

Research Article

LATINX IMMIGRANTS' PSYCHOLOGICAL SENSE OF COMMUNITY: VARIATION BY IMMIGRATION STATUS ACROSS DIVERGENT U.S. POLICY CONTEXTS

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Immigrants' psychological sense of community (PSOC)—feelings of belonging, influence, emotional connection, and fulfillment of needs within a community—is shaped by both individual and contextual factors. This study examined whether Latinx immigrants' PSOC varied by immigration status and state-level immigration policy environments across four U.S. states. We hypothesized that immigrants living in more restrictive policy environments would report weaker PSOC, and that this association would be strongest for immigrants without an authorized immigration status, as compared to those with legal immigration authorization or who had become naturalized U.S. citizens. Using data from 407 Latinx immigrants surveyed in Arizona, Maryland, New Mexico, and Virginia in 2015, a 4x3 ANCOVA was conducted controlling for key demographic variables. Findings indicated that PSOC significantly varied by immigration status: Immigrants without authorization reported the lowest levels of PSOC. Contrary to expectations, no effect of state-level immigration-related policy context was found, nor was there an interaction with immigration status. Time spent in the United States was positively associated with PSOC. Men also reported stronger PSOC. As such, community-level interventions directed at newcomers, women, and immigrants with precarious legal immigration statuses may be especially important in fostering PSOC. Future research should investigate additional dimensions of communities' contexts of reception that may influence immigrants' PSOC.

Keywords: Psychological sense of community, Latinx, immigration status, immigration policy, contexts of reception

1. Introduction

Migration not only transforms individual lives but also the communities in which people settle. A 2024 report by the International Organization for Migration concluded that as of 2020, approximately 281 million people worldwide relocated to a different country after their birth, with almost 10% of migrants across the globe being of Latin American and Caribbean descent (McAuliffe & Oucho, 2024). In the United States, roughly one in seven people relocated to the

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country after their birth, with approximately 41% migrating from Mexico, Central America, and South America (Moslimani & Passel, 2024). As human mobility continues to expand around the globe and humanitarian needs rise due to crisis situations, environmental impacts, and economic and sociopolitical insecurity, migration rates are projected to continue to increase (McAuliffe & Oucho, 2024). Transitioning from one's origin country to a new place of residence involves a multi-system ecological transition that is related to many aspects of an immigrant's life, including the communities to which they belong. Immigration not only impacts one's relationships to their relational communities (e.g., familial, cultural communities; Ward et al., 2010), but also to their territorial communities, including the new places in which they create their homes. Features of a location are related to how one develops a sense of membership, belonging, and emotional connection to this new community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Prezza et al., 2008).

1.1 Psychological Sense of Community

The feeling of belonging, mattering, benefiting from, contributing to, and being able to impact a community is known as psychological sense of community (PSOC; Chavis & Wandersman, 1990; Sarason, 1974). McMillan and Chavis (1986) describe PSOC as being comprised of four components: *Membership* refers to an individual identifying with and investing in a community and feeling that they belong. *Mutual influence* regards reciprocal validation among all members of the community; that is, the degree to which members feel that what they do and say impacts the community and the community impacts them. *Integration and fulfillment of needs* is what reinforces members to *stay* members, such as having the status of "member" and having their needs met from community membership. Lastly, *shared emotional connection* refers to a shared history among community members. Although PSOC has frequently been posited as a positive construct, when a community is perceived to be perilous, detrimental to health, or otherwise harmful, people may choose to actively disconnect from the community. This concept is known as negative PSOC (Brodsky, 1996; Brodsky et al., 2002; Mannarini et al., 2014).

Positive PSOC has been tied to a host of individual and community-level outcomes. Positive perceptions of one's neighborhood and environment, the establishment of strong social relations and networks, and fostering self-efficacy are all signs of positive PSOC (Chavis & Wandersman, 1990). Additionally, strong, positive PSOC predicts community engagement, such as participating in neighborhood groups and organizations (Chavis & Wandersman, 1990), registering to vote, and connecting with positive role models (Brodsky et al., 1999). Positive PSOC has also been shown to decrease the negative consequences related to discrimination (García-Cid et al., 2020), increase individuals' perceived health (Ross, 2002), and improve satisfaction with life across varying immigrant groups (Hombrados-Mendieta et al., 2013; Novara et al., 2021). A weaker PSOC, contrarily, is associated with a frailer community system, more direct and harmful threats to residents, higher unemployment rates (Brodsky et al., 1999), greater isolation, less social cohesion (Castellini et al., 2011), increased competition between racial groups (Bathum & Baumann, 2007), and gender-based discrimination and stereotypes, particularly for women (Bauloz et al., 2024). For Latinx¹ immigrants, strong, positive PSOC has been found to relate to

¹ 'Latinx' is used throughout this paper instead of 'Latino/a' as a gender-inclusive term (DeGuzmán, 2017). Other scholars have suggested adopting Latine.

greater life satisfaction (Hombrados-Mendieta et al., 2013) and being more likely to give back to the community (Bathum & Baumann, 2007). Additionally, non-immigrant community members experience greater quality of life and increased interactions with Latinx immigrants as PSOC becomes stronger (Hombrados-Mendieta et al., 2009). Furthermore, weaker PSOC is associated with Latinx immigrants having a decreased sense of belonging to their social network, greater levels of psychological distress (Dillon et al., 2018), lower likelihood of engaging with non-immigrant community members (Perreira et al., 2006), and less frequent community participation (Nuñez, 2009). PSOC therefore shapes both individual and community outcomes.

Individual and community characteristics simultaneously influence the development of PSOC. For example, community members' age, length of residency, and home ownership have been shown to promote PSOC (Brodsky et al., 1999; Millán-Franco, Gómez-Jacinto, Hombrados-Mendieta, García-Martín, et al., 2019). Additionally, sense of safety in one's environment impacts PSOC development, as those who feel less safe due to increased crime rates and more perceived discrimination are more likely to withdraw from their social environments, limiting PSOC development (Chavis & Wandersman, 1990). Experiences of racial/ethnic discrimination, hostile exchanges, and prejudice all negatively predict PSOC (Bathum & Baumann, 2007; Castellini et al., 2011) whereas multiracial and multiethnic interactions and understanding promote PSOC (Nuñez, 2009). Additionally, unjust and xenophobic immigration policies in communities inhibit PSOC development for Latinx individuals (Bathum & Baumann, 2007). Many studies of PSOC are cross-sectional; therefore, directionality is unclear and predictors of PSOC may also be outcomes.

1.2 Contexts of Reception

Unique to immigrants' development of PSOC is the context of reception they face when immigrating to a new community (Schwartz et al., 2014). A context of reception encompasses the (a) policies of the community that influence the lives of immigrants, (b) social reception provided by established residents, and (c) accessibility to and reception by community institutions (Portes & Rumbaut, 2006; Schwartz et al., 2014). Contexts of reception reflect overarching views on immigrants and immigration, as attitudes across time impact and reinforce national immigration policies (Ueffing et al., 2015). At a more local level, state governments and municipalities can shape this context of reception by providing immigrants with equitable access to needed services and infrastructure to live their lives, such as education, social safety net programs, and employment opportunities; they can also mitigate or reinforce an anti-immigrant social climate through their messaging and actions (Young et al., 2023). A community's beliefs are also reflected in the supports available to and the treatment towards immigrants (Gelatt et al., 2017; Laglagaron et al., 2008). Immigrants are embedded in multiple, overlapping contexts of reception—including municipal, state, and national levels—and can experience divergent contexts of reception even within states or regions (Buckingham, Brodsky, et al., 2018; Golash-Boza & Valdez, 2018). Negative contexts of reception have been shown to inhibit immigrants' trust in any available supports (Wong et al., 2019) and augment their fear of engaging with the community (Valdez et al., 2013), therefore likely obstructing the development of PSOC.

1.2.1 Immigration-Related Policies

In the United States, although immigration policy is established at the federal level, states enact a variety of immigration-related policies that shape their contexts of reception. For example, policies related to employment, higher education, enforcement of local and/or national immigration policies, immigration inquiry, housing, state identification, and public benefits laws all determine the support available and indicate the reaction of communities towards immigrants (National Conference of State Legislatures, n.d.). Immigrants living in states with more restrictive immigration-related policies may struggle to integrate into the community and fulfill their needs, as resources such as language access services, employment opportunities, education, and access to healthcare may be limited or not available to them at all (Golash-Boza & Valdez, 2018; Laglagaron et al., 2008; Philbin et al., 2018). Stricter immigration enforcement also appears to promote a negative emotional connection to the community (Philbin et al., 2018). However, more welcoming contexts of reception, as evidenced by immigration-related policies, promote greater sense of belonging (Huo et al., 2018). Therefore, state policy contexts likely shape immigrants' PSOC development in their new communities.

While restrictive immigration-related policies may negatively affect all immigrants (Szkupinski Quiroga et al., 2014), policies are often directed towards those who do not have a lawful presence in a country (Gelatt et al., 2017); therefore, unauthorized² immigrants may be especially impacted by these policies. For example, policies can prohibit employers from knowingly hiring an immigrant without legal immigration authorization; revoke business licenses of those who do hire; deny social, educational, and medical services for unauthorized immigrants; and criminalize the sheltering of individuals without legal immigration authorization (Gelatt et al., 2017; Laglagaron et al., 2008). Unauthorized immigrants are more likely than their authorized counterparts to struggle engaging with and having their needs met by the receiving community, and thus may be particularly affected in communities with restrictive immigration-related policies. When compared to their authorized peers, unauthorized immigrants face more hiring discrimination and fear surrounding employment (Valdez et al., 2013), difficulty securing housing (Szkupinski Quiroga et al., 2014), greater economic stress (Patler & Laster Pirtle, 2018), more discrimination (Cobb et al., 2017), higher likelihood of being arrested for minor traffic violations (Gelatt et al., 2017), and more bail restrictions if arrested (Laglagaron et al., 2008). Restrictive immigration-related policies may prevent individuals without legal immigration authorization from becoming economically and socially connected to their community (Cobb et al., 2017; Dillon et al., 2018), especially when compared to those who are authorized to reside in the country or have become naturalized citizens. Thus, state-level immigration-related policies likely differentially impact Latinx individuals' PSOC based on their immigration status, such that the PSOC of immigrants without legal immigration authorization is more strongly and negatively impacted by restrictive immigration-related policies than for authorized immigrants and naturalized citizens.

² We use the spectrum of authorization to describe the level of precarity associated with one's legal immigration status: At one end, "unauthorized" describes a lack of government permission to reside in the country, including due to status expiration or revocation; at the other, "naturalized" describes the permanency of becoming a citizen of the country; in the middle, "authorized" describes any other legal immigration status, permanent or temporary (Merolla et al., 2013).

1.3 *Current Study*

There is little research to-date that specifically examines the intersection between legal immigration status, immigration-related policy contexts, and PSOC related to one's new, local community. The present study examined whether Latinx immigrants' PSOC with their new local communities differed by legal immigration status across four U.S. states that had divergent immigration-related policies. It was hypothesized that PSOC would be weaker in states with more restrictive immigration-related policies, and that this association would be progressively more marked for immigrants without legal immigration authorization compared to those with legal immigration authorization and naturalized citizenship, respectively.

2. *Method*

2.1 *Design*

The present study used archival, de-identified data from a study approved by the University of Maryland Baltimore County Institutional Review Board. The larger study utilized an explanatory mixed-methods approach to examine socioecological factors shaping acculturation and well-being among Latinx immigrants across four states. Data for the current study were collected from a survey conducted in 2015. The team who collected the data included 14 bilingual (English/Spanish) community members and university students, with at least three from each study location. Members brought lived experience as first-generation immigrants, children of immigrants, and other U.S.-born individuals who identified as Latina, Black, and White. Team members had backgrounds in psychology, public health, transborder studies, and social services. Their cultural, linguistic, and community knowledge supported a research process grounded in trust and contextual understanding. For a more detailed methodological account, refer to Buckingham & Vargas Garcia (2018).

This study was carried out in four U.S. states: Arizona (AZ), Maryland (MD), New Mexico (NM), and Virginia (VA). The selection of states aimed to distinguish the influence of immigration-related policies shaping context of reception from geographical and demographic factors. AZ and NM, situated in the United States' Southwest region, share comparable demographics, such as their foreign-born populations, racial/ethnic composition, household size, English proficiency, education, income, and employment rates. However, their immigration-related policies diverge. On the other hand, MD and VA, located in the Mid-Atlantic of the United States, share similar demographics that are distinct from AZ and NM. As with AZ and NM, their policies differ. For instance, in NM and AZ, the majority of immigrants are predominantly from Mexico. In contrast, MD and VA have a smaller proportion of Latinx immigrants and have a more diverse array of countries within Latin America represented (United States Census Bureau, 2018).

Table 1. State-Level Immigration-Related Policies Based on Restrictiveness in 2015.

Policy	State			
	New Mexico Score = 3.00	Arizona Score = 17.00	Maryland Score = 3.50	Virginia Score = 13.33
Immigration status inquiry and enforcement				
Level of law enforcement inquiry of immigration status in the community	Moderate (2)	Severe (3)	None (0)	Severe (3)
Level of law enforcement inquiry of immigration status in custody	Moderate (2)	Severe (3)	Minimal (1)	Severe (3)
Employment				
Level of penalties for employers who hire workers without employment authorization	None (0)	Severe (3)	None (0)	None (0)
Level of requirement that employers participate in using E-Verify programs	None (0)	Severe (3)	None (0)	Moderate (2)
Level of penalties for immigrants seeking employment without authorization	None (0)	Severe (3)	None (0)	None (0)
Restrictions for immigrants seeking driver's licenses and state IDs without authorization	None (0)	Severe (3)	Minimal (1)	Severe (3)
Higher education				
Level of restriction from enrollment in higher education schools without authorization	None (0)	None (0)	None (0)	None (0)
Level of restriction from in-state tuition for students without legal immigration authorization	None (0)	Severe (3)	None (0)	Minimal (1)
Level of restriction from financial aid for students without legal immigration authorization	None (0)	Severe (3)	Severe (3)	Severe (3)
Voter identification requirements for immigrants without authorization	None (0)	Severe (3)	None (0)	Moderate (2)
Restrictions on housing and renting to immigrants without authorization	None (0)	Minimal (1)	None (0)	None (0)
Public benefits				
Restriction to accessing existing public benefit programs for immigrants without authorization	Minimal (1)	Minimal (1)	Minimal (1)	Severe (3)
Level of requirements for enrollment in public benefits for immigrants without authorization	Minimal (1)	Severe (3)	Minimal (1)	Severe (3)

Note. Total scores were calculated by reviewing the states' policies in place to create subdomain scores on a scale from 0 to 3 (0 = not restrictive/no law in place, 1 = minimally restrictive, 2 = moderately restrictive, 3 = severely restrictive). Subdomain scores were averaged to calculate a domain score, which were then summed to create each respective state's total score. Levels of restriction are in relation to federal policy and represent restriction above and beyond federal policy. In-state tuition and aid for higher education includes DACA recipients. For requirements for public benefits enrollment, AZ and VA check immigration status through SAVE. Restrictiveness is representative of policies in existence during 2015, the year data was collected for this study

State immigration-related policy restrictiveness scores were derived from a systematic coding of policies across seven domains: Immigration enforcement, public benefits, higher education, employment, driver's licenses/state IDs, housing, and language access. These domains reflect key structural elements of immigrants' daily lives and community integration, with demonstrated impacts on immigrant well-being and inclusion. Each domain was scored from 0 (inclusive) to 3 (restrictive) using a standardized rubric based on state law and policy documentation. Although some domains (e.g., enforcement, employment) may carry more direct implications for

immigrant precarity, we chose to weight all domains equally to enhance interpretability and avoid imposing subjective weightings; this approach is aligned with other efforts to index state-level immigration policy environments including the Immigrant Climate Index, the State Immigration Policy Climate Index, and legislative databases maintained by the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL). The resulting State Immigration Policy (SIP) scores represent a heuristic for understanding how structural inclusion or exclusion may shape immigrants' community experiences. Based on the composite scores, NM and MD were classified as having more inclusive policies whereas AZ and VA were classified as more restrictive (Samari et al., 2021; see Table 1). This pairing allowed for examination of how immigration-related policies were associated with variations in PSOC across distinct contexts.

2.2 Participants

Participants were eligible to participate if they were at least 18 years old, spoke English or Spanish; emigrated from a Spanish-speaking Latin American country; identified as Latina/o/x, Hispanic, or Chicana/o/x; and resided in one of the aforementioned states. While participants from any city or area in those four states were eligible to participate in the study, participants were recruited from urban centers within their states to improve comparability across the states. Participants were recruited from the following cities: Phoenix, AZ; Baltimore, MD; Albuquerque, NM; and Richmond, VA. Participants' specific location was determined by their zip code collected from the main survey. In Arizona, all participants resided in Maricopa County, the metropolitan area that includes Phoenix, with 48.0% living within Phoenix city limits. In Maryland, 78.9% of participants lived in Baltimore City, with the remainder in nearby counties. In New Mexico, 92.0% resided in Albuquerque, with the rest in surrounding areas. In Virginia, 60.6% lived in Richmond, with most others living in adjacent counties. The 407 participants were represented approximately equally across immigration status categories; they ranged in age from 18 to 77 and had immigrated to the United States from infancy to 62 years old (see Table 2).

2.3 Procedures

Recruitment was carried out in partnership with trusted community organizations and in public gathering places, such as educational programs, school programs, social service organizations, community organizing groups, Spanish-speaking religious institutions, Latinx student clubs, markets/grocery stores, neighborhood events, libraries, and cultural/immigrant liaison government offices. Approximately two-thirds of participants (65.6%) were directly recruited by multilingual research team members at diverse public locations. The remaining one-third were recruited from a friend or family member (13.7%), Latinx immigrant-facing community organization (13.2%), or another source (7.5%), such as flyers or radio programs. Researchers shared information about the study in both print and audio formats and communicated in participants' preferred languages, answering questions, and providing contact information. Following informed consent, participants could choose to complete the survey online or on paper in Spanish or English. Upon completion, they could also indicate future interest in participating in focus groups regarding the survey topics, and/or choose to enter a raffle for one of 13 \$30-\$100 Visa gift cards.

Table 2. Participant Background and Demographics.

Demographic variables	Full sample N = 407	Arizona N = 99	Maryland N = 114	New Mexico N = 99	Virginia N = 95
Age in years	37.87 (12.92)	37.20 (12.03)	35.98 (11.43)	44.43 (12.91)	33.99 (13.18)
Age at immigration	22.31 (11.67)	19.70 (10.61)	23.64 (9.23)	27.51 (13.87)	18.02 (10.58)
Time in the United States	16.56 (9.51)	18.51 (10.68)	13.34 (8.11)	17.93 (8.96)	16.97 (9.49)
Gender					
Female	60.5%	54.1%	71.9%	61.6%	52.1%
Male	38.5%	43.9%	28.1%	37.4%	46.8%
Transgender, Nonbinary, or Other	1.0%	2.0%	0%	1.0%	1.1%
Immigration status					
Unauthorized status	39.3%	33.3%	50.0%	41.4%	30.5%
Authorized status	30.0%	33.3%	28.1%	34.3%	24.2%
Naturalized citizenship	30.7%	33.3%	21.9%	24.2%	45.3%
Education level					
High school or less	53.8%	47.5%	62.3%	64.7%	39.0%
Some college or more	46.2%	52.5%	37.7%	35.4%	61.1%
Employment status					
Not working outside the home	25.3%	20.2%	36.0%	31.3%	11.6%
Working outside the home	74.7%	79.8%	64.0%	68.7%	88.4%
Family in the United States					
Yes	93.4%	92.9%	88.6%	95.0%	97.9%
No	6.6%	7.1%	11.4%	5.1%	2.1%

2.4 Measures

Psychological Sense of Community. Participants' PSOC with their local United States community was assessed using the Sense of Community Index, Second Edition (SCI-2; Chavis et al., 2008). The SCI-2 is available in both English and Spanish and consists of 24 items rated on a 4-point Likert scale. The measure is comprised of four dimensions of PSOC: Membership, fulfillment of needs, mutual influence, and shared emotional connection (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Participants' responses were summed, ranging from 24 to 96, with higher scores indicating a stronger positive PSOC ($M = 57.54$, $SD = 15.55$). Reliability of the measure is high, with a previously reported Cronbach's alpha of .94 across Latinx cultures and in both Spanish and English (Chavis et al., 2008). Internal consistency was high ($\alpha = .96$) for the current sample.

Immigration Status. Status in the immigration process was organized by grouping immigration status into three categories: Naturalized citizenship, authorized status (including current or renewed temporary stay permit, permanent stay permit, or other type of permit such as Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals [DACA]), and unauthorized status (including expired permit or no permit). Twelve open-ended statements were coded into one of these three immigration status categories. Furthermore, the minority of participants who declined to indicate their immigration status were combined with the unauthorized status group. This decision was based on prior literature suggesting that fear of disclosure is highest among immigrants without legal

immigration authorization (e.g., Government Accountability Office, 2006; Young & Madrigal, 2017), and thus declining to answer was likely related to legal precarity, as non-response rises when content is sensitive (Tourangeau & Yan, 2007). This grouping approach aligns with decisions made in related community-engaged research with immigrant populations in the United States (e.g., Cadenas et al., 2022). Other research has indicated that non-disclosure groups share demographic and social characteristics with unauthorized immigrants, making them analytically similar (e.g., Xie & Baumer, 2021).

Demographics. Demographic data included current state, country of origin, gender, education level, employment status, current age, age at immigration, and presence of family members in the United States. Participants' time lived in the United States was calculated by subtracting age at immigration from current age.

2.5 Data Analysis

Analyses were conducted using SPSS Statistics 29 software. Prior to analyses, a sensitivity analysis was conducted using G*Power 3.1 (Faul et al., 2007) with an alpha level of .05 and a power level of .80. Results indicated that an ANCOVA with 12 groups and six covariates was sufficiently powered to detect a moderate effect (Cohen's $f = 0.219$), corresponding to 4.6% of the variance in PSOC. Age, amount of time in the United States, education level, employment status, gender, and presence of family members in the United States were controlled for based on likelihood of potential influences to the outcomes (Brodsky et al., 1999; Hill, 1996). Education level, employment status, and presence of family members in the United States were transformed into binary variables for analyses as follows: Education (0 = high school diploma or less, 1 = some college or more), employment³ (0 = not employed outside the home, 1 = working in some capacity outside the home), and presence of family in the United States (0 = no, 1 = yes). Due to the limited number of participants of other genders, only participants who identified as a woman (0) or man (1) were included in the analysis sample to ensure reliable statistical analyses. Normality of data, linearity, and homogeneity of variance were examined during analyses with histograms and scatter plots.

3. Results

Correlational analyses were run to test whether the predetermined covariates were significantly related to PSOC (see Table 3). Age in years and presence of family in the United States were not significantly related to PSOC and subsequently left out of the ANCOVA model.

³ For employment status, *not employed outside of the home* included *unemployed and looking for work*, *unemployed and not looking for work*, *homemaker*, *retired*, and *unable*. For *working in some capacity outside the home*, the categories included were *self-employed*, *employed full-time*, *employed part-time*, and *student*.

Table 3. Intercorrelations of Study Variables.

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. PSOC	—								
2. State Policy Context [^]	.008	—							
3. Immigration status	.27***	.13*	—						
4. Time in the United States	.23***	.05	.44***	—					
5. Education	.19***	.17***	.53***	.18***	—				
6. Employment	.10*	.15**	.26***	.12**	.31***	—			
7. Age in years	.06	-.20***	.06	.50***	-.10*	-.12*	—		
8. Family in the United States	.06	.02	.10*	.19***	-.01	.12*	.04	—	
9. Gender	.11*	.09	-.09	.01	-.02	.26***	-.01	.08	—

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$. [^]This variable corresponds to the total immigration-related policy restrictiveness score for a given state based on Table 1.

A 4x3 factorial Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) was used to examine mean differences in PSOC across state and immigration status. Together, the set of variables controlled for a large amount of variance in PSOC ($\eta^2 = .15$; see Table 4). However, contrary to hypotheses, there was no significant interaction effect, suggesting that the association between immigration status and PSOC did not vary by state policy context. The main effect of state policy context on PSOC also did not reach statistical significance ($p = .052$). There was a main effect of immigration status on PSOC, suggesting that PSOC varied across immigration status groups. Neither a main effect of education nor employment status on PSOC was observed. However, there was a main, positive effect of time in the United States, suggesting that longer duration of residence was associated with stronger PSOC with the receiving community. Furthermore, a main, positive effect for gender was observed, indicating that men reported stronger PSOC.

Table 4. ANCOVAs for PSOC by State Policy Context and Immigration Status Controlling for Covariates.

Variables and measures	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	η^2
Overall model	4.42***	15, 385	<.001	.147
Immigration status	4.68**	2, 385	.010	.024
State Policy Context	2.60	3, 385	.052	.020
Immigration status*State	0.97	6, 385	.447	.015
Covariates				
Time in the United States	11.11***	1, 385	<.001	.028
Education	1.77	1, 385	.184	.005
Employment	0.50	1, 385	.830	<.001
Gender	8.84**	1, 385	.003	.022

Note. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Simple effects with Bonferroni adjustments were conducted to examine the relation between immigration status and PSOC (see Table 5). Consistent with the hypotheses, Latinx immigrants without legal immigration authorization had significantly weaker PSOC than their peers with either legal immigration authorization or naturalized citizenship, when controlling for time they had lived in the United States and their gender. Participants with legal immigration authorization and those who had become naturalized citizens did not significantly differ in their level of PSOC, when controlling for length of time lived in the United States and gender.

Table 5. Comparisons of PSOC by Immigration Status Controlling for Time in the United States and Gender.

Variables and measures	PSOC		Pairwise <i>M</i> Comparisons	
	Mean (<i>SE</i>)	95% CI	Unauthorized	Authorized
Immigration status				
Unauthorized status	53.81 (1.23)	51.40, 56.22		
Authorized status	58.93 (1.36)	56.25, 61.60	5.11*	
Naturalized citizenship	61.51 (1.46)	58.64, 64.39	7.70***	2.59

Note. * $p < .05$. *** $p < .001$.

4. Discussion

This study examined associations between state policy contexts (via state-level immigration-related policies) and immigration status on Latinx immigrants' PSOC with their receiving communities. We found that PSOC varied according to immigration status across contexts, such that Latinx immigrants without authorization reported weaker PSOC with their new communities compared to their authorized peers or those with naturalized citizenship, even when controlling for the amount of time they had lived in the country and their gender. As such, the results demonstrate that immigration status can be a factor in Latinx immigrants' PSOC development in their new community regardless of their state's immigration-related policies.

Legal immigration status is uniquely associated with the ways in which immigrants develop PSOC with their new communities. Participants without authorized immigration status presented the weakest levels of PSOC when compared to peers with authorization or naturalized citizenship. There was no statistically significant difference in PSOC between participants with authorization or naturalized citizenship. These patterns suggest that legal authorization on its own may serve as a protective factor for developing PSOC, as it can promote an increased sense of security, belonging, and possibility in one's community (Cobb et al., 2017; Dillon et al., 2018; Gelatt et al., 2017). When one's presence in a new community is marked by unclear permanence from the constant threat of deportation, the development of PSOC may be stifled. Existing research has also demonstrated that while all Latinx immigrants may face discrimination, those without legal immigration authorization are more likely to experience discrimination in ways that inhibit PSOC development (e.g., Szkupinski Quiroga et al., 2014; Valdez et al., 2013). Therefore, federal immigration reforms that create viable pathways to authorization and eventual citizenship are likely to promote stronger PSOC. At the local level, community-based organizations may wish to focus efforts on supporting immigrants with precarious statuses to develop PSOC; for example, they could design programming that intentionally fosters

interactions between immigrants with precarious immigration statuses and other residents, creating spaces where membership, mutual support, and influence can be cultivated. Additionally, expanding access to basic community supports—particularly in light of exclusion from many formal safety net programs based on legal immigration status in the United States—may help fulfill needs and bolster PSOC.

The findings also indicate that PSOC development is associated with length of residence in the United States, which dovetails with other research suggesting that when length of residence increases and more opportunities for engagement in a community are available, PSOC is strengthened (e.g., Maya-Jariego & Armitage, 2007; Millán-Franco, Gómez-Jacinto, Hombrados-Mendieta, García-Martín, et al., 2019). Length of residence in a community has been shown to uniquely impact specific components of PSOC, such as promoting active membership in the community, feeling a responsibility to other community members, and a sense of belonging within the community (Levinson et al., 2007; McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Increased length of residence can also promote stronger support from one's family and the local receiving community (Millán-Franco, Gómez-Jacinto, Hombrados-Mendieta, González-Castro, et al., 2019). Therefore, policies and programs that encourage long-term settlement may be especially beneficial for PSOC development, such as protections from deportation, opportunities for permanent residence, and family reunification policies. Community interventions that actively engage recent arrivals in civic, cultural, and neighborhood activities may also help newcomers build meaningful connections more quickly. Research shows that people often develop the strongest sense of community in small, relational groups such as friends, faith communities, and local organizations (Buckingham, Brodsky, et al., 2018; Buckingham, Emery, et al., 2018; Buckingham et al., 2024; McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Prezza et al., 2008). Moreover, when diverse community members interact as equals on shared goals, such contact can foster belonging, whereas negative encounters undermine it (Buckingham, 2025; Buckingham, Brodsky, et al., 2018; Gaertner et al., 1996; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). These findings suggest that interventions should intentionally create spaces of shared membership where immigrants and long-term residents can interact in affirming ways, build mutual support, and work towards common goals together.

Time spent in the United States and certain immigration statuses are inherently interrelated, but imperfectly. For example, while authorized immigrants are required to live within the United States for at least five years before becoming eligible for naturalized citizenship (United States Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2021), unauthorized immigrants may remain in the United States indefinitely without legal immigration authorization (Taylor et al., 2011). Therefore, taken together, these variables have a large association with PSOC, while each individual variable shows a smaller unique association when controlling for the others. Further, men reported higher PSOC than women in this study. Interestingly, this difference does not appear to be attributable to labor market access, as employment outside the home was not associated with PSOC. Instead, the gender gap may reflect other dynamics, such as caregiving responsibilities, gendered experiences of discrimination, or safety concerns, that may constrain women's opportunities to cultivate belonging in their new communities (Bauloz et al., 2024; Salami et al., 2019). These findings highlight the importance of developing community supports that intentionally foster membership and belonging among people who have lived in the United States for shorter periods of time and particularly immigrant women.

PSOC did not vary significantly by state policy contexts in this sample. This may signify that state-level immigration-related policies are not associated with PSOC. Alternatively, the multitude of factors that shape one's experience of a receiving context may make it difficult to isolate the specific effects of state-level immigration policies. For example, a context of reception includes community-wide values pertaining to universalism (Davidov et al., 2014) or multiculturalism (Elliott et al., 2010); community histories such as relation to colonialism (Koopmans & Michalowski, 2017); present-day concerns in the community and the related attitudes regarding xenophobia and safety (Elliott et al., 2010); general economic worries and concern for occupational competition (Davidov et al., 2014); ethnicity, cultural characteristics, and immigration histories of receiving community members (Jaworsky et al., 2012; Maggio, 2021); and the nationality and ethnicity of new immigrants (Stepick & Dutton Stepick, 2009). Moreover, implementation of immigration policies is not always consistent across communities, further obfuscating their potential effects. Related research from this dataset has demonstrated that inconsistent policy implementation, policy changes, and the presence of competing authority systems that immigrants must navigate shapes the impact of expressed policies (Buckingham & Angulo, 2022). When it comes to developing PSOC with their new communities, immigrants may be more impacted by policy enforcement and the community's reception to immigrants than the presence of any single policy (Rhodes et al., 2015).

Further, immigrants are nested in multiple receiving contexts and thus local or national contexts of reception may obscure the impact of any one state characteristic (Golash-Boza & Valdez, 2018). In the years since these data were collected, the United States has seen increased punitive actions toward immigrants, including mass immigration raids, the revocation of lawfully attained work permits, the detention of lawfully present migrants, and escalating efforts at deportation; such actions have created conditions of fear, insecurity, and instability that may further disrupt the development of PSOC across multiple contexts (Buckingham, 2024; Oberoi et al., 2025). Given that findings from this study indicate immigrants without legal immigration authorization are especially at risk for weaker PSOC, these national trends are likely to exacerbate existing disparities. Within this broader climate, local policymakers, immigration-oriented organizations, and communities have an important role to play in fostering safe and inclusive environments that can strengthen immigrants' PSOC (Brodsky et al., 2022; Buckingham & Brodsky, 2020; Buckingham et al., 2021).

4.1 Limitations and Future Directions

These results must be considered within the context of their limitations. Notably, this study is cross-sectional and thus causality cannot be determined. Further, since the data were first collected in 2015, three different federal administrations have been in power, federal immigration policies have changed, and many immigration-related policies have shifted at the state level. Just as immigration policy changes over time, so does community reception to immigrants (Levinson et al., 2007). The archival data included Latinx participants from four states in the United States, and participants who did not report their immigration status were grouped with those who reported lacking legal immigration authorization. Participants who identified as transgender or nonbinary were not represented. Additionally, because many participants were recruited through public-facing community organizations or referrals, the sample may

overrepresent socially connected individuals, potentially limiting generalizability to more isolated or disconnected Latinx immigrants. The results therefore are limited in their generalizability to other states, communities, immigrant populations, and time periods.

Although overall statistical power was adequate (observed power > .99), post-hoc analyses suggested limited ability to detect the interaction given the small effect observed. Immigration status along with significant covariates had high observed power, increasing confidence in these effects. In contrast, the interaction between immigration status and policy restrictiveness had low observed power (< .40), suggesting that non-significant findings for these variables should be interpreted with caution.

Immigration-related policy is only one component of the overall context of reception immigrants face (Schwartz et al., 2014). Future research should examine other community-level factors that shape immigrants' PSOC with their new communities to inform community interventions, and how to best foster PSOC among immigrants at each stage of the immigration process. Furthermore, additional research could employ multilevel modeling to account for the nested nature of immigrants' experiences across contexts, and to disentangle how factors at different ecological levels interact to shape PSOC.

Future research should examine specific relations between the separate subdomains of PSOC and immigration-related policies. For example, integration and fulfillment of needs may be uniquely impacted by welcoming immigration-related policies (Huo et al., 2018), whereas the other subdomains of PSOC may not be as particularly affected. Further, future work should investigate how intersections of immigration status, gender, and length of time in the United States shape both barriers and opportunities for PSOC, and how community-based supports can mitigate disparities.

4.2 Summary

This study offers evidence that Latinx immigrants' legal immigration statuses and their length of residences in the United States is related to PSOC development with their new communities. Across differing state contexts, Latinx immigrants without legal immigration authorization demonstrated significantly weaker levels of PSOC than their authorized counterparts or those who had naturalized citizenship. Moreover, longer residence in the United States corresponded with stronger PSOC. This pattern was also evident among men, who reported higher levels of PSOC. Therefore, community-based efforts for fostering PSOC amongst Latinx immigrants should specifically support newer immigrants, women, and those without legal immigration authorization. Systemic changes, such as immigration reform and the development of welcoming communities that encourage immigrants to continue to reside and participate fully in them, are needed to cultivate PSOC.

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