Background

- In 2008, it was estimated that 11.3 million undocumented immigrants lived in the United States. It is estimated that approximately 18% or 2 million of these individuals are undocumented immigrant children. These undocumented immigrant children are often referred to as the “1.5 generation” by scholars.
- Approximately 7,000 to 13,000 undocumented youth enroll in college throughout the United States each year.
- Despite growing and receiving primary and secondary (K-12) education in the U.S., many undocumented young adults cannot legally work, vote or drive in most U.S. states, or received federal financial aid for college tuition.
- While some provisions allow undocumented youth to attend primary and secondary schooling, none of these provisions provide a pathway to citizenship — limiting their full participation in society.
- Studies show that fear of deportation/detainment, loneliness, increased anxiety, and depression are central, emotional concerns of undocumented students. These negative social and psychological effects can further limit the ability for undocumented youth to fully participate in society even after receiving an undergraduate degree.

Methods

One-hour one-time, audio-taped open-ended qualitative interviews were conducted either in-person or via phone with undocumented college students who:
- came to the US at age 15 or younger
- attended college as undocumented, remain undocumented
- attended college in Massachusetts or New Jersey
- speak English

Objectives

- To examine how not having legal immigrant status impacts the psychosocial well-being of undocumented college-age students
- To identify what social supports are in place to alleviate psychological stressors associated with not having legal U.S. status

Preliminary Results

Demographics (N=22)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>59.0% Female</th>
<th>41.0% Male</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age Range</td>
<td>18-30</td>
<td>Age average: 21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race/Ethnicity</td>
<td>50.0% Mexican</td>
<td>45.0% Asian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9.0% African</td>
<td>4.5% Afro-Caribbean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>14.0% Brazilian</td>
<td>4.5% Bengali</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9.0% Salvadoran</td>
<td>4.5% Asian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- 77.5% self-identified as Latino/Hispanic</td>
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</tbody>
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Stressors

Preliminary results indicate that undocumented college students experience several life stressors that place them at risk for poor mental health:
- financial insecurities related to paying college tuition,
- stress induced from “navigating the system” on their own,
- feelings of isolation and instances of social sacrifices,
- constantly hiding their ethnic identity and status for fear of being judged, fear of being deported or having everything taken away,
- barriers to developmental milestones (e.g., obtaining, a driver’s license, voting, school and work).

Coping and Help-Seeking

Family support, self-determination, listening to other people’s stories, religion, and music and art are various strategies used to cope with psychological distress.

Financial Insecurities

- “It’s a burden more so economically. Stigma on not having benefits, like preoccupying myself with how much I pay, my clothes, food. To see how much college costs, I knew many students Aren’t paying, I was the one paying for the school. I didn’t change my documents. We were so reduced.”
- My father always believed in us the value of education. He had this saying, “A good education is a guarantee.” Aarp.org

Conclusion

“Understand that we didn’t choose this life. I’m still a person and that doesn’t define me...I have the same dreams and goals and goals to go to college that you do...undocumented classmates have grown up immersed in American culture as any citizen and have education in American schools.”

Recommendations

- Long-term exposure to psychological distress can have a long-lasting negative impact on overall health and mental health. To mitigate these risks, colleges should:
  - Make mental health counseling services more accessible, provide staff trainings on cultural competency and immigration policies, and provide support for the transition from high school to college and beyond
  - Provide more social-structural supports (e.g., peer support groups, informational support, financial support)
  - Building a sense of community on college campuses; a space where students can be open about their experiences.
  - “I believe that a lot of the healing I’ve been having this past months have been through my community right through like us talking with one another.”
  - Raise awareness about the presence of undocumented students on campus and the issues they face (e.g., resource guides, outreach and educational events)

Stigma

- “I still can’t go out. I can’t go out...at the end of the day...I feel like I was on the other side...they didn’t see me as just another person, but a macho who can’t express emotions...I have to hide it.”

Emotional and Informational Support

- “It’s important to continue to talk to the doctors, to continue to talk to our families about this, to continue to talk to our neighbors and friends, and to know that it’s okay. It’s okay if you’re not okay. It’s okay if you’re not fine. It’s okay if you’re not well.”

DREAMers Study: Undocumented College Students, Social Exclusion and Psychological Distress
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