



Displaced Childhoods: Health, Education, and Criminalization of Immigrant Children in the Turkish Context

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Abstract

Immigrant children constitute one of the most at-risk populations within global displacement dynamics, facing multifaceted challenges in health, education, protection, and integration. This study examines these vulnerabilities with a specific focus on the Turkish context, where large-scale migration flows—particularly following the Syrian conflict—have intensified systemic gaps in service provision and legal protections. The paper analyzes key issues such as limited access to healthcare and schooling, child labor, psychosocial stress, and exposure to abuse, especially among unaccompanied minors. It highlights how structural inequalities, legal ambiguities, and socio-economic deprivation intersect to deepen exclusion and hinder rights realization. The findings underscore the need for comprehensive, rights-based, and child-centered policies, implemented through coordinated efforts between state institutions, civil society, and international agencies. Addressing these issues is critical not only for the well-being of immigrant children but also for fostering social cohesion and sustainable development in host communities.

Subject Areas

Sociology of Migration

Keywords

Children and Migration, Child Protection, Psychosocial Vulnerability, Educational Inequality, Social Exclusion and Delinquency

1. Introduction

Migration is a multifaceted and dynamic process driven by a combination of

socio-economic, political, and environmental factors. Push factors such as poverty, unemployment, conflict, and environmental disasters, and pull factors such as better economic opportunities and safety, drive individuals and communities to relocate [1] [2]. For the purposes of this analysis, “immigrant children” refers to individuals under the age of 18 who have crossed international borders, either accompanied or unaccompanied, regardless of legal status or migration circumstances. This inclusive definition covers refugee children fleeing persecution under the 1951 Geneva Convention, asylum seekers awaiting status determination, undocumented children lacking legal authorization, and the children of labour immigrants seeking economic opportunities. While these categories differ in legal implications and protection frameworks, they share common experiences of displacement, cultural transition, and structural vulnerability that transcend formal classifications. This perspective recognises that children’s rights and developmental needs remain constant across different migration pathways, even though their access to protection and services varies significantly depending on legal status. Theoretical perspectives like Berry’s [3] acculturation model help understand the adaptation processes of immigrants, categorized as integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization. Furthermore, the transformation of migration in the global era—with increased female participation and politicization—reflects the complexity and shifting nature of mobility today [4].

In addition to acculturation theory, more recent sociological frameworks such as transnationalism and critical border studies emphasize the hybrid, non-linear, and often precarious nature of contemporary migration, particularly in the Global South [5]. These approaches underscore how immigrant experiences are shaped not only by their cultural negotiations but also by legal regimes, institutional exclusions, and global power asymmetries.

In the Turkish context, internal rural-to-urban migration has led to increased urbanization, resulting in spatial and social polarization [6]. Following the Syrian civil war, Türkiye became one of the major host countries of displaced populations, with more than 3.6 million registered Syrians under temporary protection as of 2024 [7]. This demographic shift has significantly impacted urban infrastructures, social services, and public attitudes toward immigrants. Immigrants often experience cultural dissonance, exclusion, and challenges in adapting to new environments. Beyond mere geographical displacement, migration triggers profound transformations within immigrants’ social and cultural contexts.

Immigrants face significant challenges in adapting to new environments, and among them, children constitute one of the most vulnerable groups due to their developmental stage and dependency on family structures. Immigrant children encounter multiple risk factors, including language barriers, limited access to healthcare, deprivation of educational rights, discrimination, and social exclusion. Unlike adults, children are structurally disadvantaged due to their dual dependency on both family and state protection systems, which are often absent, frag-

mented, or inaccessible in migration settings [8]. These adversities can have long-lasting psychological effects at both the individual and social levels. For example, Bronstein and Montgomery's systematic review highlights that rates of PTSD among refugee children range from 19% to 54%, with depression rates between 3% and 30%, influenced by demographic variables and pre- and post-migration traumas [9].

From a sociological perspective, such challenges can be analyzed through the lenses of Migration Systems Theory, which conceptualizes migration as embedded within global economic, political, and social systems that shape both the drivers and patterns of movement [10]. This framework emphasizes how state policies, labor market demands, and historical colonial ties perpetuate asymmetric mobility and contribute to unequal integration outcomes. Social Exclusion Theory, as articulated by Silver [11], explains how immigrant children—especially those lacking legal documentation—are systematically marginalized through institutional mechanisms that deny them access to education, healthcare, and social capital.

Moreover, Johan Galtung's [12] notion of Structural Violence sheds light on the invisible yet pervasive forms of harm experienced by immigrant children. These include inadequate housing, bureaucratic obstacles in service access, and chronic exposure to precarity—conditions that are not necessarily the result of direct aggression but of entrenched social and political arrangements. Such violence often becomes normalized within host societies, rendering children's suffering structurally invisible and politically neglected.

The health dimension is further complicated by public health concerns. According to the World Health Organization, immigrant and refugee children consistently exhibit lower vaccination rates, posing significant risks to both their own health and that of host communities [13]. These disparities are often amplified by linguistic barriers, fear of deportation, and institutional distrust, which discourage immigrant families from seeking preventive healthcare services. Vervliet *et al.* found that unaccompanied immigrant children exhibit high levels of depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress even after 18 months of follow-up, emphasizing the enduring psychological toll of migration-related trauma [14].

Education and integration represent another critical arena of concern. Access to education can mitigate risks such as discrimination and exploitation, supporting the development of immigrant children. However, linguistic barriers, cultural incongruities, and economic constraints frequently hinder effective educational participation [15]. This is particularly salient in the Turkish context, where the influx of Syrian refugees has created unique challenges in accommodating immigrant children within the national education system [16].

Although Türkiye has made formal commitments to provide equal access to schooling under the Temporary Protection Regulation, *de facto* barriers such as overcrowded classrooms, lack of trained multilingual teachers, and intermittent enrollment persist [17]. Many refugee children initially attended Temporary Education Centers (TECs), which operated in Arabic, but these were gradually phased

out, creating new integration challenges within mainstream Turkish schools.

Drawing on Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, it becomes clear that immigrant children often lack the institutional habitus expected by formal educational systems, leading to symbolic exclusion even when physical access is granted [18]. Educational participation, in this regard, is not merely a matter of presence but of meaningful inclusion.

Economic hardship often forces children into early labor, obstructing their right to education and exposing them to exploitative and hazardous working conditions [19]. These economic dynamics disproportionately affect unaccompanied minors and children from female-headed households, intensifying their vulnerability to trafficking, street work, and informal sector exploitation.

The risks of delinquency and social exclusion also weigh heavily on immigrant children, especially adolescents. Structural poverty, discrimination, and social marginalization may push these youths toward risky behaviors, exacerbating vulnerabilities on both individual and societal levels. High unemployment and increased population density contribute to rising crime rates and deepening inequalities affecting immigrant children [20] [21].

However, it is essential to avoid reductive criminalization narratives that frame immigrant youth as latent threats. As Agamben [22] argues through the notion of the "homo sacer," certain populations—such as undocumented youth—are rendered outside the protective bounds of law, treated as subjects of control rather than rights-holding individuals. In this light, what is often read as 'deviance' may in fact be the expression of systemic abandonment.

Economically disadvantaged immigrant families' financial struggles frequently lead children to participate in the labor market prematurely, amplifying the prevalence of child labor exploitation and abuse. Immigrant children often endure insecure, physically demanding, and hazardous work conditions, alongside violations of child rights such as violence, sexual abuse, forced labor, and early marriage. Unaccompanied minors represent the highest-risk group, being particularly vulnerable to labor and human trafficking [23] [24].

From a sociological standpoint, child labor among immigrants cannot be understood solely as a matter of individual or familial survival strategies; it must be contextualized within broader neoliberal economic frameworks that commodify childhood and externalize care responsibilities to marginalized populations [25]. The informal labor market—especially in sectors like agriculture, textiles, and domestic work—functions as a site of both economic incorporation and deepened exploitation for immigrant children. Furthermore, the intersection of undocumented status and child labor creates what Anderson [26] terms "hyper-precarity," where children lack not only legal protections but also social visibility.

In many cases, child labor becomes normalized within host communities, particularly in economically strained urban centers, where it is framed as a 'necessary evil' rather than a rights violation. This normalization further obscures structural accountability and redirects blame onto immigrant families themselves.

In light of these multifaceted challenges, this paper aims to comprehensively analyze the complex interplay of health, education, delinquency, labor, and abuse issues faced by immigrant children, with a particular focus on the Turkish context. Employing a sociological lens that integrates structural, cultural, and interactionist perspectives, the study foregrounds how immigrant children's lived experiences are co-constituted by macro-level policies, meso-level institutional dynamics, and micro-level familial practices. By integrating sociological theories with empirical evidence, this study seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of immigrant children's lived experiences and the structural conditions shaping them.

2. The Psychosocial and Physiological Effects of Migration on Children

Forced migration processes leave some of the most lasting and profound effects on children. Displacement due to war, poverty, or precarious living conditions poses multidimensional threats to both the physical and mental well-being of children. Accompanied by trauma, insecurity, and the loss of a sense of belonging, this experience can cause developmental setbacks that are difficult to reverse.

Immigrant children often experience disruptions in education, limited access to healthcare, and severe psychological stress due to constant uncertainty. Language barriers, cultural mismatches, and legal ambiguity hinder both individual development and social integration. Bronfenbrenner's [27] Ecological Systems Theory provides a useful framework here, as it illustrates how the various layers of a child's environment—family, community, institutional systems, and policy—interact to shape developmental outcomes. In migration contexts, nearly all of these systems are destabilized, leaving children exposed to multiple, cumulative risks [28].

For girls, these risks are particularly acute, as gender intersects with displacement to amplify existing vulnerabilities. Feminist sociological perspectives emphasize how migration intensifies gender-based inequalities, rendering girls more susceptible to forced marriage, sexual violence, and economic exploitation [29]. The 2021 report by Save the Children documents the vulnerabilities of girls to early marriage, abuse, and child labor under migration conditions [30].

Children's physical health is also significantly impacted. The WHO's 2022 review highlights structural barriers to healthcare access, including poverty, informal living conditions, and inadequate infrastructure in refugee camps [13]. These challenges prevent early diagnosis and treatment while increasing exposure to infectious diseases, malnutrition, and stunted growth. Moreover, the concept of "structural health vulnerability" [31] highlights how institutional neglect and systemic inequities produce chronic, preventable suffering among displaced children.

Psychological trauma is closely intertwined with physical vulnerabilities. Prolonged uncertainty, family fragmentation, and social exclusion contribute to de-

pression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Fazel *et al.* [32] note that pre- and post-migration stressors significantly increase the risk of mental disorders in refugee children. Similarly, studies by Aydeniz and Sarıkaya [33] and the OECD [34] underscore the identity struggles and academic difficulties faced by immigrant children adapting to new sociocultural norms.

However, trauma should not be understood solely as an individual psychological phenomenon, but as a socially situated process. Sociologists such as Alexander [35] have conceptualized “cultural trauma” as a rupture in collective identity that emerges when a group feels it has been subjected to a fundamentally dislocating experience. For displaced children, especially those uprooted at formative ages, trauma can manifest as disorientation, loss of narrative continuity, and intergenerational silence—factors that not only hinder individual recovery but also obstruct community integration.

In this sense, post-migration stressors such as institutional neglect, hostile host community attitudes, and insecure legal status reinforce feelings of exclusion, thereby aggravating trauma and delaying resilience. Drawing on Goffman’s [36] concept of stigma, immigrant children may internalize perceived social inferiority, leading to self-exclusion and social withdrawal. These dynamics are not merely incidental—they are structurally reproduced through inequitable schooling environments, bureaucratic obstacles, and exclusionary citizenship regimes.

According to UNHCR’s [37] report, addressing this complex set of challenges requires integrated psychosocial support systems, culturally sensitive education policies, and accessible healthcare services. More importantly, these interventions must be embedded in a rights-based approach that recognizes immigrant children as active rights holders rather than passive recipients of aid. Long-term well-being and social cohesion cannot be achieved through temporary charity but through inclusive policy frameworks grounded in justice, equity, and non-discrimination [38]. Supporting immigrant children is essential not only for their individual development but also for promoting broader social cohesion.

3. Integration and Educational Challenges of Immigrant Children

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) defines education as an inalienable right for every child and places the obligation to provide this right upon all states. Education plays a protective role in reducing the impact of psychological traumas experienced by immigrant children. However, structural barriers continue to restrict their access to education, deepening their vulnerabilities [39].

From a sociological perspective, educational exclusion can be analyzed through Bourdieu’s [40] theory of cultural capital, which helps explain how linguistic and cultural misalignments between immigrant families and dominant institutional norms disadvantage children in formal schooling environments. Immigrant children often lack the “institutionalized cultural capital” required to navigate bureaucratic and pedagogical expectations, thereby reinforcing structural inequalities.

In Türkiye, children must have a legal status to access public education. Only those with residency permits or passport entries can be officially enrolled in state schools. Nonetheless, language barriers remain the most critical obstacle for immigrant children, negatively affecting their academic performance and social inclusion [39] [41]. Other significant challenges include financial hardship, child labor, low parental engagement in education, unsuitable housing conditions, and limited teacher-student interaction [42].

According to the Turkish Ministry of Education, the number of enrolled Syrian children reached approximately 325,000, with a 50% increase reported by mid-2015. Globally, increasing numbers of immigrant children remain outside formal education, raising concern over a potential “lost generation” [39] [43]. According to the Turkish Refugee Council’s Access to Education Report [44] and official statistics from the Ministry of National Education [45], there were 1,124,353 Syrian children aged 5 - 17 under Temporary Protection (TP) in Türkiye during the 2021-2022 academic year. Of these, approximately 65% (around 730,800 children) were enrolled in formal education, while 35% (over 392,000) remained out of school. Enrolment rates for TP Syrian children were 31.48% - 34.34% in preschool, 75% - 75.13% in primary school, 80% - 81.17% in lower secondary, and 42% - 43% in upper secondary education. Gender parity was largely achieved at preschool, primary, and lower secondary levels, but dropout rates were significantly higher among boys in upper secondary. Notably, 47,482 Syrian students were enrolled in higher education during the same period, with 62% being male and 38% female.

Discrimination by peers, teachers, and communities further hampers adaptation. Programs that foster empathy and intercultural understanding—alongside structured support for teachers and families—are essential to ensure educational inclusion [46]. Research also shows that some educators are reluctant to engage with refugee children, especially in early childhood settings [41], exacerbating their sense of exclusion and affecting their academic and psychological development.

These relational dynamics can be interpreted through the lens of Critical Pedagogy [47], which advocates for an education system that not only includes the marginalized but empowers them as agents of change. Without transformative educational models, immigrant children are at risk of becoming passive recipients in systems that fail to represent or respond to their lived realities.

International practices indicate that inclusive policies—such as language support programs, teacher training, cultural orientation, and family involvement—are crucial to integrating immigrant children into schools. In Türkiye, pilot initiatives and adaptation centers are being implemented along these lines. In addition, supporting community-run immigrant schools and linking them with public systems can enhance social cohesion.

Educational integration for immigrant children is not only a matter of individual rights but a foundation for societal resilience and solidarity. Given the scale of contemporary migration, education must be reimagined as a dynamic and inclu-

sive social institution—capable of adapting to plural identities and facilitating intercultural dialogue [48]. Developing inclusive education policies and effectively utilizing international cooperation are critical to preventing these children from becoming part of a lost generation.

4. Immigrant Children and Criminalization

The migration process encompasses multiple challenges and risk factors that can influence children's behavioral outcomes. While immigrant children often experience psychosocial trauma, economic hardship, and social exclusion, it is critical to emphasize that migration itself is not the root cause of delinquent behavior. Instead, socio-economic and cultural factors such as unemployment, poverty, restricted access to education, and systemic discrimination play decisive roles in shaping delinquency among immigrant children [49]. Moreover, trauma endured during migration amplifies behavioral problems and vulnerability to delinquency, as highlighted in Fazel *et al.*'s longitudinal analysis of refugee populations [32].

In the Turkish context, immigrant children are particularly susceptible to risks such as becoming “street children,” a phenomenon closely linked to economic deprivation and family disintegration [50]. The intersection of family impoverishment and migration-related uncertainties often results in heightened social exclusion, diminished self-esteem, alienation, and perceived psychological threats—factors which may precipitate hostile and aggressive behaviors [39]. These psychosocial stressors underline the need for nuanced approaches that address both structural and individual dimensions.

The increasing economic hardships faced by immigrant families have been correlated with rising incidences of petty crimes, including theft and robbery, among immigrant youth [49]. Additionally, unfamiliarity with host society norms, compounded by social exclusion and psychological distress, contributes to the manifestation of delinquent behaviors [51] [52]. This aligns with social disorganization theory, which explains how weakened social bonds and community structures in immigrant contexts can increase susceptibility to deviant behavior [53].

Media representations frequently exacerbate societal prejudices by depicting immigrant children as inherently prone to criminality, which not only stigmatizes this group but also hinders their social integration. This misrepresentation calls for critical media literacy and advocacy to challenge dominant narratives and promote social inclusion. Therefore, comprehensive social integration programs, educational support, and enhanced economic opportunities are vital preventive measures to reduce delinquency among immigrant children [54] [55].

In Türkiye, the current child justice system and social services exhibit significant gaps in adequately addressing the unique needs of immigrant children, thereby undermining their protection [56]. A multidisciplinary approach, combining legal safeguards, psychosocial support, and tailored educational services, is imperative. Notably, language assistance and cultural orientation programs, successfully implemented in European contexts, have demonstrated effectiveness in

mitigating delinquency among immigrant children, and such models are increasingly being adopted within Türkiye [57].

In conclusion, delinquency among immigrant children is a multifaceted phenomenon shaped by traumatic experiences, socio-economic deprivation, social exclusion, and systemic inadequacies in protective mechanisms. Developing inclusive, evidence-based policies and comprehensive support systems at both individual and societal levels is essential to addressing these challenges and fostering integration.

5. Child Labor and Exploitation among Immigrant Children

Immigrant children often face exploitative and abusive conditions as they attempt to participate in social and economic life. This phenomenon reflects what Marx [58] conceptualized as the “reserve army of labor,” where vulnerable populations become available for exploitation during capitalist accumulation processes, with immigrant children representing the most precarious segment of this reserve labor force. Economic hardships experienced by immigrant families frequently force children to work, and in some cases, even lead to early marriage [59].

Due to the inability of many immigrant families to meet their basic needs, all family members, especially children, are compelled to contribute to the household income, raising serious concerns about child labor exploitation [60]. Drawing from Zelizer’s [61] concept of the “economically worthless but emotionally priceless child,” immigrant children experience a painful reversal where economic necessity overrides the modern conception of protected childhood, creating what Nieuwenhuys [62] terms “global childhood”, where economic value supersedes emotional worth.

Reports from the International Labour Organization [63] and UNICEF [64] highlight that immigrant child labor is particularly prevalent in labor-intensive sectors such as textiles, agriculture, construction, and services in developing countries.

In Türkiye, the influx of Syrian refugees since 2011 has increased child labor rates, with many children working under insecure and hazardous conditions in sectors like construction, textiles, agriculture, and services [65].

This situation exemplifies what Sassen [66] describes as “expulsions” from formal economic systems, where displaced populations become absorbed into informal economies characterized by extreme precarity and exploitation. Girls are particularly vulnerable to early marriage and sexual exploitation [39].

Applying feminist intersectionality theory [67], girls experience what can be termed “triple jeopardy”—discrimination based on age, migration status, and gender—creating unique vulnerabilities that compound exponentially rather than additively. The international literature also stresses that child labor among immigrants is not merely an economic issue but also encompasses social and psychological dimensions [8] [68].

The main sectors employing immigrant children include textiles, services, sea-

sonal agriculture, shepherding, and construction. In these sectors, children often endure long working hours, unsafe and unhealthy environments, and lack social protections [57] [63]. These conditions reflect what Burawoy [69] terms “labor process degradation,” where workers experience intensified exploitation through extended hours, unsafe conditions, and the absence of protective regulations. For immigrant children, this degradation is amplified by their legal vulnerability and social invisibility.

In Türkiye, particularly Syrian children face social exclusion, educational discontinuity, and psychological trauma due to insecure and informal labor conditions [70]. This exclusion operates through what Agamben [22] conceptualizes as “bare life,” where individuals are stripped of political rights and reduced to biological existence, making them available for unlimited exploitation.

The high mortality rates among children attempting to cross the Mediterranean underscore the urgent need for international cooperation to protect immigrant children [62] [71]. This humanitarian crisis reflects what Butler [72] describes as “grievable lives” versus “ungrievable lives,” where certain populations become socially constructed as less worthy of protection and mourning.

Legal regulations and social policies remain insufficient in preventing immigrant child labor. This inadequacy reflects what Santos [73] conceptualizes as “abyssal thinking,” where certain populations exist “on the other side of the line” beyond the reach of legal protections and social rights. Social services and educational programs in Türkiye are inadequate to address the specific needs of immigrant children. Therefore, increasing access to education, strengthening economic support mechanisms, and effectively safeguarding children’s legal rights are essential [58]. Following Freire’s [45] critical pedagogy framework, educational interventions must address not only skill acquisition but also critical consciousness-raising that enables children to understand and resist their exploitation.

In conclusion, the involvement of immigrant children in the labor force is a multifaceted problem that requires attention to economic, legal, psychosocial, and societal factors. This complexity demands what Fraser terms “transformative” rather than “affirmative” solutions—addressing root causes of inequality rather than merely ameliorating symptoms [74]. Reports from international organizations and national studies in Türkiye highlight the necessity of comprehensive and integrated policies to protect these vulnerable children [8] [61] [62].

6. Conclusions

Migration is a complex, interactive, and dynamic phenomenon that reshapes societies at multiple levels. Among all affected groups, immigrant children stand out as the most vulnerable, facing compounded threats to their physical health, psychosocial well-being, educational attainment, and fundamental rights [9] [75]. This study’s findings reveal a troubling paradox: while international frameworks like the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child theoretically protect all children regardless of status, the reality demonstrates systematic exclusion of immigrant

children from these protections. The evidence presented challenges dominant narratives that frame migration as primarily an economic phenomenon, instead revealing it as a deeply social process that fundamentally reorganizes power relations and creates new hierarchies of belonging and exclusion.

Language barriers, social exclusion, and economic deprivation not only hinder individual development but also undermine broader social cohesion. This challenges conventional policy approaches that treat language acquisition as a technical problem rather than recognizing it as a gateway to broader social participation. Similarly, the evidence reveals that economic deprivation among immigrant families creates a cascading effect where children's immediate survival needs override their long-term developmental requirements, perpetuating cycles of exclusion across generations. The implications for social cohesion extend beyond immediate humanitarian concerns to encompass fundamental questions about the sustainability of societies that systematically exclude significant portions of their child populations.

Access to healthcare remains a critical challenge. Structural obstacles—such as poverty, lack of legal status, and inadequate camp infrastructure—limit preventive and curative services for immigrant children [13]. This analysis reveals that these barriers operate as interconnected systems of exclusion rather than isolated obstacles. The literature demonstrates how legal status operates as a fundamental determinant of health access, creating what can be understood as “stratified healthcare citizenship”, where different categories of children receive differential levels of protection.

These barriers contribute to malnutrition, delayed development, and heightened susceptibility to communicable diseases [62]. The cascading effects documented throughout the literature suggest that healthcare exclusion in childhood creates long-term developmental deficits that extend far beyond immediate medical concerns, fundamentally compromising these children's life trajectories and social integration prospects. To address these issues, states should adopt mobile and community-based health interventions, expand entitlements irrespective of legal status, and integrate mental health and psychosocial support into primary care [75].

Educational inclusion is equally urgent. Despite the Convention on the Rights of the Child guaranteeing free primary education, many immigrant children remain out of school due to legal restrictions, language difficulties, and discriminatory practices [15]. The research reviewed reveals a fundamental contradiction between universal rights rhetoric and exclusionary practices.

Educational exclusion operates not merely through formal barriers but through subtle mechanisms of marginalization that position immigrant children as perpetual outsiders within educational systems. National authorities must implement comprehensive language-support programs, teacher training on intercultural pedagogy, and flexible enrollment policies. The scholarly evidence suggests that current approaches to educational inclusion often reproduce rather than challenge exist-

ing hierarchies, treating cultural difference as a deficit rather than a resource. Partnerships between ministries of education, local NGOs, and refugee-led organizations can facilitate community learning hubs and accelerate integration.

Child labor and exploitation represent severe rights violations. The ILO estimates that some 73 million children perform hazardous work globally, with immigrant children disproportionately represented in textiles, agriculture, construction, and service sectors [61]. This review demonstrates how immigrant children's labor exploitation represents the extreme manifestation of their broader social exclusion. The research literature reveals that child labor among immigrants is not simply an economic necessity but a symptom of systematic failures in protection systems that render certain children available for exploitation.

These conditions jeopardize both physical and mental health and perpetuate cycles of poverty [8] [30]. The evidence reviewed challenges conventional approaches that focus on individual family decision-making, instead revealing how structural forces create conditions where exploitation becomes normalized and institutionalized. Governments must rigorously enforce minimum-age and hazardous-work legislation, provide conditional cash transfers to vulnerable families, and strengthen labor inspections, especially in informal economies.

The analysis throughout this review reveals that unaccompanied children represent the most extreme manifestation of the vulnerabilities affecting all immigrant children. Their experiences illuminate the inadequacy of protection systems that rely on family structures while failing to provide alternative frameworks for children without such support.

Strengthening child protection systems is imperative: states should designate guardians for every unaccompanied child, ensure access to legal counsel, and offer safe temporary accommodations with specialized psychosocial support.

7. Recommendations

Rights-Based, Multi-Sectoral Policies: Develop integrated strategies combining health, education, child protection, and social welfare, guided by the CRC and ILO Conventions 138 and 182. The literature reviewed demonstrates that fragmented, sector-specific approaches fundamentally misunderstand the interconnected nature of immigrant children's vulnerabilities. Policy integration must move beyond mere coordination to address the structural forces that create and maintain exclusion.

These structural forces include restrictive residence-based access to education, unrecognized informal labor, and punitive asylum mechanisms that marginalize children's everyday lives.

Legal Inclusion: Remove barriers to legal status and expand access to social services regardless of migration status. This review reveals how legal status operates as a master category that shapes access to all other rights and services. The scholarly consensus suggests that incremental reforms that maintain status-based distinctions will continue to reproduce exclusion.

Effective legal inclusion also requires establishing pathways to citizenship, temporary protection mechanisms that ensure continuity of rights, and legal aid for undocumented or irregular immigrant families.

Community Engagement: Involve immigrant communities, civil society, and refugee-led groups in designing and implementing programs. The analysis demonstrates that top-down approaches that treat immigrant children as passive recipients of services fail to recognize their agency and community resources. Meaningful participation requires fundamental shifts in power relations between service providers and communities.

Moreover, child participation mechanisms—such as youth advisory councils, peer-mentoring programs, and child-led community projects—should be institutionalized to ensure that immigrant children have a direct voice in shaping the services that affect their lives.

Gender-Sensitive Interventions: Design and implement policies that address gender-specific vulnerabilities such as early marriage, domestic labor, and gender-based violence. Immigrant girls, in particular, face compounded risks that require targeted, culturally sensitive, and rights-based programming. Gender-responsive budgeting and sex-disaggregated data should guide policy development.

Data and Research: Invest in disaggregated data collection on immigrant children's health, education, and labor conditions; promote longitudinal studies to assess the long-term impact of interventions. This review highlights how data gaps often reflect and reproduce the invisibility of immigrant children within policy frameworks. Comprehensive data collection is essential not only for monitoring but for challenging narratives that minimize immigrant children's presence and needs.

Additionally, periodic policy evaluation and open-access research dissemination can help strengthen evidence-based practices and improve accountability.

Monitoring and Accountability: Establish independent monitoring bodies, ombudspersons for child rights, and feedback channels for immigrant families. These tools allow for real-time policy adjustment, increased trust, and long-term learning. Inclusive child protection requires institutionalizing these mechanisms across government and civil society actors.

Local-Level Implementation: Strengthen collaboration with municipalities, local schools, and community-based organizations, which serve as key frontline actors. Localized responses—such as neighborhood integration centers, language support hubs, and school-family liaison units—have shown high effectiveness in addressing immediate and contextual needs of immigrant children.

International Cooperation: Support cross-border collaboration to protect children in transit and destination countries, and share best practices through forums like the Global Refugee Forum. The literature reveals how national approaches to immigrant children's protection are fundamentally limited by the transnational nature of migration itself. Effective protection requires recognizing migration as a global phenomenon requiring coordinated global responses.

Regional child protection protocols, harmonized asylum procedures, and joint

funding initiatives can also enhance long-term resilience.

By adopting these measures, policymakers can uphold the rights of immigrant children, foster their healthy development, and strengthen the social fabric of receiving communities. However, this review suggests that meaningful change requires more than policy adjustments—it demands a fundamental reconsideration of how societies conceptualize belonging, citizenship, childhood, and protection itself.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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