



DREAMers Study: Undocumented College Students, Social Exclusion and Psychological Distress

Rosalie A. Torres Stone, PhD¹²

Clark University¹ and UMass Systems and Psychosocial Advances Research Center (SPARC)²

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Contact info: rtorresstone@clarku.edu

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Overview

- Despite growing up and receiving primary and secondary (K-12) education in the U.S., many undocumented young adults cannot legally work, vote or drive in most U.S. states, or received federal financial aid for college tuition (*Gonzales et. al., 2013*).
- While some provisions allow undocumented youth to attend primary and secondary schooling, none of these provisions provides a pathway to citizenship – limiting their full participation in society.
- Studies show that fear of deportation/detainment, loneliness, increased anxiety, and depression are central, emotional concerns of undocumented students (*Cavazos-Rehg, Zayas & Snitznagel, 2007; Gonzales et. al., 2013; Smith, Bradley, James & Huang, 2006; Young & Dietrich, 2015*).
- These negative social and psychological effects can further limit the ability for undocumented youth to fully participate in society even after receiving an undergraduate degree.
- This is important because decreased social networks and chronic stress have been shown to be negatively impact physical and mental health outcomes (*Thoits, 2011*).

Background



- Approximately 43.3 million foreign born people live in United States.
- In 2016, an estimated 11.3 million unauthorized immigrants lived in the United States (*Krogstad, Passel D'Vera, 2017, Pew Center*).
- In 2014, 42% of the unauthorized population – around 4.5 million were visa over stayers
- Approximately 2/3 (67%) of the *new unauthorized arrivals* in 2014 entered the U.S. in legal nonimmigrant visas and overstayed their visa's validity period.
- The majority of unauthorized immigrants are long-term residents in the United States. In 2014, the average length of stay was 13.6 years.
- Over 7 million people live in mixed status families.

Background

- An estimated 5.1 million U.S. children under the age of 18 live with at least one unauthorized parent.
- Of these children, an estimated 959,000 (19%) were undocumented (Capps, Fix, & Zong, 2016) - often referred to as the 1.5 generation by scholars.
- Although not born in the United States, these children have grown up in the US and have received primary and secondary schooling in the US.
- Approximately 65,000 undocumented students who have lived in the United States for five or more years graduate from high school each year (Nunez & Holthaus, 2017) and approximately 7,000 to 13,000 undocumented students enroll in college throughout the United States (http://www.e4fc.org/images/Fact_Sheet.pdf).

Plyler v. Doe

- As stated previously, while some provisions allow undocumented youth to attend primary and secondary schooling, none of these provisions provides a pathway to citizenship – limiting their full participation in society.
- ***Plyler v. Doe***
 - Any child, regardless of immigration status, is eligible for free primary and secondary education under a 1982 Supreme Court decision.

Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act (DREAM) Act – 2001 (repeatedly failed to pass)

Would have offered those who had arrived illegally/unauthorized as children the chance of permanent legal residency valid up to eight years.

Beneficiaries of the DREAM Act must meet the following requirements:

- Be between the ages of 12 and 35 at the time the Law is enacted
- Arrived in the United States before the age of 16
- Resided continuously in the United States for at least 5 consecutive years since the date of their arrival
- Graduated from a US high school or obtained a general education diploma
- Good moral character
- In addition to the temporary residency, unauthorized immigrant students who qualified would also be entitled to apply for student loans and work study but **would not be eligible for Pell grants.**
- After having obtained and held conditional resident status, *permanent residency* may be granted if the following requirements have been met in a period of six years.

Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) – A federal government program launched by the Obama Administration in 2012

Allows people brought to the US unauthorized as children the temporary right to live, study and work in the US.

- Young people (born on or after June 16, 1981) who came to the U.S. before the age of 16.
- Don't have lawful immigration status.
- Have lived continuously in the U.S. since June 15, 2007.
- You must be at least 15 years old
- Currently in school or a graduate of high school or GED recipient or honorably discharged military veteran.
- You must also have a clean criminal record and pass a background check.

Trump to end DACA...

- On September 5, 2017, President Donald Trump stated that he will end DACA on March 2018 and would give lawmakers six months to agree on an immigrant reform package to legalize DACA.
- By the time Trump announced his decision to rescind the program, 787,580 had been granted approval.
- Those with work permits expiring between September 5, 2017 and March 5, 2018 will be allowed to apply for renewal by October 5, 2017
- New applications would no longer be accepted
- For those currently in the program, their legal status and other Daca-related permits (such as to work and attend college) will begin expiring in March 2018 – **unless Congress passes legislation allowing a new channel for temporary or permanent legal immigration status** – Dreamers will all lose their status by March 2020.

Top countries of origin for DACA recipients

Current DACA enrollees

	Total	%
Mexico	548,000	79.4
El Salvador	25,900	3.7
Guatemala	17,700	2.6
Honduras	16,100	2.3
Peru	7,420	1.1
South Korea	7,310	1.1
Brazil	5,780	0.8
Ecuador	5,460	0.8
Colombia	5,020	0.7
Argentina	3,970	0.6
Philippines	3,880	0.6
India	2,640	0.4
Jamaica	2,640	0.4
Venezuela	2,480	0.4
Dominican Republic	2,430	0.4

Note: Only refers to individuals who are active DACA recipients, as of Sept. 4, 2017. Figures rounded by USCIS. Only top 15 countries shown.

Source: U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.

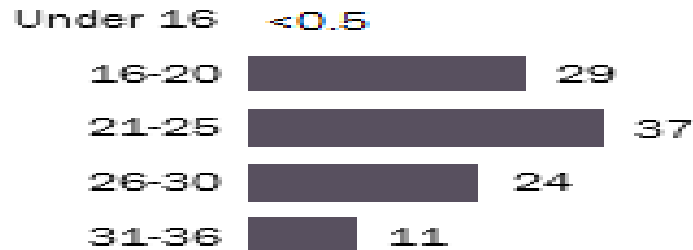
Most 'Dreamers' enrolled in DACA are ages 25 and younger

% of current DACA enrollees

Sex



Age



Marital Status



Note: Only refers to individuals who are active DACA recipients, as of Sept. 4, 2017. Data "not available" for sex, age and marital status not shown.

Source: U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services.

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Objectives

- This purpose of this research is twofold:
 - (1) to extend our current understanding of the impact of undocumented status on the mental health of college students, and
 - (2) identify supports to undocumented college students that may help facilitate academic success in college. This work has implications for improving counseling support and mental health services on campus for undocumented students.

Methods

- One-hour one-time, audio-taped open-ended qualitative interviews were conducted either in-person or via phone with undocumented college students who:
 - came to the US at age 15 or younger
 - attended college as undocumented, remain undocumented
 - attended college in Massachusetts or New Jersey
 - speak English
 - who are not institutionalized and are currently attending college;
 - and can legally attend college but are not eligible for federal government sponsored financial aid.

Methods

- The interviews were based on prior work conducted by Cardemil and colleagues (2015) that explored the relationship among how individuals conceptualize and experience their mental health challenges, their attitudes and beliefs about coping with these challenges, and their experiences with the mental health care system (Table 1).
- We used snowball sampling to recruit study participants.



Table 1: Interview questions

1.	Let's talk about the common challenges people experience on a day to day basis – that you have experienced, your family and/or friends have experienced, or that you've heard other individuals in the community have experienced, and so on.
2.	You've talked about your life stressors and challenges. As you can imagine, we think that these things are deeply connected to mental health. What do you think about mental health more generally?
3.	What are the different ways in which you or other individuals in your community manage these stressors?
4.	What have your experiences or others' experiences that you know been with trying to access mental health services?
5.	Do you have any recommendations about the provision of services on your campus, or services that don't exist that you'd like to see exist, or additional social assistance programs?

Preliminary Results

Demographics (N=15)

- 60% female (N=9) and 40% male (N=6)
- 73% Latino/a (N=11)
- Ages 18-30
- Race and Ethnicity (self-identified)
 - Mexican 53%
 - Honduran 7%
 - Salvadoran 20%
 - Nigerian 7%
 - Brazilian 7%
 - Afro Caribbean (St. Lucia) 7%
 - Bangali 7%

Preliminary Findings

Preliminary results indicate that undocumented college students experience several life stressors that place them at risk for poor mental health:

Stressors

- financial insecurities related to paying college tuition,
- stress induced from “navigating the system” on their own,
- feelings of isolation and instances of social sacrifices,
- constantly hiding their ethnic identity and status for fear of being judged, fear of being deported or having everything taken away,
- barriers to developmental milestones (e.g., obtaining, a driver’s license, voting, school and work) due to their undocumented status.

Preliminary Findings

Coping and Help-Seeking

- Family support, self-determination, listening to other people's stories, religion, and music and art are various strategies used to cope with psychological distress.

Mental health viewed in your community

- Mental illness is highly stigmatized in their communities and families limiting the likelihood they would seek help for their psychological distress.

Uncertainty of Future/Blocked Opportunities

“There was a point where I was thinking, ‘why am I even trying? I can’t get into college and even if I can I won’t be able to afford it.’ I was also thinking, ‘I don’t want to be a financial burden. They already have bills to pay, my clothes, food. To see how much college cost [I knew they couldn’t afford this].’ During high school I stopped doing my work, I stopped caring. In middle school I got straight As but when I got to high school it all changed. **In the inside, I had so much fear and anger. I felt a lot of hopelessness.”**

Uncertainty of Future/Blocked Opportunities

- “My father always instilled in us the value of education. He has this saying, ‘A que se va la escuela? A aprender, a estudiar, y hacer algo en la vida [translation: What is school for? To learn and study, and to do something in life].’ it didn’t become an issue until high school. I’ve always kind of known that high school would be it for me because of money. I also had preconceived notions that made me think I wasn’t going any further.... **I hate seeing the line, “Must be a U.S. citizen.” It was another door being shut in my face.** It made me think that I better make the best of these next four years because that’s all I am going to get..”

Fear of Deportation

- “My dad got pulled over once and he had a court date to go to...I went with him to court and I was paranoid – I thought he would never come out....He thought this was it. I had school that day, my mind was like pre-occupied (in high school, sophomore year). Once I go in - who knows what will happen...luckily all we had to do was pay for the flat tire, they didn't check documents. We were so relieved.”

Financial Insecurities

“Its been a burden more so economically. Scholarships for example have caused me some trouble. There are a lot of them out there, most of which I cannot apply for. Of those that are for “undocumented” people, many are specific for DACA-mented persons and those still don’t apply to me. And in high school for example, there is a scholarship that a lot of people received. It is for low income persons but I wasn’t able to receive it because of my status.”

Social Supports

“My mom has been a huge help. She is a “holder” of all our struggles and pain. It’s affecting her a lot, she has heart problems, high blood pressure. She is falling apart. She holds it in, and says it’s her problem not ours.”

Social Supports

“I was lucky to be able to go to my counselor. I told her what DACA was. She made a bunch a phone calls. If it wasn’t for her I wouldn’t have been able to get the scholarships.”

Stigma and Mental Health

“Eso es para locos [translation: that’s for the crazy people]...depression not a thing – they are like get over it – what’s wrong with you – something not serious....my aunt hears me out – my parents on the other hand – they wouldn’t really understand – they come from a machismo culture don’t express emotions have to move on...”

Conclusion

“Understand that we didn’t choose this life. I’m still a person and that doesn’t define me....I have the same dreams and goals to go to college that you do...undocumented classmates have grown up immersed in American culture as any citizen and have education in American schools.”

Recommendations

- Long-term exposure to psychological distress can have a long-lasting negative impact on overall health and mental health. To mitigate these risks, colleges should consider ***emotional, instrumental, and informational support***:
- Making mental health counseling services more accessible, provide staff trainings on cultural competency and immigration policies, & provide support for the transition from high school to college and beyond
- Providing more social-structural supports (e.g., peer support groups)
- Raising awareness about the presence of undocumented students on campus and the issues they, (e.g., resource guides, outreach and educational events)