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5-2012

## Working with Undocumented High School Students: A Psychosocial Guide to Understanding the Daily Life of Undocumented Youth

Sylvia E. Rusin  
Illinois Wesleyan University, [srusin@iwu.edu](mailto:srusin@iwu.edu)

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### Recommended Citation

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# Working with Undocumented High School Students:

## A Psychosocial Guide to Understanding the Daily Life of Undocumented Youth

By: Sylvia Rusin

MAY 2012



# ICIRR

ILLINOIS COALITION FOR IMMIGRANT AND REFUGEE RIGHTS



### ***In Memory of Joaquin Luna Jr.***

*Whose suicide is a symbol  
of the psychological toll taken on by  
young undocumented people.*



***“ ... Jesus, I’ve realized that I  
have no chance in becoming  
a civil engineer the way I’ve  
always dreamed of here... so  
I’m planning on going to you  
and helping you construct  
the new temple in heaven.”<sup>1</sup>  
- Joaquin Luna Jr.***



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## Foreword

The United States has historically attracted people from every corner of the world. It is, and always has been, the target destination of immigrants, spellbound by the treasures of the American Dream and starry eyed at the sparkle of their earned meager coins. They came, shedding warm drops of sweat on our farms and factory floors, all in pursuit of that sparkle. Their very migration was coupled with the birth of global capitalism and the beginning of a whole new world.

During the 1990's, 4.5 million people arrived to the United States, according to a 2010 report by the Pew Hispanic Center. Many of these people were undocumented immigrants, and those who arrived as small children are now teenagers or in their mid-20's.<sup>2</sup> This group of individuals is known as the 1.5 generation, a group which silently and painfully experiences the reality of living an undocumented life.

Our country has a reputation for exclusion and conquest, not only of its land, but also its people. Prior to 1924, there was no such thing as an "illegal immigrant." The 1924 quota law created three new things: Border Control, deportation, and the concept of an illegal immigrant (also known as the undocumented immigrant). Until the 1980's, undocumented immigrants were openly welcomed to the United States as recruited temporary labor

workers, many of them from Latin American countries.<sup>3</sup> But as European immigrants began successfully assimilating into white dominant culture, their Latino and Asian counterparts did not. For this reason, the latter groups continue to receive a significantly higher degree of discrimination and hostility than their white counterparts, socially, economically, and politically.

Most Americans love looking back at their ancestors' journeys, adventures, and triumphs in the pursuit of the American Dream. But they don't reminisce as much on the here and now of today's immigrants who find anxiety, exclusion, and xenophobia in the everyday search of the sparkle.<sup>4</sup> Although globalization has provided international opportunities, it has also created chaos in nearly every region on Earth as countries struggle to manage its new complexities. The world is messy with overlapping categories and policies of legal and illegal immigrants, and today, its youngest victims are paying the price.

Undocumented immigrant youth are identical to their American-born counterparts in many ways. They are football players, class presidents, valedictorians, and honor roll students. They want to be teachers, doctors, and lawyers and are unshakable dreamers of the sparkle. However, various social,



financial, and legal barriers waste their talent and cause heavy financial and emotional costs not only to themselves, but to society as a whole.

Instead of allowing them to pursue high aspirations and contribute to the global economy, these youth risk getting stuck in the margins of society. Since 2001, a bipartisan solution to this immigration issue, known as the Dream Act, has seen much debate. Although it has not yet passed on a federal level, the act enjoys a large support network both in and out of Congress.<sup>5</sup>

The Dream Act would allow undocumented immigrant youth who were brought to this country as small children (the 1.5 generation) to obtain legal permanent status as long as they graduate from high school and pursue a college degree or join the military.<sup>6</sup>

If students meet the conditions of the Act, they would be able to apply for a six year, “conditional,” legal permanent status. If they complete at least two years toward a four-year college degree, graduate from a two-year college, or serve at least two years in the military, they could then apply for U.S. citizenship. Estimates say that the Dream Act would provide 360,000 undocumented high school graduates with a legal means to work and for another 715,000 youth between the ages of 5 and 17 to graduate from high school and pursue college.<sup>7</sup>

Although the Dream Act has not passed

at the federal level, a separate Dream Act has passed on a state level in over 10 states (including Illinois). The federal Dream Act should not be confused with the IL Dream Act, which qualifies eligible, undocumented youth to pay in-state tuition when attending public universities in Illinois, provides trained counselors on college options and resources for undocumented youth, and gives them access to savings programs so that parents can invest and save for their children’s education. Additionally, an IL Dream Fund Commission is in the process of acquiring privately donated scholarship money for eligible students.<sup>8</sup>

The problem is, undocumented students don’t *just* need a green card and college/scholarship advice— they need someone to talk to. They need someone to help them survive the fear and struggle of their daily barriers, someone to help them breathe, someone to turn that sparkle of the American Dream into a reality.

This guide is intended for high school principals, teachers, and counselors to enhance their understanding of the range of psychosocial constraints that impact the daily lives and health of their undocumented students. The goal is to create safe zones and effective support networks and encourage undocumented youth to pursue post-secondary education.

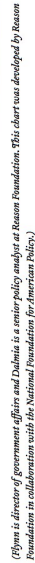
Sylvia Rusin  
Author

## 6

## What Part of Legal Immigration Don't You Understand?

*Illustrated by Terry Colon*

**Total time to  
immigrate and  
become a citizen:  
BEST CASE: SIX  
TO SEVEN YEARS**

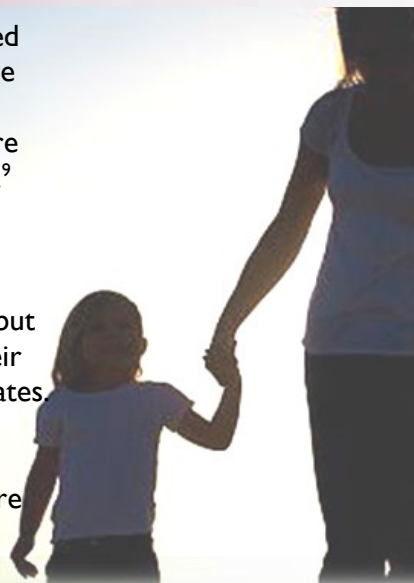




## Who is the 1.5 Generation?

The 1.5 generation are the undocumented children who were born abroad and were brought to the United States by their parents at an early age, and fit somewhere between the first and second generation.<sup>9</sup>

They straddle two worlds, having some association with their countries of birth but primarily identify themselves through their experiences growing up in the United States. Almost overnight they wake up to a nightmare where they learn about their undocumented status and their worlds are turned around.





## Undocumented Immigrant Students:<sup>10</sup>

+	—
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• High aspirations</li><li>• Dedication to hard work</li><li>• Ethic of family support and advanced learning</li><li>• Positive academic behaviors</li><li>• Often get higher than expected academic outcomes</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Perform poorly on high-stakes tests because of language barriers</li><li>• Some youth never enroll in school, choosing to work instead</li><li>• Frustration with language acquisition</li><li>• Schools are not equipped with effective personnel or resources to help overcome many of their barriers</li></ul>

***As they reach adolescence and early adulthood, they become severely restricted in daily life.***

# Identity Development

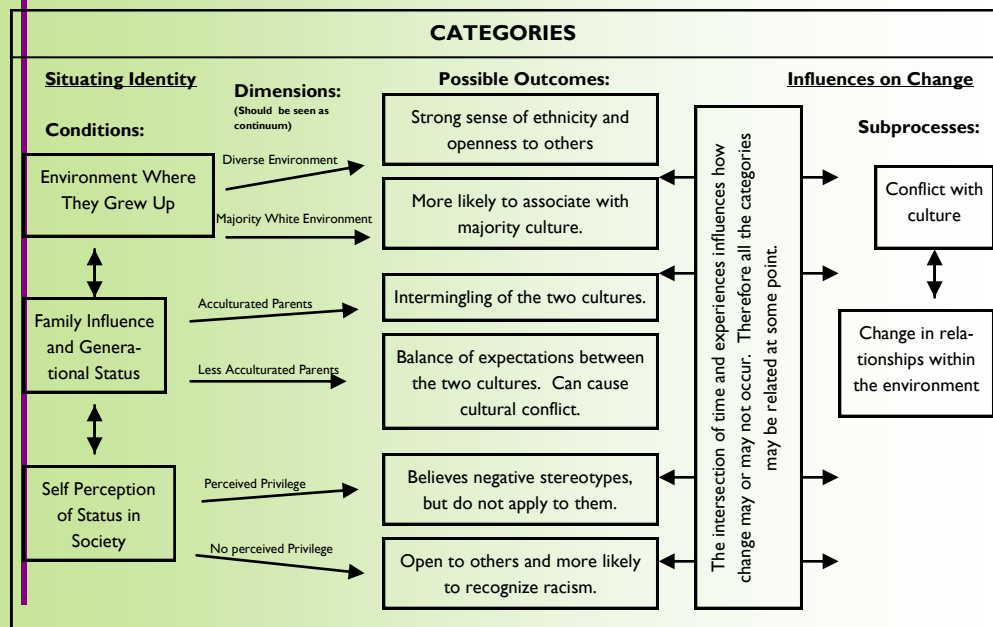
## Bicultural Orientation Model (BOM)

According to Vasti Torres, Professor at Indiana University, the influences of where immigrant students grew up, their generational status, and self perception of societal status play a role in the identity development of Latino students and how they perceived their culture and environment.<sup>11</sup> *This model can be applied to any ethnicity.*

Torres says, “[a]cculturation looks at the choices made about the majority culture, whereas ethnic identity looks at the maintenance of the culture of origin.”<sup>12</sup>

She proposes four cultural orientations:

1. **Bicultural Orientation**– a preference to function completely both in Hispanic and Anglo cultures.
2. **Anglo Orientation**– a preference to function within the Anglo culture.
3. **[Hispanic] Orientation**– a preference to function within the Hispanic culture (can be any culture, given the student’s ethnicity)
4. **Marginal Orientation**– unable to function adequately in Anglo or [Hispanic] cultures.





## Discovery

Undocumented high school students between the ages of 16 and 18 are in the “discovery” stage. In this stage, they begin to experience dramatic shifts in their daily lives and future plans.

**Before the age of 16, many are unaware of their citizenship status.**

As their peers begin legally driving and working, undocumented youth “discover” their daily constraints.

### Rodolfo

“I never actually felt like I wasn’t born here. Because when I came I was like 10 and a half. I went to school. I learned the language. I first felt like I was really out of place when I tried to get a job. I didn’t have a social security number. Well, I didn’t even know what that meant. You know Social Security, legal, illegal, I didn’t even know what that was.”<sup>13</sup>

Like Rodolfo, most students are not prepared for the dramatic limits of their rights. They struggle to make sense of what is happening to them.

Common psychosocial issues evident in the discovery stage:<sup>14</sup>

- **Shock**
- **Hopelessness**
- **Extreme Stress**
- **Anger**
- **Confusion**
- **Frustration**
- **Despair**
- **Embarrassment**
- **Severing of Support Systems**
- **Fear**
- **Depressed Motivation**

And in extreme situations:

- **Anxiety Disorder**
- **Depression**
- **Substance and Drug Abuse**
- **Eating Disorders**
- **Higher Prevalence of Severe Mental Illness**
- **Suicidal Thoughts and Behavior**

As a result of heightened levels of these psychosocial issues, undocumented youth also experience a variety of physical health issues:

- **Ulcers**
- **Chronic Headaches**
- **Trouble Sleeping**
- **Toothaches**
- **Fatigue**



Going through the discovery stage is like being stuck in a developmental limbo. It's like a state of paralysis, both mentally and physically. Once youth start understanding their status,

they begin to view and define themselves differently.<sup>16</sup> Many feel like they won't ever achieve anything.

This state of paralysis may interfere with their academic performance and social relationships.

#### Miguel

"During high school, I thought I had my next 10 years laid out. College and law school were definitely in my plans. But when my mom told me I wasn't legal... I couldn't see my future anymore. I feel as though I've experienced this weird psychological and legal stunted growth. I'm stuck at 16, like a clock that has stopped ticking. My life has not changed at all since then. Although I'm 22, I feel like a kid. I can't do anything adults do."<sup>15</sup>

**"...I'm stuck at 16, like a clock that has stopped ticking."**



## Barriers

Before getting to know your undocumented students, be aware of some of the daily constraints they all share.

Unlike their documented peers, undocumented students face a number of daily barriers. The following are examples of the types of barriers the 1.5 generation faces on a daily basis and how they affect their well-being:

- **Driver's License:**

In most cases, it's not the possession of a driver's license, it's the act of driving that impacts the youth. Driving is an example of attaining adolescent independence, but it's inaccessible to the undocumented student.<sup>17</sup>

⇒ *Note:* For boys, it's about peer status. They want to show off that new car to friends, girlfriends... etc. Their inability to do so results in a loss of peer status.<sup>18</sup>

Undocumented youth are tied down, relying on their family and peers for rides, which **reduces their sense of independence**.

Additionally, when considering commuting to and from college as a future option for students, it's important to



be aware that it can have negative effects on youth as well. Because of long commutes through public transportation, the time left for on-campus activities, schoolwork, study groups, meetings with professors and volunteer opportunities is cut down considerably. These activities could otherwise enhance student experience and improve academic standing.<sup>19</sup>

### Cory

Cory came to the US with her family at the age of 3 from the Philippines. She grew up just like any other American child and worked hard to get into college. When she finally did, Cory realized how much she was giving up because she couldn't drive legally. Because she cannot get a driver's license, some days Cory spends up to six hours commuting on the bus to get to school. She compares her life to her long bus commutes. "I find myself moving very slowly, looking at the nothingness and time passing by, as I go through a series of stops and detours."<sup>20</sup>



- **Poverty**

Nearly 40% of undocumented children live below the federal poverty level.<sup>21</sup> This is nearly double the poverty rate for U.S.-born children. That's 1 of every 7 immigrant children who is officially poor, and the rate is even higher for children with origins from Mexico.<sup>22</sup>

A lot of families deal with the mismatch of high costs of living and meager wages. In order to meet these costs, they bring in family members to work, such as their own kids. Times when these kids could be relaxing or studying, **they have this stress of constant work and having to support their family at 15 years old.**

#### Shirley

Shirley, a Brazilian of Chinese descent, was brought to the US by her parents in 2002. When her parents suddenly returned to Brazil, Shirley could not enroll in a four year university as planned. She was left to care for her two younger siblings on a budget that was barely adequate to cover the cost of food for the family. But, she didn't give up. Shirley found babysitting jobs to help with the family income and saved enough money for her education.<sup>23</sup>

Many undocumented students are in reciprocal financial relationships with their parents. Many even support them.<sup>24</sup> Once they reach college-age, they are largely on their own. As a result of their financial strain and responsibility for their own care, they are less likely to linger in adolescence.<sup>25</sup>

#### **Additional Barriers Associated with Poverty:**

- **Overcrowded Housing**

More than 1 of every 5 (22%) children in immigrant families in Illinois lives in overcrowded housing.<sup>26</sup>

- **No health insurance**

Nearly half of undocumented children (45%) are uninsured.<sup>27</sup>

- **Families have trouble paying for rent and food**

Due to fear of deportation, undocumented families are hesitant to apply for food stamp or health care benefits. They avoid the very institutions that have traditionally benefitted immigrant families.<sup>28</sup>

- **Likely to face high levels of street violence**

- **High likelihood of dropping out of high school**

- **Increased risk of teenage pregnancy<sup>29</sup>**

- **Work:**

Without a social security number, it's impossible for undocumented immigrants to get a legal job. As a result, many of them resort to illegal forms of employment.

**Illegally working is physically and mentally detrimental.**

Youth not only risk deportation and arrest, but also extremely high levels of anxiety and stress on a daily basis.

Many times, undocumented youth work long hours after school, many enter the workforce at an early age at stable, albeit low incomes with at least a little protection from immigration officials.<sup>30</sup>

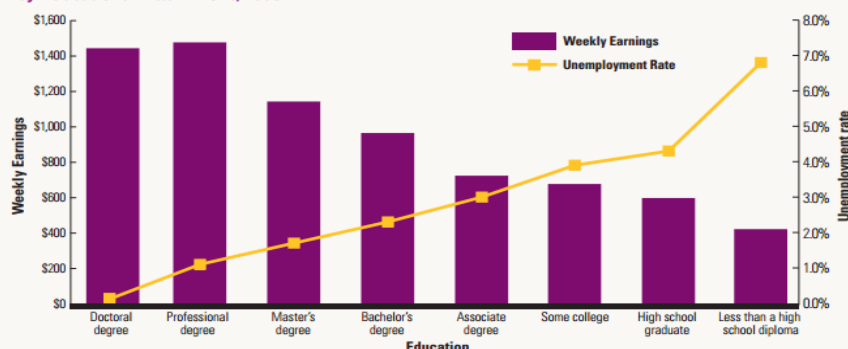
Based on the current U.S. economy, post-secondary education is a necessity for nearly anyone who wishes to participate in today's

labor market and make a decent living wage.<sup>31</sup>

### Rosalba

Rosalba arrived to the United States when she was 10. Despite her undocumented status, she successfully navigated the education system and found scholarships available to immigrant students in pursuit of her dream to be a teacher. On Feb. 14, 2007, Rosalba received a Valentine's gift that would change her life. Waiting 12 long years and accumulating degrees in the process, Roslba finally received her work permit in the mail. She immediately applied for residency which she got shortly thereafter. **Because Rosalba had prepared herself with education and volunteer experience, she was more than qualified once she was allowed to work.** By the end of the week, she got three job offers.<sup>32</sup>

**Figure 1: Average Weekly Earnings and Unemployment Rate of Full-Time Workers Ages 25-64 by Educational Attainment, 2006**



Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Spotlight on Statistics: Back to School Data," based on 2005 Current Population Survey, [http://www.bls.gov/spotlight/2007/back\\_to\\_school/data.htm#table1](http://www.bls.gov/spotlight/2007/back_to_school/data.htm#table1).

- **FAFSA:**

Undocumented youth do not qualify for federal or state grants, loans and scholarships, such as the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), even if their parents pay taxes.

Undocumented students can still fill out the application, they just can't submit it to the government. Some private scholarships may ask students for a FAFSA in order to prove financial need. If they ask students to do this, the student can print the FAFSA out and mail it to them without sending a copy to the government. A student should never submit a FAFSA to the government.<sup>33</sup>

On college applications, a social security number is never required. School staff should with students to contact their university of interest to find out whether they should leave this question blank, fill in zeros or fill in the

space with an identification number provided by the university.<sup>34</sup>

When contacting universities, the students should also inquire about which private scholarships and resources they offer for undocumented students.

The IL Dream Fund, which will consist of privately donated scholarships, has not been created yet. However, many schools offer private scholarships regardless of immigration status. Many communities have also created their own scholarships to help with the cost of tuition or books for college.

**It is critical, to get students involved in school or community related activities and push them to excel academically early, Freshman year. Involvement and academic excellence is vital to scoring competitive scholarships.**



### Private vs. Public Universities:

Although the cost of tuition may be lower for public universities, private universities offer a lot more scholarship money for low-income, highly qualified students.

Tables B and C show a comparison of the public universities (Table B) and private universities (Table C) hypothetical financial aid packages for high-need students.<sup>35</sup>

Even though undocumented students do not qualify for state or federal financial aid, the private universities can meet their need through private scholarships and grants.

### Juan

Juan Hernandez– Campos crossed the border at nine years old with his father from Guadalajara, Mexico.

When it came time to fill out his college applications, Juan learned about the vast range of scholarships awarded from prestigious schools to distinguished, undocumented students and took his chances.

Because of his high achievements and involvement, he was accepted to 15 universities, 7 of which offered him full scholarships. He accepted a \$50,000 per year scholarship from Harvard University.<sup>36</sup>

**Clearly, hypothetical student/family responsibility is \$0 for private universities, and a few thousand at public institutions.**

**TABLE B**  
Hypothetical financial aid packages for a high-need student at colleges to which a student with average qualifications might apply

College	Northeastern Illinois University	Eastern Illinois University	Aurora University	University of Illinois at Chicago	Southern Illinois at Carbondale
Type	Public Non-Selective	Public Somewhat Selective	Private Somewhat Selective	Public Somewhat Selective	Public Somewhat Selective
Tuition	\$22,788 <sup>O</sup>	\$18,550	\$28,072	\$24,244	\$20,286
Average Portion of Need Met	57%	75%	88%	85%	97%
Student/Family Responsibility	\$9,799	\$4,638	\$3,369	\$3,637	\$625

**TABLE C**  
Hypothetical financial aid packages for a high-need student at colleges to which a student with high qualifications might apply

College	Loyola University	University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign	Knox College	Grinnell College	University of Chicago
Type	Private Selective	Public Very Selective	Private Selective	Private Very Selective	Private Very Selective
Tuition	\$43,223	\$25,184	\$39,583	\$45,750	\$52,298
Average Portion of Need Met	78%	71%	95%	100%	100%
Student/Family Responsibility	\$9,509	\$7,303	\$1,979	\$0	\$0

Note: These estimates are derived from cost and financial aid figures reported on the College Board website and reflect data from the 2008-2009 school year.



### • **Early Exiting:**

Frustrated with the present, uncertain about the future and left alone, many undocumented students don't pursue secondary education.

Nationally, 40% of undocumented adults ages 18-24 do not complete high school, and only 5-10% of undocumented high school graduates go to college.<sup>37</sup>

*Possible reasons for early exiting:*

- **Lack of trusting relationships in schools**
- **General lack of information about how to move forward**
- **Depressed motivation**
- **Psychosocial issues related to the 'discovery stage'**

Most undocumented youth attend community colleges, based on financial reasons, but that might not always be the best route to go.

### **Karina**

Karina, an early exitter, maintained a B average throughout high school. When she applied to college, she didn't have guidance. Unaware of a California provision that should have made it possible for her to attend school at in-state tuition rates, Karina opted not to go to college. "I didn't know anything about AB 540. Maybe if I knew the information, I could have gotten a scholarship or something. I don't know if my counselors knew, but they never told me anything."<sup>38</sup>

Many students get stuck in the community college cycle, where they get stuck in between working and school and usually can't afford to keep up both financially and physically. In reality, most community college students do not transfer to four year institutions. The transfer rate from a community college to a four year university is 10-12%.<sup>39</sup>

**The solution is generating trusting relationships with undocumented students. It's having conversations that show them what they can do, instead of what they can't do.**



- **Discrimination:**

As of March 2008, there were 11.9 million undocumented migrants living in the United States. 9.6 million of those were from Latin America.<sup>40</sup>

Racially distinct immigrants are at a greater risk for experiencing discrimination than those who are not.<sup>41</sup> They may be identified by their “unusual” names and manners of dress.

- *Experiencing stereotypes at school:*

Bullying based on skin color takes place more often than we think. Teachers do more than just teach, they are mediators and problem-solvers.

They need to:

- **Be aware of the comments they make in class and the example they set to their students.**
- **Watch humor. The things teachers say can hurt students.**
- **Use effective problem-solving techniques.**
- **Know that bullying is a serious issue and cannot be solved in one mediation.**

### Nayeli

Although Nayeli was silent for many years, she decided to be brave and tell a teacher about her bully in 4th grade. Unfortunately, the teacher simply separated her bully from her in class.

As the discrimination continued, Nayeli began experiencing suicidal thoughts. “I didn’t want to deal with it, I just wanted to solve it,” she said. Not wanting to burden her parents with more stress, it took Nayeli years to finally tell her parents about her bully.

“I want teachers to know that they could do something... It’s the teachers responsibility to look after us, not just be worried about teaching. **They could have done something and prevented me from finding out what hate truly is,**” Nayeli said. Effective problem solving could have saved Nayeli many nights of tears.<sup>42</sup>

Asian American and Pacific Islander undocumented students are still greatly affected by the **model minority myth**.

The myth masks their daily struggles, resulting in a lack of research on the part of professionals and ultimately a neglect of programs and services for these students.<sup>43</sup>

It’s vital for teachers and counselors to transcend the stereotype and provide this group with necessary tools and support in their quest for higher-ed.

# Stigma

## What is it?

Stigma is the shame that is often attached to being undocumented. It's the negative stereotype of the undocumented immigrant.



## How does it work in the 1.5 generation?

It plagues the lives of undocumented students. They live their entire lives believing they are American and almost overnight their lives are completely turned around when they find out about their status.

- It makes the lives of undocumented students incredibly traumatic, full of fear, and a multitude of physical and mental issues.
- It involves internalizing all of their barriers and their new identity, and living with it everyday.
- Undocumented students want to believe that they are different from their parents because they have an education and speak English but when faced with barriers, they find themselves in the same situation as their parents.
- When students learn about their status, they go out of their way to keep quiet and don't participate in things they can't.
- As a result, teachers, friends, and counselors may think undocumented students are lazy and unmotivated.
- **Keeping the secret is more important than anything else for the undocumented student.**

## • Learning to Lie:

Undocumented youth find themselves making excuses as to why they can't travel with their friends during the summer or spring break, or why they have to miss field trips with academic clubs or classrooms.

This results in **learning to lie**. Undocumented youth believe they have been lied to in childhood, so they adopt lying as a survival strategy.<sup>44</sup>

### Anonymous

"I had to lie more than before, I just HAD TO. It became more than a barrier, it became a shame. I didn't know anyone in my situation in school. As far as I knew, I was the only one going through this. The person I was closest to could not understand my citizen. This person was a citizen and I felt like I was coming off as one who just complains."<sup>45</sup>

Many undocumented youth report being **afraid of what their friends might think** or how they would react if they revealed their undocumented status.

### Chuy

During high school, Chuy played soccer. After he saw one of his teammates refer to players on an opposing team as "wetbacks" and "illegals," he was wary to disclose his undocumented status even to his closest friends. "I grew up with this guy," he said, "we had classes together and played on the same team for like four years. But wow, I don't know what he would say if he knew I was one of those wetbacks."<sup>46</sup>



## Relationships



18th Street Mural, Chicago IL

- **Parents**

Many parents are confused about post-secondary opportunities for their children.

### Rocio

“To be real, I don’t believe it, [these savings programs] are just trying to steal from our parents.”

Rocio’s parents are pushing her to go back to Mexico after she finishes high school because it’s just easier and less expensive for her to study there.

They don’t want her to have the same life they have here.<sup>47</sup>

**“You can’t study so you have to work,”** is a common mentality in undocumented family households. It has the capacity to place undocumented youth in the same position as their parents, economically and socially, and hinders their dreams of post-secondary success.

Additionally, there is confusion about savings funds such as the IL College Savings Plan as parents dismiss them as scams.

Undocumented youth become disoriented, not wanting to upset their parents if they don’t follow their advice, but they’re also dreaming of living a better life than that of their parents.

### Rebellion:

In the 'discovery stage,' undocumented adolescents tend to blame their parents for "not fixing their status."

There is a severe degree of discontent and anger towards parents, as teens are confused as to why their parents didn't "fix" their undocumented status. As a result, home-life tends to be full of fights, stress and anger.

*That anger turns into hopelessness, and undocumented youth experience an emotional freeze.*<sup>48</sup> During this period, their grades, motivation and overall self-esteem might fall.

⇒ Note: Many children in immigrant families have parents with limited education.

Parents with little schooling are:

- Less comfortable with the education system
- Less able to help their children with school work
- Less able to effectively negotiate with teachers and education administrators

**It is critical for school personnel to focus on the needs of children from Mexico and Central America because these groups are especially likely to have parents with less schooling.**<sup>49</sup>

### Risking Deportation:

There are approximately **5 million children** in the United States who live with at least one undocumented parent.<sup>50</sup>

Knowing that their parents can be deported at any time, every day, these children experience fear, confusion, uncertainty, anxiety, and chaos regarding the status of their parent.<sup>51</sup>

Immigrants have a very tight family unit, so when a member gets deported the effect can be psychologically detrimental to their children.

Common effects include:

- **A sense of loss**
- **Isolation**
- **Lack of emotional and instrumental support**<sup>52</sup>

⇒ Note: The distress is even more likely if the deportee is the child's mother.<sup>53</sup>

## • “Cross-Status” Dating

U.S. citizens and green card holders date undocumented immigrants all the time. Research says it’s more frequent on college campuses because the diversity and space makes students feel safer about their status.<sup>54</sup> High schools have a similar space as college campuses, so it’s likely to find cross-status couples there too.

For the 1.5 generation, cross-status dating is very common since they speak flawless English and share an American identity.

### ***Cross-status couples face a few barriers:***<sup>55</sup>

- For boys, not being able to drive or work, paying for dates is not easy.
- Students are viewed with suspicion by the families of the families of their U.S. boyfriends/girlfriends who think they’re after a green card
- Constant worry that the undocumented partner will get deported
- Learning to lie happens, with couples constantly making excuses for why they can’t meet their friends in places where ID is needed, or travel.
- Both partners are consumed by guilt: Citizens, for privileges and undocumented immigrants, for the burdens



they pose.

- Potentially more abusive relationships because their partner might hold their status information over them

Marriage used to be a ticket to a green card, but nowadays it’s a bit more complicated than that.

Many illegal immigrants need to return to their birth countries to apply for papers and will be barred for a decade unless they get a special waiver.

### **Laura**

Last summer, Laura went to Alaska and walked on glaciers in a pair of her undocumented boyfriend’s shoes, holding up his photo as she took pictures of the scenery. It’s as if he was there with her. Laura said her boyfriend made a promise that they won’t get married until he’s already got his green card, so that it’s clear that they are not marrying for papers. Although she’s okay with that, she still wishes they could travel together like other couples.<sup>56</sup>



- **Friends**

Difficult to relate to anyone, no one to talk to.

Watching documented peers advance, undocumented students live in a completely different world. It's difficult for them to have the same type of hope for success.

When everyone is making plans for their future after graduation, undocumented students are left alone with their limitations.

**Anonymous**

"I hated that no one could really know me. For somebody to understand me, they'd have to understand my status. This situation even cost me a few friendships; friendships have ended because it turns out they resented me for my status. I felt so limited and sometimes like there was no way around this... It constantly eats at you. What triggers anxiety, fear, depression and anger is the future."<sup>57</sup>

Undocumented Youth suggest the following would be helpful:

- **Meet with someone on a monthly basis, just to ask you how your getting by**
- **Have someone know your situation**
- **Find a community**

*Culture isn't everything:*

There is a disconnect between immigrant born Latinos and U.S.-born Latinos. Culture is not everything, it's the common hardships that really make the difference for undocumented students in terms of friendships.

For this reason, most undocumented youth find healthy, supportive friendships with similar, undocumented youth.

This sort of support group makes them feel less alienated and gives them a network in which they can freely talk about their daily barriers.

**"... It constantly eats at you.  
What triggers anxiety, fear,  
depression and anger is the  
future."**

## • School Faculty

Students are used to hearing:  
'Here's what you cannot do...'

*Instead, they need to hear:  
'Here's what you can do...'*

*How can we serve and treat the student just like any other student, but still be aware of and attend to their unique barriers?*



**“... I wish someone could just show me that I’m a valid human being...”**

The language used by staff is the biggest issue undocumented students face.

The next one is access.

Students usually get stuck when they ask for information on schools and they encounter a person who may have the best intentions to help, but who is just unaware of the policies.

Having to tell their story to a number of people gets discouraging. Especially if these people are using ineffective counseling techniques.

### Antonio

“I wish someone could just show me that I’m a valid human being, that would listen and show me what I can do and the ways I could do it. We need to teach educators, to teach students, to teach their friends to respect us.”<sup>58</sup>

Research shows that social capital is critical for undocumented youth.

**The presence of “really significant others” who take an interest in these kids, motivate them to pursue college, and have the knowledge and experience necessary to push them toward success is critical.**<sup>59</sup>

## So... what can you do?

Where would you rather have your students? In college, getting an education and being around a positive peer group, or doing something that might get them arrested or deported, like mopping floors of a restaurant or pulling weeds?

**Wake. Up. Dream. Act.**



18th Street Mural, Chicago IL



### Things to Keep in Mind:

- Environment plays a big role

#### Anonymous

"My experience would have been different if I had been in the city than in the suburbs. There is a sense of privilege within undocumented people out in the city. There is at least decent public transportation, compared to the suburbs... I can't do anything without planning things days in advance."<sup>60</sup>

- Understand real barriers and the barriers which undocumented people create for themselves

#### Anonymous

"At my high school, it felt like people would say oh you're undocumented, but they acted like it wasn't a big deal or something. They sort of minimized it. There is a lack of understanding.... They just kind of blow it off as a smaller problem than it is to you."<sup>61</sup>

- Most undocumented students are not getting help.  
One, because they are too afraid to ask for help and  
two, because in most schools this hasn't been identified  
as a problem.



## Getting Help

### The Invisible Problem:

Often people dismiss the psychosocial issues of undocumented youth as problems of adolescence. They have to directly target individuals and understand that in addition to the problems of adolescence, these undocumented youth are also experiencing issues of the discovery stage.

The most important thing school personnel need to know is:

#### **START EARLY.**

#### **Target Freshmen.**

Have them talk to someone right as they start high school, so they can be on track in terms of academics and extracurricular activities to help them get college scholarships Senior year.

**Prevent the psychosocial issues associated with the discovery stage from influencing academic standing.**

It makes no sense to counsel Juniors or Seniors if grades aren't high enough to qualify for scholarships.

Generally, the invisible problem is coupled with two others:

### I. The Problem of the Empathetic Ear:

⇒ The "I know what it's like..." phrase can sometimes do more harm than good.

You don't really know what it's like unless you've been through it. Comparing the issues of undocumented students to ones that barely resemble their experiences discourages youth. They feel even more alienated because these comparisons may have nothing to do with what they are going through. Instead, *just listen* and show students their resources.

### I. The Problem of the Optimistic Mind:

⇒ The "Focus on the good things in your life..." phrase can also do harm.

This phrase doesn't really help. It tells the student to just keep waiting and see what will happen. But that's not what they need in this difficult time.

Instead, they need someone to tell them what they can do, realistically. They can't afford to wait, they *need* to act. In other words, they need someone to push them into clubs, volunteering, and academic excellence.



- **Solving the Invisible Problem:**

- 1. **Create Safe Zones**

Just like LGBTQ youth have safe zones in schools, where they can freely talk about their identity and daily barriers, undocumented youth need the same type of space.

The embarrassment, lack of social support and the various psychosocial issues associated with their undocumented identities, require a safe, confidential space where they can get the help they need.

⇒ Note: School personnel are encouraged to hang Safe Zone signs in various parts of their schools.

- 2. **Establish a Liaison**

Teenagers are extremely individualistic. For this reason, they need to be the ones who choose who they want to talk to.<sup>62</sup>

Schools need to appoint a Liaison, who will be primarily responsible for having conversations with undocumented students regarding their psychosocial well-being. This individual will have the most information and access to the school's undocumented youth.

The Liaison can be anyone: a Teacher, Principal, Counselor, Academic Advi-

sor.. Etc.; but, there can only be one.

In the beginning, one-on-one conversations work best. Later, the Liaison can start to think about getting the undocumented teenager involved in support groups or other activities.

Other responsibilities of the Liaison will be the following:

- Meet with the undocumented students on a quarterly or monthly basis to talk about their issues
- Within a Safe Zone, get to know undocumented students on a more personal level and establish trusting relationships
- Determine the needs of the undocumented student and decide where to refer them (within the school)
- Act as a 'Point Person,' directing students to the services they need within the school
- Get updated and communicate with school personnel (counselors, psychologists, financial aid, advisors...etc) regarding the psychosocial status of the students
- Be familiar with mental health providers and other professionals

### 3. Form a Dream Committee

The Liaison can't do everything alone. He/she will need a group of people to help.

Establish a committee of school personnel who will be willing to work with undocumented students. This group should meet with the Liaison quarterly to discuss updates and related information.

This committee should at least include:

- Psychologist/social worker
- Academic advisor
- College Counselor
- Principal
- Dean
- Financial Aid Advisor

### 4. Learn and Act

Once the Liaison and Dream Committee are established, make sure everyone is familiar with not only the mental health/psychosocial issues related to undocumented immigrant problems, but also the Dream Act policies.

Assign roles to the committee members, make sure members know their responsibilities and make solid plans for the future.

### 4. Involve the Family


It's great to have a student open up and talk about their undocumented status to someone at school, but at the end of the school day, that same student still needs to face his/her barriers at home.

School personnel can have effective conversations, but unless these conversations affect the family, they might as well be useless.

Adolescents tend to follow their family's advice, whether it's good or bad. But when parents don't understand options for their undocumented children, there are severe obstacles and students get confused about what to do.

Because of English language barriers and personal levels of education, many immigrant parents find school intimidating. The solution is welcoming parents to more school events.

It's crucial to involve the family and teach them about post-secondary options for their children. Bi-annual parent-teacher meetings are not enough, teachers need to reach out to parents during school events.



It's not as hard or time consuming as it sounds. Clubs and organizations put up events for parents and students all the time. These same events can be instrumental in establishing effective teacher-parent communication.

### **5. Involve the Community**

Part of alleviating some of their psychosocial issues is showing them a place where they can escape the every-day.

Through clubs and organizations, undocumented youth can participate in the community's volunteer opportunities and get a sense of life outside of their daily barriers.

- ⇒ Keep school doors open for longer than just the 8 hour school day. Create clubs, workshops, and classes accessible to the entire community (including the parents).

As students have more community service experience, they have better chances to get future scholarships.

- ⇒ Keep updates on local community events and use these events as tools, encouraging undocumented youth participation.
- ⇒ Encourage undocumented youth to partake in unpaid internships.

⇒ Additional Resources:

#### **1. Resources and scholarship information for immigrant students:**

⇒ Student Scholarship Guide:

<http://icirr.org/content/immigrant-student-scholarship-guide>

#### **2. Guides to College Accessibility**

⇒ Student guide:

<http://icirr.org/content/undocumented-students-guide-college-illinois>

⇒ Counselor Guide:

<http://icirr.org/content/counselor-guide-resources-undocumented-students>

#### **3. Legal Help**

⇒ <http://endnow.org/>

⇒ <http://icirr.org/content/immigration-legal-resource-referrals>

#### **4. Community Resources**

⇒ Keep yourself updated on your community's events, scholarships...etc.

## 6. Empower Students

The battle isn't over after high school. It actually just begins. There's no certainty about whether or not the student will receive citizenship but there is hope.

School personnel need to be realistic with students in terms of their possibilities. But there really isn't any value in preparing someone for a life of limitations, so there is no need to prepare them for the barriers they might face in college.

Concentrate on the reality of the here and now. Make sure they are doing everything they need to be doing in order to get into college and obtain scholarships.

As undocumented students will be getting more and more involved and excelling academically, they will feel empowered for the future.

With this type of empowerment, the barriers they might encounter in college won't be as heavy as the ones they faced in high school.

**"If we know someone might die of cancer at 22, do we stop caring about them at 16 and throw their lives away, or do we want them to have a meaningful experience?"**

**-Dr. Roberto Gonzales**



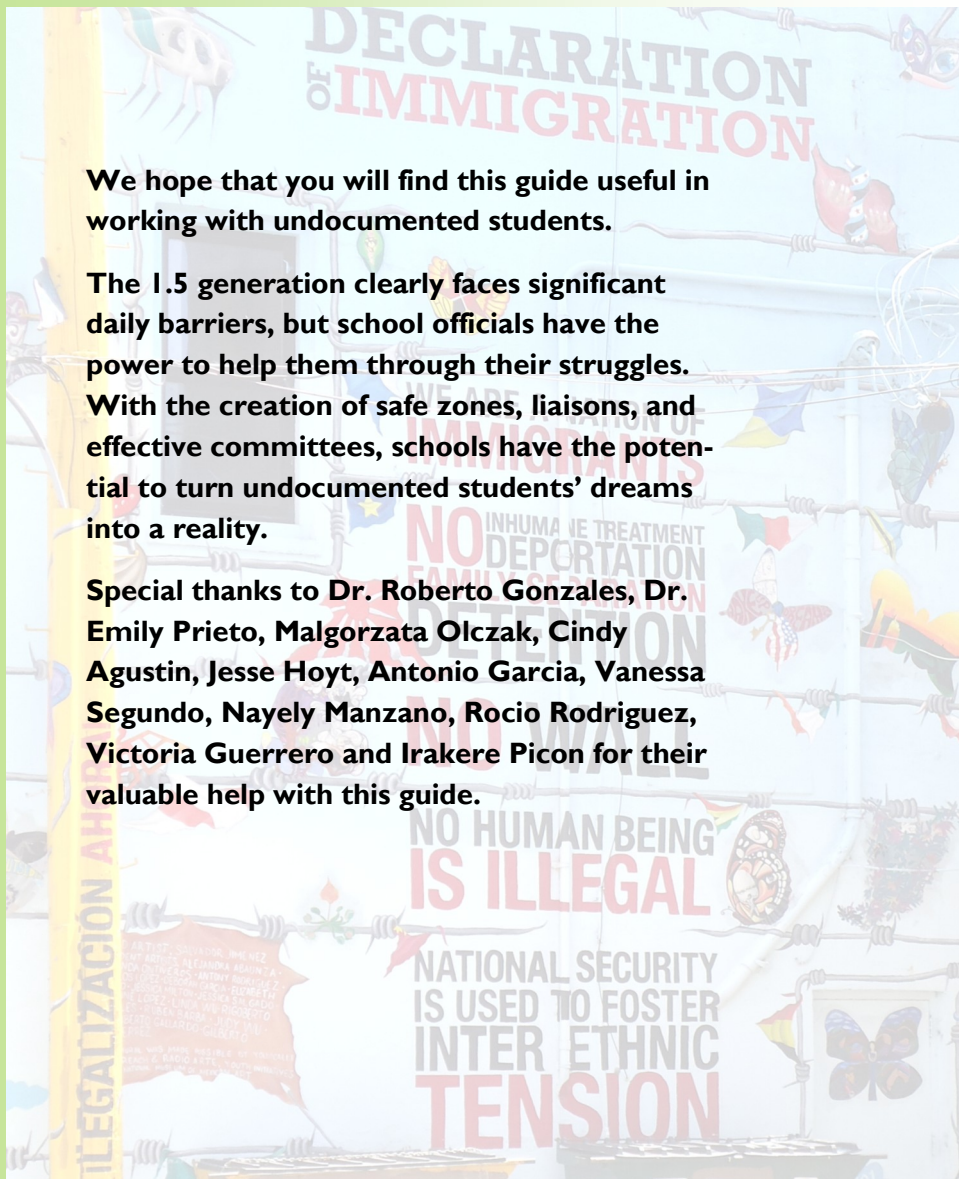
*Immigration Mural, Chicago IL*

## Acknowledgements

**We hope that you will find this guide useful in working with undocumented students.**

**The 1.5 generation clearly faces significant daily barriers, but school officials have the power to help them through their struggles. With the creation of safe zones, liaisons, and effective committees, schools have the potential to turn undocumented students' dreams into a reality.**

**Special thanks to Dr. Roberto Gonzales, Dr. Emily Prieto, Malgorzata Olczak, Cindy Agustin, Jesse Hoyt, Antonio Garcia, Vanessa Segundo, Nayely Manzano, Rocio Rodriguez, Victoria Guerrero and Irakere Picon for their valuable help with this guide.**



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