

Stressed: Undocumented Students' Mental Health

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The Undocumented Student Equity Project is dedicated to conducting rigorous empirical research to inform institutional policy and practice, and ensure that universities effectively meet the needs of undocumented students.

USEP was founded at the University of California, Irvine.

It is a collaboration of undocumented and allied undergraduates, graduate students, and faculty.

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Undocumented students face several challenges while pursuing a college education. One such barrier is the difficulty associated with managing the stressors connected to their immigration status. Understanding undocumented students' stressors allows us to better understand how to create and provide mental health services and support.

Drawing on 508 survey responses and interviews with 30 undocumented students at the University of California, this brief explores undocumented students' mental health and wellbeing. We conclude by outlining policy recommendations.

Undocumented students report high levels of stress.

We administered the Cohen's Perceived Stress Scale, ten statements about how often certain feelings emerged in the past week such as having "been upset because of something that happened unexpectedly," "felt that you were unable to control the important things in your life," and "found that you could not cope with all the things that you had to do." Students rated the frequency of each feeling on a scale of 0 (never) to 4 (almost always). The responses are added up, resulting in a stress score ranging from 0 to 40.

The average score of respondents was 21.5, or the approximate equivalent of "sometimes" (2) on all items. This score is substantially higher than those reported by nationally representative studies of other populations including white Americans (mean 15.70), Latino adults (mean 17.00) and all young adults of comparable age (18–25 years; mean 16.78) (Cohen and Janicki-Deverts 2012).

Students readily acknowledged their high levels of stress during the interviews. Stress indicators fell into four broad categories: inability to concentrate, inability to complete tasks and fulfill responsibilities, emotional instability, and physical pain. For example, Angie shared, "I have this anxiety feeling. And I feel like there's just a million things I need to get done in a day. ... I've noticed in the last couple of weeks, a lot of headaches. And a lot of wanting to plan but not accomplishing everything." She and others suggested that stress emerges frequently and piles up as students try to keep up with the demands of their college education.

Their comments also foreshadow implications for their overall health. Their stress leads to negative health consequences such as disrupted sleep, frequent and persistent colds, and recurrent headaches. Their limited time means that healthful activities, like eating well and exercising, are also cut from busy agendas.

Undocumented students' stress is driven by several stressors, including academic concerns, future concerns, financial concerns, and deportation concerns.

Students cited common academic stressors and suggested that these were worsened by their immigration status. Bryan highlighted material barriers: he was “dead broke” and unable to buy a \$100 textbook, leading him to struggle in class. His status also created psychological barriers to studying as much as he would like: “Depression sometimes. Again, it gets to that feeling where you're just like, ... I should be working on this. And you start just beating yourself up over it but you're not doing anything.” Sometimes these feelings were so overwhelming that he missed class.

Students' fears of the future centered their (in)ability to obtain employment and pursue a career after graduation. These concerns stemmed from students' tenuous access to legal employment, which hindered their ability to make concrete future plans, in turn, feeding their stress. Dan explained, “I just have stress about uncertainty. Like what will I do after college? What will I do right now? I can't really get much opportunities. A lot of things need social security [numbers]. And I just feel like, not less than [others], but I'm not fulfilling my fullest potential. So I get stressed out and anxious about that.”

Despite receiving financial aid, many students still reported financial stressors. Rebecca gave an example, “I haven't been able to finish paying my October rent. ... I've had to choose between buying books and buying food. ... It just stresses me out.” Others discussed trying to save money by living in more crowded housing conditions. However, this could ultimately create more stress by limiting their access to quiet study space or restful sleep.

When discussing deportation-related stressors, most students focused on threats to their parents and other family members safety before their own. Calvin shared, “For my family for sure. I could say I'm not too worried [for myself] but I'm definitely worried about, in particular my grandma. Because she's at home all the time by herself.” Many students perceived undocumented adults to be at a higher risk for interacting with police and/or immigration enforcement officials because of their less protected social locations.

After the 2016 election of President Trump, students began to express increased concerns about their own deportation, suggesting this may become a more salient dimension of stress in the future.

Stress worsens undocumented students' overall health.

A substantially greater proportion of respondents reported poor or fair health (34%) rather than very good or excellent health (23%). This is considerably worse than most young adults; for example, a 2007 national survey found that only 10% of young adults aged 18–24 reported poor or fair health (Tsai 2010).

Statistical analysis of our data shows that academic and future concerns drove high stress levels, which were then associated with poorer health.

Financial strain was also directly related to poorer health by limiting students' ability to engage in health-promoting activities. Bryan reported substantial financial instability that manifested as food insecurity: “This quarter ... I was broke half the time and I didn't have— as a college student, you don't [even] have time to make yourself cereal ... or a Cup of Noodles. ... There was times I didn't eat. I would eat at breakfast in the morning and not eat till 7:00 or 8:00 o'clock at night.”

Policy Recommendations

- 1. Develop institutional resources that help mitigate academic, future, financial, and deportation stressors.** A variety of academic, career, financial, and social programs can help address these multiple dimensions of stress and improve health.
- 2. Promote the use of mental health services.** Develop educational campaigns that promote the recognition of mental health strain and highlight how undocumented status can create stress and negative health consequences.
- 3. Establish undocumented student support groups.** Create safe spaces where students can discuss their stress and learn coping techniques.
- 4. Establish drop-in counseling hours or other avenues through which undocumented students can quickly access mental health services.** This is critical when immigration-related stress may be higher, such as after announced immigration policy changes or during periods of high immigration enforcement.