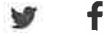




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Undocumented Status: The

Impact on Teens and Their Families Living in the United States



29 AUGUST 2018



What are the mechanisms at work and what mitigates the negative impact on adolescents?

Unauthorized status is one of the defining policy issues of the day in the United States (U.S.). A growing body of evidence regarding the effects of this status on youth development suggests action at the community, social program, and public policy levels could alleviate the detrimental effects of this status on millions of children and youth. Bringing this issue to the center of research on immigration and youth development, moreover, should reap scientific, practice, and policy benefits for children and youth.

Unauthorized status is usually perceived as a factor affecting only adult immigrants, but a growing body of research strongly suggests it negatively impacts children and youth as well. Those with unauthorized status reside in the U.S. but do not have permanent or temporary residence status. There are over 775,000 unauthorized



children and youth within the U.S. and an additional 4.5 million youth reside with at least one unauthorized parent. Collectively, over a quarter (28%) of first- and second-generation children in the U.S. are directly affected by unauthorized status. In a recent SRA Consensus Statement on this topic, the focus was on the consequences of unauthorized status for youth development in the U.S. including how status interferes with healthy development, mechanisms at play, and approaches that may help.

What are the effects of unauthorized status on youth development?

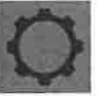
Research has identified a number of ways in which own or family members' unauthorized status interferes with positive youth development in relation to mental health, education, and employment. Relative to similar youth with authorized immigration status or without an unauthorized parent, youth with unauthorized status and in mixed-status families experience:

- greater internalizing and externalizing behaviors (in children, youth and college students).
- lower levels of educational progress and engagement from early childhood through elementary and high school such that youth receive an average of 5 fewer years of schooling.
- worse working conditions, greater participation in low skilled occupations, lower wages, and higher rates of poverty.

What mechanisms are at work?

The mental health and educational impacts described above occur through a variety of contextual and psychological mechanisms related to work conditions, pursuing higher education, access to "safety net" resources, separation of family members, and stigmatization.

Students with unauthorized status face a number of challenges when pursuing higher education. For example,



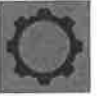
undocumented students have difficulty securing funding to cover tuition and living costs. The majority of undocumented college students are first-generation students, a status which presents various challenges including lower access to information regarding the application process, lower access to funding, and inconsistent supports from university systems, staff, and faculty.

Unauthorized youth are generally excluded from federal and state safety net programs providing health care, job training, public housing, food, and cash assistance. As adolescents begin driving, take first jobs, and apply for financial aid for college, unauthorized youth find themselves legally excluded from many of these rites of passage. Many children of unauthorized parents are eligible for such services as U.S. citizens. Yet, unauthorized parents face high and increasing barriers to accessing programs. This is overwhelmingly due to either lack of information or reluctance to enroll in public programs due to fear of detention and deportation.

The most pervasive and immediately damaging family event associated with unauthorized status is likely the removal of a family member from the U.S. Available evidence suggests when a parent is deported, children are likely to experience:

- an immediate and large decline in family income.
- disruptions in attachments following separations from loved ones resulting in anxiety, depression, and fear.
- placement in new caretaker situations or entry into the foster care system.
- less attendance in school or transition to new school.

Older youth and young adults also experience psychological challenges. As unauthorized youth transition to adolescence and young adulthood, they may acquire an identity that is politically charged. Youth awakening to this stigmatized status report:



- profound discomfort and subsequent constriction of social networks.
- avoiding contact with legal or public authorities.
- feelings of pronounced stigma and social exclusion, which impacts identity formation and social belonging.

Awareness of their status can depress motivation and spur feelings of anger and hopelessness, while social exclusion can lead to frustration, disorientation, and increased worry about the future. Given these identity threats and elevated exposure to stress, undocumented children and youth appear to be vulnerable to poor mental health outcomes.

What can be done to help?

Most fundamentally, policies that provide a pathway to citizenship may address the roots of this problem. The political climate around unauthorized status has been highly contested and dynamic over the last three decades. As such, our recommendations are provided as current illustrations rather than definitive solutions that could serve the developmental needs of children and youth.

1. Enact comprehensive federal immigration reform.

Long-term, providing a pathway to citizenship can provide security to those with unauthorized status and their family members. Available evidence suggests developmental gains and greater access to resources given by authorized status will support healthy youth development.

2. Prevent termination of the Deferred Action for

Childhood Arrivals executive action. DACA has been shown to reduce the developmental harm to affected children and youth. Advocacy for continuation of DACA can communicate the existing evidence base regarding implications for the next generation.

3. Improve the workplace conditions of the

unauthorized and their families. To prevent the harm

to economic and psychological well-being of harmful work conditions on children and youth, labor enforcement should be strengthened among job sectors (e.g., agriculture, food processing) where unauthorized workers are concentrated.



4. **Encourage state and local policies that can increase social inclusion and access to education.** Efforts to propose and pass legislation at the state and municipal level allowing unauthorized immigrants to, for example, obtain driver's licenses, access health insurance, or compete for financial aid, could make use of relevant research evidence related to youth development.
5. **Support efforts to provide a responsive continuum of services – legal, health, mental health, educational – to low-income immigrant children and families, including those with members with unauthorized status.** It is important to understand the wide range of needs and strengths of low-income immigrant families and to provide culturally and linguistically appropriate services while reducing barriers to accessing services.
6. **Conduct developmental and evaluation research to better understand consequences of unauthorized status, circumstances of positive outcomes, and causal effects of programs and practices that address the status.** Specifically, ethically sound methods to analyze the consequences of unauthorized status are needed. This includes understanding trajectory and timing issues (e.g., what is the impact of status across the lifespan?) as well as the circumstances under which positive outcomes occur to inform interventions fostering positive development.

The information presented here is derived from a Society for Research on Adolescence Consensus Statement which was a comprehensive review and commentary on relevant research literature performed by Hirokazu Yoshikawa, Carola Suárez-Orozco, and Roberto G.

Gonzales published in 2016. This statement subsequently received the 2018 Society for Research on Adolescence's best article award.



To get a copy of this SRA Consensus Statement, see the citation and link below:

Yoshikawa, H., Suárez-Orozco, C., & Gonzales, R. G. (2016). Unauthorized status and youth development in the United States: Consensus statement of the Society for Research on Adolescence. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*. DOI: 10.1111/jora.12272.

* Edited by Marcela Raffaelli and Laura Ferrer-Wreder

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