

COMMENTARIES

## Fear, Love, and News: How US News Coverage of Immigration Negatively Impacts the Mental Health and Well-Being of Immigrant Families

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Amidst the dreary autumn clouds, I ascended the worn, cracked steps to my “little brother’s” apartment in south Boston, determined to whisk him away for an unforgettable apple-picking adventure. But as I pressed the doorbell, a disheartening silence echoed. I called his mom “Lisa,” trying her many phone numbers without any luck. I peered between the steel bars outside their living room window to see if they were inside. The blinds were down, and I could see nothing but the light radiating from their television, which was always tuned in to the news. I tapped on the window. A familiar face peeled the blinds apart and waved, Liam, the youngest brother of 7 in my little brother’s family. When he opened the door and I walked in the apartment, a stale odor washed over me. Dishes had piled up in the sink, trash was strewn across the apartment floor, the beds were unmade, and there was no food to be found in the apartment. I walked through the kitchen to see all 7 children and their single mother huddled together on their one worn-out couch. Paralyzed with concern, they were unable to look away from videos of parents and children being evicted from their homes as the headline “ICE Launches Raids Targeting Immigrant Families” ran across the bottom of the screen.

I interrupted their focus and asked Lisa if me and Sam (my “little brother”) could hit the road. Forgetting who I was for a moment, she looked over to her children as she considered this outsider taking her son away from her. She did not want him to leave the house today. I stayed and chatted with Sam, but we were constantly interrupted by his younger siblings who viewed my arms, legs, and shoulders as their personal jungle gym. After some time, I left and called Big Brothers Big Sisters, the supporting organization, to explain what had happened. After hearing my concern, they detailed a heartbreaking situation. Lisa had withdrawn her children from school and quartered them inside the apartment. No one had left the apartment for weeks.

Lisa had unwillingly become an avid watcher of the news. Unable to look away from the horror in front of her, she witnessed countless videos and reports of families like hers being forcibly separated and expelled from the United States, the same country their children had grown up in, and she feared hers would be next. In response, she cut herself and her family off from any outside contact.

Inspired by love but driven by fear, she kept them home from school and in the apartment, fearing the worst if anyone were to venture outside. The team of lawyers at Big Brothers Big Sisters once tried explaining that she was not at risk of forcible removal from the country, yet after watching numerous reports showing families like hers ripped apart, she was unconvinced. She quoted headlines such as “Their first day of school turned into a nightmare after record immigration raids”<sup>1</sup> and “ICE agent with boot on the neck of migrant during workplace raid,”<sup>2</sup> terrified the same fate would become her own.

Without question, the policies and practices that consequently led to these headlines require intense scrutiny, but the ways in which the media cover these practices also impacts families like Lisa’s, who are not in fact at risk. The drastic measures she had taken to protect her family were fueled by a sense of impending doom instilled by the news she consumed, and these created longer-lasting ramifications on the mental health and social relationships of her and her family. Sam—who was previously an amicable, above-average student—began to struggle in these areas. Even after his mother allowed him to go back, he isolated himself from his peers, with whom he felt he could not share his experiences. Despite his mother’s best intentions, Sam shouldered the burden of these family secrets, and he began to feel disconnected from his classmates who could not possibly relate.

From our earliest days, the capacity of humans to socialize and maintain a sense of belonging has been critical to our survival and advancement. These instincts date as far back as the neolithic era, around 10 000 BC, when human connections served as the catalyst for the emergence of larger civilizations, agricultural surplus, and an improved quality of life.<sup>1</sup> Here in the United States, I was born and readily accepted as a member of the American tribe. While my qualifications were never questioned, many within the tribe regarded outsiders with contempt. When I joined Big Brothers Big Sisters, I was paired with a mentee who came from a dramatically different background. Sam’s family emigrated from the Dominican Republic. His family spoke Dominican Spanish and his family dinners consisted of sancocho and mangu . His neighbors and friends spoke English and ate traditional American dinners. During school lunch, his peers consistently expressed their disgust and confusion with the foods he brought. He had few close friends. His days consisted of school and a quick return home, back to the family television that frequently ran stories of families who fled their countries suddenly and in fear, leaving behind their family, friends, and homes. He looked at those stories and saw his family’s experience reflected. He wanted to find community, but instead his self-image was repeatedly reinforced negatively on the news. I listened as he questioned his self-worth and struggled with mental health as a consequence of the media’s portrayal of immigrants and, in particular, how they portrayed other Americans’ views towards immigrants.

In an era marked by globalization and interconnectedness, immigration has emerged as a leading issue in the United States.<sup>3</sup> Since 2001, more than half the country has felt that immigration is a vital election issue.<sup>4</sup> The influx of people from other countries shapes our societies, our economies, and our cultural fabric. Yet, when it comes to media coverage of immigration, we are caught in a paradox: an abundance of information coupled with a dearth of understanding. It is time to critically examine how the media portray immigration and acknowledge the profound consequences of our storytelling choices.

The media's recent tendency to emphasize fears over immigration and highlight inflammatory speech that draws in viewers creates a false narrative that the American public is anti-immigration.<sup>5</sup> While the average tone of immigration rhetoric by politicians has become more supportive over the past century, it has also become more polarized.<sup>6,7</sup> This creates a decision point for the media outlets who broadcast it, which has increasingly been in favor of giving more airtime to language that associates negative consequences with immigration.<sup>5,8</sup> At face value, this may not seem malicious. If the general sentiment is becoming more positive, what does it matter how the media cover it? Nevertheless, as evidenced by the experience of Sam and his family, the media coverage affects the mental health and well-being of immigrant families, due mainly to restricted access to health care, but also by promoting feelings of anxiety, isolation, and a negative self-image.

Access to mental health care for Sam and many other children of immigrants is already challenging. Nearly 23% of lawful immigrants are uninsured, which is far above the national rate of 8.6% among US citizens.<sup>9,10</sup> Some access mental health resources through hospitals, schools, or community centers. However, fears over deportation and living status create another barrier to access proper care.<sup>11</sup> These fears are allowed to flourish due to a changing news landscape best exemplified with a key finding by the RAND Corporation on how news coverage has evolved:

The post-2000 [news] sample showed a meaningful shift away from such language [context- and event-based reporting] and toward unpacking social and policy issues through character-centered stories, such as homeless children as a way to discuss homelessness.<sup>12</sup>

Character-centered news coverage is becoming more widespread. It is appealing, creates a deeper connection, and provokes feelings of empathy and connection.<sup>13</sup> What makes this style of news coverage more attractive is also what makes it more dangerous. Fear and concern take hold more effectively to drive negative action, like confining a family within an apartment unnecessarily or not seeking out mental health resources.<sup>11</sup>

Media outlets must be cognizant of how their framing of immigration issues impacts immigrant families. Unrelenting, character-driven news coverage surrounding a crackdown on immigrant families struck fear into the hearts of Sam and his family, who watched families like theirs severed and branded as outsiders. This led them to severe actions with negative consequences for their health. The media coverage of immigration, which resonates with an already vulnerable audience, must be more objective, balanced, and reflective of public opinion. The burden is on media companies to broadcast responsibly and on us consumers to demand unemotional news coverage. Only then can we ensure that families are not subjected to fear-inducing broadcasts, and that everyone finds community within the American tribe.

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