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KEY FACTS

- The dominant portrait of undocumented youth in the U.S. ignores the diversity of childhood arrivals from Mexico and Central America.
- Far from being a homogenous population, undocumented youth vary in age-at-arrival, family dynamics, social roles, and degree of social inclusion and institutional participation as they come of age.
- Failure to acknowledge this diversity hampers the effectiveness of protection policies and leaves many young people largely off the grid from the institutions associated with immigrant incorporation, including schools.
- Child labor migrants, teenage parents, and individuals of minoritized gender and ethnic groups are especially likely to be left out.

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Undocumented Childhood Arrivals in the U.S.: Widening the Frame for Research and Policy

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Immigration Initiative at Harvard Policy Brief 11.



Introduction

Amongst undocumented immigrants living in the U.S., the fate of childhood arrivals has garnered greater public sympathy and political support relative to other segments of the population since the early 2000s.[2] People typically imagine childhood arrivals as children migrating alongside or in the hope of reunifying with parents.[3] Undocumented children are assumed to follow a Western normative coming of age trajectory. The dominant portrait assumes they grow up as dependents with access to education and socialization in K-12 schools and make decisions about pursuing higher education, entering the workplace, and family formation as they transition into adulthood.[4]

Despite undocumented childhood arrivals being at the center of the immigration debate over the last two decades,[5] youth who do not follow this linear coming of age trajectory are left in the political fray. Our qualitative research in Los Angeles, California and Chicago, Illinois shows that the common portrait of the undocumented young person growing up in the U.S. does not reflect the diversity of childhood arrivals and the full range of their incorporation and coming of age experiences.

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In this brief, we show how the three primary assumptions about the social and institutional contexts that undocumented youth grow up in ignore the diversity of the childhood arrival population and hamper the effectiveness of protective policies. Limited frames have led to policies that exclude a significant segment of undocumented youth. We share stories of lesser-known segments of this population as a corrective to the limited understanding. Widening the frame of undocumented childhood arrivals in the U.S. can support more inclusive immigration reform.

Methodology

This brief draws on two interview-based studies with Mexican and Central American undocumented young adults who immigrated between the ages of 11 to 17. The respective studies highlight the diversity of experiences among undocumented childhood arrivals.

The first study is based on 75 semi-structured in-depth interviews with Central American (64) and Mexican (11) young adults aged 18 to 31 who arrived in Los Angeles, California as unaccompanied minors (11 to 17 years old) between 2003 and 2013. The sample included 51 men and 19 women. The median age of interviewees was 23, and the median age at migration was 16. This study was conducted between 2012 and 2016.

The second study is based on 40 semi-structured interviews with Central American (16) and Mexican (24) undocumented young adults who migrated as

teenagers (13 to 17 years old) in the Chicago Metropolitan Area.

Participants arrived in the U.S. between 1998 and 2013. The median age of interviewees was 26, and the average age at migration was 15. The sample included 22 men and 18 women. This study was conducted between 2016 and 2018.

Background: Familiar Portraits of Undocumented Childhood Arrivals

The familiar portraits of undocumented youth growing up in the U.S. have concretized three assumptions about childhood arrivals. First, whether immigrating with a parent or reuniting with a parent, undocumented childhood arrivals are assumed to reside in a parent-led household in the United States.[6] Second, under the care of parents or adult caregivers, childhood arrivals are expected to enroll in K-12 schools, making schools the central institution shaping their incorporation.[7] The third assumption is that undocumented childhood arrivals retain little memory of their country of birth and lack awareness of their legal status until adolescence.[8] It follows that they grow up feeling culturally ‘American’ and are indistinguishable from their native-born peers in their aspirations, values, and English-language skills.

These assumptions about undocumented youth have informed significant policies aimed at protecting childhood arrivals. For example, the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act,[9] first proposed in 2001, and Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA),[10] signed in June 2012, tie protections for unauthorized youth to educational attainment requirements. In doing so, they exclude many undocumented young people. Although the DREAM Act never passed, the Migration Policy Institute estimated that 62 percent of undocumented youth may fail to benefit from it because of educational eligibility requirements.[11]

DACA, which shields undocumented youth from deportation and provides renewable work permits, strictly reserves benefits for childhood arrivals who meet educational enrollment or attainment levels.[12] Moreover, DACA reinforces assumptions of young immigrants who grow up and are socialized in the U.S. by cutting off eligibility to those arriving before the age of 16. Overall, major policy proposals and implemented actions reinforce the portrait of a young school-involved child in the public's mind.



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The Diversity of Childhood Arrivals

Undocumented childhood arrivals are not homogenous, and their transitions into adulthood are neither neat nor linear. Instead, they vary by age-at-arrival, family structure, and institutional participation as they come of age. The clandestine nature of undocumented child migration poses challenges to precise data. Nonetheless, available estimates show young migrants who fall outside of the popular image of undocumented youth represent a meaningful segment of childhood arrivals.

Recent developments have drawn attention to unaccompanied Central American minors making the journey to the U.S. without a parent in a way that has disrupted the dominant narrative of child migrants' family structure at migration and as they come of age.[13] Childhood migration outside of parent-led family structures, however, is far from a new phenomenon. [14] Both of our studies were conducted with undocumented childhood arrivals who entered before the increase in unaccompanied minors from Central America starting in 2014 and include Mexican youth. Across Mexican and Central Americans, the number of childhood arrivals who do not live with a parent in the U.S. is significant. Estimates from census data find 37% of Mexican immigrant youth (who were 16 and 17 years-old) did not live with a parent in the United States. [15] Likewise, although most apprehended unaccompanied minors reunite with a family member in the U.S., less than half reunite with a parent. [16]

The role and function of schools

K-12 schools function as a central source of institutional participation for childhood arrivals. They are broadly viewed as inclusive settings at the policy level.[17] The inclusive nature of K-12 education policy stems from the 1982 U.S. Supreme Court decision of *Plyler v. Doe* which determined a free public K-12 education was a constitutional right regardless of immigration status.[18] The dominant narrative is that undocumented childhood arrivals are included in the U.S. social and cultural fabric primarily through K-12 schooling. Scholars have emphasized that undocumented childhood arrivals are very similar to their native-born peers because they are included and socialized in the U.S. school system.[19] They carry similar aspirations for the future, are English proficient, dress the same, and listen to the same music.[20] Moreover, school inclusion means legal status does not become a salient marker of exclusion until adolescence is reached, wherein youth become aware of the challenges presented by their legal exclusion as they attempt to drive, work, and transition to college.[21]

However, undocumented childhood arrivals do not evenly experience school participation and the benefits of school inclusion. Financial need, lack of information, and lack of support to navigate enrollment shuts out some undocumented childhood arrivals from school.[22] Census data show that approximately 17% of Mexican minors never enroll in U.S. schools.[23] Furthermore, school enrollment is intertwined with family structure. Among Mexican immigrant youth who never enroll in school, 81% do not live with either parent. All else equal, living in a household without either parent increases the likelihood of non-enrollment among Mexican immigrant youth,[24] which we found common among Central American youth in our samples.

Embedded in the assumption of school participation and the emphasis on cultural similarities between undocumented childhood arrivals and their native-born peers is that undocumented youth mainly immigrate in early or middle childhood. While childhood arrivals technically encompass those who migrate before reaching 18-years-old, the age of majority in the United States, the focus has remained on younger arrivals.[25] Nevertheless, early adolescents and teenage arrivals are well-represented among undocumented childhood arrivals. The Mexican Migration Project data show that 14 is the mean age-at-arrival among undocumented Mexican children,[26] and data from a survey of randomly selected neighborhoods in Los Angeles show 55% of Latinx childhood arrivals are between the ages of 13 to 17. Among these, 45% are undocumented.[27]

Older youth arrivals are more likely to migrate and settle in the U.S. as unaccompanied youth. Among unaccompanied minors, for instance, 84% of those apprehended are between the ages of 13 to 17 years old.[28] The school non-enrollment rate also varies by age-at-arrival. Those immigrating after age 12 are substantially more likely not to enroll in school compared to their younger arriving peers.[29] Early adolescents and teenagers might not blend in as easily as younger arrivals but stand out culturally and linguistically.[30] Additionally, far from

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possessing few memories and connections to their country of origin, these young people carry deep roots to their birth countries that do not sever in the United States. In fact, these might become more salient.[31]

Ultimately, a skewed picture has emerged of undocumented childhood arrivals based on assumptions about family structure, school participation, and age-at-arrival. Our research captures the coming-of-age stories of childhood arrivals whose stories have remained on the margins.

Intersectional Exclusions

The stories we share illustrate the way axes of divergence from the dominant narrative are not mutually exclusive but intersect to shape our participants' trajectories. Moreover, rather than one shared experience, diversity in family structure, age-at-arrival, and institutional participation is further stratified by gender and ethnoracial identity.

Rafael was 15 when he left Mexico for Chicago. His decision was motivated by a mix of desperation at witnessing his parents struggle to find work and the sense that, although still "young," he bore responsibility for caring for himself and providing for his family. "I thought about my parents, and I thought about my sisters," Rafael recalled, and resolved to "take the reins" and "contribute to the family."

Upon arrival, school enrollment and navigating a new school system were far from Rafael's experience. Rafael enjoyed school in Mexico and had the "hope to study," but lack of information and financial responsibility prohibited enrollment.

It did not happen [enrolling in high school] because, because I think, lack of knowledge of my brothers. That they did not have an education. If I had little education, they really had absolutely none. Lack of knowledge, lack of, economically, because they could not take care of me either. I was not just thinking about me. I already had a family in Mexico to help, my dad and my mom.

Rafael's first weeks in the U.S. revolved around locating work and figuring out transportation. His job search began the day after arriving in Chicago. Within two weeks, he was working at a restaurant six days per week for 10 hours each day. Besides the long workday, his daily routine included a 45-minute bicycle ride each way. A grueling ride in the cold Chicago winters, Rafael only used public transportation when it snowed.

Far from the normative image of a childhood arrival, Rafael made life-shaping decisions and carried significant financial

responsibility as a teenager. He allocated every paycheck. He explained: "a check for rent, another to pay the bills, another to send to Mexico, and another to dress myself and eat."

Likewise, Marianna is a Guatemalan woman who arrived in the U.S. at 15. Marianna immediately began working as a domestic worker for a couple and their two children in an affluent Los Angeles neighborhood. When Marianna was 13 years old, she inherited the responsibility of grocery shopping for the family after her older sister—who previously completed this task—migrated to Los Angeles. Marianna recalled that the seed of migration was sown when she realized how little money her mother (and older sister) relied on to provide food for six children and two adults. Ultimately, Marianna migrated to work to provide for her family, feeling especially compelled to ease the stress and worry that overwhelmed her mother.



As a live-in domestic worker in Los Angeles, Marianna was constrained in how she spent her non-work hours. Despite wanting to attend school to learn English, Marianna's employment on the affluent Westside of Los Angeles limited her access to social networks that could direct her to adult English language schools or other community educational resources. Marianna resorted to learning English alongside the children she looked after as they moved through their elementary school years. She also watched English-language programming with subtitles to learn the English language. Like other live-in domestic workers,[32] Marianna lacked proof of employment and therefore documentation proving her length of residence in the U.S. Like many undocumented young workers coming of age in the U.S. during the ascension of DACA, Marianna lamented her exclusion from the program. She expressed helplessness because of her responsibility to provide for her left-behind family and limited opportunities to do so.

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It is no surprise that within a migration context where departure from the country of birth is motivated by labor and financial need, children would find themselves outside of traditional educational institutions. Indeed, Marianna, like Rafael, evinced circumstances that were incompatible with K-12 school enrollment. The disqualification from legal protection because of their role as workers rather than students, despite meeting the age-at-arrival criteria, disillusioned youth about their prospects for full participation and mobility in the U.S. in adulthood.

Flipping the idea of a parent-led family structure on its head, rather than being dependent children, some of our participants formed families as teenagers and were parenting. The same conditions that push young people to immigrate for work, such as poverty, lack of opportunities, and violence, limit options for teenage women. This situation posits marriage as one of the only options for survival and stability.

When Arely completed compulsory education in Mexico, she desired to continue studying, but that would mean moving out of her parents' home. Because Arely's parents did not approve and did not have the resources for Arely to move, she accepted a marriage proposal instead. As Arely recalls, "I knew that I didn't want to get married, that I wanted to study." Married and several months pregnant, 16-year-old Arely followed her spouse to Chicago.

In Chicago, Arely's social network was limited to her spouse and his family. She lacked information about school enrollment and spent most of her days in the bedroom they rented caring for her child as she did not work or drive. She felt lonely, Arely explains.

I mean it is difficult. Because when you are used to be with your family, it is a change to loneliness. One says, "Well, I am with my spouse, and I am going to have a son here." But you still feel lonely.... So, I would stay by myself.



Following a spouse to the United States, and in some cases becoming parents, some teenage women carry heavy family responsibilities. School enrollment, while desirable, is hindered by lack of information and severely limited social networks. These young women may not engage with work outside the home and live largely off the grid from many of the institutions associated with immigrant incorporation.

Similar to Arely, Ervin, an Indigenous Maya K'iche garment worker who migrated from Guatemala to Los Angeles at age 16, experienced social isolation. After three years of living in Los Angeles, Ervin described that he preferred darkness to avoid being ridiculed for his darker complexion, shorter stature, and Mayan K'iche proficiency. He explained that he left work when it got dark at seven or 7:30PM each day and was at work before the sun shone at six in the morning because "I do not like the light, I feel like the people will stare at me. There is something inside of me that does not leave me in peace."

Four years after the interview during which Ervin explained his fear-induced isolation, he continued to mention how his *timidez* (timidity) kept him out of school, from pursuing work outside of the exploitative garment industry, and from joining social groups that could assuage his feelings of exclusion and loneliness.

Without social networks that share information about mobility and social integration opportunities, youth like Arely and Ervin fall outside of proposed policies born out of normative assumptions about childhood arrivals and their coming-of-age trajectories.

Recommendations for Policy and Research

At the time of this writing, the American Dream and Promise Act of 2021 [33] was introduced and passed in the House. The bill addresses the age-at-arrival assumption by increasing the eligibility age to 18. However, protections remain tied to participation in educational institutions and ultimately exclude youth like Rafael, Marianna, Arely, and Ervin.

Our research findings in Los Angeles and Chicago urge policymakers and researchers to widen the frame of childhood arrivals. Hence, our recommendations include the following:

1. Federal and local policy makers should apply the U.S. definition of childhood to immigrants, thereby including all children migrating before 18.

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2. Federal and local level policies should disaggregate protections from institutional participation. In this way, childhood arrivals who enter the U.S. as workers (in public and private realms), rather than students, can be acknowledged and supported.
3. Efforts at the local level should expand outreach to youth participating in adult spaces such as churches, health care centers, the workplace, and shared community spaces.
4. Researchers should consider the lives of childhood arrivals of all legal statuses outside of K-12 schools. Doing so will not only increase our understanding of these experiences but might also elucidate the diverse and under-acknowledged ways immigrant youth participate in and contribute to society.
5. Researchers should continue to consider how age-at-migration, family structure, responsibilities, gender, indigeneity, among other social dimensions, can facilitate or constrain access to social networks, institutional participation, and legal protection.

Conclusion

Our research, though conducted individually across two cities, elucidate one primary finding: the dominant portrait of undocumented youth in the U.S. has missed the diversity of childhood arrivals from Mexico and Central America. Widening the frame of this portrait would especially support the mobility and well-being of those who arrived in later adolescence, who were thrust into adult roles due to lack of opportunities in both their countries of origin and the U.S., and who navigated settlement in the U.S. with limited networks and, in many cases, in social isolation.

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This issue brief is also available in Spanish.

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Endnotes

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