

Report links kids' behavior with parents' legal status



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Children of undocumented immigrants often grow up worried about their parents being taken away and deported.



(Photo: azcentral)

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- A study found that children of undocumented parents have a higher risk of behavior issues.
- Behavior issues may be caused by stress from children worried about their parents being deported.
- The findings could be helpful for educators and others who work with children of immigrants.

Now there is groundbreaking research that strongly indicates that the unique stress of having an undocumented parent leads to a higher incidence of behavior issues.

The study suggests that children of undocumented Mexican immigrants have significantly higher risks of behavioral issues compared with children of legal immigrants and U.S. citizens.

Those issues range from internal feelings of sadness and withdrawal to more outward signs, such as acting out.

The findings are significant because they offer, for the first time, concrete evidence of something already widely suspected: that the insecurity of living with an undocumented parent creates a unique form of stress that can lead to behavior problems.

The findings are particularly relevant to Arizona, where 11 percent of children in kindergarten through 12th grade have at least one undocumented parent, the fourth-highest share behind Nevada, California and Texas, according to the Pew Research Center.

"We don't want it to sound like these are bad kids at all," but behavior problems found in children with undocumented parents "are really indicators of distress among these children," said Nancy Landale, a sociologist at Penn State University and the lead author of the study.

The researchers ruled out the most obvious explanations for the higher rates of behavior problems, factors such as poverty and other socioeconomic disadvantages associated with children of undocumented immigrants, Landale said.

That suggests children who are fearful that an undocumented parent will be caught and deported may exhibit behavior problems in reaction

to that stress, Landale said.

Or "it could be that there is a whole constellation of disadvantages that occur together, including the insecurity of legal status, and it's the whole package," she said.

The study, released in the March issue of the *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, was based on data collected from parents of 2,535 children between the ages of 3 and 17 in the Los Angeles area. They took

part in one of the only large-scale surveys ever conducted to include the legal status of parents, Landale said.

The survey was conducted between 2000 and 2002, but Landale said she believes the data remains relevant.

The findings could help educators and mental-health-service providers understand what may be causing behavior problems in children of undocumented immigrants.

"While you are never going to be asking, 'Are your parents undocumented?' I think it's useful to be aware of the fact that these children may have special insecurities and also to be attuned to this in order to potentially connect them and their families with services," Landale said.

Luz Sarmina, former president and CEO of Valle del Sol, a non-profit organization that provides mental-health services primarily to Latinos, said the report's findings make sense. "If a person in the family is at risk of being deported, real or perceived, then that is going to make you scared if you are a kid, and then you are going to be acting out from being scared all the time," she said.

Sarmina said children of undocumented immigrants may also experience higher levels of discrimination, which could also lead to more behavior problems.

The findings underscore the need for schools to be aware of the possible link between students' behavior problems and their parents' immigration status, said Marjorie Kaplan, director of the Beat the Odds Institute, a non-profit organization that works to improve academic achievement among Latino students in Arizona.

She said the findings also help show the need to provide appropriate support services for these children.

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