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Study finds education gap for illegal Mexican migrants' children

They finished two fewer years of school than peers with legal immigrant parents. The research on Los Angeles area residents shows the need to help such families become legal, the report's authors say.



Students in hallway at Belmont High School, which has a large number of illegal immigrant students. (Vince Compagnone / Los Angeles Times / September 16, 1994)

By Teresa Watanabe, Los Angeles Times

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The majority of children of illegal immigrants from [Mexico](#) in the Southland fail to graduate from high school, completing an average of two fewer years of schooling than their peers with legal immigrant parents, a new study has found.

The study by [UC Irvine](#) professor Frank Bean and three other researchers documented the

persistent educational disadvantages for such children — who number 3.8 million, with about 80% born in the United States.

The study's authors said their findings highlighted the need to help such families gain legal status and a more secure future, arguing that deporting all of them was unrealistic.

"By not providing pathways to legalization, the United States not only risks creating an underclass, but also fails to develop a potentially valuable human resource," the report said.

Lupe Moreno of the Santa Ana-based Latino Americans for Immigration Reform, however, said the study's findings do not justify granting legalization to undocumented migrants, who she believes should be deported and made to reenter legally. Moreno, the daughter of an illiterate Mexican bracero worker who worked the fields herself but graduated from high school, also blamed schools for failing to help the children of illegal immigrants graduate.

"Amnesty is the wrong solution," she said. "I'm putting it on the schools — they need to do better educating these kids" regardless of their parents' legal status.

The study analyzed data from a 2004 survey of 4,780 adult children of immigrants in the five-county Los Angeles metropolitan area. Among them, 1,350 were children of Mexican immigrants; 45% of them had undocumented parents.

The study found that children of illegal immigrants averaged 11 years of education, compared with about 13 years for those whose parents were legal residents. But once illegal immigrants found ways to legalize their status, the study found, their children's educational levels rose substantially.

And the study found that mothers had the largest influence: Children whose mothers were legal residents but whose fathers weren't completed about 12 1/2 years of education. If the father was legal and the mother wasn't, the children finished about 11 years of school.

Bean said children of illegal immigrants face high levels of stress, lack money for academic enrichment activities and, particularly for boys, pressures to work that lead many to drop out of school. The study, however, found no differences in the education levels of boys and girls born to illegal immigrants.

Patricia Quijano, a senior at Edward Roybal Learning Center in downtown Los Angeles, said immigration status definitely matters. A U.S. citizen by birth, Patricia has a 3.8 GPA and dreams of attending a California State University to become a high school counselor. But she said she hasn't been able to qualify for fee waivers, grants or scholarships because her Mexican parents don't have papers and can't document their income.

Her father works for cash at a carwash, earning an average monthly income of \$200 during winters and \$800 during summers. Her mother is unemployed. And Patricia's minimum-wage job at a Salvation Army after-school program has ended, leaving the family with no money for college applications, SAT or ACT exams, even home Internet access.

Although she has managed to maintain good grades and career ambitions, she said most of her friends with undocumented parents lose hope and give up at school.

"They say, 'My parents weren't born here, so why try hard when I can't go to college?'" Quijano said. But if their parents could become legal, she added, "they would think they had an opportunity so [they] would try hard to make their parents proud."

In contrast, she said her friends whose parents have green cards or are U.S. citizens have more stable lives and are able to get better jobs, scholarships and other benefits.

Since the country heavily depends on the labor of illegal immigrants, politicians should find ways to deal with the problem, Bean said.

"We need the work these people do but haven't figured out a way to make them regular members of society," he said. "So we're reproducing a very handicapped and disadvantaged generation."