

ASPIRING AMERICANS

Undocumented Youth Leaders In California

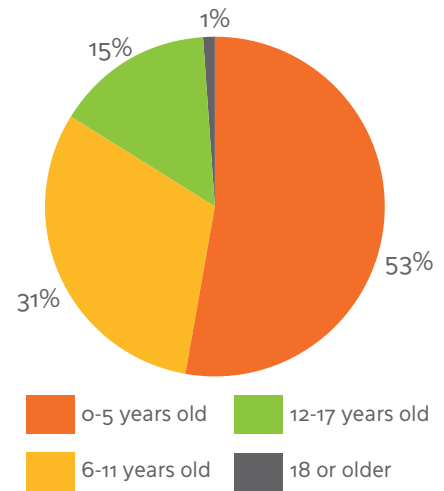
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There are approximately 5 million undocumented children and young adults residing in the United States, with 24% (or 1.1 million) living in California alone.¹ Many of these young people are actively seeking access to higher education and a pathway to citizenship so they can fully utilize their talents and credentials to contribute to U.S. society. This research brief highlights the experiences of undocumented young adult leaders who belong to immigrant youth organizations in California. We demonstrate that these are accomplished individuals who are actively involved in their communities. We also show that these young people disproportionately experience economic hardship and challenges to their personal well-being. The brief concludes by recommending policies that can further the economic and social contributions of undocumented youth leaders and others like them.

Who Are Undocumented Young Adult Leaders in California?

This research brief focuses on undocumented leaders age 18 and over who are members of college and community-based immigrant youth organizations in California. These leaders are not representative of all undocumented young adults, though they do share similar ethnic and income backgrounds with many other undocumented immigrants who grew up in this state. Nearly all of the undocumented youth leaders who participated in this research were brought to the United States as minors. As Figure 1 demonstrates, over half arrived by the age of five and 84% arrived before the age of 12. The leaders come primarily from Mexico, other parts of Latin America, Asia, and the Pacific Islands. Women outnumber men, comprising 58% of undocumented youth leaders.

Figure 1: Undocumented Leaders' Age Upon Arrival to the United States



Source: California Young Adult Study
 Undocumented Youth Sample Size=410



This research brief is based on data from the California Young Adult Study, an investigation of the postsecondary education, employment, and civic engagement experiences of California residents as they transition to adulthood. This brief is based on web survey data collected from 410 undocumented young adults who reported current membership in an immigrant youth organization. We compare the experiences of this highly selective group of undocumented leaders to those of a representative sample of 2,200 young adults who attended high school in California before the age of 17. More information about this research is available at: <http://www-bcf.usc.edu/~vterriquez/>

¹This number includes minors, as well as undocumented immigrants in the 18-29 year-old age bracket. See Fortuny, Karina, Randolph Capps, and Jeffrey S. Passel. 2007. "The Characteristics of Unauthorized Immigrants in California, Los Angeles County, and the United States." Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute.

Contributions and Achievements

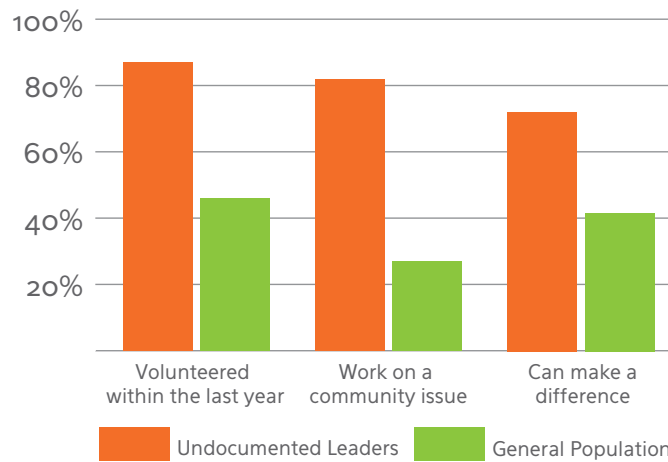
Undocumented young adult leaders expect to be successful in the United States, in spite of their current immigration status. They represent an exceptional group of students. As Figure 2 demonstrates, most obtained above-average grades in high school and have higher educational expectations than youth in the general population. The career aspirations of these young people are also well above average: 89% of undocumented youth leaders expect to have a future job that requires a 4-year college degree, compared with only 60% of the general population. The high expectations of the undocumented youth leaders are related to the fact that 95% have enrolled in at least some postsecondary education, compared to 79% of the general population.

Figure 2: Educational Performance & Expectations



Source: California Young Adult Study 2011-12. Undocumented leader sample size = 410. General population sample size = 2200.

Figure 3: Civic Engagement & Empowerment



Source: California Young Adult Study 2011-12. Undocumented leader sample size = 410. General population sample size = 2200.

Youth leaders' organizational membership and educational attainment facilitate their civic participation. As such, undocumented youth leaders are significantly more likely to be involved in their schools and communities than are their peers in the general population. Figure 3 shows the civic engagement of these two groups. Compared to their counterparts in the general population, undocumented youth leaders were almost twice as likely to have volunteered in the past year. In addition, 82% of undocumented youth reported working on an issue affecting their community in the past year, compared to only 27% of the general population. Moreover, undocumented youth leaders feel empowered to make a difference in their communities. They are notably more

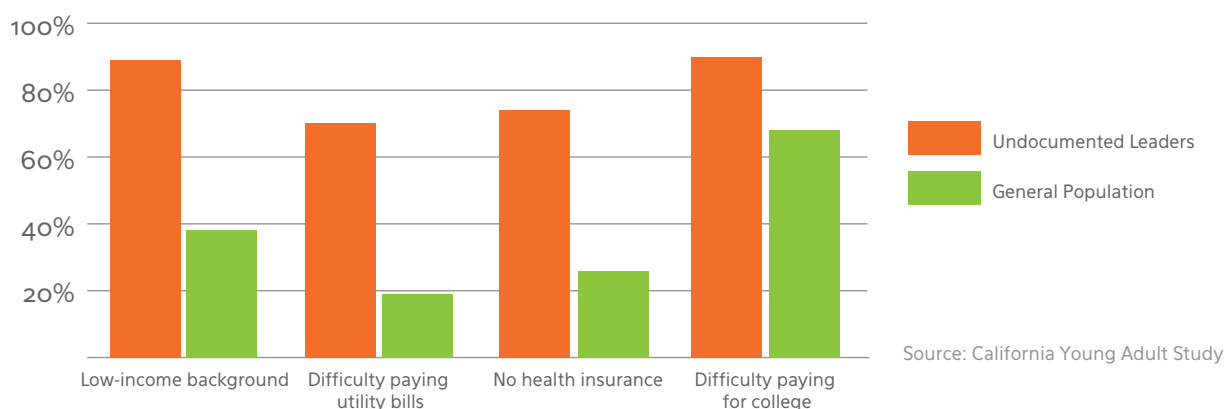
likely than the general population to strongly agree that they "can make a difference in the community or in broader society." Undocumented leaders' civic engagement reflects their sense of belonging to communities in the United States.

Challenges and Blocked Opportunities

Barriers to legal documentation keep undocumented families poor, making it very challenging to pay for housing, healthcare, and education.² As a result, undocumented youth disproportionately encounter economic hardships. As Figure 4 demonstrates, nearly nine out of ten undocumented youth come from low-income backgrounds (determined by their eligibility for free and reduced lunch while in high school), compared to 38% of the general population. In addition, 68% of undocumented youth report having had trouble paying their utility bills in the past year, compared to 19% of the general population. Furthermore, 74% of the undocumented leaders lack health insurance, compared to 26% of the general population.

Across the board, California's youth are having a hard time covering the costs of their education: however, while an alarming 68% of the general population who enrolled in college reported that paying for school had caused financial hardship for themselves and their families, this number jumped to almost 91% for undocumented youth leaders.

Figure 4: Poverty & Socioeconomic Status



Policy Recommendations

Findings from the California Young Adult Study (CYAS) demonstrate the academic achievements and social contributions of undocumented youth leaders in the Golden State. Such youth are actively seeking higher education and are getting involved in their communities at remarkable rates, despite their precarious legal status and high levels of poverty. However, their futures are far from certain. We therefore make the following recommendations that can affect the education, future well-being, and economic contributions of undocumented youth leaders and others like them:

- 01 Protect Access To In-State Tuition For All California High School Students**
Assembly Bill 540 provides access to in-state tuition rates for youth who completed at least three years at a California high school, have a diploma or GED, and are currently registered at a public institution of higher education in California. Without this bill, college tuition would become financially impossible for many undocumented youth.

²Donato, Katharine M., and Amada Armenta. 2011. "What We Know About Unauthorized Migration." *Annual Review of Sociology* 37:529-43; Passel, Jeffery S., and D'Vera Cohn. 2009. *A Portrait of Unauthorized Immigrants in the United States*. Washington, D.C.: Pew Hispanic Center; Fortuny, Karina, Randolph Capps, and Jeffrey S. Passel. 2007. *The Characteristics of Unauthorized Immigrants in California, Los Angeles County, and the United States*. Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute.

02 Institutionalize Access To Scholarships And Financial Aid

This research shows that undocumented youth leaders disproportionately struggle to pay for higher education. Policy changes in California in 2011 opened up access to some forms of financial aid for this population. Assembly Bill 130 now allows undocumented students to access privately funded scholarships at public colleges and universities if they attended high school in California. In addition, Assembly Bill 131 allows undocumented students to apply for and receive Board of Governors Fee Waivers at California community colleges and to participate in state-administered university financial aid programs such as Cal Grants.³ Under Assembly Bill 131, undocumented students with financial need will be able to receive Cal Grants; however, they will only be eligible for merit-based Cal Grants after all eligible U.S. citizens have received funds. We recommend that the California budget include enough funding so that all qualifying low- and middle-income students can access state-sponsored aid, regardless of immigrant background. In addition, we recommend an implementation plan for Assembly Bills 130 and 131 at the high school and postsecondary levels that would educate teachers, counselors, administrators, parents, and students about how to apply for financial aid.

03 Provide A Pathway To Citizenship For Undocumented Youth

As this research shows, undocumented youth leaders have high educational and career expectations, and are actively involved in their communities. Yet California's economy does not yet fully benefit from the investments made in the education of these young people. Temporary employment authorization, such as that announced by President Obama in June 2012, offers a short term solution to some of the economic barriers that undocumented youth encounter. To further the economic and social incorporation of undocumented youth, California residents and elected officials can support federal legislation, such as the DREAM Act, that provides a pathway to U.S. citizenship for those who were educated in the U.S. school system. Permanent legal membership in this country will increase the long-term contributions of undocumented youth.

The future of California—and indeed our country—depends on making education, legal employment, and citizenship accessible for all young people who grow up in the United States. Undocumented youth who make a difference in their communities and seek economic success are truly aspiring Americans and deserve to be legally recognized as such. ♦

This research brief was produced by the Pathways to Postsecondary Success Project at UC ACCORD (All Campus Consortium on Research for Diversity) and the USC Center for the Study of Immigrant Integration.



³For more information on A.B. 130 and A.B. 131 (also known as the “California Dream Act”), see: http://www.csac.ca.gov/dream_act.asp.