

Risk and Resiliency Among Newcomer Immigrant Adolescents

By Sita Patel, Ph.D.



PAU Professor Sita Patel with school principal Julie Kessler, PAU student Maggie del Cid, and high school students at San Francisco International High School

Global mental health is sometimes much closer to home than we imagine. Each year, large numbers of youth from around the world migrate to the United States without their parents or guardians, and the number of these unaccompanied minors have dramatically increased in recent years. This population faces multiple challenges, including adjusting to a new cultural context, learning a language, forming friendships, separation and reunification with family, traumas during migration, and the normative developmental challenges associated with adolescence. Despite the high risk, most urban schools serving newcomers fall dramatically short in terms of the resources necessary for complete and accurate assessment of student needs.

My work with recently-arrived, or “newcomer” immigrant adolescents expanded last year to include collaboration with two Bay Area public high schools exclusively serving this population. In a public school system already overburdened with high-needs students, high schools like [Oakland International](#) and San Francisco International, which are both devoted to receiving and educating new immigrants, have the added burden of a student population facing the myriad challenges of acculturation. Teachers and administrators are left without comprehensive understanding of their students’ complex life circumstances (e.g., unaccompanied minor and legal status, health coverage, educational gaps) or practical needs (e.g., legal, mental health, housing, health).

Along with a group of student volunteers from PAU’s Ph.D. program (Tara Bagleri, Maggie del Cid, Wil Firmender, Vanessa Ma, and Erynn Macciomei), I developed and implemented a newcomer adolescent assessment screening program for [SF International High School](#). Our immediate goal was to help identify students in need of services. The project used community-based participatory methods to develop the scope of the assessment, including collaborating with the school’s staff and students. We conducted interviews (in Spanish, Chinese, and English) with all ninth and tenth grade students. Most had arrived in the past year from Central America (El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras). We asked students about their immigration experiences, current living circumstances (home, family, work, social), health and legal needs.