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POLICY BRIEF

Meeting the Need of Central American Migrant Youth in Schools

2019 | Laurie Millan MSW '19, Desiree Lopez MSW '19, Amy Aguilar MSW '19

ISSUE

Recently immigrated Central American youth face some of the starkest educational disparities in the American education system. Data on unaccompanied minors show that California and Los Angeles, in particular, continue to receive an increased rate of immigrant youth, most notably from the Northern Triangle region of Central America. Between 2017 and 2018, California received an estimated total of over 10,000 unaccompanied minors, and over 40 percent of these youth were released to sponsors in Los Angeles County (ORR, 2018). Data show that this population is rapidly increasing and may continue for years to come.

Dropout rates for English Language Learners (ELLs) as a whole are significantly higher than those of native English speakers. LAUSD open data show that ELLs are more than twice as likely to drop out and less than half as likely to attend college (LAUSD, 2019). In addition to having elevated language needs, evidence also shows that newcomer immigrant youth specifically may have increased needs for a variety of diverse interventions and accommodations to address their unique needs.

APPROACH

This exploratory qualitative inquiry consisted of 12 participants from ages 17 to 23 who immigrated to the United States from Central America during their adolescence. Semi-structured hourlong interviews were conducted in Spanish using a Participatory Action Research Framework. Peer researchers conducted interviews with the guidance of the primary researchers. Data collection consisted of open-ended interview questions developed using existing literature to identify themes to be explored. The research team utilized social media and a snowball recruitment strategy to identify, communicate, and recruit former students of San Francisco International High School. Primary data was collected through interview audio recordings which were then transcribed, coded, and analyzed to identify patterns within each theme. These patterns were then examined, compared, and contrasted to the broader literature on immigrant youth.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

- Eight out of the 12 students described limitations around their education in their home country

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Participants in the study faced a number of barriers to educational participation, such as linguistic acquisition, socioeconomic burden, burnout, acculturative stress, and school disengagement.
- Values and norms around education in participants' country of origin affected attitudes towards how they approach education in the United States, particularly around compulsory education and attendance policies which interfered with their former status as a self-supporting adult.
- Mental health was the most discussed dimension of need in this study, and social isolation and connectedness had a notably strong impact on the ways that participants described and conceptualized their mental health.
- Eleven of the 12 study participants worked while attending school and discussed how a key barrier to educational participation was scheduling. This suggests that flexible school schedules are an unmet educational need in this population.

including poor student-to-teacher ratios, inconsistent teacher attendance, shorter school days, and feeling limited to no investment in their education.

- Many students had already stopped going to school in their country of origin and were viewed as independent and capable adults by their family and community. This made it difficult for them to comply with American compulsory education laws.
- Eleven of the 12 participants worked at some point during high school to meet their basic needs for food, shelter, and clothing. For many participants, the additional responsibility of working long hours as a full-time student resulted in sleep deprivation, trouble concentrating in class, and overall feelings of burnout.
- Immigrant adolescents often feel pressure to help their families pay for the fees associated with immigrating to the United States, including attorney's fees.
- Family separation and reunification affected multiple participants' perceived levels of social support and social isolation.
- Settlement in the United States was the first time that many participants had ever met people from cultures other than their own. This contributed to a notable level of acculturative stress and feelings of isolation. Participants adjusted on a daily basis to small details from disliking the school lunch to larger issues such as feeling excluded by peers as a result of language barriers.

- Participants described generally feeling excluded or invisible in the classroom setting, often ignored or neglected by school staff.
- Multiple participants brought up the lack of local and flexible services to accommodate their rigorous schedules and workload.
- Multiple students described positive experiences with the campus Wellness Center. Positive components of interactions in this space were communication in their native language and the supportive, non-punitive approaches of staff members.

CONCLUSIONS

- The immediate needs of this population encompass a wide range of intersecting systems, including legal services, health and mental health care, language acquisition services, and school engagement programs.
- To promote academic engagement and success, schools should be proactive in engaging this population immediately upon enrollment with individualized services and referrals which are linguistically competent, culturally responsive, trauma-informed, and accessible to working students.
- Efforts to meet the needs of this rapidly growing population require comprehensive efforts facilitated through collaborative partnerships between education, legal, mental health, and social service professionals.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Millan, L., Lopez, D., & Aguilar, A. (2019). *Meeting the need of Central American migrant youth in schools*. (Master's capstone, UCLA). Retrieved from: https://www.lewis.ucla.edu/2019-capstone_group_migrant-youth-in-schools/

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