Unauthorized Immigrant Parents and their Children’s Development: A Summary of the Evidence and Implications for Public Policy

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Introduction

• Of 11 million unauthorized immigrants in the U.S.: many parents
• Over 5.5 million children with at least one unauthorized parent (Passel & Cohn, 2011)
• Roughly 80% of these are U.S. citizens (Passel & Cohn, 2009)

• How do these children and their parents fare?
• What are the implications when considering policy options from the standpoint of children’s development and parent well-being?
Effects of parent unauthorized status on children and youth

• Evidence of risk to children, above and beyond socioeconomic correlates of unauthorized status:
  • Lower early cognitive skills (Yoshikawa, 2011)
  • In middle childhood, lower levels of positive development (Brabeck & Xu, 2010; Ortega et al., 2009)
  • In adolescence, higher anxiety and depressive symptoms (Potochnick & Perreira, 2010)
  • By young adulthood – 1.25 to 1.50 fewer years of schooling (Leach et al., 2011)
  • Removal proceedings’ effects on child behavior, school attendance and mental health (Chaudry et al., 2010)
Effects on Parents

- Removal proceedings and associated family experiences (Parent-child separation; income loss; parent mental health; Chaudry et al.; Suarez-Orozco & Hernandez, 2012)
- Lower access to means-tested programs for U.S. citizen children (Capps & Fortuny, 2006)
- Very high rates of wages below legal minimum (30%-40% in Bernhardt et al., 2009; Yoshikawa, 2011)
- Hardship and Parent psychological distress (Yoshikawa, 2011)
- Awareness of own unauthorized status and associated barriers (Gonzales, 2011)
- Blocked education and employment (Gonzales, 2011)
Policies and their Implications for Children

• **Directly modifying unauthorized status:**
• Pathway to citizenship
• DACA and DREAM Act – focus on young and college-ready excludes many parents due to age limit and those not participating in educational activities / programs
• Temporary worker programs – if without Social Security number access, excludes EITC receipt and its benefits for children (Dahl & Lochner, 2009)

• **Policies Improving Workplace Conditions:**
• Worker legalization + verification vs verification alone
• Reducing key risks of wage violations and wage stagnation (minimum wage and its enforcement)
Policies and their Implications for Children

- **Policies Modifying Enforcement Practices**
- Prosecutorial discretion and consideration of parents under family and community ties provisions
- Reducing unnecessary detainment and associated parent-child separation
- **Policies Providing Universal Access to Early Education**
- Expansion of non-means-tested universal pre-K, which benefits children’s cognitive development (only 8 out of 39 states currently providing non-means-tested preK)
In Closing

• Policy aspects that may benefit children’s development:
  • Full pathway to citizenship (with access, e.g., to Social Security numbers and the EITC)
  • Application to all unauthorized, including older parents and those not participating in education / least college-ready
  • Worker legalization + employee verification integrated
  • Reducing barriers to enrolling citizen children in supports that aid their development