

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE

The Challenges Confronted by Undocumented Latinx Children and their Families in the
U.S.

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for the degree of Master of Social Work

By

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Dedication

First and foremost, the authors would like to thank God for allowing them to be well and make it this far. The authors thank each other for supporting one another throughout the process and building a lifelong friendship.

Dedicamos nuestros logros a nuestras familias y les agradecemos su amor incondicional y su apoyo. Nada de esto hubiera sido posible sin sus sacrificios.

Table of Contents

Signature Page	ii
Dedication	iii
Abstract	v
Introduction	1
Methods	4
Results	5
Discussion	12
References	14
Appendix A: Addendum	18

Abstract

The Challenges Confronted by Undocumented Latinx Children and their Families in the
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By

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Master of Social Work

Purpose: The purpose of this literature review is to examine the challenges undocumented Latinx children and their families face in the United States. Although there is a lack of recent research demonstrating the needs of this growing population, previous research shows undocumented children and their families experience unique challenges in comparison to their documented counterparts. This literature will look at some of the most common challenges affecting undocumented families such as constant fear of deportation, health effects and healthcare access, lower education attainment, housing insecurity and some changes in policy.

Methods: Methods used to find articles for this literature review were the California State University, Northridge library search engine, Google scholars, as well as other online sources.

Results: Results showed that undocumented Latinx children and their families account for a large percentage of the population in the United States. Their undocumented status makes them a vulnerable population facing major barriers as they navigate their way through the United States. Due to these barriers, many families do not have access to the services they need. There is a need for more research that explores the complexities of the lives of undocumented families as well as the resources available to help them overcome these challenges.

Keywords: undocumented Latinx children, DACA, undocumented Latinx families, public charge, challenges confronted by undocumented families

Introduction

In 2014, it was estimated that 67 percent (7.5 Million) of undocumented individuals in the United States were from Mexican or Central American Origin (Chang et al., 2017). Although the United States attracts individuals from many different backgrounds to immigrate to the United States, the majority identify as Latinx. The United States has long been idealized as the land of opportunity, a land in which prosperity and upward mobility is made possible for those in the United States (Abramitzky & Boustan, 2017). However, all the dreams that undocumented individuals come with are made more challenging due to immigration policies that the United States has in place. Unfortunately, as a result of the immigration policies that have been put in place, individuals have to resort to entering the United States both legally and illegally (Chang et al., 2017).

There are many policies that have been put in place throughout the years dictating who is or is not allowed to enter the United States and some of the restrictions once already in the United States. In 1952, The immigration and Nationality Act was enacted limiting legal immigration from countries such as Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Middle East (Turner & Figueroa, 2019). In 1996, The Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act militarized the Mexico-U.S. border by taking on more security measures for those entering the United States. As a result of this act, undocumented individuals decided to extend their stay by settling in the United States rather than risk repeated border crossing and not being allowed back in (Turner & Figueroa, 2019). The Illegal Immigrant Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act, also established some of the offenses that could lead to an individual getting deported and allows for judicial review over deportations (Turner & Figueroa, 2019). In 2001, The USA Patriot Act was passed allowing a rise in border enforcement, added more challenges for obtaining legal

permanent residency, to have access to any services and it also states that legal residents still be deported (Lovato, 2018).

Policies like these have been impacting the lives of undocumented individuals who immigrate to the United States chasing the American Dream within the past three decades (Lovato, 2018). However, in more recent years, programs like the DREAM Act and DACA have been created to shed light to those individuals that immigrated to the United States as children. In 2010, The Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act was passed attempting to provide a conditional pathway to citizenship for those who qualify for being brought to the United States as children (Turner & Figueroa, 2019). In 2012, DACA was passed extending from the DREAM Act by allowing those who qualify to live, work and be able to attend school in the United States legally, although still with some restrictions (Turner & Figueroa, 2019).

With the continued passage of immigration laws, changes in presidency and programs only holding temporary status, undocumented individuals continue to live with uncertainty regarding their undocumented status. According to Garcia (2018), the highest rates of deportation occurred during Obama's presidency, with about 2 million people getting deported under his administration. Although Obama won himself the title of "Deporter Chief," the threat of deportation became more prevalent under the Trump administration (Garcia, 2018). Trump has openly made threats about deporting undocumented individuals, building a wall, and banning refugees and immigrants (Garcia, 2018). The rates of arrests for undocumented individuals have also rose by 25% and programs such as the Deferred Action for Children Arrivals (DACA) have been cancelled (Turner & Figueroa, 2019). Although a decision regarding DACA is still to be made, individuals who were previously protected through these programs, are living with the

uncertainty of what their future holds for them if they are no longer protected and given the ability to legally live, work and attend school in the United States (Turner & Figueroa, 2019). As a result of all the challenges faced by undocumented individuals, this paper will particularly focus on the challenges confronted by Latinx children and their families.

Methods

Articles were found via California State University, Northridge online library database. Under CSUN collection, we searched phrases related to undocumented Latinx immigrants. For example, "undocumented Latinx children," "undocumented Latinx families" "DACA recipients," and "challenges confronted by undocumented families." We aimed for peer-reviewed articles within the past 10 years. We also used Google Scholars to find articles that are not available in the CSUN library. Similarly to the CSUN database search, we aimed for peer-reviewed articles by using phrases related to undocumented Latinx immigrants. Lastly, we used Google search to find recent newspaper articles and publications related to our topic.

Results

DACA termination

There are very few options that allow undocumented children and adults to reside lawfully in the United States. On August 15, 2012, President Barack Obama introduced the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program to protect undocumented youth, often referred to as “Dreamers,” from deportation (Kuck, 2018). Although DACA does not equal permanent residency nor does it lead to citizenship, it provides eligible undocumented youth the opportunity to live in the U.S. without fear of deportation and work lawfully for the effective time period (Kuck, 2018).

DACA benefits those that entered the U.S. before the age of 16 and were under the age of 31 as of June 15, 2012 (“Consideration Of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals,” n.d.). Additional requirements include physical presence and residence in the U.S. since June 15, 2007, must have graduated from high school or gotten a GED and be free of major issues with the law (“Consideration Of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals,” n.d.). The program grants its recipients a temporary work permit, which has allowed many people to find jobs that offer them healthcare insurance, the ability to earn a living and even pursue higher education (DACA Litigation Timeline, 2019). As of 2017, there were approximately 800,000 DACA recipients from all around the world (Lopez & Krogstad, 2017). About 94% of the recipients are from Mexico, Central and South America (Lopez & Krogstad, 2017).

A national survey showed that out of 1050 DACA recipients from 41 different states, 96 percent of the participants were employed or attending school (Wong et al., 2018). Despite its good turnout, since the launch of his presidential campaign, President Donald Trump has profusely attempted to terminate DACA as well as other programs that President Obama put in

place to help undocumented families. On September 15, 2017, the Trump administration announced the termination of DACA leaving many people feeling uncertain about their future and in fear of deportation (Kuck, 2018). However, in January 2018, a federal judge in California ordered the Trump administration to continue the DACA program (Planas, 2018). A hearing is scheduled for May 2020 but until then, recipients are allowed to renew their permits (Dickerson, 2019). The termination of DACA would revert many individuals to undocumented status and further complicate the challenges they already experience such as fear of deportation, housing instability, lower education attainment, health, and healthcare access.

Fear of deportation

It is estimated that around 2.5 million U.S. citizen children live in families in which one or both parents are undocumented (Gulbas & Zayas, 2017). Research by Rubio-Hernandez and Ayon (2016) states that 5.5 million of Latinx children have an undocumented parent. As a result, the process of migration to the United states has resulted in what is known as “mixed status families.” These family units result in different members within the same family unit having different legal status (Rubio-Hernandez & Ayon, 2016). Although there is a high number of undocumented parents who have citizen children, there are also high numbers of undocumented children. As a result of living in “mixed status families,” undocumented children and their families live with an intense fear of being deported or having a member of their family unit deported. Literature by Rubio-Hernandez and Ayon (2016) suggests that the fear of deportation is so intense that undocumented families refrain from going out into their community and end up taking extreme measures resulting in isolation. Rubio-Hernandez and Ayon (2016) state that undocumented parents often avoid leaving their home or driving in their community due to the fear of being stopped by law enforcement and getting deported. Additionally, Garcia (2018)

states that undocumented individuals are living their everyday life with the constant fear of being deported at any day and any time. Furthermore, Rubio-Hernandez and Ayon (2016) also stated that due to the media, children learn about family separation, fear authority figures and as a result Latinx children fear the deportation of a family member or their own deportation if they themselves are undocumented. Living with the constant fear of being deported or having a family member get deported, has shown to have a negative impact in the mental and physical health of undocumented individuals (Garcia, 2018).

Public charge

Adding to the list of challenges undocumented immigrants face is the rule called “public charge.” Public Charge has been around for a while, but its latest version went into effect on February 24, 2020. It affects immigrants looking to obtain permanent residency that could possibly become dependent on government assistance at any time in the future (“Public Charge,” n.d.). Such government assistance services include federally funded programs like public cash assistance, housing, food stamps, and Medicaid (“Public Charge,” n.d.). Data shows that close to 18 million immigrant individuals, of which 10.3 million are Hispanic, live in a home where one or more of these services are used (Batalova, Fix, & Greenberg, 2018). U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) may deny the petition for permanent residency to those deemed as a, “public charge.” According to Wallace, Henry and Simmons (2020), Arizona alone had 106,000 fewer Hispanics enrollees in Arizona Health Care Cost Containment System (AHCCCS) in 2020 compared to July 2018; Florida and California experienced similar trends. Even though the rule does not apply to all immigrants, misinterpretation, confusion, and fear of future repercussions prevent undocumented families, even eligible immigrants, from getting the help they need (Rojas-Flores & Medina Vaughn, 2019).

Housing insecurity

According to Baker (2018), as of early 2015, there were approximately 12 million undocumented immigrants living in the United States. He also noted that out of this large amount, close to 80 percent had lived in the United States for more than 10 years (Baker 2018). Having lived in the U.S. for so long does not necessarily mean that their challenges have improved. In fact, studies have shown that housing affordability is an increasing challenge affecting the lives of undocumented families constraining them to complex living conditions. According to Hall and Greenman (2013), undocumented families are less likely to afford their own homes thus forcing them to live with other family members in crowded households.

Unlike their documented counterparts, federal law prohibits undocumented immigrants from receiving housing assistance from programs such as Section 8 (Wiltz, 2019). Children with at least one undocumented parent face a lot of hardships. Studies show that changes in employment, crowded households, frequent moves, food insufficiency in the home and even worse, deportation, can have detrimental health effects in children (Ajay, 2011). These challenges, along with scarce affordable housing, put undocumented families at risk of homelessness. Based on interviews Chinchilla (2019) conducted with undocumented families, he asserts that even though Latinx homelessness is an understudied subject, it is significantly affecting the lives of many families in large urban regions such as Los Angeles. For example, in 2017, Latinxs made up 48.6 percent of the population in the city and of those, 35 percent were homeless (Chinchilla, 2019). Even though homeless shelters are available, undocumented immigrants avoid them due to fear of discrimination, deportation, language barriers, lack of understanding and the fear of getting their children taken away by Child Protective Services (Chinchilla, 2019).

Lower education attainment

Many undocumented students have dreams of achieving higher education. For many, those dreams are crushed when they learn that they aren't eligible for the same financial aid that many of their peers receive. According to the College Board, there are no federal laws that prohibit colleges from accepting undocumented students, however, colleges have their policies on accepting them. For example, some colleges charge undocumented students out-of-state tuition even if they have lived in the state for many years, which makes college completely unaffordable for many ("6 Things Undocumented Students Need to Know," n.d.).

Undocumented students do not qualify for any type of federal aid including FAFSA, work-study, grants, loans and a lot of scholarships require their applicants to be U.S. citizens or lawful residents ("6 Things Undocumented Students Need to Know," n.d.). In addition to the financial burden, undocumented students often feel excluded and rejected based on their status. These feelings can be exacerbated when they are questioned about their inability to participate in school-sponsored international travel, get their driver's licenses or attend a four-year university like the rest of their peers (Garcia & Tierney, 2011). Even if they were admitted to prestigious colleges, it is not guaranteed that they will receive a lawful residency that will allow them to exercise their profession, therefore some don't bother applying. Abrego (2006) stated "Upon learning that their undocumented status can limit their future, these students often struggle with the contradictions. In most cases, they have been in the United States since childhood and have incorporated as much as their legal resident peers. The academic experiences and expectations have been the same, but upon graduation, the options for undocumented students are greatly reduced (Abrego, 2006, para. 35).

Child welfare involvement and undocumented status

Scott et al. (2014) found that children are entering the foster care system at higher rates as a result of family deportation. The literature suggests that 85% of undocumented children in the child welfare system identify as Latinx (Scott et al., 2014). Although there is limited research comparing the experiences of undocumented Latinx children and their families in the Child welfare system, the literature suggests that the experiences of undocumented Latinx children or their families are different when compared to their non-undocumented counterparts (Scott et al., 2014). A major barrier experienced by undocumented children in the child welfare system has to do with the child welfare system deciding not to place Latinx children in relative placements (Scott et al., 2014). According to the research, kinship placements have been found to assist children who are separated from their families to develop a greater sense of stability and positive self-identity (Scott et al., 2014). Kinship placements allow children to remain in a familiar setting that would not be possible when placed with non-relative caregivers. However, the literature suggests that undocumented Latinx children get placed in kinship care at lower rates (Scott et al., 2014). Findings contribute this barrier to challenges often confronted by the Latinx population. Immigration status, not having services in the Spanish language, relative caregivers not meeting criteria for what is determined to be the state's definition of kinship care are some of the barriers contributing to the child welfare system not being able to place children with relatives (Scott et al., 2014). Furthermore, research suggests that the state might not be able to financially account for an undocumented child in the child welfare system due to their immigration status. For this reason, the number of undocumented children and their families is not accurately recorded and often times recorded as undetermined (Scott et al., 2014).

Healthcare Access

Undocumented Latinx families are as susceptible to health care needs as anyone else, but studies show that they face way more challenges when accessing health care. Undocumented individuals are ineligible for Medicaid, Children Health Insurance Program (CHIP) and Affordable Care Act (ACA) marketplace coverage, thus causing implications for the health and wellbeing of these families ("Health Coverage of Immigrants," 2020).

Impact on physical and mental health

Literature by Rubio- Hernandez and Ayon (2016) suggest that the fear of getting deported or having a family member deported, has an impact in children's well-being and the family unit as a whole. A study conducted by The National council of La Raza on 500 children who were victims of parental deportation following a workplace raid, suggest that children who are separated from their families show symptoms of abandonment, trauma, fear, isolation and depression (Rubio-Hernandez & Ayon, 2016). Additionally, anxiety, withdrawal symptoms, exhibited aggression, and changes to their appetite and sleeping patterns, are other ways in which the mental health of Latinx children is impacted following family separation (Rubio-Hernandez & Ayon, 2016). Furthermore, since their undocumented status limits their access to mental health services, Latinx children experience challenges towards their development. As a whole, research by Rubio-Hernandez and Ayon (2016) suggest that immigration policies are negatively impacting the well-being of Latinx children by causing them to develop insecurity and an array of behavioral and emotional irregularities.

Discussion

There is a nationwide need for awareness about the challenges undocumented families face and the implications those challenges have in their lives. Our literature review findings have shown that having an undocumented status is a major roadblock in the lives of Latinx children and their families. Not one challenge is better than the other because they are all interrelated. Undocumented individuals have to work extra hard to be able to provide for themselves and their families. The possibility of terminating DACA indefinitely has caused children and their families to feel fearful and uncertain about their future. Its termination would leave individuals completely unprotected and exclude them from many essential services.

Current policies are set up to make it extremely challenging for undocumented Latinx individuals to be able to thrive in the American society and achieve the American dream. The recent version of the public charge policy has discouraged people from seeking much needed services due to the fear of getting disqualified from obtaining their permanent residency in the future. Survival has become very difficult for this community especially during the Trump administration that continues to corner them. The lack of assistance, employment insecurity and scarce affordable housing, places undocumented Latinx at the risk of homelessness (Chinchilla, 2019). A lot of children are entering the foster care system as a result of family deportation (Scott.,et al 2014). Others get placed with a relative caregiver when separated from their families, however, an undocumented child faces more challenges to being placed with a relative (Scott., et al 2014). The impact of being undocumented is massive and serious. It affects people's mental and physical wellbeing. Children were found to experience feelings of abandonment, trauma, fear, isolation and depression as a result of family separation (Rubio-Hernandez & Ayon, 2016). Anxiety, withdrawal symptoms, aggression, changes in appetite and sleeping patterns were also noted as ways in which the mental health of children is impacted.

However, most of these people never receive medical treatment because they are ineligible for Medicaid, Children Health Insurance Program (CHIP) and Affordable Care Act (ACA) marketplace coverage ("Health Coverage of Immigrants," 2020). Even if they were eligible, they fear they will be deemed public charge and the cycle continues.

Conclusion

This review showed that having undocumented status is a heavy burden in the lives of undocumented Latinx children and their families. Individuals come to the U.S. in search of a better life for themselves and their loved ones, but they are faced with many challenges. There is substantial evidence that shows they are ineligible for essential services thus making them a vulnerable population. Our research suggests that now more than ever, they need support and advocacy related to DACA continuity, pro-immigration policies, housing, education, family preservation, safety, healthcare access, and health needs.

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Appendix A

ADDENDUM- The challenges confronted by undocumented Latinx children and their families

The Challenges Confronted by Undocumented Latinx Children and their Families is a joint graduate project between **Katherin Ybarra** and **Brenda Gonzalez**. This document will explain the division of responsibilities between the two parties. Any additional information can be included in a separate document attached to this Addendum page.

Katherin Ybarra is responsible for all the following tasks/document sections:

- Wrote the abstract and thoroughly introduced the topic and purpose of the literature review, methods used and results
- Wrote the sections of DACA termination, housing insecurity, public charge, lower educational attainment and healthcare access for the results section
- In detail wrote the conclusion to wrap up the literature review

Brenda Gonzalez is responsible for all the following tasks/document sections:

- Thoroughly researched literature to write about the experiences of undocumented children and their families and wrote the introduction of the paper which described the importance of our literature review
- Wrote the sections on fear of deportation, child welfare involvement and impact on physical and mental health for the results section
- Structured and edited the full document, before submitting the preliminary document to Graduate Studies

Both parties shared responsibilities for the following tasks/document sections:

- Collaborated in finding sources at the Oviatt library and online and described in detail the procedures that were taken to complete the methods section of the paper
- Collaborated in writing the results section with the information gathered from the literature review
- Collaborated in writing the discussion section to wrap up our literature review
- Collaborated in writing the joint graduate addendum

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