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Undocumented Students During the Times of COVID-19

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Abstract

Through the pandemic setting that society has endured during the last 9 months of 2020, the community of undocumented immigrants in the United States has dealt with some of the harshest, most excruciating effects of any group of people in the country. Undocumented immigrants deal with exacerbated lifestyles on an everyday basis prior to the pandemic, however, through circumstances that COVID-19 has brought upon them, their struggles are further complicated. Through this article, a focus is put on undocumented students during COVID-19 and the additional struggles they are facing due to the pandemic including things such as limited access to school resources, insufficient food sources, and lack of in-person interaction with peers and teachers.

Introduction

Mayra Pérez, who has been without employment for weeks has immense fears about her son as well as neighbors in their community since schools have been moved online. She had less fear when her son was still in school while she was out of work but is in constant worry for his physical and mental well-being now that he is not getting the proper nutrition necessary to remain healthy (Sánchez-Guerra, 2020.)

Since March of 2020, the nation has been at wits end trying to grapple with the widespread virus COVID-19. At one point the economy lost over 20 million jobs; people were afraid to go out of their homes to go grocery shopping; due to a lack of testing, people did not know who had the virus and who didn't (Gonzalez, Karpman, Kenney, and Zuckerman, 2020). There was a run on certain houseware products like toilet paper, alcohol cleaners, and hand sanitizers (Hudleston, 2020). There were and continue to be at this time long lines of the unemployed receiving donated food from food pantries, churches, and government run organizations (Dunn, Kenney, Fleischhacker, and Bleich, 2020, 2020). Mass outbreaks of cases have been appearing across the country in meat packing plants, where people stand shoulder to shoulder breathing each other's air (Zilber, 2020). Schools closed their doors in March with the hope that the virus would slow down in the summer. However, due to people not wearing masks, not social distancing, and not washing their hands, the spread of the virus has not waned (Zhang, C.H. and Schwartz, G.G., 2020). In fact, the number of COVID-19 cases has exploded across the country making the U.S. which only has 4% of the population of the world have 25% of the COVID cases on the planet (Zhang, C.H. and Schwartz, G.G., 2020).

In September 2020, going into their fall semester in a new grade with brand new content and material, millions of students across the United States faced remote learning for the foreseeable future. While some districts began the year in a fully face to face format, the majority of schools chose to do either an entire remote learning setting or a hybrid format. With 50

million students in grades PK-12 taking part in some form of online learning (Sharfstein, J. M., & Morpew, C. C., 2020), it is imperative that we look at the imbalances in what this really means for families from different demographics in our communities. With the circumstances of remote learning comes the expectations that all families have access to the materials to make a productive education setting right within the four walls of their own home. For many of our low income and mixed-status (mixed-status means at least one family member is undocumented and at least one family member is documented) households across the nation, hybrid or fully remote learning is not always the easiest thing to ask of families. From the actual in-person experience for a child whose first language isn't English, to the nutritious meals they are missing out on from free and reduced lunch programs, to the mental health and home environmental concerns for students in mixed status households, schools transferring to any percentage of an online format has an exacerbated negative effect on the students from within these communities (Lancker, Wim Van, and Zachary Parolin, 2020).

In this paper, we provide information regarding the contexts of undocumented immigrants in the school setting during the COVID-19 pandemic. We collected data from reports, newspaper articles, journal articles, and surveys to provide the most up to date information available beginning when the World Health Organization first labeled this epidemic a pandemic on March 11, 2020 to when we submitted this manuscript for publication. The paper is structured in the following format. We first cover the historical context of undocumented immigration to the U.S.. We then provide a description of the current situation of undocumented immigration in U.S. schools, which is followed by the changes this pandemic is causing in the homes of undocumented families. We conclude the paper with an implication section providing

educators suggestions on how best to work with undocumented immigrants during these troubling times.

Current context of undocumented students in school

The sheer number of students that are undocumented within the current sociopolitical context (i.e. massive ICE raids in industries that cater to undocumented immigrants, over all adverse impression towards undocumented immigrants from Trump administration) and the resulting detrimental mental and emotional health of the undocumented immigrants themselves and their families (Cholera & Falusi, 2020) implores us to explore more deeply the circumstances of undocumented students in American schools. Approximately 600,000 students in grades K-12 in the United States are undocumented, and around 450,000 undocumented students are currently enrolled in higher education (Baker and Rytina, 2013). To paint a more nuanced and detailed picture, in 2014, there were only 3.2 million students living in mixed-status households. This increased to 3.9 million by 2016 which made another jump to 4.1 million students in 2018 (Passel and Cohn, 2020). Though this number has been exponentially increasing over time, between the years of 2016-2018, this is the lowest rate of increase in a decade (Passel and Cohn, 2020). In fact, there are now estimates that due to the combination of deportations from the government and self-deportation, the number of undocumented immigrants in the U.S. has a net zero increase since 2008.

What Are Undocumented Students' Realities in School?

Home-Learning Environment

Coupling the precarious academic environment for undocumented immigrants from before the pandemic with the current context only exacerbates their situation. Students from low-income mixed-status households go through a much different experience than students from

documented low-income households (Mass et al, 2016). When adding undocumented status to the equation, the effects of poverty are exacerbated. Undocumented workers, as an example, contend with poorer work conditions, fewer sick days, less overtime pay, and reduced employer-provided benefits (Bernhardt et al., 2009; Luce, Luff, McCartin, & Milkman, 2014) than their lower-wage earning documented peers. The impact that these issues cause on mixed status families is often more impactful than within low wage documented families (Mass et al, 2016). The coupled effects of mixed-status with low-wage earnings creates an incredibly problematic environment for the families, often causing hunger, homelessness (or frequent high mobility due insufficient funds to pay rent), and joblessness (Clark et al., 2020). Research is very clear that when any household experiences these types of stresses, an increase of socio-emotional distress is the result (Mass et al, 2016).

These factors create a very harsh setting of a mixed-status household's home environment. Because of the working hours, the members of the household may not be able to interact with one another throughout certain hours of the day, making communication about topics such as school difficult. This lack of social structure in a child's school day as well as lack of supervision while one's parents/guardians are working is being seen to result in a diagnosis of emotional disturbance among students in these households (Cholera et al., 2020). This now is providing a segue for a home environment that a child cannot be functional in because they have developed emotional deficits that are difficult to process while not at school or around professionals that can handle such things. Mixed-status families have the desire to reach out to school staff and faculty when needing resources or more information, but they have a barrier in as a fear due to their immigration status of becoming too involved with their child's school (Migration Policy Institute, 2020).

The Remote Learning School Day

Despite education lauded as highly valued by many immigrant families, these mixed status households struggle with being able to make time for every hour of school for their children as well as time for their homework and assignments because of the sporadic hours that come with the jobs undocumented immigrants often hold (Cholera et al., 2020). During school hours, children may have to leave home to assist their parents with doctor appointments, errands, court dates, etc. to translate for them (Poza and Williams, 2020). Though this may interrupt the student's learning day and educational experience, this is the norm in quite a few immigrant families across the country (Poza and Williams, 2020).

Because parents of mixed-status households are on the frontlines of work during this pandemic era, immigrant students of all ages are frequently subject to caring for younger siblings (Jeanne Batalova, 2020). Attempting to balance new remote-learning classes alone while also having the burden of being responsible for a younger sibling's care can be quite overwhelming for a student of any age. Whether it be working for their parents, with their siblings, or working for money for themselves, undocumented students have quite a bit on their plate in addition to carrying out their school responsibilities. These everyday types of challenges have had a deleterious effect on their education, substantially reducing their attendance rate (Sugarman and Lazarín, 2020).

Not only are the children in these households experiencing widening educational gaps from their peers, but they are also missing out on crucial benefits from in-person education such as social interaction with English speakers and the introduction to American structural environments (Lancker, Win Van, and Parolin, 2020). A study was done at the University of Texas that demonstrated not only are immigrant students in grades K-12 benefiting more from

the structure of schooling to their social development than their native peers, but are also, if placed in social settings with peers strategically by a teacher, predicted to succeed academically in a much higher manner through their adolescent years (Ryabov, 2009). Undocumented children require these types of experiences every day to not only get acclimated to the language norms, but also to the American school structure. This crucial time, especially for younger students early on in their social development skills, is being hindered by the implementation of a hybrid or fully online format of education due to COVID-19.

Access to Materials and Information

Because the remote learning model is the probable norm for schools for the duration of the pandemic, students in these types of households are now losing out on typically easily accessible resources, structured schedules, and direct teacher/faculty communication that would otherwise be there to help deepen their educational and social capital. Undocumented families are more often than not socially isolated from the community around them; this adds another layer of uncertainty that contributes to the overall home environment (Jablonski et al., 2020). Uncertainty and angst are more often than not the results from this type of situation. Mixed-status families have to decide how much they want to inquire about things open to them in their communities and neighborhoods while also not reaching out to much that they have to fear for their citizenship status being exposed.

To exacerbate the complex situation created by this pandemic, only approximately 60% of children who live in low-income mixed status households have the sufficient internet speed in order to complete the work they are assigned. The remaining 40% are missing out on receiving resources as well as potential communication with teachers and aids to receive remote learning materials (Poza and Williams, 2020). These crucial resources consist of the general education

curriculum content and the integral ESL instructional materials. Even if families are fortunate enough to have the combination of sufficient internet speed as well as access to digital resources and classroom content, parents and children in mixed-status households are struggling to keep up with content and maintain engagement due to struggles with sporadic class times and varied programs (Sugarman and Lazarín, 2020).

School Communications

Although school administrators and staff are working to communicate with all families, due to the lack of adequate English proficiency, the families that need more assistance during the school year are the communities who have the greatest difficulty of receiving school communications (Ghosh, Dubey, Chatterjee, Dubey, 2020). The language proficiency barrier among families can create deficits in communication for both classroom content and materials as well as community involvement and teacher connection to parents/families (Sugarman and Lazarín, 2020). To combat this, districts are offering professional development on ELs and virtual learning to increase teachers' knowledge due to the disadvantages mixed-status families experience while completing E-learning (Sugarman and Lazarín, 2020).

English Learners

Although not all undocumented immigrants are English Learners (ELs) and not all ELs are undocumented, many ELs are indeed undocumented (Capps, 2015). Whatever the case, ELs bring with them a rich linguistic reservoir. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2015) there are 350 languages spoken in the U.S., and subsequently, 5 million school aged immigrants are enrolled in some form of ESL or bilingual instruction (Sugarman and Lazarín, 2020). The fact that such a high number of immigrant students are in some form of English instruction complicates the online schooling experience even more.

The act of ELs physically being in school to learn with their peers and participate in the daily goings on is imperative to retaining and acquiring foundational English skills. These students not being able to attend face to face classes can lead to detrimental setbacks in their English skills (Sugarman and Lazarín, 2020). ELs going any duration of time without opportunities for listening, speaking, writing, or reading in English results in a deficit in skills for years in the future (Sugarman and Lazarín, 2020). Sugarman and Lazarín (2020) report that there are estimates suggesting ELs who are without any sort of in-person education for over 8 months to one year may lose up to 30% of reading gains and up to 50% of gains in mathematics knowledge. Experts worry about the number of students, especially those needing more advanced English accommodations, that are receiving a proper foundational education via virtual learning (Sugarman and Lazarín, 2020).

Not only do EL's need sufficient education from teachers in English on a daily basis in order to maintain their foundational skills, but the social interactions they encounter with their English-speaking peers are critical for development as well. What Sugarman and Lazarín (2020) refer to as engaging in "collaborative peer learning" and "productive talk" (p.5) are imperative strategies for EL's for their oral language development. If students are at home where English is not a language spoken proficiently by anyone in the residence, there will more than likely be an auditory and oral English skill setback for them. In addition to verbal setbacks, in the time out of face-to-face instruction for EL's, they are not only missing out on collaborating and socializing with peers, but they are also withheld from receiving face to face work time and direct individualized instruction from professionals (Sugarman and Lazarín, 2020).

School system struggles

Due to linguistic and cultural differences coupled with their fear of public-school buildings as a place of potential deportation, families frequently do not attend parent teacher conferences and school events unless personally invited by someone from the school community (Mass et al, 2016). This lack of attendance leads to immigrant families having an exceedingly difficult time accessing school resources for their children and a minimal knowledge of how the American school system works (Rogers, Saunders, and Terriquez, 2008).

Life is difficult enough for immigrant students; understanding content being delivered in a language they do not understand, interacting with other students who may or may not be from a similar culture, learning the expectations of teachers and how to be academically and socially successful. These all complicate matters for immigrant students. However, to complicate matters even more, undocumented immigrant students during the pandemic are often concerned with knowing when to speak out in class, participate in on-line discussions, and potentially expose their lack of English proficiency to their peers.

Life is difficult enough for any teenager, but to add a new culture, a different language, a different school system, different teaching styles and expectations, new friends, and an altogether different environment compounds the difficulties that adolescent immigrant students must deal with in order to be academically successful

Risk of dropping out of school

Undocumented immigrant students have the highest dropout rates of any immigrant group in the country (Potochnick, 2014). As of 2014, studies done on adults ages 25-64 show that undocumented students received a high school diploma at only 50% compared to documented immigrants at 75% as well as natives at 91% (Potochnick, 2014). This community

of people is up to 40% more likely to drop out of school prior to their high school graduation than the average American citizen, this truly showing the divide and the exacerbation that the undocumented immigrant community faces in their everyday lives. Additionally, because undocumented students are completing their education in an environment that already brings daily stressors and anxieties to them each and every day, the pandemic and the educational consequences that it brings it with are predicted to add an extra 9% of students to that dropout list (Sugarman and Lazarín, 2020).

Undocumented students occasionally are placed in school settings at inconvenient times of the school year or are placed in a new school environment at the beginning of the school year, but, say, in the sophomore or junior year, when it is difficult to acclimate to a new climate when others have been in the prerequisite classes for current academic material (Sugarman and Lazarín, 2020). This can not only be discouraging for them as students and as people, but it can also make it more difficult for them to complete all high school graduation requirements, another factor that may encourage a student to drop out. Positive components of an undocumented immigrant's school day such as in-person interaction with teachers, friends, EL specialists, and involvement in different school/community activities have been seen as things that are combative to the dropout rates for this community (Potochnick, 2014). However, now that those experiences have much less potential and ability to occur in any kind of similar manner through virtual learning, this will be detrimental to an undocumented student's desire to remain in school (Potochnick, 2014).

An additional reality for these students that discourages them from continuing to complete their education is discrimination that occurs within schools with high undocumented student populations (Potochnick, 2014). During school hours, (Potochnick, 2014) discusses that

students are more focused on the perception of them as they complete their daily activities rather than focusing on their lectures and assignments at hand. Not only affecting their academic performance and achievement, but this is another factor that can result in students developing low self-esteem, depression, and anxiety from feeling constantly isolated and excluded in an environment that should be working to make them feel safe (Potochnick, 2014). Schools in which these ideations among students are not addressed can lead to a much greater risk of undocumented students or students residing in mixed-status households dropping out.

Stress/Anxiety

In combination with a pandemic, the undocumented immigrant community is being subjected to an everyday series of events in which their experience is heightened in complexity compared to the average documented citizen. In addition to the previously mentioned fear of deportations or losing a parent in addition to the academic struggles these students are bearing that COVID-19 has created, this community of people is undergoing an immense climb in percentages of depression, anxiety, and other mental health problems (Cholera et al., 2020).

When comparing this to the everyday life of a child/adolescent in a mixed-status household, it puts the circumstances of what they are enduring in perspective. Undocumented immigrants along with students residing in mixed-status households are already subjected to an everyday life filled with anxiety and stress (Mass et al., 2016). Without a pandemic, an undocumented student or student with an undocumented individual in their house lives in a world where they are always threatened with worries such as the constant fear of deportation, access to healthcare, and compounded finances (Naff, D., Williams, S., Furman, J., Lee, M., 2020). Undocumented immigrant families continuously face struggles of post-traumatic stress disorder, major depressive disorder, and generalized anxiety disorder as well (Clark et al., 2020).

Those that live in these households are subjected to everyday feelings of anger and fear which, in turn, can and does easily lead to advanced psychological consequences (Mass et al., 2016).

When looking at the psychological effects that COVID-19 has had on the general population, the increase of negative effects is overwhelming. In a study surveying approximately 17,000 people, 53% of those stated that their psychological reaction to the pandemic was at a moderate-severe level. These people reported some severe anxiety symptoms such as anxiety attacks, inability to focus when working/studying, and depressive episodes (Sher, 2020). 28% of those surveyed said that they had not previously ever had any symptoms of depression or anxiety and never had any diagnoses prior (Sher, 2020). Because the circumstances are already exacerbated, these numbers are much larger for families that are mixed-status or completely undocumented.

It's not a secret that with the COVID-19 pandemic, xenophobia has been a large theme among a variety of communities. Between people of color, those of Asian descent, and immigrants in general, stereotypes have been formed of these communities, making their experience that much more difficult and lonelier (Watson et al., 2020). Especially during the political climate the United States as created in today's society, undocumented immigrants face an immensely discriminatory world on a daily basis. Due to these struggles with xenophobic tendencies, an additional stress and anxiety factor is added to undocumented immigrant families when looking at healthcare and reaching out for services/resources that they require to keep themselves and their families safe and healthy (Cholera et al., 2020). Despite promises made by local healthcare providers, many undocumented families go without sufficient health insurance, and even with the free testing and emergency treatment that can be given to them, many are afraid to reach out due to having their citizenship status revealed (Cholera, et al., 2020).

Therefore, even though students are not in schools or around those that may contract the virus to them and/or impose discriminatory phrases or actions upon them, this uncertainty of healthcare and medical aid during a pandemic has created an extremely apprehensive environment for undocumented immigrants and mixed-status households.

Individuals in these homes have referred to their student's current situation as needing to be looked at from a traumatic perspective (Luna, 2020). Undocumented parents/guardians discuss that their lives are already filled with concerns regarding keeping or finding a job in the current job market climate, keeping themselves and their families safe, and constant fear of deportation or exposure of citizenship status in their communities (Cholera et al., 2020). (Cohen et al., 2016) also discusses how mixed-status families often have strained relationships with one another on a consistent basis, not providing a good family foundation prior to pandemic circumstances. All these fears and stressors are a full-time job, and when looking at families who have a child or a few children in grades pre-k - 12th grades, this is yet another massive burden that has been put on them.

Students Having Insufficient Food Sources

The science is very clear that without adequate nutritional support, the students cannot process or take in information to learn at school (Ghosh et al., 2020). In other words, "School is also a place for nutritional support, and shutdown will intensify food insecurity which in turn can be correlated with low scholastic accomplishment and ample risks to general well-being of the students (Ghosh et al., p. 228)." Children not having a place to go during the day to be educated and to be fed at sufficient levels for months at a time create additional stress for all families. However, it is exacerbated for families who are undocumented or are mixed status. 67% of a child's daily food intake is provided by schools in the form of meals and snacks, and often

contain more sustenance and nutrient-filled foods than what a child receives at home (Kenney, Fleischhacker, and Bleich, 2020). Because more than an estimated 775,000 students in grades K-12 are undocumented, this is a vast number of children/teenagers that are missing out on this essential resource (Waters, 2015).

Although many schools are reaching out to undocumented and other low-income families to help assist with providing meal distribution as much as possible, there are still many who remain without proper daily nutrition. It is estimated that only one in six children will be able to receive benefits from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Food Programs whose assistance is being provided to public schools to help these students, especially during the summer months (USDA Economic Research service, 2020). This is a number that local communities hope to improve but is difficult because of the amount of resources needed to support the families as well as the worsening conditions of the pandemic. Families that need to spend more money on food for their family that they are not receiving from schools may result in even more additional financial hardships that can result in them needing to forgo other necessities down the line such as medications, rent, and utilities (Dunn et al., 2020).

The lack of nutritional food for students in these families can lead to later hardships down the line in regard to a child's physical, psychological, and emotional development and well-being (Dunn et al., 2020). Both the components of malnourishment along with mis-nourishment have been seen to cause a slow or halt in cognitive development in younger students in both academic and socio-emotional realms. (Dodsworth, 2010). Students that don't get fed proper nutrition on a daily basis can be seen exhibiting behaviors such as hyperactivity, aggression, and anxiety. These things are only to be emphasized by students who do not eat breakfast. Therefore, because ___ % of undocumented students were receiving the free/reduced breakfast and lunch benefits

from their schools as of last spring, pre-COVID-19, these students are the most likely out of the school's communities to demonstrate these sort of cognitive flare ups during class times.

Food insecurity has also been seen to lead to scholastic difficulties down the line as well. Students that come from low-income households are already put at risk for low academic achievement, and this shortage of food provided for them from school and after/before school care programs will only hinder the chances of success additionally (Dunn, et al., 2020). Therefore, when looking at the impact that being undocumented has on this food supply issue, these mixed-status low-income households are put at such an advanced disadvantage.

Coinciding with Maslow's hierarchy of needs, if students are not getting the proper nutritional needs their body requires, their brains are not able to function at full capacity, limiting their focus and attention spans (Ghosh et al., 2020). Students with diets containing low nutrient foods are seen to have an overall lower attendance rate, lower absences, and lower test scores (Dodsworth, 2010). This food contemplation in combination with a student's lack of opportunity for the appropriate physical activity they would be getting during the day can and will have a detrimental effect on their academic success and progress. Issues such as these so young in a child's life, especially one that is dealing with the hardships of being in a mixed-status household, can be seen to really put negative implications for students' academic careers down the line.

Conclusion

The United States is not often considered to be a warm, welcoming place for their 11 million undocumented immigrants. Often, undocumented immigrant students struggle academically and socially in schools as well. COVID-19 has only shown to make that harder on this community of learners, especially those who do not have fluent English in their repertoire.

Undocumented students as well as those in mixed-status households have an immensely exacerbated pandemic learning experience that contains online classes, lack of nutritional food for meals and snacks, lack of school communication and academic resources, and especially crucial in-person learning. This has created a difficult home environment for undocumented and mixed-status families during the past 10 months, and for at least the next semester, these same families who will continue to struggle.

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