

ADVOCATING FOR UNDOCUMENTED YOUTH

By Therese Genis

As staff and youth started to come into the community center for their after-school youth program, everyone felt the somber mood throughout the building. Through hushed tones one could make out some occasional soft sobs and some bouts of enraged discord. One 8-year-old youth was overheard saying she was scared. Some other youth didn't really understand what this all meant but they could sense the shift and had many questions such as, "What will happen to me and my family?" Staff members were intentional about making the space a safe area to discuss all these concerns for their youth. Some staff did their best to fight back tears as they answered the young people's questions; "Do other people hate me because I wasn't born here?" It was the day that Donald Trump was voted into office, and the youth center I coordinate that serves majority immigrant families, was doing its best to walk the youth through all their concerns. As I watched all of this unfold I felt very inept in my role. I felt like I didn't know how to best comfort my staff or the youth they served. I didn't know how to keep them safe even though I desperately wanted to. And I realized that many other adults that work with immigrant youth probably felt the same way. So I set off to find out what we as youth workers, could do to advocate for undocumented youth. Through some research and informant interviews I was able to educate myself about the issue and hope to share that knowledge with other youth workers through this paper.

THE ISSUE OF UNDOCUMENTED YOUTH

Immigration and the politics around it is a broad and significant topic, especially in current times when news headlines around immigration appear almost daily. And for good reason. The United States is a nation that has been made up of many groups of immigrants over the years since it was first invaded by Europeans in the 1400s. Now Native Americans make up only 1.5% of the nation's population (Ogunwole, 2002), the rest are all immigrated populations. As our population grows, minority, non-European-descended groups grow, and more people from other countries seek lives here, immigration continues to develop into a top point of discussion. It is also often a divisive issue, especially in relation to undocumented immigrants in the United States.

The term *undocumented immigrants* refers to "foreign nationals residing in the U.S. without legal immigration status. It includes persons who entered the U.S. without inspection and proper permission from the U.S. government, and those who entered with a legal visa that is no longer valid. Undocumented immigrants are also known as unauthorized or illegal immigrants" ("Undocumented Immigrant Law and Legal Definition," n.d., para. 1). This is a unique population that is made up of many different nationals, races, and ages. It is hard to find reliable statistics on undocumented immigrants because they are often purposely living "under the radar." According to the Migration Policy Institute, an estimated 11 million undocumented immigrants lived in the United States in 2014 (Zong & Batalova, 2017); about 1.1 million of these were children under the age of 18, who mostly migrated with their parents (Gleeson & Gonzales, 2012). The majority of undocumented immigrants (54%), reside in four states: California, Texas, New York and Florida, and an estimated 71% come from Mexico and Central America (Zong & Batalova, 2017). A third of undocumented immigrants who are 15 years of age or older live with at least one child who is a United States citizen by birth (Yee, Davis, & Patel, 2017). Every year, an estimated 80,000 undocumented youth turn 18 and approximately 65,000 graduate from high school (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT UNDOCUMENTED IMMIGRANTS

As the above data shows, immigrants are a large population, and it looks as though those numbers will only increase if immigration trends continue. Therefore, their issues are our country's issues as a whole, which affect everyone. Some argue that undocumented immigrants wreak havoc on our country and need to be sent back to their countries. However, this is not true. In fact, they contribute positively to our society in a number of ways. Some common misconceptions about undocumented immigrants follow.

THEY ARE TAKING OUR JOBS AND ARE BAD FOR THE ECONOMY.

This statement is unfounded. In reality most of the jobs they take are not wanted by American citizens as they are the lowest paying jobs in sectors such as cleaning, food business, and agriculture. These industries are very dependent on undocumented immigrants. Furthermore, these workers contribute to our economy through taxes, consumerism and even create lower consumer prices. Harvard economist Jorge Borjas found that the average American's wealth has actually increased by 1% because of illegal immigration (Goodman, 2014).

THEY ARE DANGEROUS CRIMINALS AND MAKE OUR STREETS UNSAFE.

This is untrue. Immigrants, both documented and undocumented are less likely to be incarcerated or commit crimes than citizens born in the United States (Landgrave & Nowrasteh, 2017). Less than 3% of undocumented immigrants have committed felonies, compared to 6% of the total population (Yee, Davis, & Patel, 2017).

THEY ARE CREATING A LARGE BURDEN ON OUR SOCIAL SERVICES AND OUR TAXES SUPPORT THEM.

In fact, through property taxes, personal income taxes, sales and excise taxes, unauthorized immigrants have contributed more than 11 billion dollars per year. From 2000 to 2011, unauthorized immigrants contributed 35.1 billion dollars more into Medicare than they withdrew. In 2010 alone their net contribution to Social Security was 12 billion dollars (paying \$13 billion into Social Security and receiving \$1 billion in services). They are not able to use many of the social services they pay into (Nicholson, 2017).

These are some of the ways that the benefits of unauthorized immigrants actually outweigh the detriments from a numbers and data perspective. It also bears mentioning from a standpoint of empathy and compassion, that undocumented immigrants frequently come from dire circumstances in another country, which is why they come here, often risking their lives in the process. For these reasons, immigrants deserve to be treated with dignity and respect and to feel safe, especially as vulnerable young people.

UNDOCUMENTED YOUTH AND YOUTH WORK

The issue of immigration and how it relates to youth work is a complicated one. The younger generation is more diverse than any previous generation in the United States (Pew Reserach Center, 2014). Many young people that youth workers currently work with are immigrants, some of whom are undocumented or have family members that are undocumented. Advocacy in the context of youth work, can mean many things, but in my own words it represents youth working towards change in the context of positive youth development. Youth work has often been an arena ripe for advocacy. Youth were at the forefront of many social movements, especially some of the largest ones that took place in the 1960s such as the antiwar, feminist, gay rights, and free speech social movements (HoSang, 2003). As adults that work with youth, it is our responsibility to empower youth and encourage active citizenship. However, in the circumstance of undocumented youth, youth advocacy has to look different. It would usually be our role as adults to stand back and let youth take the lead and be the faces and leaders of social change. But in the context of this

issue, and with the current political climate, it is instead our role to play a more protective role and stand at the forefront in order to safeguard our youth who are in a vulnerable situation. Being at the lead for these youth could put them at risk.

PERSONAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS TOPIC

I have worked with the Latino community professionally in some context for about 10 years. It has always been my desire to support this community and positively impact it. I have worked with immigrant families in clinical, educational, and research settings. As a Mexican American woman who is the daughter of a Mexican immigrant, I have many personal experiences as well that have helped shape my interest in supporting the Latino community. I have been able to get to know many immigrant Latinos, many of whom are undocumented or have someone in their household who is, whether it's a parent, sibling, cousin or neighbor. All of them know someone close by in their community that is undocumented. I have observed and learned how deeply legal status can affect the emotional and physical health of these families. The issue is often forefront in their minds, however it is frequently not talked about. They don't know whom they can trust and they live in constant fear for themselves and for their family members. Many live with severe anxiety that they will be separated from their families. One undocumented youth I spoke with told me through tears, "I'm just tired. I am tired of living in fear, feeling like I have to defend myself, and not have opportunities even though I have never done anything wrong." She was brought here as a small child by her parents. The United States is the only home she has ever known. She is a kind, responsible and strong young woman. She has big dreams of what she wants to accomplish in her career and education, but her legal status keeps creating roadblocks for her. Youth like her don't deserve to have this stress put on them as young children. This is why I feel strongly that we should have tools to help undocumented youth and be advocates for them.

HOW TO ADVOCATE FOR UNDOCUMENTED YOUTH

There are some things that those working with undocumented immigrant youth can do to advocate for them. Below is a list of some things that my research has surfaced as being effective ways to help them.

KNOW THEIR RIGHTS

The number one thing that I have learned from interviews with immigrant youth and through reading about this issue is to help immigrants to know their rights, and so, as their support network, we also need to understand their rights. This is a short list of rights that are most important to know for people working with immigrant youth:

- All youth have a right to public education regardless of their legal status.
- Schools cannot ask about immigration status of the children or their families and/or require documentation to enroll a youth.
- Immigration Control Enforcement (ICE) cannot take enforcement action on school grounds.
- In private settings, ICE can be refused entry, unless they have an official arrest warrant signed by a judge.

Table 1 lists resources where one can learn about the legal rights of undocumented immigrants in more detail.

Table 1. Resources For Those Working with Undocumented Youth

Resource	URL	Description
15 Ways to Advocate for Undocumented Youth	https://www.iacac.org/wp-content/uploads/15-Ways-to-Advocate-for-Undocumented-Youth.pdf	Document that suggests great ways to advocate for undocumented youth
Know Your Rights	https://www.nilc.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Rights-No-Matter-Who-Is-Pres-2016-11-10.pdf	Write up on important basic immigrant rights in an accessible format including printable pocket-sized cards
The Facts on Immigrants Today	https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/immigration/reports/2017/04/20/430736/facts-immigration-today-2017-edition/	Current facts and data on immigration to aid in your discussions about this issue
Resource Guide: Supporting Undocumented Youth	https://www2.ed.gov/about/overview/focus/supporting-undocumented-youth.pdf	Comprehensive guide from Department of Education for adults that work with Undocumented youth, focused on post-secondary options
Minnesota Dream Act Fact Sheet	http://www.ohe.state.mn.us/pdf/MNDreamActFactSheet.pdf	Information and resources for the Minnesota Dream Act Law

SEE THEM AS INDIVIDUALS

It can be tempting to just lump all immigrants together, thinking they all behave a certain way or they are all Mexican. Realize that they are each unique individuals, and that just because you have had a certain experience with one, doesn't mean experiences with others will be the same. Just like any population there are all types and kinds, but they are all human and deserve a chance for you to get to know them and hear their stories before judging them. See beyond legal status. Doing this and encouraging others to do this humanizes undocumented immigrants.

GIVE THEM A VOICE

Immigrant populations feel they can't speak up for themselves or others or advocate without putting themselves or their loved ones in danger of being deported. If they draw attention to themselves it could mean law enforcement becoming more aware of them and threatening their situation. Therefore, it falls on our shoulders to give them a voice and speak up for them. We can advocate for them in some of the following ways:

- If someone is being harassed speak up.
- Reach out to your government officials to support or create policies that are immigrant friendly.
- Be vocal about what rights you demand for them. Talk to friends, neighbors and coworkers about it, especially those that are unfamiliar with the issue.
- Go into fields that can help make changes for them such as law enforcement, government, policy and law.

LET THEM KNOW THEY HAVE YOUR SUPPORT

In 2015 the U.S. Department of Education published a resource guide for supporting undocumented youth which states:

Case studies and testimonials from undocumented youth suggest that one crucial factor in their academic success has been support from family, educators, and other caring adults in their lives. And research has shown certain environmental factors—such as access to extracurricular activities, advanced coursework, and engaged parents—can boost resiliency among undocumented youth, and are correlated with greater educational attainment.

These findings show that caring adults can make an impact—that educators, counselors, principals, and specialized instructional support personnel can be the linchpin of success for undocumented students (2015, p. 3).

Even little encounters that include encouraging words or compassionate actions can make an impact on a youth for the rest of their lives. Tell them that you are there for them and going to fight for their rights and do everything you can to keep them safe. Tell them and that they can talk to you about anything they need to without fear. Show them often that you care by being a consistent, positive presence in their lives.

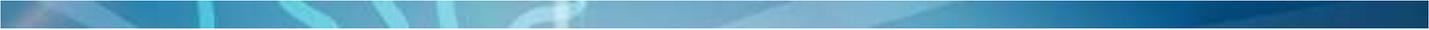
LET THEM KNOW THERE ARE OPTIONS

For undocumented immigrants, especially minors, there are options related to employment, continuing their education beyond high school, and creating a life they want. Help them research resources and find options they are interested in. Encourage them to not feel hopeless and to utilize options such as:

- Financial aid and scholarships for undocumented immigrants to pursue post-secondary education and training.
- DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals); the policy that allows certain youth that were brought to the United States as children to apply for the opportunity to not be removed from the country and get work authorization.
- The Dream Act. In Minnesota, the Minnesota Dream Act law allows certain eligible undocumented youth the opportunity to receive in-state tuition rates at colleges and universities and be eligible for state financial aid as well as other scholarships.

CONCLUSION

In summary, a large immigrant population is a reality of the country that we live in. As youth workers that work with immigrant youth or those directly affected by immigration, it is our duty to be informed about the issue and vigilant about being advocates for them whether they can be for themselves or not. The main ways to do this are:

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1. Know their rights.
 2. See them as individuals.
 3. Give them a voice.
 4. Let them know they have your support.
 5. Help them know their options.

Youth workers working with undocumented youth can also find additional information to support their youth in Table 1.

A youth worker recently told me that after the presidential elections one of her very young boys, speaking of the community program center they were in, said “I feel afraid, but I feel safe here.” My hope is that all youth can have a place where they feel this way whether they are undocumented or not. As youth workers, advocating for undocumented youth is our responsibility and how we can best serve our youth and support them as they continue to grow into amazing adults and positively contributing members of society.

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