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*Where Do We Go From Here
Undocumented Youth and an Effort Requiring the Entire Village?*

Congress' failure to pass the DREAM Act has left more than 2 million children and young adults in a legal limbo. Political experts believe that federal legislation addressing their particular circumstances will not be brought up for at least two years. While urgent needs for legalization may have to wait, the problems they confront on a daily basis likely will not. Their circumstances compel local-level policy makers, educators, institutional agents, and community leaders to develop a comprehensive set of strategies and policy solutions aimed at providing more immediate support and assistance.

Research suggests that this sizeable and vulnerable subset of the immigrant population is at risk of becoming a disenfranchised underclass, cut off from the very means through which to lift itself out of poverty.ⁱ To be sure, undocumented immigrant youth—those who migrate at early ages and reside in the United States without legal permission—confront a troubling mix of circumstances.ⁱⁱ Their tenuous situation stems from a confluence of confusing and contradictory laws that allow them to legally attend school and, thus, be integrated into the legal and social framework of the U.S., but deny them the opportunities to work, vote, receive financial aid, and drive in most states, just as they are finishing high school. Most importantly, at any time, they can be deported to countries they barely know.

While legalization would remedy many of troubles these young people face, *it is not the only solution* to a complex and interconnected web of problems. In the absence of federal legislation that would put these young people on a pathway to legal inclusion, there are many local-level

policy measures and community efforts that can still be put in place.

A burgeoning body of research has begun to inform us about these youngsters and the effects of non-legal status on their lives. While their material conditionsⁱⁱⁱ place them at risk growing up, much of their problems take root in late adolescence when the world which was largely accessible to them in childhood and through their participation in K-12 schools starts to dramatically shrink. Of primary importance, the inability to legally work or receive financial aid severely constricts labor market and educational options. However, families' limited economic means leaves many without financial assistance.^{iv} Instead, they are forced into the low-wage labor market, to help their struggling families.

Current policies leave these youngsters without many options. Because of legal exclusions, higher education is one of the few pursuits legally accessible to them. However, because of barriers to higher education—notably exclusion from financial aid and resource-poor families—a small percentage actually matriculates. What is left to do for those not enrolled in post-secondary institutions? In reality, there is very little. And, in fact, we might imagine that the negative effects of such exclusions for a population that is culturally American to be several.

Policy Proposal

What can local leaders do? Research shows that supportive school environments, positive peer groups, adult mentors, and extracurricular involvement boost academic performance and raise levels of self-esteem. Schools can assist



more undocumented youth to matriculate to college by providing opportunities for mentorship. Local institutions can raise, and make available through scholarships, funds to help meet tuition costs. Communities can provide a wider range of legally accessible activities through which to involve more undocumented young people in productive activity. And community health professionals can mobilize resources to treat mental and physical health issues related to accumulated stress and worry.

A. Improve the Pipeline

Beyond legalization, it is clear that the low post-secondary matriculation rates of undocumented immigrant students call for greater efforts to move them through the educational pipeline. The majority of undocumented youth fails to reach college after high school. Given economic demands and limited options, the longer they stay out of high school, the further away they are from potential eligibility for legalization. Moreover, once out of school, it becomes more difficult to return. Peers are powerful influences on undocumented youth and their educational trajectories.^v Targeted efforts in high school to connect undocumented students with peers who share their experiences and college mentors who understand the legal and financial hurdles could yield a big payoff.

Further, undocumented students are in particular need of adult guidance and support during the important juncture between high school and life beyond. Positive school-based relationships can help students to excel in school by providing them with access to information about college, much-needed support, and assistance in applying for college.^{vi} For undocumented students, these relationships are especially crucial. By helping them to move on to college, school personnel can preserve the legal protection school provides and help students to access important financial support.

College access is one thing. Retention is another matter. Mentorship and support in post-secondary institutions are cornerstones to success.

B. Community Efforts

Although the particular circumstances of undocumented youth undoubtedly warrant a broader discussion about legalization, immediate integration efforts are of equal importance. The difficulties they face, particularly in their last years of high school, compel us to think also of the individual experiences of being excluded.

When health care officials, social service providers, and community police perform immigration-enforcement duties, the odds of them retreating into the shadows, not seeking they help they need and becoming susceptible to the lure of illicit activities become even greater^{vii} But if they are invited to greater levels of inclusion, their participation allows them to stay productive and motivated, while benefiting the broader community. Efforts aimed at the development of trusting relationships and a broadening of access to community activities and opportunities are especially important. Chambers of commerce, police districts, community service agencies, schools, and other neighborhood institutions can play a vital role by expanding the menu of legally permissible community level pursuits—job training programs, internships, community service opportunities, leadership development, and recreational programs, to name a few.

Finally, individual-level attention must be paid to the mental and physical health consequences of legal exclusion. Adolescence is a difficult time for many young people. But for those whose transitions also entail a shift in their legal landscape, there are urgent needs for support. Counseling and mentorship, in particular, are critical towards efforts to reduce stress and anxiety, and help undocumented youth and young adults to navigate their social worlds.



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Legalization has been a long and entrenched battle. In the absence of federal solutions, local-level decisions regarding health care, education, law enforcement, and general access to social and political institutions can help shape the lives of undocumented youth.^{viii} Contemporary immigration is taking shape differently than it did a century ago. The increased presence of undocumented immigrants—young and old—compels us to make important decisions about their role in communities. However, to do so, it is important that we move beyond one-size-fits-all approaches to this complex set of issues.

ⁱ Since 2003 I have been engaged in an ongoing, in-depth study of undocumented immigrant young adults. This research has taken place in two strategic sites on the West Coast. From 2003 to 2007 and then again in 2009, I conducted extensive fieldwork in Los Angeles and 150 individual life-history interviews with undocumented young adults (20-34 years old) who migrated before the age of 12 (known in the academic literature as the 1.5 generation). The second study began in 2009 in the state of Washington, involving young adults of the same age, immigrant generation, and immigrant status.

ⁱⁱ Gonzales, Roberto G. 2007. "Wasted Talent and Broken Dreams: The Lost Potential of Undocumented Students." *Immigration Policy In Focus*. Washington, D.C.: American Immigration Law Foundation.

ⁱⁱⁱ Chavez, Leo R. 1998. *Shadowed Lives: Undocumented Immigrants in American Society*. Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers; Hondagneu-Sotelo, Pierrette. 1994. *Gendered Transitions: Mexican Experiences of Immigration*. Berkeley, California.: University of California Press; Zolniski, Christian. 2006. *Janitors, street vendors and activists: The lives of Mexican immigrants in Silicon Valley*. Berkeley and London: University of California Press.

^{iv} Fuligni, Andrew J. and Sara Pedersen. 2002. "Family Obligation and the Transition to Young Adulthood," *Developmental Psychology* 38, 5: pp. 856-68; Suarez-Orozco, Carola, and Marcelo Suarez-Orozco, 1995. *Transformations: Migration, Family Life, and Achievement Motivation among Latino Adolescents*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

^v Abrego, Leisy J. 2006. "I Can't Go to College Because I Don't Have Papers: Incorporation Patterns of Undocumented Latino Youth." *Latino Studies*, 4: 212-231; Gonzales, Roberto G. 2010. "On the Wrong Side of the Tracks: The Consequences of School Stratification Systems for Unauthorized Mexican Students." *Peabody Journal of Education*, Volume 85 Issue 4, 469.

^{vi} Gonzales, Roberto G. 2010. "On the Wrong Side of the Tracks: The Consequences of School Stratification Systems for Unauthorized Mexican Students." *Peabody Journal of Education*, Volume 85 Issue 4, 469; Perez-Huber, Lindsay, and Maria C. Malagon. 2007. Silenced Struggles: The Experiences of Latina and Latino Undocumented College Students in California. *Nevada Law Journal*, 7, 841-861; Portes, Alejandro, and Patricia Fernandez-Kelly. 2008. "No Margin for Error: Educational and Occupational Achievement among Disadvantaged Children of Immigrants." *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 620; 12, pp. 12-36.

^{vii} Gonzales, Roberto G. 2009. "Why Integration Matters: Undocumented Immigrant Youth and Making a Case for Moving Beyond Enforcement." *The Role of Local Police: Striking A Balance Between Immigration Enforcement and Civil Liberties*, The Police Foundation.

^{viii} Marrow, Helen B. 2009. "Immigrant Bureaucratic Incorporation: The Dual Roles of Professional Missions and Government Policies." *American Sociological Review*, 74:5, pp. 756-776.

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