

The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Undocumented and DACAmented Students in Higher Education

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Background

The "Crossing Borders to Connect Routes: Higher Education, Immigration, and the Pandemic in the Midwest" study is part of a broader international collaboration interested in understanding the deepening of educational inequities affecting racialized and minoritized immigrants in the context of COVID-19. UWM being one of the six participating universities in this global project, focuses on undocumented and Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) recipients in higher education.

Purpose

This literature review aims to understand 1) the impact of COVID-19 on undocumented and DACAmented students in higher education, 2) how structural and emergent inequalities against undocumented migrants operate in the context of a pandemic, and 3) how educational policies and practices may ameliorate those inequalities.

Methods

Selection Criteria and Approach

All types of publications (including grey literature)

Focused on undocumented/DACAmented students, higher education, and COVID-19

Timespan: 2020-2022.

Indexed in: Google Scholar and Web of Science

Keywords

Migration, immigration, DACA, DACAmented, undocumented, higher education, universities, community colleges, colleges, COVID-19, COVID, and pandemic

Number of publications

30 relevant publications were collected in the initial search using the keywords and timespan of 2020-2022. Publications meeting all three topic criteria including COVID-19, Higher Education, and Undocumented/DACAmented totaled 14.

Analysis

Using the specific pre-established criteria to analyze and summarize research already conducted on undocumented and DACAmented students in higher education we conducted a scoping review (Pham et al., 2014). These literature reviews provide guidance and summaries to researchers, practitioners, and policy makers. Additionally conducting a literature review allows the researcher to know what has already been researched and where gaps exist to inform their study

Findings

Theme 1

The first, most prominent theme was the negative impact of the pandemic on the mental health of undocumented/DACAmented students as they navigated not only the tense political landscape but also now had to juggle the addition of a global pandemic. The pandemic has been a significant source of stress, uncertainty, and psychological distress in students' lives (Andrade, 2021; Corr, 2021), mainly contributing to increased rates of depression and anxiety (Goodman et al., 2020). There were a variety of causes behind this decline in mental health, including financial instability, generalized discrimination, a lack of a sense of belonging, and inaccessible mental health services, among others (Billini, 2021; Cadenas et al., 2022; Enriquez et al., 2022; Melendez, 2020). Further contributing to this adverse effect, a

dominant factor was the prominence of food insecurity within the undocumented population, with many students citing the need to cut back on meals to prioritize rent (Cadenas et al., 2022; Enriquez et al., 2021; Gluckman, 2021).

Theme 2

The second emerging theme was the lack of accessible resources and support for undocumented students in higher education. Undocumented students already had a hard time accessing support in the pre-pandemic world, and the introduction of COVID-19 only exacerbated those struggles (Walsh et al., 2021). These barriers included the absence of governmental support due to their legal status, such as no stimulus check, a lack of unemployment benefits, and no educational relief grants (Enriquez et al., 2022), as well as a significant lack of technological resources, which are vital for academic success in online learning (Puente, 2022). Furthermore, the resources available to these students are often underutilized due to fears of discrimination and microaggressions (Goodman et al., 2020; Melendez, 2020). These fears extend beyond discrimination and microaggression to fears of deportation when utilizing healthcare services such as testing for covid or receiving treatment (Goodman et al., 2020). Not only was this noted by many students as a cause for concern, but many researchers also cited it as one of their main recommendations for educational institutions to implement to better serve and support their undocumented populations (Jackson & Saenz, 2022; Lucio, 2022).

Conclusion

Undocumented and DACAmented students already had a hard time accessing support in the pre-pandemic world, and the introduction of COVID-19 only exacerbated those struggles in pursuing education. Two themes emerged demonstrating the different areas undocumented and DACAmented students in higher education may need more support. Documented/DACAmented students in some states cannot access public funding and the prevalence of mental health issues as a result of the pandemic has been widely documented. Higher education institutions need to find ways to reduce inequities towards this student population. More studies are needed to understand the role these institutions have played in increasing or addressing these inequalities.

Significance

The results of the literature review contribute to the understanding of 1) the impact of COVID-19 on undocumented and DACAmented students in higher education and 2) the status of current research and potential research areas in the future. This is a topic that has not yet been examined or researched due to its emerging nature.

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