



Research in the Works



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The DREAMers Study: Undocumented College Students and Their Mental Health Needs

In 2008, it was estimated that 11.9 million undocumented immigrants lived in the United States.¹ Of these undocumented immigrants, 18% or 2 million are children.² These undocumented immigrant children are often referred to as the “1.5 generation” by scholars. The “1.5 generation” arrived in the United States at a young age (before the age of 12) and has traits and experiences that lie in between those associated with the first and second generation. A small portion of these children – approximately 7,000 to 12,000 – go on to pursue college in the United States.³

Undocumented college students face several barriers that may place them at high risk of poor mental health. Despite growing up and receiving primary and secondary (K-12) education in the U.S., many undocumented young adults cannot legally work, vote or drive in most states. Their illegal status interferes with their ability to accumulate relevant/practical work experience leading to the inability to develop the necessary job skills before graduating high school, which can limit their employment opportunities.

Several studies indicate undocumented college students experience several psychosocial stressors related to their illegal status. Undocumented students experience high rates of depression, anxiety, loneliness and fear of deportation/ detention.^{4,5} While twenty U.S. states offer in-state tuition to undocumented college students, restrictive conditions may limit where and when an undocumented student can attend college.⁶ Navigating the system to receive in-state tuition can also be a major stressor. Undocumented college students often have limited pathways to legal citizenship, which may cause undocumented college students to “fear discovery” and feel separation from their peers.⁵



The goals of our study are twofold:

- To examine how not having legal citizenship status impacts the mental well-being of undocumented college students; and
- To identify what social supports are in place for college students to alleviate psychological stressors associated with not having legal citizenship status.

The study team is in the process of conducting 25 semi-structured interviews with “1.5 generation” undocumented Hispanic college students who have been in the U.S. since before the age of 15. Starting in the fall of 2016 they began recruiting study participants from colleges in New Jersey and Massachusetts. Recruitment and interviews are conducted in person or via phone.

Having a better understanding of the mental well-being and potential supports for undocumented college student has implications for improving counseling and mental health services on campus for undocumented college students, as well as creating structural supports (e.g., peer networks).

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