Undocumented Latino youth turn to activism to combat obstacles

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Undocumented Latino youth in the U.S. face futures clouded by fewer rights than their documented peers and the constant fear of deportation. Such status constraints usually aren't fully understood until young adulthood, said UC Irvine anthropologist Leo Chavez, and the awareness often serves as a catalyst for political and civic involvement.

"Rites of passage common to American youth – getting a driver's license, traveling, working and applying to college – are either denied, unattainable or dangerous to pursue for undocumented immigrants," he said. "It's at this point that many realize society sees them as disposable, as easily cast away. Yet rather than merely give up, they become involved in campaigns to change the law."

In a study that appears in the June issue of *Current Anthropology*, Chavez and co-author Roberto Gonzales, an assistant professor at the University of Chicago School of Social Service Administration, use interviews and survey data to shed light on the experiences of undocumented Latinos in Orange County who came to the U.S. as children.

"Shrinking rights for undocumented immigrants and increased enforcement efforts narrowly constrain everyday life and cause a great deal of stress for undocumented youth and young adults," Gonzales said. "Even mundane acts of driving, waiting for the bus, and traffic stops can lead to the loss of a car, prison and deportation."

Political and civic engagement has provided an outlet for frustration and

a potential path for change, particularly through the Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors Act. First introduced in Congress almost 11 years ago, the proposal seeks to reconcile the untenable circumstances of undocumented immigrant youth, Gonzales said. A majority of study participants acknowledged having taken part in marches and demonstrations in support of the DREAM Act, risking social ramifications and possible deportation by exposing themselves publicly.

"For them, the risks are worth it for a chance to advocate for legislation that would allow an opportunity for residency, even citizenship," Gonzales noted.

Researchers conducted in-person interviews of 80 Latino men and women and phone surveys of 805 Latino and 396 non-Latino white men and women with both listed and unlisted phone numbers. This yielded detailed information on income, work, education, residence, family, discrimination, immigration status, political engagement and use of medical services.

Said one undocumented young adult: "I know I can do so much more, but I can't because … I can't choose where I live. I can't choose where I work. And the worst thing is that I can't choose my friends. In high school I was able to do that; I can't anymore. I can't even hang out with my high school friends anymore, and that hurts a lot. Yeah, they want to do grown-up stuff. I can't do anything that is 18 and over…. I can't travel with them. If I want to go to a bar, I don't even have a drink."

In addition to social constraints, the study found that just 23.5 percent of undocumented Latino participants who immigrated to the U.S. as children had an annual family income of $35,000 or higher, compared with 67.6 percent of legal Latino residents in the same age group. Similarly, only 30.3 percent of undocumented Latinos had 13 or more years of schooling, compared with 50 percent of their legal-resident

counterparts.

"As adults, these individuals wind up making less money, are less likely to own their homes, and have less schooling – discrepancies directly linked to their immigration status," Gonzales said.

Chavez added, "As political debate continues over who deserves to be American, the young people we surveyed and interviewed are struggling to find ways to make something out of their lives. Until Congress acts, undocumented youth will live with uncertain futures."

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