

POWERED BY

IMMIGRANT YOUTH



SYSTEMIC RACISM IN EDUCATION

and the Impact on Wellbeing Among
Undocumented Students of New Mexico

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Executive Summary



Immigrant and undocumented youth face many barriers when navigating the educational system. Over and over again, data shows that attaining higher education revolves around access and financial resources. In the lives of undocumented youth, this is no different. However, this study demonstrates that access to institutions and financial aid is not sufficient to ensure the wellbeing and success of undocumented youth.

The study gathered 13 in-depth individual interviews of undocumented youth across the state of New Mexico. After a thematic and critical race analysis, data depicted three major themes that negatively impact the wellbeing and educational attainment of undocumented youth. Reoccurring themes include: (1) Discrimination and Microaggressions, (2) Limited

Access and Resources, (3) Immigration Status Realization. All themes were mentioned in the context of public educational settings.

All data was presented to undocumented youth and adults in Albuquerque and Santa Fe, NM via public community gatherings. Through researcher-led facilitation, these community members engaged in dialogue to analyze the data and themes. Collaboratively, the community members came up with a solution to address these themes at the state government level in the form of an education policy. The community wants an education policy that encourages educators and staff of public schools in New Mexico to ensure the safety and dignity of undocumented students in public institutions.

Introduction



Being an undocumented student often comes with barriers that impede an individual to thrive or live a life without constant fear. In 2016, with the election of Donald Trump, a violent political rhetoric against immigrant and undocumented populations emerged in the United States. The termination of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) and Temporary Protected Status (TPS) programs created instability, fear and uncertainty for immigrant youth in New Mexico. The safety of many undocumented families and New Mexico's youth certainly felt on edge. In the midst of fear and uncertainty, the New Mexico Dream Team UndocuResearch (NMDTUR) decided to take action by launching a research project. The NMDTUR is a multidisciplinary team of undocumented and

mixed status scholars. The research project's objective was to explore how systemic racism in education impacted mental health, and educational attainment among undocumented and mixed status youth. The research was completely led for and by the undocumented community. Through a qualitative and community-engaged approach, the analysis depicts emergent themes that inhibit the general wellbeing and education attainment of undocumented youth. The NMDTUR hosted community gatherings, wherein youth highlighted policy change in the educational system. A policy that ensures the safety and dignity of undocumented students in public schools is imperatively needed in the state of New Mexico.

Background

According to a 2016 PEW research article 10.7 million undocumented immigrants live in the U.S. making it the 3.3% of the overall population (Krogstad, J. M. et al., 2018) As of 2016, 5.1 million children with at least one undocumented parent live in the U.S. (Capps, Randy et al., 2016). According to a 2015 U.S. Department of Education Report, 65,000 undocumented student graduate high school every year. Only 5% - 10% pursue a college degree and less than 1% a graduate degree. The rate of undocumented students decrease dramatically as you go higher in education. According to the Migration Policy Institute, New Mexico has a large immigrant community. 85,000 undocumented immigrants reside in the state. Approximately 90% of the undocumented community in the state are Spanish speaking, and 75% of them are of Mexican origin. Of all New Mexican children ages 0-17, 18% are US citizens with foreign born parents. A total of approximately 100K children in New Mexico have at least one immigrant parent. As a result, New Mexico communities are directly and indirectly impacted by immigration policy on a daily basis.

Systemic Racism and Educational Attainment

For the purposes of this research, it is critical to consider the effect of systematic racism. The effect of systematic racism on communities of color has been shown to foster poor health conditions by creating poor social living conditions (Williams, 2000). Systemic racism is the way in which institutional policies and practices create barriers for marginalized



through a “gate keeping” of goods and services, often resulting in lower socioeconomic status among oppressed groups (e.g. women, differently abled, sexual minorities, or people of color; Williams, 2000). Minimal research has been carried out regarding the effects of systemic racism on mental and emotional wellbeing and educational attainment among undocumented youth of color.

Internalized Racism and Its Impact on Mental & Emotional Wellbeing

A result of systematic racism at the individual level is the internalization of racism. More specifically, individuals often internalize a sense of racial inferiority, an acceptance of feeling – and therefore, acting – inferior to an oppressive individual or

group. In a 1996 study conducted by Fischer and Colleagues, it was found that the acceptance and internalization of negative and stereotypical images contributed to an increase in anxiety and poor psychological functioning among people of color. Such internalization of inferiority is often reinforced in educational systems through microaggressive behavior by educators, that is, intentional and unintentional insults based on race and/or ethnicity. (Sue & Sue, 2010).

Life in the Shadows

An additional issue faced by undocumented youth, are the psychological repercussions of living a life in the shadows — in other words, having to deal with the daily stressor of hiding one's undocumented status. Over time, such stress is detrimental to an undocumented student's daily functioning, especially while pursuing educational goals (Ellis, Chen, 2013). The feelings of shame and anger paired with the stress of trying to assimilate may lead to changes which counter the immigrant youth's native culture. This could be manifested in ways such as refusal to speak in their native language or refusal to acknowledge their status as an undocumented individual. The undocumented immigrant youth also experiences distress due to the threat of being deported themselves and/or their family members. The stress and fear experienced by immigrant populations can be accelerated through anti-immigrant policies (Rubio-Goldsmith, et al., 2009; Takei, et al., 2009) and may lead to immigrant youth to further isolate themselves and live in the shadows. Overall, systemic stressors based on current immigration policies impacts the wellbeing of immigrant communities.

The environment plays a crucial role in a person's development. Children lose social and academic

support due to the fear of violence in their school networks and thus affecting academic outcomes (Gulbas, et. al, 2016; Patel, et. al., 2016).

Undocumented adolescents struggle with "illegal" identities, forcing them to question themselves, their belonging, trust and future hope (Gonzalez, Suarez-Orozco, & Dedios-Sanguinetti, 2013). Studies on Latino immigrants in higher education indicates that discrimination may contribute to higher rates of distress, suicidal ideation, anxiety, and depression (Ayon, Marsiglia, & Bermudez-Parsai, 2010; Hwang & Goto, 2008). Investigations on Latinos in terms of their unique educational experiences, intersections of race and immigration status, and rurality are critical (Nguyen & Kebede, 2017).

Methods

Upon Institutional Review Board approval, the NMDTUR team collected a total of 13 individual interviews across the state of New Mexico. All the participants consented to record and use their quotes for the publication. No identification information was ever collected from the participants. After the process of collecting interviews, all data was transcribed in its original language and analyzed. The NMDTUR team used Nvivo for organizational and analysis purposes. There was a total of four rounds of analysis. Analysis was composed of: (1) individual transcription and thematic analysis, (2) collaborative thematic analysis with discussion between the team with a code book development, (3) final round of thematic coding of all data with code book, (4) discussion of significance and trends of themes in data. Funding support for all rounds of data analysis was provided by the University of New Mexico Transdisciplinary Research, Equity and Engagement Center for Advancing Behavioral Health (TREE Center).

The NMDTUR team recruited youth who self-identified as undocumented, DACA-mented, or who belong to a mixed immigration status family. Study investigators performed outreach to prospective participants via social media such as Facebook, and Instagram as well as email and telephone calls through the UWD DREAM Connect platform. In addition, university staff and community site personnel also identified potential participants. The NMDTUR team also provided an email invitation along with a digital flyer explaining the purpose of research, date and location.

Email invitations were sent through the New Mexico Dream Team network of volunteers, members and affiliates. Demographic surveys were collected immediately before individual interviews.

Individual interviews were transcribed in the native language of the participant (English or Spanish). Data and analysis was organized through Nvivo qualitative analysis software. The individual interviews were analyzed using a Thematic Analysis approach, keeping focus on the content of participant thoughts and feelings, (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Joffe, 2012) along with maintaining a critical race theory framework (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Ford & Airhihenbuw, 2010). The framework was used to highlight the voices of participants to counter the current rhetoric that perpetuates xenophobia. With the specific steps entailed NMDTUR collaboratively reviewed the themes via visual mapping. All stories shared in Spanish were later translated into English for the reader. Finally, all data was de-identified to protect confidentiality of shared personal experiences as much as possible.

Through NMDT's Summer of Dreams, community gatherings were hosted. The space allowed for undocumented youth to analyze the data and thematic analysis the NMDTUR conducted. Through guiding 'Undoing Racism' activities (adapted from People's Institute for Survival and Beyond, "Foot of Oppression"), the community identified the institutions that contributed to oppression. Critical race analysis was conducted with the community to identify the policies interconnected to such institutions. After, a dialogue about policy change was conducted, and a list of policy change request was formulated.

Results

Analysing the demographics of all 13 participants Table 1 depicts, there was a majority of self-identified females and an overall DREAMer and undocumented social identity. However, 3 of the interviewees had their immigration status fixed but came from mixed status family households. All interviewees had Spanish as the primary language, 9 reported a significant fear to deportation and 12 had a family member deported.

Table 1: Demographics of Participants

Demographic	No. (%)
Demographic	
Female	8 (62%)
Male	5 (38%)
Social Identity	
DREAMer	6 (46%)
Undocumented	8 (62%)
Undocu-Queer	2 (15%)
Nationality	5 (38%)
Latino/a	7 (54%)
LGBTQIA+	
Yes	2 (15%)
No	11 (85%)
Immigration Status	
DACA	6 (46%)
Undocumented	3 (23%)
Lawful Permanent Resident	1 (8%)
U.S. Citizen	2 (15%)
Primary Language	
Spanish	13 (100%)
English	0 (NA%)
Reported Significant Fear of Deportation	
Yes	9 (69%)
No	3 (23%)
Has had a Family Member Deported	
Yes	12 (92%)

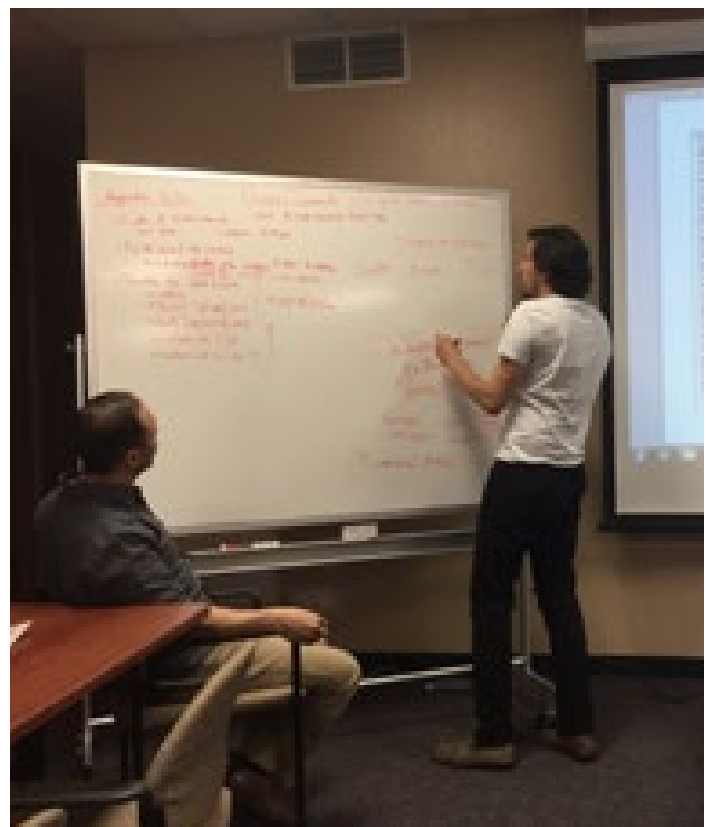
Thematic analysis of all individual interviews resulted in three major overlapping themes including, Discrimination and Microaggressions, Limited Access and Resources, and Immigration Status Realization. The most prominent theme discussed by the participants was the experiences of racial and immigration status discrimination within educational settings. Trauma from being discriminated in a educational setting were discussed to be the most common concern which created barriers in higher education. All names used in this report are pseudonyms assigned by the researchers to further protect confidentiality of participants.

Discrimination and Microaggressions. Direct discrimination is experienced from interactions with counselors as well as other educational staff. Furthermore, systemic issues also creates barriers toward academic pursuits, just how Adala, a 24 year old female, explains:

Yeah, we went to what I now know is considered an "at-risk-school". So, our school wasn't taken to the university, we weren't special enough...like now, in retrospect,... I realize that they [school counselors] didn't care, like, they were just there for their money and they were like...they had this whole attitude like ..."He'll be lucky to even get into a community college...Even when I was in high school, no one would go talk to you about, like, going to college or going to a community college unless you were "Gifted". And if you were "Gifted" and they told you about it, then they made sure that you had a SSN [social security number] or otherwise, you couldn't do it.

While the previous excerpt is an example of a negative experience, counselors and educators can positively impact a youth in education. However, a direct impact is not enough to ensure the success of students as Andrea, an 18 year old student, exemplifies:

Yeah since I got here to the states.. Um.. well.. I had good teachers thank God, that will help me and tutor me in English. But lately I have been thinking a lot to go back to Mexico to study at a university over there and just.. Stay over there. I see many opportunities for me over here but when I ask for help they tell me where to find information but no one truly helps me person to person... I truly see more future in Mexico I see more job opportunities over there... having a dream over there is easier for me.



The overall wellbeing of undocumented youth begins to deteriorate with the pressure, stress and constant discrimination in their daily lives. Such stressors are not only rooted in their immigration status but is also intersected with race. Along with systemic stressors and barriers, the direct microaggressive environment in schools plays an impact in their education. Manuel, a 19 year old, shares with us one of those moments he experienced.

At first, yes, like in elementary school [I felt inferior based on using my native language]. I was kept segregated outside of the room. When I had just arrived [to the United States] I went to the school in the military base. I was forced to sit in the back of the classroom... While the teacher was giving her lesson, I was kept at a computer desk playing games so I could learn English. I did that for quite a while but I never learned [English]... In elementary school, there was a group of little "gringos" that would bully us [Mexicans] because we were poor or because we had to wear the same clothes for weeks.

Take Martha, a 21 year old girl, she would have gone to college if it was not because of direct discrimination from her educator and misinformed counselor.



I remember... when I was about to graduate from high school I remember that in my mind I wanted to go to college... I wanted to study and I wanted to learn. I remember I went to the counselor because I wanted to apply for financial aid and she said I was not going to be able to apply for financial aid because I didn't have a [social] security number... and she told me I was never going to find any help whatsoever, because I was not from here. When I first started school here. It was back in fourth grade I used to go to school in arizona. When I started school there everyone in my classroom was white except for me... I was Mexican.... Si senti la diferencia (I did feel the difference)... like they would push me away like they would... me dejaban afuera me entiendes... (they would leave me out know what I mean)?.. even the teacher herself because she was white... I remember she didn't like that I [spoke] Spanish and I didn't know English at the time and she would tell me " you speak english here you are in America you need to learn English"

Limited Access and Resources. The current anti-immigrant political climate and the insecurities of current DACA litigations, is driving some young undocumented students to consider going back to the country of origin to look for opportunities. The pressure of succeeding in education can be stressful for undocumented youth, especially when it is the only tool they can use to show they belong in the United States. However, it is not a matter of merit when barriers exist in the educational system. Ava, a 23 year old undocumented graduate student shares the following:

My mentors who have Ph.D's and Masters tell us that we have to do it [graduate school] and we have no option, we always have to know more because we have to prove that we're worth it, even when we already are... they face the barrier because they don't have the money or the access to go to school. Not because they're not smart, but they don't have access made for them and they have to take care of their families so they have to put food on the table...Although this is New Mexico, which is very inclusive, there still aren't enough resources for undocumented students, so people not knowing that there are people who don't have Social Security numbers, ...just comments like that... show me that there is still so much ignorance and that makes me see how ignorant we are in terms of immigration and documentation.

The access to education is a serious barrier undocumented students face. It is not solely on the financial aspect but also the misinformed representatives of those institutions that reject undocumented students because of the lack of social security numbers. Juan a 28 year old graduate student shares his first experience in trying to attend a community college.

I was trying to apply for college, at the local community college. Which was TBI back in the day. In 2006, they told me I couldn't apply because I didn't have a social security number. That's when I realized that I didn't have a social security number...that was the first time.. that was the first time that I realized I didn't have a social security number and it was weird [laughs]



Realizing Social Status. Just like Juan, many others have had the experience of applying to college and realizing the social status that came along with being undocumented. Jorge, a 24 year old college student, also shares how applying to college was what unveiled that reality of being undocumented.

When did I discover my immigration status?...Hm it was very early on hm. It was mostly like whenever we got here I think. Or like a couple of years after we got here. Hm my mom would always tell us not to like do anything bad because hm they might take us away from them or stuff like that. Hm but It didn't really hit until [pauses] like [sigh] high school age for just applying to scholarships and stuff like that... [I felt overwhelmed] in college more than anything because, specially when it comes to money. Sometimes I don't know how I'm going to pay for stuff or how I'm going to, just basically just survive sometimes.

Raul a 29 year old entrepreneur, also shares this same experience.

I always had a clear understanding that we were undocumented but I never thought much of it. When I was a kid I never paid much attention to it. It started to hit me when I was going to graduate from high school by friends always talking going to college. Back then there were much resources for undocumented student graduating from high school so I never, I kinda never really even bother to apply for school, even if I applied it would have been hard to pay for school. That when it hit me the most because that's when I saw the differences of like people my age going through school and I had to work and not just that I couldn't just apply to Walmart, I had to work on jobs undocumented people do because they don't have paper right? So that when it hit me when I was 17 or 18.

Impact on Wellbeing. There are situation in which these systemic stressors and microaggressions impact the overall wellbeing of people. Nadine, a 31 college student that moved from Arizona running away from anti-immigrant policies, reflects on what she went through in her middle school and her situation currently.

I have a sense of loneliness. ... sometimes I say I give up on life but I think I am just joking [laughs] I don't think I have any desire to like hurt me or anybody else but sometimes I do think I would be better off being somewhere else and also away from my family and that's one of the reasons why I try to do really well in school because I just ... like... part of me just wants to get as far away from them [family] as possible. I remember this one time in junior high, where I think we were learning about civil rights and so the teacher had us to do this exercises in which she put us into groups and we had to put a person in the middle of the circle, so we have to surround the person and I was the first person in the group to be pushed in the middle and you had to like call the person in the middle like racist things I guess or tell them things that would be discriminatory so this were my friends that were like all around me so I didn't think they would say anything back but they started calling me a "wetback" and they called me of course a "mojada" and they told me like "go back to mexico" and that really hurt me because this was my friends and I didn't really think they were going to say that, I mean I trusted them enough to tell them "this is my status, this is what is going on with my life and I felt like they just used all of that against me, like they could have said other things but you know your like 13 and being called a wetback it's like almost traumatic. And the high school I mean... I learned from that experience, so in high school I just never told anyone (cont.)

... my parents moved us to another city and I just didn't tell anybody about my status until my senior year when it was time I had to figure out how to get to college and they were no options for me. I was looking for options and the advisor had told me that he didn't know what to do. He told me to call the college, the community college in my city at the time. And I called them and they told me that they didn't even been aware of people that were in my situation even existed.

Having a sense of exposure on delicate topics such as one's immigration status can have an impact on the self-esteem of a child. Having that fear of exposure in the educational setting could give the child a sense of insecurity thinking with the possibility of staff or teachers calling ICE or immigration officers. Experiences like Nadine's can further make students "live in the shadows" and feel ashamed of their immigration status. Adala, shares how it has impacted her overall wellbeing.

I had a panic attack in front of my preceptor and in front of the deans of the school, you know, to me, if I'm emotionally vulnerable, it's with people who understand, but definitely not with the deans, definitely not with career services at the school because being emotionally vulnerable makes you weak, it gives them the advantage of knowing that you have a weakness. It's just scary knowing that there's a point in my humanity when I may not be able to control that... that it may be so overwhelming that I may have a panic attack, just like my sister... and there's nothing I can do about it, but hope that they're understanding, but, you know, that's not always the case[...] I was really unstable, I felt hopeless because of my immigration status, I felt hopeless because (cont.)

... I had a \$20,000 tuition that I had no idea how to pay and I couldn't ask my mom for it because my mom was barely paying rent and the bills and we had just gotten evicted from our home so we were looking for a new home to live in because, at the time, I hadn't really told people I was undocumented!...so even at my school I didn't know... and when I did ask for help, they were like, 'Well, we don't know what to do with you, you don't have a Social Security Number so we can't give you any, like, aide or loan.' ... I think, since then though, I like, I've been able to heal through being with the Dream Team and understanding that, at least I'm not the only person going through all of this, I mean, I'm not suicidal anymore, thank God!

Community Gathering Summary. The community gatherings were hosted in Albuquerque and Santa Fe, NM. Those locations were selected due to the high density of population and where some participants were recruited from. After a thorough analysis of the community using anti-racism tools, undocumented youth established that policy change was a necessary step to reduce the recurrent themes impacting young undocumented students in their communities.

Community gathering assisted in further conceptualizing, verifying, and finalizing the three major themes. The main objective was to facilitate discussion between the community members who participated and to collaboratively delineate next steps. Overwhelmingly, participants at both community gatherings were concerned with policy. Participants identified a lack of education policy as the root cause of these themes. that addresses the fears of undocumented students and microaggressions from educators/staff. Specifically, it was discussed that trainings for employees in public education that facilitates culturally-responsive, comprehensive, and dignified treatment to undocumented students should be mandatory.

Discussion

The results demonstrate that since entering elementary school, undocumented students encounter discrimination and experience microaggressions based on their documentation status, language, and, ethnicity. These students further encounter limited access and resources due to not having Social Security numbers. Many undocumented students are not aware of their status and what it means in the larger societal context until being asked for a Social Security number. This can have a unique impact on their personal identity and interpersonal interactions within school settings in particular. Furthermore, these experiences of discrimination, microaggressions, structural limitations and new self-understandings have an impact on an undocumented youth's personal wellbeing. Managing their social status amongst educational personnel and peers alike increases stress and anxiety with youth.

This study demonstrates that access to institutions and financial aid is not sufficient enough to assure educational attainment. Undocumented youth experience distress and anxiety as a result of microaggressions from school's staff/educators. This mental stress impacts the educational performance of students. Addressing these concerns must be met at an individual, community and institutional level. That is, educators and administrators must

address their own biases, as well as their students' in the classroom, schoolwide and district-wide. Likewise, policy makers need to consider their role in perpetuating discrimination and racism in their state as a whole.

It is not a coincidence that undocumented youth see that a mandatory training for educators, to become familiarized and sensitive to current situations of undocumented youth, a possible solution that can promote educational equity and positive self-actualization. For such change to happen there needs to be a policy and a model of training in place. Having trainings for educators to become allies for undocumented students is not a foreign idea and is a project the New Mexico Dream Team has been working for the past 4 years.

Conclusion

Immigrant and undocumented youth face many barriers when navigating the educational system and there is a critical need for intervention and training. However, intervention and training modules that address these issues are quite limited but have great impact. The Dream Zone is a one example of the potential impact of having a mandatory training to public education staff that could potentially reduce the impact of race and immigration status microaggression in an educational setting.

The NMDT Education Justice Dream Zone curriculum is a professional development opportunity for educators, school faculty, and staff on understanding the U.S. immigration landscape and equipping participants with tools to better serve all their students, regardless of immigration status. This training is developed and facilitated by immigrant students. After having trained over 200 educators, school faculty and staff at the University of New Mexico, there has been institutional change at the university, co-led by previous participants.

Addressing policies that impact undocumented youth is imperative to improve their wellbeing. There could be many possible solutions to the impact of systemic racism on wellbeing among undocumented youth in New Mexico and possibly nationwide. This study shows what the community reported is a critical

need for policy change. The community wants an education policy that encourages educators and staff of public schools in New Mexico to ensure the safety and dignity of undocumented students in public institutions.

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