

Spring 4-23-2022

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Recommended Citation

Reyes, Flor, "Undocumented Students and Mental Health" (2022). *Student Capstone Projects*. 11.
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Undocumented Students and Mental Health

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Spring 2022

February 20, 2022

Abstract Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals also known as DACA was first implemented in 2012 after many failed attempts to legalize the millions of undocumented people in this country. DACA was an executive order of former President Obama. This program provides temporary relief from deportation and a work permit that allows those under this program to legally work in the United States. DACA has allow many undocumented people who arrived to this country at a young age in the hopes of leading a somewhat normal life. Some of those who are protected by this program have gone to college, built their own businesses, and became first time homeowners. Higher education in this country is extremely expensive. While citizens generally have access to financial aid, people that fall under DACA do not have the opportunity to access any kind of federal aid or grants towards college due to their legal status. Many rely on private scholarships and on their own income. Higher education can be extremely stressful to navigate especially when you are the first one in your family to ever attend an institution of higher education. To what extent is mental health affected by being undocumented? Anxiety, depression, suicidal thoughts, and social pressures are some of the mental health problems that were prevalent among the participants. The primary mental health problem that was present was anxiety and stress related to the financial burdens and uncertainty stemming from their own legal status. For this study I interviewed undocumented/DACA students at Northern Illinois University. Due to the pandemic and to allow more flexibility interviews were completed online.

Introduction

Being undocumented in the United States, especially when this is the only country you have known can be extremely stressful, full of fears, depression, and in some instances traumatic for not having that piece of paper that proves your worth. This research study includes a brief description of the DACA program, literature review on mental health and undocumented status, methodology, and the findings of first and second hand qualitative and quantitative data. This research ends with the implications of the research and the recommendations. It is fundamental to research this area because not only does it help higher education institutions to better understand undocumented students, but it can also help doctors and others in the healthcare field to better serve this community that faces many challenges.

Undocumented immigrants oftentimes are escaping traumatic experience from their home country that affect their living situations. In more recent years we have seen a crisis in our southern boarder with many immigrants escaping poverty, war, violence, and other crimes. In more recent weeks we have seen Ukrainians trying to cross the border into the United States from Mexico due to the war that is happening in their country at the moment. According to an article on NPR “Ukrainians fleeing the war have been arriving at the Mexico’s northern border cities by the thousands” (Florido, 2022).

I encourage others to take part in research to better understand and answer the question of to what extend mental health is affected by being undocumented and how different factors can contribute to this. Mental health among the undocumented community especially among the Latino community is often seen as a taboo. Being part of this community, I have been exposed to comments that indifference mental health as a problem. Our community has been known to be

hard workers and are often times told to “suck it up”. The stigma among mental health in the undocumented community can be present in our social/public lives, self-stigma, and institutional stigma. Having more research and information about mental health among the undocumented community can help many different institutions to better serve this community. Higher education institutions can have a better understanding of the challenges that undocumented students face while attending their institution and can identify areas where help is needed for the success of their students. Healthcare facilities can also use data to better understand the needs of this community and it can help to avoid any misdiagnoses due to the lack of background about the needs of this community.

The community can have a better understanding of the many challenges this community faces and how local governments or local nonprofits can provide or advocate for more mental health facilities that are staffed with people that can understand their language, culture, and experiences as an immigrant in this country. General mental health in this country has been a problem for many years and in more recent years as our world faces war, poverty and division among our communities I believe that it is important to make mental health accessibly a top priority to governments. During the pandemic we saw many people losing their jobs and we were all exposed to the high numbers of deaths due to covid around the world. We saw staff shortages in every field. It has become almost impossible to access mental health services in the past two years as counselors and psychologists are booked and their next available appointment is months ahead.

Literature Review

Undocumented immigrants especially those that come to this country illegally often times are carrying many years of trauma due to violence, poverty and other socioeconomic factors that force them to immigrate to another country for a better life. Once they have arrived in this country many are faced with inability to access healthcare due to the lack of resources or due to language barriers. Undocumented students in higher education oftentimes find themselves having to navigate through this complicated phase on their own without any family support or any financial support. Financial stressors and the uncertainty of their legal status can lead to major mental health problems in the undocumented student community.

This literature review will discuss the DACA program, barriers to health care access and how these barriers contribute to stress, and it will also discuss how the legal status of the undocumented youth has had on their mental health and accessibility to health care.

History

In 2012 President Obama enacted the Deferred Actions for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) after many failed attempts to provide legal status to undocumented immigrants who were brought to this country as children. DACA recipients are eligible for temporary relief from deportation, that must be renewed every two years, recipients are financially responsible for any associated fees as well. Those protected by the DACA program are eligible to obtain a social security number, this creates the opportunity to obtain a driver's license, establish credit history, open a bank account, credit cards and most importantly allows individuals to legally work in the United States. This has not only improved the labor market, but it has also decreased poverty

among DACA recipients. Even though DACA is not a permanent solution it has provided some relief to those under the program.

Barriers

Coming to a different country where you do not know the language and the culture can be stressful by itself. “Acculturation is the process of culture change and adaption that occurs when individuals with different cultures come into contact” (Gibson, 2001, p. 19). Acculturation often can lead to high levels of stress and depression for individuals as they are trying to adapt to a new environment, they are not familiar with. Once these children come into adulthood, they can begin to experience high levels of stress and due to their legal status, they can miss out on many opportunities like attending college and experiencing the college life. Many immigrants, especially those that come to this country unlawfully, are for the most part escaping poverty, war, violence, and political persecution just to name a few of the dangerous conditions that they may be escaping. These immigrants have faced trauma in their country of origin or on their journey to this country. Those that are undocumented in this country are most vulnerable to exploitation by employers, marginalization, racism, hate crimes and are in constant fear of deportation. These circumstances can lead to mental health problems due to high levels of stress and vulnerability (Landale et al., 2015).

Not having legal status in the Unites States can restrict accessibility to health care. Currently, undocumented immigrants are unable to obtain health insurance under the open market also known as Obama Care. In most states this group of people can obtain health insurance privately or through their employer if they offer such a benefit. Obtaining insurance in the private market can be out of reach for many, especially undocumented immigrants, as the price can be incredibly high compared to benefits offered through an employer. Kamal and

Killian (2015) mention how mental health services are rarely offered to the undocumented community. They also believe that many of their health issues are ignored due to ignorance, cultural barriers such as language and due to the lack of financial resources. This is often true in states where undocumented communities are not welcomed. States and local governments often use fear and create laws targeting immigrants to decrease their numbers in their state or community. Kamal and Killian do a great job in explaining the employment and financial stressors that being undocumented can have on one's mental health. Kamal and Killian (2015) qualitative study examined the experiences of undocumented youth and the mental health impact of living in fear of deportation. Their results showed that those who are undocumented are more likely to suffer from mental health issues than those with a legal status in this country. On the other hand, a systemic review by Hamilton et al. (2019) on physical health disparities by legal status among farm immigrants in the United States suggested that there was no disparity in physical health among immigrants by legal status. Their study suggests that unauthorized farm workers reported lower chronic conditions and musculoskeletal pain than those with authorization to work in the United States. Hamilton et al. (2019) study focus is on physical health, but I believe that this can also lead to mental health problems such as stress due to the lack of health care accessibility or fear of loss of employment due to reported physical health conditions. The authors of this study might have found their results to be shocking, but I believe that they are accurate based on the social economic differences between both groups. Those who have a legal status generally have a better income than those that are unauthorized which gives them the access to health insurance and other benefits that the undocumented have much less accessibility to. I also believe that many of the people interviewed for this study may have lied about their legal status out of fear. Also, the author points out that unauthorized farm workers are

more likely to have a health condition but less likely have had it diagnosed (Hamilton et al., 2019). This can be tied back to how several undocumented immigrants can be misdiagnosed or ignored by doctors due to many different factors such as ignorance, racism, or inability to access health care.

Employment and Financial Stressors

Mental health issues in the undocumented community are not just due to their legal status but also to employment and financial stressors. Many immigrants especially those that are undocumented are forced to work for lower wages and in many cases in unsafe working conditions. Working in such conditions can result in many physical and mental health problems. Constant exploitation and inability to overcome the poverty line can lead to depression, anxiety, hopelessness, and high levels of stress (Kamal and Killian, 2015). Unsafe working conditions and discrimination in the workplace and in the day to day lives of individuals can also have a great impact on their mental health. Williams (2015) agrees that incidents such as discrimination and bias can adversely affect mental and physical health. Undocumented immigrants have higher probabilities of being incarcerated due to their status. Studies have revealed that incarceration has increased mental health problems in children from 15% to 25% for externalizing problems and 24% to 46% for internalizing problems (Williams, 2015). In more recent years we have seen authority abuse in detention centers where adults and children have faced mistreatment by those in power. These mistreatments have been exposed in more recent years and many experts have given their opinions on the effects this can have on the mental health of detainees.

Undocumented Youth

The Trump administration's toughness on immigration and their policies against immigration became a controversial topic that had many immigrant friendly organizations and allies on the edge. During this time, we saw high levels of hate towards immigrants and high levels of hate crimes against the immigrant community. We also saw the large number of adults and children being held in detention centers for long periods of time. Talleyrand and Vojtech (2018-2019) addressed potential stressors of undocumented Latinx youth and provided school counseling implications and recommendations for this group of people. Both authors point out that discrimination, poverty, depression, fear of deportation, acculturation, and ethnic identity are potential stressors that the undocumented youth may face due to their legal status. Gellata (2016) also sees the correlation between poverty and access to health insurance as a factor contributing to unstable health. Galleta (2016) examination on how children and parent's immigration status is associated with the ability to access insurance and healthcare and with children's physical health found that insurance coverage does vary based on immigration status. The study discovered that 90 percent of children in families where the parents and the children are U.S. born citizens had some sort of health insurance while sixty-seven percent of children in undocumented families lacked health insurance. Children in undocumented families did not see a doctor as often as U.S. citizen children and children in mixed status families. The study of (Gelatt, 2016; Kamal and Killian, 2015) on legal status and access to health care and insurance is important to understand how one's legal status can affect youths access to health care and insurance. Both studies give the audience a good understanding of how a child and parent's immigration status are tied together in reference to accessibility of healthcare and how this access can be related to a children's health history. Just as there has been an increase in harsh policies against immigrants in this country, there has been several institutions taking steps to

help that same group of people. A study by Suarez-Orozco et al. (2015) evaluates the experiences of undocumented undergraduate students in colleges across the United States where they look at the challenges they face, campus experience, and how campuses can better serve them. Undocumented students are unable to obtain any federal aid and in some states are ineligible for in-state tuition making attending college more stressful. Suarez-Orozco et al. (2015) assessed the undocumented students concerns with deportation, anxiety, discrimination, safe spaces, and other factors that play a role in the college experience of undocumented students. The study revealed that of those surveyed sixty eight percent of undocumented students were the first ones in their families to attend college with sixty one percent of students coming from low- income households (Suarez-Orozco et al., 2015). A high number of undocumented students reported worrying about being detained or deported. Constant worry about being detained and deported can lead to high levels of stress among immigrants. Suarez-Orozco et al. (2015) discovered that ninety five percent of the undocumented students had concerns about financing their college education. The study showed that participants had three times higher anxiety than the norm group. Coming to a new country can be a cultural shock that can go away in a few months or years as they accommodate to a new way of life. The lives of undocumented immigrants on the other hand come with a lot of traumas before and after their journey to a new country. Being exposed to abuses by employers, police, border patrol agents, and other institutions can have a great impact on mental health. Undocumented students have high levels of stress and depression due to their legal status as they try to navigate through life in order to succeed and make their families proud.

Methodology

The purpose of this study is to focus on the impacts that being an undocumented person in the United States may have on an individual's mental health. For this study, the study will consist of interviewing up to twenty students at Northern Illinois University who are undocumented and also those that are protected under the DACA program. The research seeks to answer the question to what extent is mental health affected by being undocumented.

I chose this topic because of my own personal experiences with being undocumented and the effects this has had on my mental health. Constantly worrying about what is going to happen to my parents or myself. Every four years bring a new fear whether the presidential candidates support DACA or any other immigration reform. Not having a permanent legal status causes us to be on alert almost every moment of our lives. We cannot make a mistake; we cannot get in trouble with the law. Even routine activities like flying to another state and being in an airport can strike fear into us.

History

According to the American Immigration Council (2021), Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) is a temporary relief from deportation that allows DACA recipients to obtain a social security number which allows them to obtain drivers licenses and gives them the opportunity to legally work in the United States. To qualify for DACA, those applying must meet certain requirements. DACA is not a permanent legal status, and it does not have a path to citizenship. Those that are granted DACA must renew and pay a fee every two years and continue to be good citizens without any criminal record. Many DACA recipients are young adults who were brought to this country at a really young age. A large number of DACA recipients attend higher education. Attending higher education itself can be extremely stressful and frustrating for some. Adding not having a legal status to that and constantly worrying about

how to pay your next semester while at the same time supporting your parents in their daily activities can be tough on our mental health. Anyone that is unlawfully present in the United States cannot receive federal aid. This is another issue that many students in higher education have to worry about. Many of these students rely on private scholarship.

According to Northern Illinois University (NIU), there was a total of 16,234 students enrolled at NIU as of the Fall of 2021. There are 11,834 undergraduates, 4,079 graduate students, and 321 law students. These 16,234 students are comprised of 47.1% male and 52.9% female in undergraduate programs while 40.2% male and 59.8% female in graduate programs. In the fall of 2021, there was 19.21% of students who identified as Latino. White students are the majority with 49.24%, black students represent 17.03% of the student's body, with Asian students accounting for 5.80 % of the population of students at NIU. Currently there is no information on how many of the 19.21% of Latino identifying students are undocumented or protected under the DACA program. It is also unclear whether this number also represents international students. I estimate that more than 5% of the 19.21% are undocumented/DACA students at NIU, based on my own personal experience.

This study will consist of one single case study where I hope to answer the question of how being an undocumented student in higher education can impact mental health. The methodology I will use for this case study will consist of qualitative interviews of undocumented/DACA students at NIU of varying ages. The goal is to interview up to twenty students at Northern Illinois University who are undocumented and those that are protected under the DACA program. The goal is to discover how being undocumented and in higher education has an impact on students' mental health. I will be primarily collecting new data and will also use secondary data to analyze any differences or similarities.

Due to privacy issues, I will record the answer by hand on paper and will identify students by a number that will be given to each student. I do not believe recording the interviews will provide me with honest answers as I fear students will withhold information because of their legal status. I will ask the students around ten questions that have yet to be determined. Due to covid the interviews will most likely be performed on an online platform, or be emailed to each interviewee, awaiting a response by a proposed deadline. I will ask questions about how being undocumented impacts their ability to receive financial aid and how this can lead to a stressful environment at school and at home. I will also ask how many students are financially responsible for a family member such as a parent or siblings. My goal is to uncover how being undocumented while attending higher education has negative effects on the mental health of the undocumented community. As I mentioned earlier, I will be using primary and secondary data to analyze my results and conclude how being an undocumented person while attending higher education can have negative consequences on mental health.

Findings

I began interviews by informing the interviewee of the purpose of this study and informed them that they could stop the interview at any time if they began to feel uncomfortable. All interviews were completed online to allow flexibility with scheduling on both sides. After analyzing the data collected, I was able to find many correlations among each participant. For this research, I will label each interviewee as “participant” following a number that was assigned to keep their names anonymous. All participants are undergraduate students at NIU. The majority of participants interviewed are protected under the DACA program while only one participant identified herself as an undocumented student. Participant #1 was unable to obtain DACA because soon after she had applied, President Trump put DACA on hold which prevented

her from being granted protection under this program. Her application has been on hold ever since. Participant #1 was brought to this country at the age of eight months when her mom carried her across the desert in an attempt to give her a better life in the United States. She informed me that she found out about her legal status in part from her mother often telling her to stay out of trouble, she also observed how her mother would try to actively avoid interacting with police. She mentioned that at around the age of ten, her mother had a conversation with her about their current legal status. Participant #2 was brought to this country at the age of five when her family traveled to the United States with a tourist visa. But it was not until she was planning to go to college that she found out about her legal status. She describes that moment as being “traumatic” and “depressing” as she saw attending college as an impossible feat, knowing she would not qualify for federal financial aid. Participant #5 also found out about her legal status when she was getting ready to attend college. She was brought to this country at the age of eight years old when her mother was trying to escape poverty and an abusive partner. All participants were brought to this country at a young age and the majority were escaping poverty and violence which they still have memories of.

All were looking for a better life, trying to escape stressors such as violence, poverty and war to name a few. More than half of the participants recall a time where they were discriminated against based on their immigration status or on their skin color. Participant #1 recalls a time where her and her mother were being followed by a store employee. Another participant recalls that her community college professor began to treat her differently after she informed her about her legal status. Other participants recall similar experiences where they were discriminated based on their legal status or due to the fact that they spoke Spanish in public. Participant #6 recalls a time when he visited the optometrist and was looking at name brand

glasses when the receptionist said, “I do not think you can afford those.” He recalls being caught off guard and wasn’t sure how to react as he was around seventeen when this event happened.

All participants live with their parents or a family member in order to afford NIU’s tuition. One pattern I found was that all but participant #1 transferred to NIU from a community college. During my interviews I asked each participant about their transition from high school to college. The majority revealed that their transition from high school to college was a little challenging as some counselors did not have resources available or have a knowledge base to help students with this legal status. Others express that their counselor was extremely helpful, and one participant was able to obtain a full ride to a community college. Participants’ experience from high school to college varied in different ways based on the resources available to them. Another commonality among the participants is that they all work to pay their tuition and the majority contribute to expenses at home. When asked what kind of impact this had on their mental health, they all expressed high levels of stress and worry. Some participants also expressed high levels of anxiety and stress as they had to maintain good grades in order to keep their scholarships.

Anxiety and stress were also present among most participants as the Trump administration began. Participants recall having high levels of anxiety and stress as the Trump administration targeted immigrants and refugees. Participants main worry was the fate of the DACA program under the Trump administration. One participant recalls having to seek a mental health professional due to the high levels of stress and depression that came with the constant fear for herself and her parents. One participant mentioned that at some point she had suicidal thoughts due to high levels of stress. Five participants mentioned that they did not feel they had control over their own lives, due to their legal status and how it is left in the hands of politicians.

They also expressed how being excluded from school activities because of their legal status caused depression and a sense of loneliness. All participants were the first ones in their immediate family to attend higher education. This meant immense amounts of pressure as all participants expressed a desire to make their parents proud and that their sacrifices would eventually pay off.

Participants were asked questions about access to health care when they were young and up until now. All participants are residents of the state of Illinois, and all mentioned having insurance through the state from a really young age. I asked interviewees on how hard it was to access affordable healthcare and whether they had to travel more than thirty minutes to find affordable care. The majority described their experience to be favorable as they always had insurance that allowed them to visit the doctor regularly. On the other hand, once they reached adulthood, they were no longer covered by state insurance. One participant said that she had not visited a doctor for yearly check ups since she turned eighteen. I followed up by asking whether or not she used NIU insurance that is offered to students, her response was that it was unaffordable, and she was forced to waive coverage each year. This is similar to previous literature findings stating that children who live in mixed or undocumented families are less likely to have insurance than those whose household has some kind of legal presence in the United States.

Overall, the majority of the participants for this study express having anxiety, depression, and even suicidal thoughts due to many factors that are around their legal status in this country. Previous literature has proof that mental health is affected by a person's legal status and the ability to have access to resources such as healthcare.

Limitations

Gathering interviewees for this topic was the most challenging part of this project, as the participants can find the subject to be personal, sensitive, and emotional to talk about openly and not everyone is willing or ready to share their story as an undocumented immigrant. I was able to send out a mass email with the help of DREAM Action NIU but did not receive the participation that I anticipated. Students being busy with their school schedules, work, or activities I believe played a big role in participation. Another implication was the lack of time to gather participants and schedule interviews. The time frame to do this research was less than four months. I believe that this type of research requires more time to make a connection.

Implications

An individual's Mental health has been proven to be affected by one's legal status, it can increase stressors like anxiety, depression, and feelings of loneliness. One factor that can develop symptoms of depression, is leaving family members in your home country and coming to a new country where you do not know the language and culture can be extremely shocking and can lead feelings of loneliness. For undocumented students in higher education the main contributing factor of these feelings appears to be the cost of tuition and the inability to receive federal aid and having to rely on scholarships. Many describe missing out on many opportunities on campus and off campus due to their legal status, this has an impact on their mental health as they feel left out. Also, due to legal status many undocumented students are unable to obtain health insurance through the open market which makes seeing a doctor almost impossible due to the increasingly high cost of healthcare. Previous research has shown that one's legal status plays a big role in becoming insured. Those with legal status are more likely to have some form of insurance over those that are undocumented. Inability to access health insurance and the taboo about mental health among the Latino community can be a compounding factor affecting mental health.

Recommendations

Improved financial literacy for undocumented students and an improved knowledge base for college administrators could have a great impact on society. Having better informed counselors and financial aid officers on campuses to better serve this population is essential. Students miss out on opportunities due to a lack of knowledge from both, students, and counselors in this case especially, undocumented students. Higher institutions are encouraged to work hand in hand with high school counselors to become better informed on how to help the Latino population of students working towards attending college. Collaboration with different institutions through workshops is a great way to learn about the experiences of other students.

The experiences of undocumented immigrants in more recent years should be the turning point to demand a permanent solution on immigration. There has been much effort and time spent towards attempting to legalize millions of undocumented immigrants in the United States. These efforts have been fruitless as politicians continue to use immigration as a platform to make empty campaign promises in the hopes of being elected to office. It is time to find a permanent solution to the immigration problem in the United States that has been proven to be a major contributing factor towards the mental health of the undocumented community.

Mental health resource accessibility should be available to all. It is time for a call to action for institutions like NIU to make health insurance more affordable especially for the undocumented immigrants who are put in a position where they must waive their insurance, as they cannot afford it, due to paying for tuition directly out of pocket in many cases. I also call for more diversity in the counseling area as many counselors can not relate to their patients' backgrounds or cultural beliefs. Undocumented immigrants need to have access to people like them that have lived their personal experiences and understand them.

Overall, undocumented immigrants who are unlawfully present in the United States are more likely to suffer from stressors such as anxiety, depression, loneliness, and fear due to their legal status. Affordability of healthcare among undocumented immigrants has been almost impossible which has resulted in major mental health problems in the undocumented community that can go untreated.

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