

Poverty Research Flash

Highlighting New Poverty Research

by Roberto Gonzales

“On the Wrong Side of the Tracks: Understanding the Effects of School Structure and Social Capital in the Educational Pursuits of Undocumented Immigrant Students.” *Peabody Journal of Education* 85: 469-85.

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On the Wrong Side of the Tracks: Understanding the Effects of School Structure and Social Capital in the Educational Pursuits of Undocumented Immigrant Students

Background: The strong relationship between educational attainment and earnings makes it important to understand why some students graduate from high school and proceed to college while others do not. For undocumented immigrant students, this transition may be particularly difficult. Among youth aged 18 to 24 in 2008, 28 percent of undocumented immigrants who arrived in the US before the age of 14 had not completed high school, compared with eight percent of US-born residents in that age group, and undocumented immigrant youth who do graduate from high school are less likely to continue on to college than US-born residents. Many of these students' parents have low levels of education and may be unfamiliar with the US school system, making these students more dependent on cues and support from their schools and their peers as they form expectations about and plans for postsecondary education. In addition, while undocumented students are not prohibited from attending college by any federal laws, they are ineligible for federal financial aid and, in the majority of states, are required to pay tuition as foreigners, at rates that can be three to seven times what legal residents pay.

Methods: Between 2004 and 2007, WCPC Affiliate and Assistant Professor of Social Work Roberto Gonzales studied the school experiences of 78 undocumented youth of Mexican origin in the Los Angeles area who moved to the US before the age of 12. Most of these students attended large and overcrowded high schools with majority-minority populations, in which teacher and staff attention are scarce resources. Through life history interviews with these “1.5 Generation” immigrants, Gonzales asked how these students' school experiences helped promote educational success or failure. To better understand the consequences academic tracking, Gonzales split the students into those who were “positively tracked” (e.g., took Advanced Placement classes or honors classes) and those who were “negatively tracked” (e.g., were not placed in any specialized programs).

Findings: Gonzales found that as a result of their positions in these positive and negative tracks, students had access to different types of resources and relationships that either helped or hindered their progress through high school and their prospects for attending college. Students who were positively tracked were more likely to report having positive relationships with teachers, while those who were negatively tracked were more likely to report feeling disconnected from school and less likely to report supportive relationships with individual teachers. Positively tracked students reported more attention from counselors and more examples of assistance and encouragement from teachers. For example, several positively tracked students mentioned getting help from teachers and counselors with their college applications, and some were even able to seek assistance from teachers in dealing with their undocumented status and with finding financial aid. In addition to these relationships, positively tracked students could also draw upon the labels that others attached to them and other students in their track, such as “college material,” to give them confidence in their trajectory and reinforce their will to succeed. Some negatively tracked students also reported internalizing others' perceptions of them as “troublemakers,” which colored their interactions with teachers and administrators and made it unlikely that they would see school officials as potential sources of support or guidance.

Gonzales stresses that given undocumented immigrant students' exclusion from financial aid and their resource-poor families, the lack of specialized attention or resources available to these students, particularly when they are negatively tracked, creates the conditions that allow them to fall through the cracks. Gonzales notes that schools can address these dynamics by actively working to provide all students with access to support from school counselors and teachers.

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New research from Roberto Gonzales

Key Findings

- Through life history interviews with 78 undocumented youth of Mexican origin in the Los Angeles area who moved to the US before the age of 12, WCPC Affiliate and Assistant Professor of Social Work Roberto Gonzales asked how school experiences shape students' postsecondary outcomes.
- Students who were in honors or Advanced Placement tracks reported greater access to school personnel than students in the standard course tracks, who reported fewer and less positive relationships with teachers and counselors.
- The youth also reported being aware of and internalizing the perceptions of school personnel about them as either "good" or "bad" students, which either facilitated or prevented the students from feeling comfortable reaching out for support from teachers and counselors.
- Given these undocumented immigrant youths' exclusion from financial aid for college and their resource-poor families, the lack of specialized attention or resources available to these students creates the conditions that allow them to fall through the cracks.