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I didn't ask to come to this country...I was a child: The mental health implications of growing up undocumented

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Introduction

In the United States, approximately 4.5 million children of undocumented Latino parents are naturalized citizens due to the fact that they were born on US soil; however, 1 million more remain undocumented [1] because they were brought to the US as minors and until recently, were ineligible for citizenship. These children face unique challenges as a result of a situation they did not choose, and are frequently the subjects of contentious political debate regarding their future as “illegal aliens”. Once they leave the protective environment of school, they enter a state of developmental limbo in which they cannot vote, drive, or apply for a job, and are thus excluded from a natural transition to adulthood [2]. Furthermore, the day-to-day feelings of helplessness combined with the intense fear of “being hunted” by immigration officials may never disappear, which can significantly affect their long-term mental health [3]. For example, among first generation, undocumented Latino adolescents, dissatisfaction with the migration decision substantially increases the odds of developing depression or anxiety disorders [4], especially over a lifetime [5]. In addition, persistent exposure to stressors such as discrimination, family cultural conflict, and difficulties related

to English proficiency may have a snowball effect on mental health [6], leading to an increase in suicide thoughts and attempts over time [2, 7]. Suicide may be the ultimate rejection of one's self and place in society, but for children and parents of undocumented immigrants, it may also represent a failure of the "American Dream".

Although there have been several federal, legislative attempts to grant citizenship to these children, none have been entirely successful. The DREAM Act, which proposed that undocumented children brought to the US as minors could be granted legal permanent residency if they met certain criteria, failed to pass in the Senate by 5 votes [8, 9]. In response, President Obama bypassed congress and created the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, which allows applicants who meet certain criteria to work legally, apply for a driver's license, and be protected from deportation for two years [10, 11]; consequently, as of May 2013, nearly 300,000 "dreamers" had been granted deferred action [12]. More recently, the "Gang of Eight" bill, which allows undocumented immigrants to apply for green cards five years after gaining provisional immigrant status, passed in the senate, indicating that for many dreamers, citizenship may be a closer, political possibility [13–15]. In this case report, we will describe the experiences of one such dreamer, reveal the effects of an undocumented status on mental health, and posit future directions for mental health promotion in this vulnerable population.

Methods

This is a case report based on a single participant (Ms. A) who was part of a larger community based participatory research (CBPR), mixed-method study on social isolation and mental health, among immigrant rural Latinos, in Florida. After IRB approval, data was drawn from an in-depth ethnographic, semi-structured interview with the participant, which asked questions regarding what elements facilitated as well as prevented connection with the local community. Sample interview questions included: "What are the places you go and the types of activities you do? How do you feel living in here? Tell me what helps and make it difficult for you to feel you belong here (or fit in here)." The interview was digitally-recorded, verbatim transcribed in the original language and thematic analysis was performed. [16] The multilevel ecological model, which offers a way of looking at complex individual and community conditions and explores potential links between social determinants and mental health, was initially used to identify common and significant content [17, 18]. The contents and themes were classified by using Nvivo10, which were taken back to the community advisory board (CAB) for refinement and validation [19]. During CAB discussions, themes were presented and paired with relevant de-identified interview excerpts in an effort to illustrate themes and maintain richness of findings; more specific categories were subsequently originated and overarching themes were identified (See figure 1).

The CAB team, which is composed of three researchers and five community leaders, has previous experience in validating qualitative data and collaborating on publications. [20]. This validation, which is consistently recommended by experts, encourages thoroughness in interrogating the data and interpreting how an analysis was developed [21].

Results

Ms. A is a 30 year old undocumented immigrant and mother of three boys who are naturalized US citizens ranging from 5 to 11 years of age. Her parents brought her to the US as a young child (5 years old) with the hope of providing a better life for her and her siblings. Since then, she has lived in a rural area of Florida, where she attended and later dropped out of high school, earning her GED instead. After high school, she wanted to attend college, but was unable to apply for financial aid due to her undocumented status. At present, she is unemployed and actively seeking a “poorly paid job” that she believes is appropriate for her. Ms. A has unsuccessfully applied for a visa three times and is unable to afford an immigration attorney to advocate on her behalf. After the interview was completed, Ms. A’s answers were transcribed, analyzed, and categorized. Following the ecological framework, themes were arranged in four different levels: 1) social level: *undocumented status*; 2) rural community level: *belonging, discrimination and geographic mobility*; 3) family level: *family dynamics* and 4) individual level: *social isolation, and depression*. *Fear* was considered an overarching category (see Figure 1). Figure 1 depicts the relationship between all the themes and categories. All categories are presented below, along with interview excerpts that clarify the category’s meaning.

Social Level

Undocumented status—For the past 25 years, the participant has lived her life in a state of constant fear, and expressed that her life was limited due to her undocumented status. While growing up, she learned to fear the police to prevent deportation, which would leave her “broken”.

“I think until ... I have a piece of paper that says I am allowed to be here with no, you know, problems whatsoever, I will always have that fear. I have that fear all the time and I think it would be re-, like, it would just break my heart, I think, if I were to be sent back over, you know, a broken taillight, or—you know, obviously whatever the case is if I were ever, you know, sent back it would be hard because I have my children, and just the way I would hate to be, you know, uprooted and moved out to Mexico just from one day to the next... I think it would be hard for them to do the same because my children were born here [in the US]. You know, they’ve never been to Mexico, and for that same fact that, you know, if they ever go over there, I would like to be there to show them where I’m from, but at the same time I think we would both be learning because I haven’t been there, you know, in years...

Rural Community Level

Belonging—The participant expressed contradictory feelings: although she sometimes feels a part of this country, the day-to-day reality of being an undocumented immigrant inspires feelings of rejection that inhibit a sense of truly belonging.

I feel to a certain extent okay. This is what I know. Like, this is, uh, pretty much where I have grown up, so, I’ve gotten used to some things...” “There’s a lot of things that I can’t do, for example, like school. You know, even, like, going t-,

through high school and going through middle school, a lot of the times when we tried to apply for certain things, it was, you know, your Social Security number, your —“Are you legal here?” I remember going in high school, and, you know, that was the fir-, one of, like, the first questions they would ask us, you know: “Do you have all your documents? You know, where are you from?” ... “I would love to just be able to get up and, you know, go get just a regular job somewhere and not have to feel like I’m having to hide all the time.”

Discrimination

Over time, the participant has experienced discrimination and internalized the powerful sentiment that she is “not equal” due to her undocumented status. Although she is qualified and speaks English well, she still struggles with the lack of job opportunities, and feels held back from jobs she thinks she could do.

Oh, well, it’s [herself] an illegal. You know, they don’t matter, or how—I mean, and I know some people don’t do that. I’m not saying everybody does. I am not, you know, disabled. I’m not—there’s nothing wrong with me other than I don’t have that card [green card]. “I was asked the other day if I would help one of the girls in the office, and, I don’t feel like that’s where I should be, even though I want to so bad. Like, an office position for me is just, like, a lot, and, and I think it’s because I’ve always been, you know, the housekeeper or I’ve always been the gardener or, you know, whatever the, the job was, that, you know, feeling in that position that I just—I just feel kind of out of place, I guess you could say.”

Geographic Mobility

The participant describes a lack of mobility due to a poor, economic situation as well as her undocumented status, which prevents her from owning and driving a car. This lack of transportation precludes involvement in her children’s school as well as having more family time outside the home. *I’ve been to quite a few meetings [in school].*

Sometimes it’s, you know, it’s hard to get there just because I don’t have a car. I don’t drive. I don’t have a license, so I can’t drive. So if, you know, I sometimes have to get, like, other moms that are going to those same meetings or have somebody come pick me up and go to, like, school meetings.

Family Level Family Dynamics

The participant describes her effort to give her children a better life. She emphasizes the importance of family communication and particularly education; she wants her children to have what she could not accomplish. Although she has an open style of communication with her children, talking about “adult problems” is limited to her eldest son, who knows what they “can or cannot” do as a family due to her undocumented status.

We try to talk as much as possible about school, about family, about... different things They, I mean, my oldest son, [B], he has— for the most part he has always been the one that I come to, you know, if there is something that’s bothering me, and, I, in a good way that’s good because he can, you know, know where, where

I'm coming from when we can't do something or when we do something. But I still don't go a lot into detail.

Individual Level Social Isolation

The participant describes her life as being in a constant mode of hiding from others in order to avoid disclosing her undocumented status; this generally requires isolating herself from even mundane activities. For example, when a person discovered her lack of citizenship and tried to exploit her, she went into isolation and was unable to get the support she needed.

...but because we've been isolated for everything else, when it comes to work, when it comes to school, when it comes to other people, we've always felt alone, that even when we get that bad, it just, it's habit. Like, we go back to just being alone, and we don't ask for help.

Depression—The participant describes her depression as a “direct consequence” of her undocumented status, which has led to persistent feelings of frustration, isolation, and inadequacy as well as a lack of belonging and opportunity. These feelings culminated in a suicide attempt, which resulted in her seeking mental health treatment at her children's request.

I think that a lot of the struggles that we have, you know, because, you know, work or, you know, financial instability or stuff like that, it brings so much pressure on a person who, who can't, you know, just get up and go that, I mean, there is a lot of times that it, it does turn into depression... and I felt so depressed that I actually tried to take my life. But I think because I have my children, you know, I just have that extra push, and I know a lot of people, they just want to just pack their bags and go back to their own country.

Fear

The overarching theme, *fear*, has been a constant in her life. In particular, she has feared backlash from the local rural community, deportation of her parents (primarily when she was a child) and herself, and abandonment of her American children. This fear has become an integral, personal feeling of her daily life for the last 35 years, and it increased after she had her own children.

I can't just go to somebody and be like, you know, this is happening. I've always felt like, I'm an illegal. I shouldn't have been, you know, working at this place or whatever. You don't know if, you know, one day you get caught, you're gonna get taken back. You don't know, like, you know, the struggles that you have to deal with, but they're all the same struggles. It's always the same thing, and everybody who is an illegal has the same and constant fear.

Discussion

Previous research has demonstrated that individuals, like Mrs. A, who immigrate to the U.S. before age 13 have a significant risk of developing mood and anxiety disorders than those who do so later in life [5]. One reason for this is a fear of deportation, which prevents

parents from reporting crimes, maintaining the same home address, or accessing health care [1, 22, 23]. This fear may result in depression, which can transfer to children, leading to language deficits, developmental delays, social aggression, and poor academic performance [24–28]. In addition, because undocumented parents work for low wages, they often cannot afford to buy books or toys, or spend time with the family, which can negatively affect their child's development [1, 29]. Outside the home, discrimination can affect first-generation Latino youth even after a short time (i.e. 4.5 years), and substantially increase their risk of depression [4]; it is also worse in rural environments where many immigrants live [30]. Finally, social isolation can debilitate mental health over the long term [31–34], and research shows it is surprisingly common. For example, a study with immigrant Latino workers in North Carolina found that nearly one in five had high social isolation scores, which was indicated by two or more signs of social isolation, measured by 8-item self-report scale [33]. Interviews with Latino adolescents have revealed that isolation and depression were the result of adjusting to life in the US, missing friends in Mexico [35], and lack of geographic mobility, which may prevent contact with the larger community [7].

Although school often protects undocumented children from the negative effects of their status, [2] adolescents increasingly find themselves unable to engage in the same “rites of passage” as their peers, such as looking for a summer job or applying to a university [1]. In despair, they may turn away from social networks, drop out of high school, engage in self-destructive behaviors, or even attempt suicide [7]. If they graduate from high school, they are likely ineligible for federal aid or in-state college tuition [1], which decreases their possibility of attending college. Similarly, if they graduate from college, their undocumented status may prohibit gainful employment, so they may work at the same jobs as their parents despite their best efforts to achieve a higher position.

The recently passed, immigration reform bill may substantially improve the health of immigrants after a path toward citizenship is achieved. Although this will not be a complete solution, it can ultimately help us—a community of health professionals—to reduce social injustices and inequities (e.g. decreasing family separation and fear of persecution and deportation) among a large, underserved group of minorities in the US. More preventive community work is needed to eliminate the social isolation, discrimination, and health inequalities (e.g. lack of health care access) that Latinos immigrants frequently experience. Mental health providers, public health agencies, and primary care providers need to be aware of the potential negative mental health outcomes that can occur in undocumented immigrants and implement preventative measures. This may include increasing the availability of bilingual mental health counselors, regularly screening for depression and anxiety, and establishing mentorship programs for adolescent immigrants. Programs aimed at increasing community connections and geographic mobility may also help protect against negative mental health outcomes.

Despite the social, economic and cultural contributions that undocumented Latino immigrants give to the US, they live in a hostile environment and suffer major social injustices and health inequities [23] that are largely unfair. In addition, they have minimal opportunities to participate as full members of society, and the daily fear of deportation as well as stigmatized identities can harm their long-term mental and emotional health [7].

Without intervention, society may face a vast population with mental health problems as well as lose the contributions that these “dreamers” could have made if they were simply granted citizenship and allowed to fulfill their career potential.

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Figure 1.
Ms. A's Categories