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"I ask my body for forgiveness": fear and occupational hardship among Latin American undocumented immigrants living in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), Canada

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Introduction

The population of undocumented migrants in Canada is rapidly rising, yet there is considerable variation in their estimated figures and composition. There is a significant challenge for exploring the needs of this hidden population, perpetuating their invisibility and unrecognized contribution to the Canadian economy and society.

Objectives

The study focuses on socio-demographic data and circumstances of everyday occupations of Latin-American undocumented immigrants living in the GTA, Canada, in particular the gendered aspects of their working conditions and social exclusion.

Methods

This qualitative study was conducted in collaboration with community advisors and community centers that serve the Latin American community in the Greater Toronto Area adopting a postcolonial theoretical framework. The participants included in the study are Latin Americans who speak as first language Spanish or Portuguese and who are non-status migrants living in Canada for over 2 years.

Results

The typical occupations found for this group are cleaning work for women and construction work for men. Preliminary findings show construction work being related to greater social isolation, harder health impact, and substance abuse as a coping mechanism, while cleaning work relates to better working conditions but lower earnings. Women describe much richer social networks that promote their well-being. As identified in this project, undocumented migrants consistently seek anonymity or avoid exposure altogether as a form self-protection, which may be inadvertently creating additional barriers to their relative integration into the "host" country's social and economic life. These strategies in turn decrease their possibilities of developing a social network and increase their vulnerability.

Conclusion

The findings clearly confirm that non-status migrants experience significant gendered forms of exploitation in the workplace, including poor compensation, abuse and subjugation to unsafe work conditions among many others which clearly configured a context of occupational apartheid and occupational hardship for this population.

Contributions to the practice of occupational therapy

We hope that knowledge and recommendations highlighted herein will function as a stepping stone to critically address issues of occupational justice within the occupational therapy field as well as among other health professions.