talk every week, every 15 days or every Saturday. Unlike with my mom, with her it's every day, every day, every day. When I wake up, when I'm getting to work, when I'm going to lunch, when I'm leaving work, when I'm getting to school and when I'm coming home and when I'm going to sleep.

The complexities of living under separation due to migration are profound, with a significant emotional toll on Central American immigrant youth, regardless of the context of separation. While technology provides a means to maintain some level of connection, it cannot fully bridge the emotional divide that physical distance creates. Although many youth deeply miss their families, maintaining meaningful bonds from afar is fraught with challenges. For many immigrant youth, the expectations of *familismo* remain unmet as migration complicates the ability to sustain strong family ties. The pressures of separation and distance reveal that the bonds idealized by *familismo* are difficult to preserve, forcing immigrant youth to navigate fractured family dynamics.

Reunifications: Era Como Abrazar a un Extraño - "It Was Like Hugging a Stranger"

When families separate, the reunion is often anticipated, as expected by *familismo* principles. However, reunifications might take longer than expected, as timing is commonly set by factors that are out of control of the family, especially when living under immigration regulation (Menjivar & Abrego, 2009). In this sample, youth were separated from their parent(s) from one to 17 years, with the majority separated from seven to 11 years. Uncertainty, migration traumas, and emotional connections to caregivers or "other mothers" are some of the critical factors that shape the process of reunification. Our participants described this phase as a "limbo", a period of waiting for this wanted reunification without knowing how getting together will happen or what it will be like.

Hope for reunification can be strained by the failure of parents to maintain regular communication, which increases the distress of separation and makes reunification more difficult, as argued by Artico (2003). When children do migrate, they experience additional separations from caretakers in their home country, complicating the emotional landscape of reunification with parents, rendering it more ambivalent and confusing. Jefri, a 21-year-old immigrant from El Salvador spoke about his experience of dealing with the separation from his grandparents and adapting to a new country, "When I first came to the U.S., I was impacted by family separation, it hit me hard leaving my grandparents. Everything changed in a second". Migrating brought many youth additional losses, which intensified the challenges of life after migration.

Reunification with parents in the U.S. was marked by a mixture of complex and conflicting emotions. Feelings of anger and resentment toward parents who left often conflicted with the hope of reunification and gratitude for new opportunities. As previously noted by Crawford-Brown and Rattray (2001), reunions did not always meet expectations, as parents and children were frequently unprepared for the challenges of living together again. These challenges underscore the tension between the ideal of *familismo* and the lived reality, enlarging the *familismo* gap.

Youth described a mixture of emotions about reunification: happiness and optimism about being together were mixed with the disappointment of reuniting with a "stranger" or "strangers" who feel like not the same people they were the last time they were together. Melanie described reuniting with her mother after 11 years of separation,

> I remember my mom talking to me about coming to live with her and I was like okay. It was weird. Honestly, it was really confusing. […] When I arrived in the U.S. my mom was there with my aunt and two sisters. Honestly, I didn't feel a lot when I first saw her, it was like hugging a stranger. You kind of feel that emotion in the moment, you know? But it was like oh she's your mom, feel happy. And I did feel happy a lot. But it was not like I was really looking forward to seeing her.

Shortly after reunification, questions began to emerge as a consequence of the resentment Melanie carried about being left by her mother. She wondered why her mother waited so long to bring her to the U.S., and how she was able to start a new family in the new country. She explained her thoughts after she started to process her new life with her mother,

> Sometimes I think about how she came here, and why so long waiting. Now that I am here, I see she has a lot of time, a lot of time. And she never really talked to me, that

> makes me feel weird. A lot of stuff that I try to ignore. With my dad, it has always been clear that he has been absent... in the sense of support emotionally.

Karen also felt like she was meeting her parents for the first time. Her father migrated when she was a baby and her mother when she was four years old,

> When I first arrived at the airport my mom didn't know me. She walked by me and she didn't know me, and I said, "Hi mom," and the lady just stared at me because she said she was my sister. And then another lady came (who is my mom) and said, "Daughter, you're so big", she didn't recognize me. [...] My dad, when I hugged my mom, he hugged me too. I felt that at least I was granted the embrace that I desired. I felt very happy, and grateful to God because it was a very difficult road to get there.

Their interactions were limited to phone calls, so Karen had little idea of what her parents would look like in person, she was nervous, but she was able to find them. Edwin, an 18-year-old male from Honduras explained the reaction he had when he found out his parents had a new baby girl during their eight-year separation,

> She was born here. I was 10 years old when I found out. No one told me your mom is pregnant, they just said, hey- you have a sister. I was like, what? I did not speak to them every day, but they called and said- you have a sister. […] When I first came here, it was a nightmare. Since I was a stranger to her, she did not let me sleep in the bed. She would cry and I had to sleep on the couch.

He was surprised about the new addition to the family, and eight years later he described the relationship with his parents as not being perfect, “It’s not the best relationship. We are not the perfect family. They get upset. They do not have the best attitude. And I do not have the best reactions. There are disagreements like all families but overall, I would say that we get along well." Some adolescents in the sample were confused when they did not recognize their parent(s)'s new life. Melanie expressed the fear she felt when she started living with her mother in the U.S., "There were a lot of adults, and men. And there was a moment when these men were trying to talk to me, and I would just get away, but that made me really scared. I didn't know my mother's new friends."

Examining the reunification experiences of youth with their parents after years of separation reveals that, while these reunions are often viewed as significant milestones, they can be fraught with emotional complexities that challenge the ideals of *familismo*. For many youth, these reunions highlight the disjunction between family ideals and the reality of their relationships. The absence of parents, who were often physically and emotionally distant, means that these reunifications involve meeting people who are more familiar in name than in personal connection.

The process of adaptation to a new country can be daunting, and this adaptation can be complicated by new family interactions and dynamics. Camila, a 16-year-old female who migrated three years ago with her brother from El Salvador explained why she describes her relationship with her mother as complicated after being separated for eight years since her mother left her when she was five years-old:

> It's a bit complicated. Too complicated. Imagine, seven or eight years of separation, and we have only been here in the U.S. for three years; in three years you cannot recover a relationship that you lost a long time ago. Mom wasn't around when I was a child, as they say, you get to know each other as a child, she wasn't around during those times, and she

> wasn't with my brother. My opinion, if I were a mother, I would say that she missed the most important moments in her children's lives.

For other youth, new family interactions necessitate time and external support to adjust and reorganize. Turbo, a 19-year-old male from El Salvador, recalled the complexity of his initial encounters with his father, whom he had not seen in eight years,

> The first months were complicated because I hadn't seen my father in years, and I had to call him "Dad." So, many times I would call him by his name. And when I was talking to my friends, I would later talk to him and tell him the same thing, and he'd be like, "did I say something bad?" "No." And he'd be the same. But so far, the relationship is going well. We both completed the Family Reunification program at an organization.

Parental discipline is another area of conflict for families reuniting after separations. As Dreby (2010) noted, adolescent children may resist parental discipline upon reunification, as they often feel like strangers to their parents, requiring family roles to be reestablished. This tension is further complicated by the principles of *familismo,* which emphasize both parental authority and respect. Consequently, while family members may be physically reunited, this does not necessarily lead to emotional connection. However, when discipline is enforced without the bond of closeness that was weakened by previous separations, it can challenge these ideals. Youth, lacking the emotional connection with their parents due to the physical and psychological distance, may find it difficult to tolerate discipline from someone with whom they share minimal to no bond. Sandra, an 18-year-old female from Honduras who migrated three years ago with her mother and her siblings to reunite with her father after ten years of physical separation, reflects on the challenges of their reunification,

> It was a difficult thing. The reunification with my father was tough despite always being in touch. We never lost contact. But it was difficult to come and spend time with him because so many years had gone by. I don’t remember how many. I think that nine years had gone by since I last spent time with him. So, it was a strange situation for me. Following his rules, it was his home, and I didn't want to follow him.

The conflict with parents that is common in adolescence as young people begin their own identity formation process may become heightened with ambivalence when there has already been a separation and disruption of a loving parent-child relationship. Yara, a 15-year-old female from Honduras who migrated with her mother to reunify with her maternal grandmother who was already in the U.S., is another example of conflict while trying to establish or reestablish family relationships. Yara and her mother were living together until the mother met a man, who later became Yara’s stepfather. Yara disclosed that since her mother started this relationship, she changed a lot and that is when their disagreements escalated. They already had disagreements prior to migrating, since Yara’s mother had previously migrated internally in Honduras. But the majority of problems amongst the two started when her mother met his stepfather,

> In Honduras we didn't always see each other very much because she was always away. [...] But now, my stepfather wants to get in between us, he wants to get involved a lot in the decisions that my mom makes, he manipulates her a lot like he watches her, where she goes and all that. And it's like oh, don't do that with me, because I'm nothing to him at all and we've already had bigger problems, so then, my mom is always trying to defend him instead of me. So, I think it broke mine and her relationship a lot. My grandmother noticed this and talked to her, but no changes.

The challenges faced by youth in the process of reunification showcase the complexities of reestablishing family bonds after prolonged separations due to migration. The difficulties are compounded by the existing conflicts that arise during adolescence, which can be intensified by the disruption and absence of a nurturing parent-child relationship. As seen in Yara's or Karen's experience, the arrival of a new family member, such as a stepfather or a sibling, can exacerbate existing tensions and complicate the reformation of family dynamics.

Moreover, family reunification, often viewed as the long-awaited resolution, does not necessarily restore the family closeness that separation has eroded. The years of physical and emotional distance can create deep fractures, making it difficult to reestablish the relationships that once existed. Rebuilding these connections requires time, patience, and commitment, and in many cases, the anticipated closeness does not fully materialize. Previous ruptures, whether due to physical separation, emotional neglect, or feelings of abandonment, leave emotional wounds that are not easily healed. This *familismo gap* underscores the unique challenges immigrant youth face, revealing how migration disrupts not only the structure of family but also the fulfillment of cultural expectations, leaving youth distanced from the family ideals they strive to uphold.

Chapter 7: Discussion

The purpose of this study was to better understand the complex and dynamic process of resilience unique to Central American immigrant youth and to reconceptualize resilience in a more nuanced and culturally relevant way within the context of their migration experiences. Additionally, this study analyzed the role of social support in promoting or inhibiting the resilience process as these youth navigated challenges and opportunities over time. Guided by this purpose, the study was structured around three primary aims:

1. To expand the understanding of resilience as it applies to Central American immigrant youth and propose a new conceptualization of resilience as a dynamic process of moving beyond adversity.
2. To examine the contexts and enablers to thriving that foster positive growth trajectories for Central American immigrant youth post-migration, focusing on mechanisms that help youth overcome challenges and thrive.
3. To deepen the understanding of social support, particularly family support, and its influence on the trajectories of growth for Central American immigrant youth.

In this chapter, I interpret the key findings in relation to these aims, illustrating how they contribute to a more comprehensive and culturally responsive understanding of resilience. The discussion situates these findings within existing research, emphasizes implications for policy and practice, and outlines the strengths and limitations of the study while proposing directions for future research.

Beyond Resilience: Thriving over the Life Course

This study challenges the traditional, individualistic conceptualization of resilience, which often portrays it as a process of returning to a baseline state prior to adversity, as stated by

Murphy (1974). Instead, these findings emphasize resilience as a dynamic process shaped by both structural and internal factors. Central American immigrant youth navigate complex social, economic, and emotional landscapes that influence their ability to overcome adversity. By framing resilience as a process of growth, this research highlights critical turning points, points of growth and challenges to growth, as pivotal moments that impact youth trajectories. This conceptualization shifts the focus from resilience as a fixed attribute to resilience as an evolving experience influenced by internal struggles, structural contexts, and social support systems.

This study identifies two distinct trajectories: thriving and navigating. In the thriving trajectory, youth demonstrate dynamic personal growth and stability despite significant adversity. Youth in this trajectory exhibit agency and purposeful action, leveraging available resources to achieve their goals, engage in community work, and support their families transnationally. Their success, while nonlinear, reflects a process of active growth and intentionality. Youth on the navigating trajectory remain entangled in persistent barriers that limit their ability to fully thrive. Their focus on immediate survival and emotional stability, rather than long-term aspirations, highlights the burden of systemic inequality that constrains their opportunities for sustained growth. By demonstrating that resilience emerges through dynamic interactions between individual agency, relational networks, and structural barriers, this study advances a conceptualization that is more attuned to the lived experiences of immigrant youth from Central America. Unlike dominant resilience frameworks that prioritize lists of protective factors (Cardoso & Thomson, 2010; Arce, Kumar, Kuperminc et al., 2020), this research reveals that resilience must be understood as a process of growth, deeply embedded within the transnational and often traumatic journeys that shape their migration experiences.

The use of life course theory (Elder, 1991) as the theoretical framework provides a comprehensive lens for analyzing the developmental trajectories of Central American immigrant youth across different life stages, connecting their experiences from childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood. This framework emphasizes how individual life trajectories are shaped by the timing and sequencing of life events, the influence of historical context, and the role of social supports in shaping outcomes. Life course theory is particularly well-suited for understanding resilience as a dynamic process because it highlights how transitions and turning points, such as migration, family separation, and school reintegration, serve as critical junctures that can either promote or inhibit growth, and are defined in this study as points of growth and challenges to growth. This research specifically introduces the term "thriving" to depict the dynamic nature of resilience among Latino immigrant youth, emphasizing that their capacity to adapt and flourish is not static but rather an ongoing process shaped by various social and structural factors. By situating resilience within the broader socio-historical and relational contexts of these youth, life course theory moves our understanding of thriving beyond earlier static conceptualizations of resilience and offers a more nuanced understanding of how it unfolds over time.

Further grounding this study in the life course health development model (Moser Jones & Roy, 2017) adds depth to the analysis by framing individual health and well-being within nested layers of influence, from family and community to societal and institutional structures. Individual health development is inseparable from family health, which in turn is influenced by broader community and societal conditions. This interconnection across generations and historical time aligns with the lived experiences of Central American immigrant youth, whose migration journeys are shaped by deeply rooted social determinants of health. These determinants, including socioeconomic inequities, legal restrictions, and labor exploitation, create significant barriers that perpetuate disparities in health and well-being across the life span. Moser Jones and Roy (2017) argue that the social determinants of health not only shape individual and family health trajectories but also produce patterns of inequality over time, reinforcing systemic barriers that disproportionately affect marginalized communities. The Central American immigrant youth in this study face many of these barriers upon entering the U.S., where limited structural supports and exclusionary policies hinder their ability to thrive. This context underscores the need for resilience frameworks that recognize how historical actors, institutions, and ideologies shape life trajectories, particularly for immigrant populations navigating intersecting forms of social and economic marginalization.

The concept of thriving proposed here builds on and extends the work of Morgan-Consoli et al. (2011, 2015), who distinguish thriving from resilience by emphasizing that thriving goes beyond returning to pre-adversity functioning. While resilience refers to enduring and coping with hardship, thriving represents a state of surpassing previous limitations and achieving personal growth (Carver, 1998). The thriving trajectory identified in this study captures this transformation, demonstrating that Central American immigrant youth often achieve elevated states of agency, purpose, and giving-back, despite ongoing challenges. This study also critiques the predominant reliance on quantitative methodologies that operationalize resilience as a fixed outcome, typically measured through static indicators such as academic success or psychological well-being (Rudzinski et al., 2017). Such approaches fail to capture the fluid, context-dependent nature of resilience as a dynamic, iterative process shaped by fluctuating interactions between risk and protective factors. In contrast, this research employs qualitative life-history interviews to conceptualize resilience as a multifaceted process encompassing both setbacks and growth. It resists precise definition, recognizing resilience as a spectrum of dynamic engagements with adversity over time, consistent with the insights of Brassett et al. (2013) and Pugh (2014), who argue that resilience must be understood through the unpredictable and fluid responses of individuals navigating social and political landscapes.

The unique transnational experiences of Central American youth, who often endure perilous journeys through the southern U.S. border and confront structural violence throughout their migration trajectories, necessitate a culturally specific conceptualization of their resilience. Unlike generic models that overlook the compounded effects of migration-related trauma, this study's framework centers the socio-political realities of these youth from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. Resilience should be understood as a social process inherently tied to the broader social context and the pressing circumstances surrounding migration. It cannot be disentangled from the structural barriers and social inequities that shape the post-migration experiences of immigrant youth from the Northern Triangle, including labor exploitation, limited access to education, and restricted economic opportunities. As this study highlights, the resilience of these youth is intricately linked to their social environments, requiring the support of families, communities, and institutions to address the systemic barriers they face.

Beyond Resilience: Promoting Health Through Strategic Enablers of Thriving

By accounting for social determinants of health and historical inequalities, this research supports a call for a paradigm shift in resilience studies (e.g., Elshahat, Moffat, & Newbold, 2022), advocating for frameworks that prioritize structural transformation, social support, and equitable access to resources. Education, social and community contexts, and economic instability are critical barriers that impede Latino immigrant youth from growing and thriving. Thus, future research should delve deeper into resilience as a collective and systemic phenomenon (Revilla, Martin, de Castro, 2017), exploring how it is shaped by and operates within specific socio-political and cultural contexts. Connecting this concept to social determinants of health (as in the life course health development model) will not only provide a more comprehensive understanding of resilience but also offer actionable insights into addressing the root causes of inequities that limit opportunities for these youth.

This study goes beyond merely listing protective factors, as often seen in survey research; it delves into the lived experiences of youth, who provide detailed explanations of how social support systems, such as family, school, and community networks, serve as critical enablers. I speculate that feelings of being cared for, coupled with emotional support, are critical in buffering the impact of adversity and promoting upward mobility. While this study emphasized the key role of life transitions and turning points in shaping the trajectories of young Central American immigrants, future research could follow interviewees to better understand how these enablers foster mobility over time. These transitions, whether promoting or challenging thriving, serve as significant mechanisms of change, illustrating how thriving is continually shaped by cumulative experiences over time. This study identified key enablers of thriving across multiple and interrelated levels, individual, relational, and community, and described how they play essential roles in fostering growth and positive outcomes for Central American immigrant youth. Such enablers are important to understand as they may offer guidance on points of intervention.

At the individual level, youth identified personal reflection, faith, and coping strategies as pivotal enablers in transforming their migration experiences into opportunities for growth. Spirituality, in particular, emerged as a profound source of strength, providing comfort, guidance, and meaning during hardship. This aligns with Dew et al. (2008) and Hill and Pargament (2008), who describe spirituality as a continuous search for meaning, peace, and transcendence. For many youth, belief in God served as a foundation for resilience, echoing

Davis et al. (2003), who highlight spirituality's role in fostering purpose, reducing anxiety, and protecting against high-risk behaviors. Hope, optimism, and the ability to make meaning post-adversity also emerged as critical enablers (Muñoz, Yumiseva, et al., 2023; Parry & Chesler, 2005). Youth who reinterpreted hardships, such as forgiving past grievances, demonstrated significant growth by reframing adversity with a sense of agency and purpose. Gratitude further supported resilience, fostering emotional grounding and a sense of connectedness (Dew et al., 2008; Hill & Pargament, 2008; Davis et al., 2003).

Building on these findings, this study, grounded in a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006), also explored how meaning-making unfolds in the lives of immigrant youth as they navigate disruption and hardship. By examining the meanings they ascribe to their identities, struggles, and aspirations, this research revealed how they find hope, forge new directions, and carve out a place for themselves in a fractured world. A key finding is that many youth express a deep desire to "*devolver a la vida"*—to give back to life—transforming their suffering into purpose and contribution. This desire exemplifies the power of metaphor in meaning-making, as they reinterpret hardship not as an end, but as part of a continuous cycle of renewal and agency (Bruner, 1990; Becker, 1994; Daly, 2007). Additionally, in their journey toward thriving, these youth demonstrate remarkable growth through forgiveness, showing compassion for those who have hurt them in the past. This capacity to see their adversaries differently, coupled with their ability to forgive, highlights a profound transformation in how they approach both their personal histories and their future possibilities. In doing so, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of thriving, not as an individual trait, but as an evolving process of reinterpretation, transformation, and reconciliation within a disrupted social landscape.

The relational enablers identified in this study emphasize the critical role of social support from family, mentors, teachers, and peers in youth's development. For instance, while only a few youth in this sample had consistent family support, others found significant relational support from mentors and romantic partners. These findings resonate with Benson and Scales (2009), who identify developmental assets, including supportive relationships, as crucial to thriving, particularly in the context of Central American immigrant youth, whose experiences have been underexplored.

The community level emerged as another crucial domain of enablers. Youth in this study identified community-based organizations as vital sources of support. These organizations promoted both relational enablers, by fostering meaningful connections, and individual enablers, by providing youth with resources and empowerment. Their role in bridging connections between immigrant youth and essential resources cannot be overstated. These organizations offer a range of services, from educational support to mental health resources, and provide critical opportunities for youth to connect with others in their communities, ultimately fostering a sense of belonging. This finding supports the work of Revens and colleagues (2008), who argue that community organizations are essential for providing immigrant youth with the tools and networks necessary for upward mobility. Moreover, Aranda (2008) highlights the positive relationship between religious attendance and social support, further emphasizing how faith-based organizations contribute to resilience and thriving.

The interaction between individual, relational, and community-level enablers is key to understanding thriving as a process of growth. Each level reinforces the others, creating a robust support system that promotes thriving. For example, community organizations provide essential services, while relational support from mentors, peers, and family, combined with internal resources such as motivation, help youth access and navigate these resources. The concept of thriving, as defined by Morgan-Consoli et al. (2023), is pivotal here. Thriving goes beyond simply bouncing back from adversity to achieving greater functioning than before. This is particularly true for Central American immigrant youth, for whom thriving involves not just overcoming the obstacles of migration but surpassing pre-adversity levels of functioning, creating a sense of identity, purpose, and belonging.

***Familismo Fictivo*: Acknowledging the Realities Behind the Ideals**

In addition, the findings of this study offer a critical examination of the role of family support and *familismo*, revealing a significant gap between the idealized cultural value of *familismo* and the lived realities of Central American immigrant youth. Although parents and youth often migrate with the intention of providing for their families, a decision aligned with the values of *familismo*, these efforts frequently lead to disruptions and complexities in everyday family life and roles. From the youth's perspective, which grounds this study, the physical and emotional distance created by migration can fracture the close relationships and support systems that *familismo* promises, revealing how structural constraints and shifting priorities complicate the enactment of these cultural ideals.

Contrary to assumptions that reunification restores family bonds, this study shows that reunification frequently exposes deeper fractures, as the absence of sustained engagement during formative years reshapes family dynamics in ways that challenge traditional *familismo*. Youth who were separated from parents due to migration experience reunification as a process of adjustment rather than a return to pre-existing bonds, necessitating a reconceptualization of *familismo* as a dynamic and evolving process influenced by the psychological and social toll of migration.

For independently migrating youth, maintaining family connections requires engaging in transnational practices such as using technology to communicate across borders. This effort underscores the tension between the cultural ideal of *familismo* and the logistical limitations of geographically fragmented families. García Coll and colleagues (1996) emphasize that for Latino families, the family unit serves as the primary and most critical environment for the socialization of children and adolescents. Through interactions with parents, siblings, and extended family members, youth acquire cultural practices and values, including *familismo*. However, migration reorders priorities and alters traditional roles, disrupting these socialization processes.

This study contributes to a broader conversation on thriving by positioning family support as both a potential enabler and a source of tension. Consistent with Roschelle's (1997) findings, structural barriers shape the ability to uphold *familismo* in practice. The gap between cultural ideals and lived experience affects emotional well-being, resilience, and family dynamics, requiring a more nuanced understanding of how family relationships evolve in migration contexts. Roy and Settersten's (2022) model of linked lives within the family life course framework provides a useful lens for analyzing this dynamic. Their conceptualization encompasses five dimensions: configuration, content, valence, environment, and time. This study highlights the critical role of valence, the quality of family relationships, in shaping thriving. Migration often disrupts the valence of family ties, challenging the *familismo* principle that bonds should remain intact despite adversity. This disruption demands a reframing of support systems that acknowledges the complex realities of separation, reunification, and transnational connectivity.

By understanding the *familismo* gap through qualitative analysis, this research answers the call for contextualized examination of protective factors, such as social and family support, which have been shown to predict resilience among Central American immigrant populations (Revens, 2021). Unlike survey-based studies that enumerate protective factors, this study illuminates how youth articulate and navigate these enablers in their own words. I suggest that this study offers rich insights into the processes through which social support can potentially mitigate the effects of adversity. The findings of this study also highlights how structural inequalities, such as poverty, documentation status, and disrupted family systems, create significant barriers to both family support and individual growth. Participants in this study vividly demonstrate how they are both victims of these systemic inequities and active agents of their own development within them. This simultaneous experience reveals a complex, dynamic process where youth confront adversity while utilizing enablers of thriving, such as family support, community connections, and agency, to grow and adapt either in the thriving or navigating trajectory.

Finally, adolescence is a pivotal stage of growth and identity formation, offering unique opportunities for positive development. However, for immigrant youth confronting significant adversities such as family separation and unstable support systems, this period is marked by compounded challenges that can hinder their ability to thrive. Despite these hardships, adolescents demonstrate a remarkable capacity to make meaning from adversity, using it as a foundation for growth and transformation. This perspective calls for a broader understanding of resilience that integrates both individual agency and the structural barriers shaping their trajectories.

Strengths and Limitations

While this dissertation provides valuable insights into the resilience process and experiences of Latino immigrant youth, several strengths and limitations must be acknowledged.

First, the small sample size of 34 interviews, while providing rich, in-depth qualitative data, limits the generalizability of the findings to broader populations. Qualitative research, by nature, seeks to explore complexity and context rather than produce statistically generalizable results. As such, this study should be viewed as a foundation for additional exploration and future research rather than a comprehensive representation of all immigrant experiences. A key limitation of this study is that the sample is not representative of all immigrant youth, as all participants are currently engaged with our community partner's services. Therefore, the youth in this study may have access to resources and support that other immigrant youth who are disconnected from services may not experience. While this limitation constrains the breadth of its generalizability, it also allows for a depth of understanding that highlights the nuances of resilience and thriving among Central American immigrant youth.

A key strength of this study lies in its potential for transferability, a crucial aspect of data quality in qualitative research. Transferability allows researchers and practitioners to take concepts and findings and apply them to other contexts or groups (Krefting, 1991). For instance, the pathways to thriving identified in this research can serve as a framework for examining resilience among diverse immigrant populations, such as those from Mexico or Venezuela, as well as youth navigating adversity in different sociocultural contexts. Additionally, qualitative studies are inherently subjective, relying on participant narratives that reflect personal perceptions and experiences. This introduces the potential for participant self-selection bias, as those willing to share their stories may differ in significant ways from those who do not participate. The lack of standardization in qualitative data collection further complicates direct comparisons across studies, though this approach allows for a richer exploration of context-specific factors that shape resilience. However, as a strength of the study, the consistency of participants' narratives across interviews reinforces the credibility of the findings.

Social desirability is another potential limitation in qualitative research. This phenomenon could occur if participants felt compelled to give socially acceptable responses to the interview prompts, rather than truthfully sharing their lived experiences (Krefting, 1991). This bias might influence participants to provide answers that align with perceived expectations or socially acceptable norms, which could distort the authenticity of the data collected. To address this limitation, the research team worked proactively to build rapport and establish trust with participants. By ensuring a nonjudgmental, open environment, the team aimed to mitigate the influence of social desirability, fostering a space conducive to honest, meaningful exchanges.

To ensure the credibility of the study, both the principal researcher and the research team were actively engaged in the data analysis process. This commitment was aimed at providing accurate descriptions and interpretations of participants' experiences, such that individuals who share similar experiences would immediately recognize and affirm them as authentic (Sandelowski, 1986). In line with the recommendations of Lincoln and Guba (1985), the researcher's role was to represent the reality shared by participants as faithfully as possible, ensuring that the findings accurately reflected their lived experiences.

Researcher bias is another inherent limitation in qualitative research. Despite efforts to mitigate bias through reflexivity, which involved critically examining my own assumptions, experiences, and cultural perspectives, the interpretive nature of qualitative research means that findings are ultimately filtered through the researcher's lens. Although reflexivity strengthens the validity of the analysis by promoting self-awareness and transparency, the potential for unconscious bias cannot be entirely eliminated. However, a strength of this study lies in the rapport and trust established between the participants and myself, as well as other members of the research team who conducted the interviews. This connection facilitated a deeper level of insight that may not be achievable in studies with less personal engagement. Establishing this trust facilitated open, honest communication and created a more authentic exchange, enriching the data collection process. By fostering an environment where participants felt comfortable sharing their experiences, I was able to capture nuanced and context-rich information that is often difficult to obtain in research that lacks strong researcher-participant relationships. This trust and rapport strengthened the richness of the findings, despite the potential for bias, and provided a level of insight that enhanced the study's depth and authenticity and rigor.

Finally, this dissertation's reliance on context-specific data calls for the attention of the need for caution in applying its conclusions to other populations. Resilience is shaped by unique social, cultural, and structural contexts; therefore, broad generalizations are inappropriate.

Implications and Future Research

The findings of this study have significant implications for research, policy, practice, and service delivery, particularly in education and community-based interventions. Policymakers and practitioners must shift from static notions of resilience as an individual trait and adopt a process-oriented framework that acknowledges the structural barriers, such as poverty, legal status, and limited access to education, that impede immigrant youth's growth. Educational policies should prioritize flexibility and accessibility, offering programs tailored to the realities of immigrant youth who often balance school with work responsibilities. Flexible scheduling and pathways to higher education are critical to ensuring these youth can access and complete their education, fostering long-term opportunities for mobility and success.

Community-level policies must address the persistent fear of deportation, exacerbated in recent years by heightened immigration enforcement. Fear of raids and deportation creates a pervasive sense of instability, underscoring the urgent need for local and institutional policies that protect immigrant youth and their families. This includes creating safe spaces in schools and communities, along with laws and protections sensitive to the unique challenges faced by minors and young adults, especially in the light of the recent changes in the U.S. immigration policy under the Trump Administration.

The complexity of family separation and reunification further highlights the need for interventions that support families in rebuilding their relationships. This study underscores how resentment and emotional distance often linger following reunification, requiring service providers to understand the dynamic and non-static nature of these relationships. Interventions must focus on helping families reconnect, restructure bonds, and foster positive relationships despite past trauma. Strengths-based approaches, emphasizing meaning-making and viewing adversity as a potential source of growth, are essential to helping immigrant youth and their families navigate these challenges.

Service delivery must address critical gaps in mental health care for immigrant youth. Providers must ensure access to bilingual, bicultural mental health services that are attuned to the unique needs of this population. Intervention developers should prioritize culturally relevant, contextually grounded programs that support resilience and growth while avoiding deficit-based approaches. Programs must also emphasize *acompañamiento,* in English support, the act of walking alongside youth through their experiences, and create spaces for meaning-making and healing. At the institutional level, there is a pressing need for laws and policies that protect immigrant youth, recognizing their vulnerabilities and unique circumstances. Institutions should advocate for comprehensive support systems that reduce barriers to education, mental health services, and legal protections.

Future research must prioritize context-sensitive methodologies to design interventions that reflect the lived realities of immigrant youth. Future research should also continue to develop contextually grounded frameworks to explore resilience as a dynamic, process-oriented phenomenon shaped by structural, relational, and personal factors. Longitudinal studies that follow immigrant youth over time would provide deeper insights into the mechanisms that foster resilience and mobility. Research should also investigate the effectiveness of interventions and policies tailored to this population, ensuring they are scalable, sustainable, and inclusive. By integrating these findings into education, policy, and service provision, stakeholders can create enabling environments that promote thriving for Latino immigrant youth. This approach not only addresses structural inequities but also empowers youth and their families to overcome adversity and envision pathways toward growth and success.

TABLE 1: Demographics

	N	**%**
Age Range		
Mean	19.5	
15 - 18	12	35.3
19 - 22	18	52.9
23 - 26	4	11.8
Country of Origin		
El Salvador	15	44.1
Guatemala	9	26.5
Honduras	10	29.4
Age of Migration		
Mean	15.9	
11 - 14	10	29.4
15 - 17	18	52.9
18 - 20	6	17.6
Total Time in the U.S.		
Mean	3.6 years	
Level of Education		
Some High School	12	35.3
High School in Progress	15	44.1
High School Grad	7	20.6

Appendix A

Wave 1 Data Collection - Community Partner's Individual Interview Protocol
DRAFT 4.20.19

Part 1. Current situation for self and community

So I'd like to start with some basic information.

How old are you?

Who do you live with?
  How long have you lived there with them?
  Are these your close family members? If not, where are they living?
  Are there any other places where you stay?
  If you needed a place to stay, who could you call?

How long have you lived there?
  What brought you to this place?

I'd like to talk about where you're living now. Tell me about the community where you live currently.

How would you describe your community?
  Neighbors
  Safety
  Businesses/jobs in community
  Resources (programs, recreation centers, hospitals, etc.)

When you think about your community, are there struggles or challenges that you see many families or friends dealing with?
  Migration experiences
  Policies for deportation
  Discrimination against Latinos
  Jobs – finding them or losing them
  Family reunification (or effects of living apart for so long)

How do you think these challenges might affect your community's physical and mental health?

Stress and anxiety
Depression and anger
Fear and isolation
Sickness, exhaustion
Drinking, drugs

Part 2. Migration history

How do life experiences pre-migration, during migration, and post-migration shape emotional well-being for immigrant youth?

Migration experience – use grid – time, location, social relationships

Prior – growing up, school:
Where did you come from?
What was your life like before you came?
What brought you to the decision to leave?
When did you come to the US?
Difficult experiences: what was that like for you? How did you deal with that?

Migration: How did you cross into the US?
How did you travel?
Who did you travel with?
How long did it take?
What stood out to you about that experience?

Post arrival in US - School, work:
What happened right after you crossed into the US?
How did you get to Maryland?
What has it been like for you since you arrived in the US?

Looking back at all that you've been through, what things stand out to you?

Are there things we haven't talked about that you think affect you (now or in the past)?

Focus on important events or turning points from grid

Event
Reaction
Effects

Meaning
Recovery

Describe the circumstance leading up to the event.
Probe: Thoughts, feelings, physiological reactions (what was going on inside of your body? Ex: heart beating faster, etc.)
What did you do while it was happening?
How did it end?
What did you do after it ended? Consequences?

Part 3. Pandemic, stress, and community mental health

Think about these events we've talked about, and think about the past year during the pandemic.
How would you describe your health these days?
How about your mental health?

Are there important turning points in the past year?
- Coming home from school
- Illness
- Taking care of siblings or finding a job

What did you do over the past year to take care of yourself?
How did you cope?
What did you do over the past year to take care of others (esp family members)?

Think about your community's health (esp mental health) over the past year.
- Tell me about challenges faced by the community (incl family)
- Tell me how the community coped (incl family)
- Tell me which challenges still remain (incl family)

Vision for Your Life

Thinking about this, tell me about as best you can about **what you want for your life**.
What do you think you'll be doing five years from now?
What do you hope you'll be doing five years from now?

What are some areas that you need to improve or change?
What are some of your greatest accomplishments? What are you most proud of?

Appendix B

Wave 2 Data Collection - Youth Individual Interview Protocol
DRAFT 5.31.22

Part 1. Current situation for self and community

So I'd like to start with some basic information.

How old are you?
Where are you from?
What grade are you in? Do you have a job? What is it?
Who do you live with?
How long have you lived there with them?

Use timeline:
Tell us about where you grew up (probe: family, school, community)
Tell us about how and why you moved to the US?
    (probe for dates, circumstances, who migrated with them, who was already in the US)
{About difficult experiences, ask: what was that like for you? How did you deal with/handle/cope with that?}

Tell me about your journey to the US
    How did you cross into the US?
    How did you travel?
    Who did you travel with?
    How long did it take?
What was that experience like for you?
{About difficult experiences, ask: How did you deal with/handle/cope with that?}

    What happened right after you crossed into the US?
    How did you get to Maryland?

What has it been like for you since you arrived in the US?

Tell me about any important moments (turning points?) in your life since you've been living here.

What have you learned about yourself through all of your experiences since you left [home country]?

Part 2. Feelings, emotions, and health

Looking back at all that you've been through, what things stand out to you?
Are there things we haven't talked about that you think affect you (now or in the past)?

There have been a lot of changes in your life recently, and those changes can bring about all kinds of feelings and emotions. Tell me about how you are feeling these days? Do you see changes over time in how you feel?

How do you think the experiences you've been through affect your feelings and emotions?

How do you cope with challenges?

> -What do you do to take care of yourself?
> -How do you overcome difficult situations?
> Has that changed as you've grown up? How so? (e.g. living apart from family members, reunification with family members, making new relationships).
> -Who do you get help from? (e.g. church, friends, family, mentors, teachers; probe for emotional help, tangible help, school help, ask about people they talked about earlier)

How do you take care of others (esp family members)?

Tell me about challenges faced by your family. How about others in your community?
Tell me how your family has coped. How about others in your community?

Part 3. The future

What is school like for you now?
> Helping you meet your goals?
> Do you feel welcomed? Are there people who help you?
> Friends? Teachers?

What are your goals for high school and after high school?
> -Would you like to continue your education after high school?
>> -What are your plans?
>> -If yes,who has influenced your decision to go to college?
>> -If no, what are you interested in doing after finishing school?
>> -What are your priorities for the next year?

What are your hopes and dreams for the future?

- -In education?
- -work/career?
- - life/family?

Looking back at all you've told me, what are you most proud of? What are you still working on?

Appendix C

Individual Case Summaries of Interviewees

Brian is 25 from Guatemala, migrated at age 20, he lives with sister, older brother, cousins and brother-in-law. Shares a room with brother. Works at a supermarket. Dad migrated to the US when he was 8 years old and returned to Guatemala when he was 13. His main support is his mother. Resentment for this dad, he was physically violent, and he shared his history of trauma during his infancy. The Church helped him support and forgive his father. Now in the US, he sends money to his parents every month. He met his girlfriend at church, she introduced her to an organization. His biggest support is God, Church, his girlfriend, his mother. His dreams are to get his GED, have a good job and get married. He wants to learn how to use a computer because he knows that’s a big part of everyday life. His girlfriend’s support in this country has been more than he could have ever imagined. He attributes much of his progress to her emotional support. He made meaning by reconciling with the way that his parents raised him. He believes that if he was not raised to be hard working and strongly disciplined, then he wouldn't be where he is now.

Martin is 24, from Guatemala. He migrated at 17. Lives with dad, stepmom, brother, and step-sister in the US. Works in IT, he graduated from HS in Guatemala and in the US attended classes to get a GED and learnt IT. Then dad separated mom when he was 6 years old. When he was 8 yo dad came to the US. Mom also migrated to Canada and to other cities in Guatemala. He went through several family separations and reunions throughout his family. Grandmother raised him when his parents separated and migrated. He is Christian, trying to be a good person for God. Biggest support is his dad, a lot of admiration. He went through depression and his dad supported. Good relationship with mom, she visits often. Referred to our community partner by friends. He has been through a process of growth and change: he got adjusted, he started learning and making new friends at school and after that didn’t feel sad anymore, “like troubleshooting things from the past at arrival. It’s like having a breakdown once you are here that you have to work on”. “He wants happiness, work, health, to always be well. I think that’s what I want more. To always be with family, although here when you grow older you get distanced from family. So that’s what I want most. He wants a family and being economically stable”. He is working his way through.

Grant is from Honduras, 23, came to the U.S. at age 20.5. Came undocumented to earn money and help his family. Works at 2 places to pay debt. Grant was raised by his grandmother; biological father was not in the picture because he had another family and mom was a single mom. Mom went to another local city to work and met his stepdad, who he considers his dad and who is here in the US (migrated when Grant was 9). He is gay and confessed this after migration, parents didn’t like that, they got divorced and did not speak to him because of the confession. Only relationship was with his uncle. He decided to come to the US because he is gay. He wanted to go through this process of change and transformation and live his life freely. His biggest support his gay partner, about to get married. Church helped him a lot throughout his life, he relied on God during puberty when he wasn't sure about his sexuality. His uncle, dad's brother helped a lot since dad did not support him. After 8 months in the US he started attending our community partner, and a client referred it to get the GED. His dad pushed him to do so. "Because I have gone through so much and I think to myself, how did I get through that? So it's something that makes me proud of myself. Thanks to my hard work and family support, I am the one who has dedicated the time and energy to be the person I want to be".

John is 18, from El Salvador, moved to the U.S. 1-year ago at 17. Lived in El Salvador with mom, dad, brother, sister, another sister 22, and a younger one, 15. Only the younger one lives in El Salvador. His father was an alcoholic, he used to spend all the money on alcohol and the family had a hard time because of this. Parents live in El Salvador, a well-respected family. He sends money to his parents. When going through difficult things, God helps, praying, listening to music. At work he has friends. Works 6 days per week. Lives with one brother. Has a sister that lives nearby and really close to her niece. Another sibling living in a different state. He works in a supermarket in the produce section, he was recommended by his brother. He attends our community partner for ESOL, recommended by a friend of her brothers. Siblings are the main support. Brother 1 and half year and sister 2 years in the US. In the future, he wants to buy a home in El Salvador for his parents. For the future, he wants to get ahead in life and that's why he risked migrating. God and praying helped him going through the migration journey.

Florence is 20, from El Salvador. Arrived 7.5 years ago to the US. Our community partner supported him, he felt alone. Mother migrated when he was 4yo, resentment towards mom for leaving him in the care of grandparents. Attending HS, a friend referred his to her job as a cooker in a restaurant. Lives with a roommate, a former supervisor who is a good friend. He supports him. "malos pasos nunca es Bueno" he is maturing. His friends are her support. Parents were together until dad ended up in jail. One brother and then stepsisters. He came undocumented and God protected him. When first arrived in the US he saw her aunt, mother, and grandmother. He lived with mom, grandmother, mom's partner, and his brothers. He lived there for 6 years, he moved out when he was 19 because of the complexity of the reunification and because he used drugs to cope with missing grandmother. Uncle called a friend of his so his son and Florence would go together to HS and they formed a friendship. Friend, who is a painter, recommended the work in a restaurant. His main support is himself, "creating the idea that one can get ahead. You can be determined to do things. There are always solutions to being well and trying to not be sad and that kind of thing."

Andre is 25 years old, migrated from Honduras 7 years ago, at age 18. He works 4 days per week as a cook at a restaurant (recommended by a friend). He also attends our community partner (referred by a friend 8 months ago) and aims to get the GED. Andre lived with her 2 sisters, brother, stepmom, dad, and a cousin. Mom was always in Honduras, they have a good relationship. Father pushes him to move forward, gives advice. Oldest sister is 27, he is 25, brother 23, sister 21, and sister 20, one Is 18, one is 15, a 13 year old, and 11 year old. His family are grateful that he was able to help family members, mother, and siblings. Moved out of the house because of relationship with stepmom, and went to leave with uncles. Raised by grandma. Uncles picked them up at airport.

Alan is 18, from El Salvador. Migrated 4 years ago, at age 14. Moved with mom and sisters because gangs killed his uncle in El Salvador and the family received a lot of life threats. They decided to migrate overnight to save their lives. Lives with mom and sisters in a house. A relationship a little strained with mom because they have a lot of disagreements. Good relationship with sisters (16, 12), they protect each other. Attends our community partner for the GED program, he wanted to work and not do HS fulltime. Currently works in a restaurant. He never knew his dad. Started doing drugs, expelled from HS in the US because he engaged in criminal activities. Because of the drugs and the bad behaviors, he started to have a lot of problems with mom, and moved out to live with other relatives. After 8 months he returned to live with his mother. He misses his grandma and mom are supports. He regretted dropping out of school. His motivation is to finish GED, get a job, start his company and carry his last name. He is working his way through and amending his mistakes when he first arrived. Working on changing his regrets and do things better.

Edwin is 18 from Honduras. Came to the US 5 years ago at age 13. Parents both migrated when he was a baby, and he was left in the care of his grandparents. Lives with mom, dad and little sister (8), he met his little sister when he migrated. Had lots of aunts and uncles in MD, only 2 left in Honduras. Has a lot of friends from HS. Still studying, counselors are great. On Sundays he goes to church. Mom helped looking for a job, called a former supervisor. Once he came he had a lot of disagreements with this parents because of the reunification. Time has helped sealed some of the damage and now they get along better. Attending our community partner for the ESOL program.

Maria is 19 from Guatemala, she migrated to the U.S. in April 2019 at the age of 17. She and her sister migrated together with the help of coyotes crossing the border from Guatemala. She reunited with her mother after 14 years, mother left Guatemala and moved to the US when Maria was 3 years old. Father left her mother when he found out Maria's mother was pregnant. Maria has 3 stepsisters. Two older sisters whose father also left and one younger stepsister in the US. Her faith in God is her main strength. She was raised with her sisters by her grandparents (who are biologically not her real grandparents), they are her two older sister's grandparents. They adopted her and treated her as another daughter. She attended school in Guatemala and never lost contact with her mother and her new husband. Currently, Maria is working undocumented as a cashier in a local center that sends remittances to Central America. She struggles with English and the adaptation because of the pandemic has been a challenge but she's keeping up. Our community partner has helped her a lot, as soon as the pandemic ceases, she wants to go back to our community partner. She aims to get college education and a better job in the US so she can be financially independent. She migrated because she wanted a better life and better opportunities. God is her main source of support.

Manuela is 19, from Honduras. She migrated 2 years ago, at age 17. She lives with mom and sister in the US. Studying at our community partner and taking a childcare course. Undocumented. She is not working. She goes to church and has friend from church. Parent are divorced, mom left when she was 6 so her sister and herself lived with an aunt for 11 years. Then she moved with grandmother to another place. While with aunt she received physical, sexual, and emotional abuse. History of abuse from uncle and aunt. Mom was very happy to be with them, she went to pick them up with friends from church at the airport. Mental health issues as consequence of early trauma and suffering, dealing with depression and trauma because of everything. She would love to have her own house and pay for mom's house. She wants to give back to the people who have helped her. Our community partner helped her in education. Grateful to God for everything. Very close to mother and sister, they have each other and she embraces mother because she migrated to provide for her. "Because no one else is going to support and understand us like our mom. My other family turned their backs on us and did bad things to us." She has big plans for the future, she would like to own a house, provide for mom and give back to the people who have helped her.

Betty is 19, from Guatemala, migrated at age 13, 6 years ago. She lives with her parents who support her with her education. HS diploma. Took cooking classes. Dad migrated alone when mom was pregnant with Betty, and then mom came to get reunited with her husband when Betty was 3. She was raised by her grandmother in Guatemala. She decided to migrate because she likes to study and wanted to study more, and having her parents support was a motivation. She never met dad because he left to the US when mom was pregnant with her, but now feels good that they are getting to know each other after the separation and the reunification. She's reestablishing the relationship with her family, it was weird at the beginning, but she was happy in the end to reunite. She's also adapting to the language; she spoke a dialect and when she reunited that was an issue with her siblings who speak Spanish and English. Works Friday afternoons in a kitchen. She relies on parents, and also friends from school who referred to her job. Dad supports his home. She attended identity before the pandemic. She wants to become a nurse, she really wants to take advantage of the opportunities here, she wants to study, get a career (nursing), be successful and help other people.

Maggie is 21, from El Salvador, she migrated 4 years ago, when she was 17. Working in attaining GED and in her immigration case with our community partner. She works in construction doing heavy duty, found the job through Church. Also works as gardening. Dad abandoned her. Mother is in El Salvador, but she migrated to a different city to work so Maggie was left in the care of grandparents. She suffered abuse from cousins. She believes in God; she attends a Christian Church since living in El Salvador. She wants to be a testimony for others, God changed her life, from living with resentment for not having a dad to accepting it. Currently, she has a boyfriend, she met him at church. God helped her understand new meaning for the abuse she suffered while growing up. God always has a plan. Decided to migrate because of the lack of opportunities in her hometown, her future there was to be a servant, and it was dangerous, and she wanted to do more. "I am going to do it, I am going to do it, I am going to succeed, even if you have to push yourself, despite how hard it is. But really you can achieve anything you want." In the US, she wants to get a career in college, work, and succeed.

Diego is 21, from El Salvador. Came to the US 5 years ago at age 16. His decision to migrate was personal, he wanted a new life, in El Salvador things were though because of the insecurity and lack of opportunities. He is taking online course because of COVID, he dropped high school, but is now taking online courses to get the GED in our community partner were things are different, nice teacher, patient, feels like family. Works at Italian restaurant in Germantown. Sister helped get the job because she used to work there. Lives with sister (29) since he arrived, and her husband the only family member here. Coworkers are friends, all pushing Diego to finish HS, and his boss recommended our community partner. He works as a painter too, and saves to send money back home. Working to get a work permit. Father is very religious, and they don't get along well because Diego is not religious even though he believes in God. A lot of expectations because he is the only boy. Paid coyote. Stayed at the perrera for 3 months. Aims to go to the marina.

Melanie is 19, from El Salvador. She migrated 5 years ago, when she was 14. Lives with mom, stepdad, 2 sisters, aunt with her husband, 3 cousins, and stepdad's brother. Helps mom sell things she cooks. Because of the pandemic she lost her job as a waitress at a restaurant. She moved away from her mom at age 17, complicated relationship because of the resentment she feels as to why mom left her, but because of the pandemic she went back. Attends our community partner and likes it, she and boyfriend received counseling. Decided to migrate because she had a complicated relationship with her grandmother. Dad lives in El Salvador, problem with family separation and reunification because her sisters were born here. Biggest support: boyfriend, and best friend. Will do everything to graduate form HS because of the relationship with mom she moved out of the house and found a job while also taking 6 classes. She is putting a lot of effort to get group grades and is very determined to graduate "strongest effort to get the best grades ever". Troubled relationship with grandmother too, she has problems same as her mom. Troubled upbringings. She does everything to help other and understand others instead of blaming them, proactive, she likes to do good things for the others. She sees herself with a good job and a partner in 10 years. Wants to know that mom is fine, and to have the ability to help others. She is, “proud that I haven't killed myself like other people. But I have faith and hope that I will be able to help me. With my sister's I feel proud that I'm there for them whenever they need me.”

Jefri is 21, from El Salvador. Came to the US 7 years ago at age 14. Works at an electric company with his brother. Not documented, got the job because of his brother. Decided to migrate because of the threats made by gangs in El Salvador, planned his trip in 3 days with the help of a coyote. Has a good sense of humor. Lives with mother but pays rent. Mother and 4 siblings (24, 26, 18) live here with mom separated from dad. Because of past traumas he arrived to our community partner. Leaving his grandparents has been the hardest part, HS director recommended our community partner, did therapy there and changed a lot. Did well in HS, but couldn’t attend college because he was working. He won several prizes in HS, he got good grades and did ESOL. Father lives in the US but not with them they both left when he was 9 months old, and separated 10 years ago. Was very close to his grandparents who raised him. Hired a coyote to come to the US. Believes in God, not religious. Dreams of owning an electricity company, hope he can have a partner and own a house, and also help the Latinx community and hire them because there’s potential and talent. His main source of support are his friends, mothers, and siblings.
GIVE BACK

Beatriz is 21, from El Salvador. She migrated at age 17, four years ago. She lives with parents, sisters (12, 5), a cousin (29), her daughter and her partner. She was raised by her grandmother, but she was rambunctious, and her aunts, who she misses greatly. Mom has a childcare center, and she works with her. She got pregnant when she was in high school and she dropped it at the age of 19. Mom helped taking care of the baby, but mom has a 5 yo daughter too. She attends our community partner to get the GED. Mom left El Salvador when she was 6-7 yo. She didn’t meet her dad until she moved to the US, at the age of 17. She gets along well with mom, she always had contact with her, with dad no because grandmother never wanted her parents to be together, so she tried to cut relationships with her granddaughter and her dad. Her partner works and pays the rent. She has worked in cleaning, a friend of her mom recommended, and Dollar City. Left El Salvador because it’s too dangerous and a cousin was killed by a gang. She met her partner in El Salvador, and then reconnected by social media. He was living in NY with his family and moved to be with her. She sees herself finishing High School, and having a career, being able to work, own a house, go back to ES and see family and make her daughter accomplish everything she has not.

Karina is 25, from El Salvador. Lives with her older sister and brother. Parents live in El Salvador; father was in the US for 7 years and went back to ES when she decided to migrate. Father migrated when she was 7 yo with two of her brothers, sisters stayed with mom. The relationship is great with parents, no complaints. Loves to go to Church, joined the youth program and loves to plan events to help people in need. Has a boyfriend, he supports and encourages her, they met at Church. Very close to her dad, he let her finish HS, and he was a good provider. Works at Qdoba, cousin recommended. Karina attends our community partner to get GED and ESOL (recommended by another friend). She drives a car. She migrated with her niece so she can be reunited with her mother, who us her sister. No negative experiences during migration. Her sources of support are her professor, her boyfriend, her siblings in the US. She wants to have a family, a house and send money to family. She facetimes every day with parents, she is proud that she can do things correctly without losing track. She wants to work and earn her own things. Have a family, she is very confident in herself, it's all about setting goals, she will keep fighting to study, get a title!

Lorena is 21, from Guatemala, migrated at. . Lives with dad, brother (26), and sister (24). One more sibling in Guatemala. Works in cleaning, referred by friends. Has a 2yo daughter. Recently lost her job because of the pandemic, but is cleaning houses to pay rent and cover basic expenses. Baby's dad is not very supportive, and does not provide financially, he will visit the baby and take care of her sometimes. She decided to migrate to reunite with her boyfriend who migrated first to the US, but after they broke up she moved to live with her dad. Dad came to the US when mother was pregnant with her. She also wanted to work to have her own things, and to have a better future. Her mother is Guatemala, she misses her. She is very determined, she went through a transformation (growth) in her mentality, she knows she's capable of everything. Pandemic is slowing things for her and also access to childcare services, she wants to work more but she also has to take care of her 2yo baby. Resolved to achieve things, give her daughter a better life. She is proud because she hasn't given up despite all challenges.

Allison is 22 from Guatemala, lives with dad and stepmom. She migrated 5 years ago, when she was 16. She works during the week at a daycare and on the weekends, she started her own cleaning houses company (created a website), her stepmom drives her because she doesn't have a car yet. Stepmom is great, she created the website because she is a citizen and helps her with advertisements. The company is a motivation for Allison, she feels she can thrive with this. Because of our community partner she's taking college courses for the Early Childcare Program. She has struggled with English, but hopes to resume ESOL. She graduated from High School in Guatemala prior to migrating. Her father and stepmom are her main source of support, they listen, they laugh. She has a good relationship with dad, she is getting to know him now because he didn't raise her since he migrated when she was a baby. She was raised by her mother and grandparents. She decided to migrate because she wants to help her mother, she works a lot and is getting sick. She struggled with adaptation in the US at first, but now she's more adapted. She wants to be a doctor. "I dream about having an organization that helps people in need. That's how I see myself. And married to someone that supports me. Someone who has the same goals as me." Her main sources of support are her counselors, Church, dad, stepmom, mom, brother.

Isabel is 20, from Honduras. Arrived in the US two years ago at the age of 18. Lives with aunt and she has a 4yo daughter. The baby's father is in Honduras, and not present in her daughter's life, Isabel left him because he would drink a lot, was violent and threatened her. In Honduras he worked as an official and she's worried because he can make her get deported. She migrated because she feared for her life. Goes to Church on Sundays and works during weekdays. Works in carpentry, with a man from El Salvador who gives her work. She had depression when she arrived in the US, she got to the point of hurting herself because she was processing everything that happened prior to coming to the US. Our community partner helped her walk through depression, thanks to God she is now feeling better, she misses her mom a lot. Her sources of support are God, her aunt, counselors, her mother, and now she has a boyfriend who has helped her a lot. Her goals are to learn English, to work and help her family economically. She wants to provide for her daughter so that she can have a better life than what she had to go through. "I want her to do better than me and to not have to go through the things that I went through. I want her to be a good person and well educated."

Nicole is 18, from Honduras, she's in 9th grade, and works in a bazaar at a thrift shop. Migrated one year ago, at age 17. Lives with her aunt. She is figuring out the process of adjustment, joining a program in our community partner helped since she has met peers, related to more people. Parents separated when she was 6yo and ultimately was killed at 10yo. Grew up with mother and grandparents until mother moved out and they loaned uncle's house. When she was 12yo, because of the killing she wanted to come to the US to study and complete her career, family law school because she saw how her family struggled and needed a lawyer to defend them in Honduras. Her decision to come to the US was after both of her grandparents passed, the sadness she went through gave her strength and she had a dream where her grandmother reassured her support. She feels she's achieving things, slowly getting to her goal. Her main sources of support: friends, our community partner, aunt, school's nurse.

Jimmy, 15, 9th grade, from El Salvador. He migrated at 11yo. Lives with father and sister in the US. Lived with mom until he was 11yo, and dad migrated when he was a baby. Grandmother is like a mother. His father pursued him to migrate. He wanted to come because he could express himself and because of the opportunities. He migrated with his mom, they both took a flight. They lived in one room, 4 people. Acculturating to the US was hard, especially because of the language. Proud of himself, because he was brave and strong to come to the US. He used to be very quiet and shy, but now he's more open, and free. He's gay, he likes to dress with women's clothes. He draws and paints, it's his way of coping with stress and sadness. Parents don't know about his sexuality yet, he's working on that, building his path so he can confront his parents. His source of support is his best friend, she knows everything about him. He also has more friends at school who support him, Daniela, a friend from our community partner, teachers at school, among others. He wants to become a fashion designer, especially gowns. Hopes to open his own design studio. Plans for the future is to become a recognized fashion designer in NYC and have a famous person (Cardi B) wear his gowns.

Marce is 19, from Guatemala, going into 12th grade. Migrated 3 years ago when he was 16. In the US lives with two brothers. Misses her mom (diabetic) deeply, but he knows that he's here to help her mother back home. Father migrated to the US, but since he's aging he went back to Guatemala to take care of mother. Since joining our community partner's programs he has been able to talk more with his brother who migrated 11 years ago and with whom had no contact. Migrated with his father, but he went back to Guatemala after two years. He plans to study, get a career and become a plumber or electrician. He worked and is working in changing his mentality, he can do it, he's capable of anything. His sources of support are friends, our community partner, peers, mentors, teachers, brother, parents.

Ale is 16, from El Salvador. She's in 10th grade. Migrated 1.4 years ago. Used to work at Subway. Lives with aunt and uncle. Parents are in El Salvador, she's an only child. Decided to migrate because their home was falling apart, couldn't take more earthquakes. Since 12yo she would work cleaning houses with her mother, but she really wanted to keep studying and go to college. High school was 1-hour away from her little town so that's why she worked with her mother. She would also work with dad in engineering, carrying cement, laying bricks, put windows. She decided to migrate because she wanted better schooling, a better future. El Salvador would not offer her security nor opportunities. They tried to migrate all 3 but couldn't so they decided to send her by herself. Source of support are her parents, they give her strength. She adapted well because she knows she's doing the right thing. She wants to study and become a nurse. She is strong and she has been through a transformation, she knows she can achieve everything and she has learned to be patient, she's patient because it's worth it. She's a leader at the Newcomers program.

Sandra is 18, from Honduras. She has been here for one year and four months, she migrated at the age of 16. She lives with her parents and sister. Dad migrated when she was 8, she and her siblings lived with him, but after he left they all moved to live with their mother. She was the first sibling to migrate to get together with her father, and it was difficult because it was like meeting a stranger, even though they never lost contact. She migrated because her neighborhood in Honduras was dangerous. Her life at home wasn't easy and the adaptation to the US hasn't either, she left people she cared and loved, but she has learned to carry on, and she feels strong. As part of her making meaning process, she started writing in a journal about all the things that happened to her, and the feelings behind the events, and it has helped her so much. She is enrolled in the Nighttime program, she has met people, she feels welcomed. She wants to become a flight attendant; she can't really picture herself in a couple of years because she doesn't want to share a lot of her goals. But, she is proud of herself, of everything she's been through and how can she always move on and do new things.

Turbo is 18 from El Salvador, he migrated at age 17, 2 years ago. He is in 9th grade. Lives with mom and a brother. Currently he is not working, but during the summer he worked in construction. He attends a program at our community partner's facilities. In El Salvador, things started to get very complicated and dangerous. Mother migrated with her brother four years ago because he had a heart condition and Turbo stayed in the care of his grandparents. Decided to migrate because things were too dangerous in El Salvador and he had his mother and brother here. His migration journey took like 1 month and he liked being at the foster house in Texas. He likes Montgomery College, he plans to start mechanics after CREA. He is focused on learning English so that he can to either mechanics or film career. He wants to have a job where he could help people, to offer his knowledge. He is proud that he doesn't give up on anything in life, and he has the courage and strength to be able to overcome difficulties and grow in the US, he has challenged himself and he's conquering his challenges.

Karen is 19 from El Salvador. She migrated two years ago, when she was 17. She is in grade 12th. She works sometimes with her dad in construction. She lives with her parents and three siblings. Both parents migrated when she was 3yp, and they were left in the care of the grandparents who supported in everything. Didn't finish high school because of delinquency. Her migration journey was tough, lots of roadblocks, it was sad and traumatizing. She finally reunited with her parents whom she didn't really know and the reunification has been very difficult, she wanted to go back to her grandparents. She even cut herself. She is empathetic, she knows how hard it is and she doesn't want others to live with it. She is strong, independent. To cope she focuses on distracting herself and get through them. Things are better now, she had a turning point of saying she wants to be happy and change her life. Her sources of support are her therapist who has helped a lot. She wants to get into the army or be a teacher, finish high school. Camila is 16 from El Salvador. She migrated 3 years ago, when she was 13. She's in 10th grade. Lives with her mother and brothers. Her hometown was very dangerous. She was raised by her grandparents because her mother migrated when she was 5. Reason for migration is fleeing the violence. The migration journey was difficult, but she did it with her brother. They arrived and got reunited with their mother. She is grateful for being here, for the opportunities. Reestablishing a relationship with her mother was tough, they get along well but there's resentment and they don't talk about the past. She wants to study criminal law, or the military and give back to this country a little of what it has done for her.

Vanessa is 18 from Honduras. She migrated 1.5 years ago when she was 17. She's in 10th grade. She works in a Peruvian restaurant. She lives with her brother, sister-in-law and nephew. She struggled while growing up with asthma. She decided to migrate because she wanted a better life, she wanted to support her family financially, and get a career in nursing. Migration trip took 2 months, she was at the Casa Hogar in Texas for one month. Her biggest source of support is her brother and sister-in-law, also mentors at school, they give her advice and support. She is brave because she didn't take the easy path, she took the complicated one but the most rewarding. She never gives up, she tries and tries until she gets it right. She treasures education, it's an opportunity that's not for everybody. She wants to learn English, and get into nursing school, she's inspired by her illness. She dreams of owning a house and going back to Honduras to take care of her mother. She's a school leader of a group, she's helping children open themselves up and speak about certain things.

Kevin is 20, from Honduras. He migrated 3 years ago at age 17 by himself. His father abandoned mom when he found out she was pregnant. Raised by mother and grandparents in Honduras. At age 8 he and his mom tried to cross the border to the US but was detained in Mexico. Once authorities released mom she met a partner and stayed in Mexico. Eventually mother sent for her kids, so they moved to Mexico, Kevin was 9. Partner was abusive towards mom and Kevin, he suffered and witnessed a lot of violence. When he was 14 he moved out to live with a friend and his family who supported him. He decided to migrate because he wanted to grow away from his stepfather, he wanted to become the opposite as his stepfather and help mom get out of the toxic relationship. He migrated by himself at age 17, and mother is back in Honduras since she left an abusive partner and with Kevin's help was able to go back. Kevin works in Chipotle, construction and is always looking for jobs. He is in the GED program at Thomas Edison. He wants to be somebody different, he knows that if he survived all the violence and traumatic experiences, then he's able to be someone new, and his working his way onto that. Working his way.

Luis is 20 from Guatemala. He migrated 2.8 years ago. His parents divorced 4 years ago because dad had drinking problems and mom did not want that anymore. He dropped out of school at 14 and started to work with dad in mechanics, but dad became more abusive than usual, verbally, taking his frustration on him. He was tired of the problems with dad and the violent situation in his hometown that he decided to migrate to the US. He also had a girlfriend and she wanted to migrate too along with her father. He migrated first with the help of a coyote and then a year later his girlfriend and her dad migrated with his help. They recently broke up because he did not see a commitment in her or any willingness to work, learn something, or do something productive in the US. She was illiterate and he wanted to help her get an education, but she refused, she just wanted him to work and provide for her. He decided to break up because he wants more, he left his hometown because he wanted more opportunities, he had big dreams and cannot be with somebody that does not support him. He defined himself as a determined person that never gives up and always looks for the positive side in situations. His attitudes lead him to grow and have a new mindset of moving forward. His main source of support is his mother, they talk daily, and two mentors in high school who support and believe in him.

Yara is a 15 year old female from Honduras who migrated four years ago at the age of 11. She migrated with her mother, and did not hire a coyote in Honduras, but they hired one in Mexico to help them cross the border. No father, he’s not in the picture. Mother and Yara migrated to Atlanta, GA., to reunite with her maternal grandmother. But mom met her stepfather in Atlanta, GA., and they moved to Gaithersburg, that’s why Yara moved too. Since mom got married her relationship with mom changed, they have a lot of disagreements, she missed her grandmother in Atlanta. Her main sources of support are her friends, school, and mentors. When she first started high school, she was very private and quiet. After some time, she started to open up with her peers, she discovered that her peers shared a common life history and that maybe she can start trusting people. She plans to become either a dentist or a chef, she wants to go to college and become someone useful that can help people.

Avis is an 18-yo female from El Salvador, she migrated 5 years ago at the age of 13. She was mainly raised by her paternal grandmother who used to beat her constantly. Dad migrated when she was 8 with her older sister and she stayed with her mother and grandmother, but mom worked in a house as a maid so she didn't see her as much. At age 13 she migrated with her mom, the journey took 1 month and she remembers it as a fun adventure. Once in MD, she reunited with her dad and her sister (who is her main support). Mom went to live with another man, she has had a troubled romantic life, since arriving to the US she has been involved in several romantic relationships, some of which were violent. Because of this, Avis decided to live with her father. Lots of hopes for the future, she wants to be a nurse and have money to be an independent woman.

Juan is a 20yo male from Honduras who migrated by himself at the age of 1, four years ago. All of his family are back in Honduras, he is the only one who decided to come because he was tired of all the insecurity and lack of opportunities in his hometown. He is very determined to thrive here and works and sends money back home. He has a very strong will to work hard and help his parents and siblings, he wants to build a house for his parents, and he also wants to send for them. He'll finish HS and then pursue a career in law to help people like him, immigrants. His support system is his roommate, his girlfriend, God, and Encuentros helped him a lot.

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