



Undocumented Parents and Their Young Children's Development

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A new book, *Immigrants Raising Citizens: Undocumented Parents and Their Young Children*, shows the harmful effects on young children of having an undocumented parent. The book reports data from a study of hundreds of children in Mexican, Dominican and Chinese immigrant families followed from birth to three years. Although the undocumented parents in the sample were just as committed to their children's development as the documented parents, children of the undocumented were excluded from learning opportunities due to their parents' poor work conditions and lower access to child care subsidies and center-based care. The result was lower cognitive skills, as early as at 2 years of age.

How Many Children?

There are over 4 million children with at least one undocumented parent in the U.S. This represents on average one out of every child in every elementary-school classroom in the country. Among children under age 6 with at least one undocumented parent, over 90% are U.S. citizens. They are largely in stable, 2-parent families with extremely high levels of work effort and a long-term commitment to the United States.

How Are Young Citizen Children Affected by Their Parents' Undocumented Status?

Citizen children of undocumented parents show lower levels of early language and cognitive skills as early as at 2 years of age. The lower cognitive skills of children of undocumented parents, compared to children of documented parents, place them at risk for lower achievement, and ultimately lower economic productivity, later in life.

Undocumented parents experience higher economic hardship and psychological distress than documented parents. Undocumented parents in this study did not show different rates of cognitive stimulation of their young children. But they experienced hardship and psychological distress, in part due to fears of deportation, which in turn predicted lower cognitive skills in their children.

Undocumented parents experience much worse work conditions — with between 30% and 40% working below the legal minimum wage in the current study, across the 3 years of research. Undocumented parents also experienced much lower rates of wage growth than other low-wage working parents in this study. These conditions contributed to their children's lower cognitive skills.

Despite their children's eligibility for basic learning opportunities — center-based child care and preschool — undocumented parents face barriers to enrolling them. For example, these parents are reluctant to document their employment to enroll their citizen children in child-care subsidies. They are also reluctant to enroll their children in other supports, such as SNAP.

Policy Implications

Bring the undocumented out of the shadows. A pathway to citizenship for stable, working families with young children represents an investment in the future of America. The U.S. cannot afford to relegate 4 million of its citizen children to a permanent underclass when we need to maximize every child's potential to succeed in school and support a rapidly aging society.

Ensure access to learning opportunities for children of the undocumented. Ensuring access to quality child care and preschool is one of the best investments a society can make in its citizen children. Children of the undocumented experience lower access to these supports, which could boost their cognitive skills and later success. Increasing opportunities to enroll in trusted settings, such as at WIC clinics or at well-child visits, would help address these disparities.

Improve the working conditions of undocumented parents. Wage violations affect on average over a third of undocumented parents of young citizen children. Minimum-wage and overtime-pay violations, which this study shows harm children's development, should be addressed by increasing funding for inspectors of workplace conditions.