SI SE PUEDE: EXPLORING THE LIVES OF UNDOCUMENTED COLLEGE STUDENTS
A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

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Introduction

• According to Educators for Fair Consideration there are 11.2 million undocumented immigrants in the United States today (2012).

• Within this group, 1.1 million are undocumented children under the age of 18, and 65,000 are undocumented students who have lived in the United States for 5 or more years and graduate from high school each year. Of these 65,000, only 7,000 to 13,000 undocumented students attend college.

• Undocumented children are brought to the United States by their parents at a young age, have lived in the United States most of their lives, and have attended elementary, middle and high school in the United States; as a result, undocumented children feel American at heart (Educators for Fair Consideration, 2012).

• Despite growing up as Americans, undocumented children face a harsh reality after high school. It is between the ages of 16 to 18 that undocumented children begin to experience the dramatic shift from protected to unprotected, from inclusion to exclusion and from de facto legal to illegal (Gonzalez, 2011).
Social Work Relevance

Social work values the importance of relationships, social justice, integrity, competence, services and the dignity and self-worth of people (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2008). Similarly, this study sought to provide competence and social justice for undocumented college students by exploring and sharing their life experiences. Moreover, this study values the self-worth of all people, particularly on behalf of vulnerable and oppressed individuals like the undocumented immigrant population. Educating social workers about this unique population can further broaden their understanding and can ultimately facilitate change for this marginalized group.
Cross-cultural Relevance

According to the Department of Homeland Security, 62% of the undocumented population in the United States is from Mexico (2010). Moreover, 6% are from El Salvador, 5% from Guatemala, and 3% are from the Philippines. More significantly, one third of the American population is made up of ethnic minorities (Bourhis, Barrette, El-Geledi & Schmidt, 2009). Understanding the experience of ethnic minorities is essential to providing effective services.

This study seeks to broaden the understanding of the undocumented immigrant population and the life of experience of current undocumented college students. More specifically, this study seeks to shed light on the life experience of 17 undocumented college students attending post-secondary education in California. By learning about pre and post migration, stressors, barriers, fears, identity, and strengths social workers can further understand the needs of the population and provide tailored services and resources accordingly.
Methods

Sample/Sampling Method

- Respondent criteria entailed being at least 18 years of age, be attending college in California, and be a part of the California Dream Network and have either an undocumented or temporary resident legal status at the time of the survey.
- The demographic questions inquired about age, place of birth, gender and the number of years the participant has lived in the United States.
- 17 participants entered and agreed to participate in the survey. Of these, 10 were female and 6 were male.
- Participant age ranged from 18 to 31 years of age.

Data Collection Procedures

- The researcher conducted an open ended online questionnaire of 19 total questions.
- The online survey was created using Survey Monkey and was utilized as a way to target and reach the California Dream Network of students throughout the state of California.
Methods Cont.

Interview Questions Sample

1) How do you describe your immigration status?
2) How do you describe your ethnicity?
3) Do you feel you are American? Tell my why or why not
4) What do you do when you feel sad, stressed, upset, and/or anxious?
5) How do you feel about accessing professional resources to help manage your feelings? (Such as seeing a Therapist, Counselor or Psychologist)

Data Analysis

• An exploratory design was chosen since little is known about the experience of undocumented students currently attending college in California.
• The researcher utilized a grounded theory approach.
Results

- Family was a key theme in the findings. The results indicate that respondents make decisions based on what is best for the family entity versus their own.
- Family separation was referenced in the migration experience.
- Participants expressed fear of losing Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) all throughout the survey results.
- In addition, the data presents that students are conscious that programs like DACA, AB 540 and the California Dream Act of 2011 do not provide a long-term solution to their legal status.
Results Cont.

- The researcher found that the barriers, fears, and stressors respondents have faced due to their undocumented legal status have affected their well-being and mental health. Respondents described feeling powerless, depressed, stressed, and anxious.
- Despite the barriers, fears and challenges described, the researcher also found that respondents displayed resiliency, empathy, leaderships and compassion.
- Research indicates that respondents became aware of their undocumented legal status in their primary years.
- Ultimately, the researcher noted that respondents continue to face a grey area and are not legal nor undocumented, like many described they are “dacamented”.
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Discussion/Implications for SW

The study results suggest that future research should focus on the mental health of undocumented college students. Furthermore, future research should study the long-term mental health effects an undocumented legal status can have on an individual. Thus examining the effects it places on the mental health and criminal justice system. Additionally, the researcher recommends that future studies examine how programs like DACA are changing undocumented immigrant identity. Specifically, addressing how policy impacts identity.

It is imperative that social workers understand the endless challenges undocumented children face throughout their life. Social workers should be aware of the impact the political arena has on the lives of undocumented families. This includes becoming aware of the barriers that impede their goals and aspirations.
References


