



# **The Civic Education and Engagement of Latina/o Immigrant Youth: Challenging Boundaries and Creating Safe Spaces**

**Hinda Seif**  
**University of Illinois at Springfield**  
**Springfield, IL**

---

The Civic Education and Engagement of Latina/o Immigrant Youth: Challenging  
Boundaries and Creating Safe Spaces  
By Hinda Seif, University of Illinois at Springfield

As demographics shift and immigration is a hotly contested area of US civic life, the civic preparation and participation of Latin American immigrant youth is becoming increasingly important. I examine the growing literature on this topic, inquiring into the

construction of Latin America

d  
c

undocumented in 2008.<sup>12</sup> Although the number of undocumented children has not been growing since 2003,<sup>13</sup> they are becoming more visible through legislative battles and organizing to help or hinder their life chances in the US.

Yet changing demographics only partially explains why the civic engagement of Latina/o immigrant youth is significant. Youth are important change agents and have played key roles in Latina/o social movements. How does their civic participation differ from that of immigrant adults and US-born youth? Latina/o immigrant youth also live at the intersection of a number of key struggles against the criminalization of youth of color and immigrants.<sup>14</sup> Political initiatives aimed at them include struggles over bilingual education, attempts to restrict the educational access of undocumented students, and federal initiatives to legalize their status. Yet the innocence of children has been highlighted in civil rights struggles, such as the integration of schools and other public facilities. There are strong arguments for incorporating all immigrant children into US society and not penalizing them for their parents' circumstances and "choices."

#### *Inclusive Definitions of Immigrant Youth Civic Engagement*

When scholars study immigrant youth civic engagement, they face special challenges that include the varied ways that these youth and their civic practices are defined and measured. We cannot use the experiences of adult or immigrant citizens to define and forecast immigrant youth civic engagement.<sup>15</sup> Jensen and Flanagan<sup>16</sup> argue that to paint a picture of immigrant youth's civic life, we must look at their general community involvement. For example, Stepick et al.<sup>17</sup> identified and measured four types of activities in their study comparing U.S.-born and immigrant youth in South Florida: 1) political; 2) civic; 3) expressive group membership (participating in athletics and ethnic organizations); and 4) social

becomes less informative.<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, scholars may fail to measure immigrant youth's participation in key political activities such as volunteering for a candidate because they assume inactivity due to age and immigration status.<sup>19</sup> Yet as immigrant youth and their parents become political targets, some volunteer in political campaigns and get-out-the-vote efforts.<sup>20</sup> The challenge is to define their civic engagement in a way that captures its scope yet is not too wide-ranging.

### *Diversity of Latina/o Immigrant Youth*

Immigrant youth's civic engagement can also be hard to assess because of their great diversity and the differing ways that researchers have defined and categorized them. Historically, the second-generation children of immigrants have been called "immigrant youth" or have not been disaggregated from the first generation (youth by race/ethnicity).

through long separations from

of moving to a new land, and learning a new language.

sending countries.<sup>30</sup> Cuban immigrant youth who lived in Miami during the Elián González controversy,<sup>31</sup> Mexican immigrant youth who walked out of California schools to protest Proposition 187,<sup>32</sup> and Salvadoran youth from families that fled political violence<sup>33</sup> have been impacted by their context. Aside from structural issues, these youth also have individual preferences and exercise agency.<sup>34</sup>

Research in fields such as health<sup>35</sup> and education<sup>36</sup> demonstrate that being foreign-born is not only associated with problems; it can also lead to resilience. Studies that disaggregate the civic engagement of first-generation Latina/o youth can also present a clearer picture of their disadvantages and strengths compared to their peers with deeper roots in the U.S. and its system of racialization.

*Methods, Themes, and Voices*

The nexus of age, race, and immigration status makes it challenging to identify and study immigrant youth, especially when they are undocumented. Because most work on immigrant youth has been conducted on their education and schools are a key site of their civic education and engagement, some larger educational studies shed light on their civic life.<sup>37</sup> Similarly, although the experience of immigrant youth was not the focus of

---

Karen Brodtkin, *Making Democracy Matter: Identity and Activism in Los Angeles* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007); Jensen and Flanagan, "Immigrant Civic Engagement: New Translations;" Stepick, Dutton Stepick, and Labissiere, "South Florida's Immigrant Youth and Civic Engagement: Major Engagement: Minor Differences."

<sup>31</sup> Stepick, Dutton Stepick, and Labissiere, "South Florida's Immigrant Youth and Civic Engagement: Major Engagement: Minor Differences."

<sup>32</sup> Seif, "'Wise Up!' Undocumented Latino Youth, Mexican-American Legislators, and the Struggle for Higher Education."

<sup>33</sup> Suárez-Orozco, *Central American Refugees and Us High Schools: A Psychosocial Study of Motivation and Achievement*.

<sup>34</sup> Valenzuela, *Subtractive Schooling: U.S.-Mexican Youth and the Politics of Caring*.

Elena Zúñiga et al., "Mexico-United States Migration: Health Issues," (México D. F.: Consejo Nacional de Población, 2005).

<sup>36</sup> Ogbu, *Minority Education and Caste: The American System in Cross-Cultural Perspective*; Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, and Todorova, *Learning in a New Land: Immigrants, Students and American Society*; Valenzuela, *Subtractive Schooling: U.S.-Mexican Youth and the Politics of Caring*.

<sup>37</sup> Olsen, *Made in America: Immigrant Students in Our Public Schools*. Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, and Todorova, *Learning in a New Land: Immigrants, Students and American Society*; Valenzuela, *Subtractive Schooling: U.S.-Mexican Youth and the Politics of Caring*.

Brodkin's<sup>38</sup> rich anthropological study of the development of youth activists in Los Angeles, approximately half of the activists profiled were immigrants.

Recent research either specifically looks at the civic engagement of immigrant youth or disaggregates them within larger studies of civic engagement. The topic has been approached from a variety of perspectives including psychology and adolescent development, education, political science, sociology, and anthropology. Most research has been qualitative and small-scale, using ethnographies, focus groups, interviews, or case studies.<sup>39</sup> This provides a nuanced picture of the lives of immigrant youth and their process of civic engagement. Our picture has recently been enhanced by data analysis from national surveys<sup>40</sup> and longitudinal studies.<sup>41</sup> Although quantitative data offers a more generalizable view, it is difficult to find a representative sample of immigrant or Latina/o immigrant youth because of their low frequency in the population and the limitations of locating them through traditional methods such as phone surveys.<sup>42</sup>

Scholars are interested in the ways that immigrant youths' civic education and activity compares to that of co-ethnics and other U.S.-born peers. Regarding identity issues, researchers examine how their immigrant or ethnic identity is related to civic engagement, and whether these pursuits focus on cultural or immigrant issues or reflect transnational perspectives.<sup>43</sup> The special role that schools play in immigrant youth civic education,<sup>44</sup> engagement, and activism is a major theme in this field of inquiry.<sup>45</sup> Youth

---

<sup>39</sup> Gonzales, "Left out but Not Shut Down: Political Activism and the Undocumented Latino Student Movement;" Rogers et al., "Civic Lessons, Public Schools, and the Civic Development of Undocumented Students and Parents;" Seif, "'Wise Up!' Undocumented Latino Youth, Mexican-American Legislators, and the Struggle for Higher Education."

Lopez and Marcelo, "The Civic Engagement of Immigrant Youth: New Evidence from the 2006 Civic and Political Health of the Nation Survey;" Judith Torney-Purta, Carolyn Barber, and Britt Wilkenfeld, "Differences in the Civic Knowledge and Attitudes of Adolescents in the United States by Immigrant Status and Hispanic Background," *Prospects: Quarterly Review of Comparative Education* 36, no. 3 (2006).

Stepick, Dutton Stepick, and Labissiere, "South Florida's Immigrant Youth and Civic Engagement: Major Engagement: Minor Differences."

<sup>42</sup> Lopez and Marcelo, "The Civic Engagement of Immigrant Youth: New Evidence from the 2006 Civic and Political Health of the Nation Survey."

Brodkin, *Making Democracy Matter: Identity and Activism in Los Angeles* Jensen, "Immigrants' Identities as Sources of Civic Engagement;" Alex Stepick and Carol Dutton Stepick, "Becoming American, Constructing Ethnicity: Immigrant Youth and Civic Engagement," *Applied Developmental Science* 6, no. 4 (2002).

Torney-Purta, Barber, and Wilkenfeld, "Differences in the Civic Knowledge and Attitudes of Adolescents in the United States by Immigrant Status and Hispanic Background."



92 Hispanic immigrants.<sup>49</sup> They find that although immigrants and Hispanic students

have a comparable understanding of the behavioral norms of citizenship compared to non-Hispanic, native-born students, the latter had more positive results in regards to “knowledge of civic concepts, understanding democracy, possessing the skills necessary to understand political communication, expressing positive attitudes toward the nation, and expressing protectionist attitudes toward the nation.”<sup>50</sup> On the other hand, immigrant and Hispanic youth express strong immigrant identities and are more likely to support “rights and opportunities” for immigrants.<sup>51</sup>

Despite this lower civic knowledge, immigrant youth report levels of civic engagement that are comparable to their native-born counterparts. Based on data from the 2006 Civic and Political Health of the Nation Survey, Lopez and Marcelo<sup>52</sup> find that although young immigrants report less civic engagement than their peers, many of these gaps disappear when demographic variables such as socioeconomic status are controlled for. The researchers find that 2<sup>nd</sup> generation youth have the highest level of civic engagement, followed by other U.S.-born youth; immigrant youth report the lowest rates. The survey was conducted soon after the 2006 immigration policy protests, and the one area where immigrant youth showed significantly higher civic engagement levels was in protest activities.<sup>53</sup> Political scientists McRee and Setzler use the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health to “examine patterns of both acculturation and civic incorporation” of foreign-born, second-generation, and native-born youth.<sup>54</sup> Their sample included 487 first generation students in grades 7-12. They find that, “young immigrants are as likely as native youth to embrace core American political values, practice volunteerism, and become politically involved to the extent that their citizenship and socioeconomic circumstances permit.”<sup>55</sup>

Stepick et al.<sup>56</sup> combine surveys and participant observation in their study of high school students and college freshmen in Miami, Florida. Their data differs from most studies that focus on Latino adolescents because they capture the civic engagement of Cuban immigrant youth. They are interested in whether immigrant youth adapt the civic engagement patterns of other US minority youth or exhibit distinct behaviors. Using a

---

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.. 352.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Lopez and Marcelo, "The Civic Engagement of Immigrant Youth: New Evidence from the 2006 Civic and Political Health of the Nation Survey."

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Nick McRee and Mark Setzler, "Becoming Young Americans: The Acculturation and Civic Assimilation Patterns of Young Immigrants in the Us," (Unpublished manuscript, N.D.). 3.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Stepick, Dutton Stepick, and Labissiere, "South Florida's Immigrant Youth and Civic Engagement: Major Engagement: Minor Differences."



activities because of language barriers.<sup>61</sup> Immigrant girls were more likely to help others, and spending time at school was a way to escape the constant supervision of strict parents. Mexico-oriented, 1.5-generation youth were culturally assimilated yet were bilingual and retained pride in their Mexican heritage. These immigrant students were the most likely to participate in mainstream extracurricular activities.

Valenzuela<sup>62</sup> also discusses the cultural values of Mexican immigrant students. For example, the principle of *educación* “refers to the family’s role of inculcating in children a sense of moral, social, and personal responsibility and serves as the foundation for all other learning. ... The end state of being *bien educado* is accomplished through a process characterized by respectful relations.”<sup>63</sup> This cultural standard may contribute to the robust civic engagement of young Mexican immigrants documented in other studies.<sup>64</sup>

Suárez-Orozco et al.’s<sup>65</sup> developmental study of immigrant youth and education also elucidates ways that the immigrant experience detracts from and promotes civic engagement. Over a period of five years, the researchers followed 309 recently arrived immigrant youth at 100 schools. Like Valenzuela,<sup>66</sup> they find that many immigrant students attend schools that are understaffed, with low academic expectations and hostile and violent peer cultures. Despite these obstacles, the researchers identify social aspects of the immigrant experience that give these students strong motivation to improve their lives.<sup>67</sup> A driving force of immigration is to provide better opportunities for children. Parents make sacrifices, and their children’s success is defined collectively by their ability to lift up their families and communities.<sup>68</sup> Although Suárez-Orozco et al.<sup>69</sup> focus

---

<sup>61</sup> See also Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, and Todorova, *Learning in a New Land: Immigrants, Students and American Society*.

Valenzuela, *Subtractive Schooling: U.S.-Mexican Youth and the Politics of Caring*.

Ibid.

Dolores Delgado Bernal, Enrique Aleman, Jr., and Judith Flores Carmona, "Transnational and Transgenerational Latina/O Cultural Citizenship among Kindergarteners, Their Parents, and University Students in Utah," *Social Justice* 32, no. 4 (2008). Brodtkin, *Making Democracy Matter: Identity and Activism in Los Angeles*; Seif, "'Wise Up!' Undocumented Latino Youth, Mexican-American Legislators, and the Struggle for Higher Education."

Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, and Todorova, *Learning in a New Land: Immigrants, Students and American Society*.

<sup>66</sup> Valenzuela, *Subtractive Schooling: U.S.-Mexican Youth and the Politics of Caring*.

<sup>67</sup> Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, and Todorova, *Learning in a New Land: Immigrants, Students*

on the ways that this immigration story influences students' educational motivation, it can also lead to civic and political engagement.<sup>70</sup>

Yet these strong incentives do not necessarily translate into achievement. Suárez-Orozco et al.<sup>71</sup> find that recently arrived immigrant youth are socially segregated, and spend most of their time with other newcomers and their families.<sup>72</sup> The authors emphasize the special role that non-family mentors have in helping immigrant youth adjust to their new lives.<sup>73</sup> Although girls were most likely to find mentors through churches, sports teams, and community centers, few immigrant students had access to supportive after-school programs or had adults outside their families who played significant roles in their lives.

*Summary: Immigrant Youth Civic Engagement*

In sum, immigrant youth are highly diverse, and their civic engagement varies based on features such as sex, age of immigration, English language ability, and the political contexts of receiving and sending regions. They are also defined in various ways; in order to produce comparable studies, researchers must establish common definitions, for example of the 1.5 generation. Because civic engagement patterns for immigrant youth and the 2<sup>nd</sup> generation differ, it is especially important to disaggregate these groups for analytical purposes.

When socioeconomic variables are controlled for, immigrant youth exhibit rates of civic engagement that are comparable to non-immigrants. The schools that serve working class and poor immigrant youth must be improved so the civic education they provide may reach the standards of more affluent educational institutions. Because they often engage in different civic practices than U.S. natives, it is important to define their civic engagement broadly. For example, immigrant youth tend to participate in religious activities, pursuits where English language ability is less important such as sports, and they assist other immigrants as translators and tutors. Although few have nonfamily mentors, these adults play crucial roles in their educational achievement and civic development.

---

<sup>69</sup> Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, and Todorova, *Learning in a New Land: Immigrants, Students and American Society*.

Brodkin, *Making Democracy Matter: Identity and Activism in Los Angeles*; Seif, "'Wise Up!' Undocumented Latino Youth, Mexican-American Legislators, and the Struggle for Higher Education."

<sup>71</sup> Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, and Todorova, *Learning in a New Land: Immigrants, Students and American Society*.

See also Olsen, *Made in America: Immigrant Students in Our Public Schools*.

See also Seif, "'Wise Up!' Undocumented Latino Youth, Mexican-American Legislators, and the Struggle for Higher Education."

Immigrant youth draw upon cultural and social resources and motivations that can increase their capacity for civic engagement. Their parents have sacrificed to provide better opportunities for their offspring who are motivated to fulfill their end of the immigrant “bargain” by contributing to their families, neighborhoods, and ethnic communities.<sup>74</sup> Cultural values such as *educación* also emphasize communal responsibility.<sup>75</sup> Therefore, ethnic and immigrant identities are strong sources of resilience and civic engagement that should be fostered rather than suppressed.

*Undocumented Immigrant Youth:*

Perez et al.<sup>79</sup>

key locus for the civic develop

Studies of undocumented immigrant's education also provide insight into their civic engagement.<sup>87</sup> Through schools, students are linked to teachers, peers, and counselors, and networks of citizens.<sup>88</sup> They join student clubs and organizations, contribute to community service, develop leadership skills,<sup>89</sup> and form robust attachments to the United States.<sup>90</sup> Like their documented immigrant peers, they tend to serve other Latina/os and immigrants and assist with translation.<sup>91</sup>

For undocumented students, there is a contradiction between their educational membership and their exclusion from other social arenas.<sup>92</sup> As minors, they have an identity as students and are less reliant on driver's licenses, working papers, and other trappings of adult normalcy. Until they reach high school, many undocumented students have limited awareness of their legal status or the future difficulties they face. Rather than a joyful rite of passage, the transition out of high school becomes a traumatic change in identity and status from student to illegal alien or illegal worker,<sup>93</sup> and its approach can thrust students into despair or action.<sup>94</sup>

### *The Paradox of Social Rejection and Civic Engagement*

---

<sup>87</sup> Coronado, "Voices of Courage and Strength: Undocumented Immigrant Students in the United States." Diaz-Strong and Meiners, "Residents, Alien Policies, and Resistances: Experiences of Undocumented Latina/O Students in Chicago's Colleges and Universities.", Martínez-Calderón, "Out of the Shadows: Undocumented Latino College Students.", Rogers et al., "Civic Lessons, Public Schools, and the Civic Development of Undocumented Students and Parents."

Gonzales, "Left out but Not Shut Down: Political Activism and the Undocumented Latino Student Movement."

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> William Perez et al., "Motives for Service: Civic Engagement Patterns of Undocumented Immigrant Latino/a Youth," (N.D.).

<sup>91</sup> Rogers et al., "Civic Lessons, Public Schools, and the Civic Development of Undocumented Students and Parents."

<sup>92</sup> Gonzales, "Left out but Not Shut Down: Political Activism and the Undocumented Latino Student Movement." Perez et al., "Motives for Service: Civic Engagement Patterns of Undocumented Immigrant Latino/a Youth." Rogers et al., "Civic Lessons, Public Schools, and the Civic Development of Undocumented Students and Parents;" Seif, "'Wise Up!' Undocumented Latino Youth, Mexican-American Legislators, and the Struggle for Higher Education."

<sup>93</sup> Seif, "'Wise Up!' Undocumented Latino Youth, Mexican-American Legislators, and the Struggle for Higher Education."

<sup>94</sup> Gonzales, "Left out but Not Shut Down: Political Activism and the Undocumented Latino Student Movement." Perez et al., "Motives for Service: Civic Engagement Patterns of Undocumented Immigrant Latino/a Youth."





Despite high levels of civic engagement reported by some researchers,<sup>102</sup> other qualitative research indicates that undocumented students feel marginalized in organizations that do not focus on their issues.<sup>103</sup> This includes Latina/o student groups that overlook immigrant issues<sup>104</sup> and immigrant groups that neglect youth and student issues.<sup>105</sup> Undocumented students may be afraid to reveal their immigration status, or their special issues may be ignored or swept aside when raised.<sup>106</sup>

This neglect has generated student clubs, organizations, and subcommittees of existing organizations that focus on the problems facing undocumented students and advocate for policy changes in schools and at local, state, and federal levels. Their activism has had an impact despite the harsh political and economic climate. Undocumented students have achieved greater college access in ten states and blocked numerous policy proposals across the country that would have thrust them further into the shadows of nation-state.<sup>107</sup> In California, they have forged an alternative identity through their successful political struggle.<sup>108</sup>

### *Undocumented Students and the In-State Tuition Movement*

Although undocumented students cannot legally be excluded from public K-12 schools, their access to higher education is more tenuous. They are generally kept out by cost, and efforts to help undocumented students attend college have focused on their ability to

---

<sup>102</sup> Coronado, "Voices of Courage and Strength: Undocumented Immigrant Students in the United States." Perez et al., "Civic Engagement Patterns of Undocumented Immigrant Youth in the United States.", ———, "Motives for Service: Civic Engagement Patterns of Undocumented Immigrant Latino/a Youth."

<sup>103</sup> Olsen, *Made in America: Immigrant Students in Our Public Schools*. S.I.N., "Students Informing Now (S.I.N.) Challenge the Racial State in California without Shame... 'Sin Verguenza!'"

<sup>104</sup> S.I.N., "Students Informing Now (S.I.N.) Challenge the Racial State in California without Shame... 'Sin Verguenza!'"

<sup>105</sup> Gonzales, "Left out but Not Shut Down: Political Activism and the Undocumented Latino Student Movement."

<sup>106</sup> S.I.N., "Students Informing Now (S.I.N.) Challenge the Racial State in California without Shame... 'Sin Verguenza!'"

Rincón,

pay in-state tuition and receive financial aid. Seif documented the successful struggle for California's in-state tuition bill, AB (Assembly Bill) 540, as part of a larger ethnography of the transformation of state legislative politics in Latina/o districts with large undocumented populations.<sup>109</sup> The author traces the connections between legislators of Mexican ancestry who were former student activists and today's undocumented students from Mexico and Central America. Undocumented 1.5- generation high school students have become leaders in Southeast Los Angeles because of their high educational achievement compared to their immigrant parents, their English-language abilities, their recognized identity as students, and the mentorship that some receive from local Latina/o activists. Beyond being very painful for the students, their "illegal" status is a dilemma for Latino immigrant neighborhoods because it demoralizes teachers and fellow students and robs communities of the full potential of its leaders.<sup>110</sup>

Rincón provides an educational policy history of the national movement for in-state tuition of undocumented students, with a focus on the story of the first in-state tuition bill passed in 2001, HB 1403 in Texas.

stories.<sup>114</sup> Many students also stress their civic contributions in verbal and written accounts. Offering testimony also empowers youth who have hidden and felt ashamed of their legal status by converting their private troubles into a political issue.<sup>115</sup> They organize and speak at campus rallies, tell their stories to journalists, and lobby and testify at government hearings. They advocate for their rights on campus, hold educational forums, gather petitions, organize mock graduations, and even participate in hunger strikes to raise awareness of their plight.<sup>116</sup> Students travel across the country to lobby, network, and conduct outreach. They use information technologies, including Facebook websites, to publicize their groups and network with other students and groups across the nation.<sup>117</sup>

Young activists engage in these political and civic activities despite the risks associated with their legal status. They must overcome their fears and assess the danger of arrest and deportation. Students participate in mixed status groups, use pseudonyms, and gauge how far they can safely travel to minimize the risk of identification in the U.S.

New in-state tuition laws have enabled thousands of undocumented students to attend college, empowered undocumented students, and generated more activism.<sup>120</sup> They are forging new identities, enforcing these laws and working to expand their scope, pushing for federal legalization, and engaging in other political and policy efforts to help marginalized groups. Abrego reports that since the California bill's passage, many undocumented student activists in the state call themselves "AB 540 students."<sup>121</sup> This new identity reflects their social membership as students and activists.<sup>122</sup> In California, the in-state tuition law has been poorly enforced by schools and the state.<sup>123</sup> To address this institutional neglect, the first wave of students to benefit from the law formed AB 540 groups on their campuses to enforce the law, organize younger students, and conduct outreach to parents, high schools, and community-based organizations.<sup>124</sup> These California organizations formed the AB 540 College Access Network.<sup>125</sup>

A remarkable account of the impact of the law on the identity and political development of undocumented students was written by the Students Informing Now (S.I.N.) Collective (2007) at UC Santa Cruz, a Latina/o student group formed to support higher education access for immigrants.<sup>126</sup> The collective offers a "safe space" where undocumented students can share their identities and their concerns are central. Because their group includes Latina/os with various legal relationships to the nation-state, members can speak publically about the plight of undocumented students without placing themselves in jeopardy by revealing their own legal status. It also provides family-like support for students who struggle to stay in college and face an uncertain future after graduation. This includes emotional, financial, and transportation assistance. Such groups are crucial

---

<sup>120</sup> Rincón, *Undocumented Immigrants and Higher Education: Si Se Puede!*; S.I.N., "Students Informing Now (S.I.N.) Challenge the Racial State in California without Shame...Sin Verguenza!"

<sup>121</sup> Abrego, "I Can't Go to College Because I Don't Have Papers": Incorporation Patterns of Latino Undocumented Youth  
." ———, "Legitimacy, Social Identity, and the Mobilization of Law: The Effects of Assembly Bill 540 on Undocumented Students in California."

<sup>122</sup> Gonzales, "Left out but Not Shut Down: Political Activism and the Undocumented Latino Student Movement." Rincón, *Undocumented Immigrants and Higher Education: Si Se Puede!*

<sup>123</sup> Madera and et.al., eds., *Underground Undergrads: Ucla Undocumented Immigrant Students Speak Out*. Rincón, *Undocumented Immigrants and Higher Education: Si Se Puede!*; Seif, "States Open up College to Undocumented Students." S.I.N., "Students Informing Now (S.I.N.) Challenge the Racial State in California without Shame...Sin Verguenza!"

<sup>124</sup> Gonzales, "Left out but Not Shut Down: Political Activism and the Undocumented Latino Student Movement." Madera and et.al., eds., *Underground Undergrads: Ucla Undocumented Immigrant Students Speak Out*. S.I.N., "Students Informing Now (S.I.N.) Challenge the Racial dþ Mo0.00030 Tc 0 Tw

incubators for undocumented students as active participants in civic life. Although student groups such as the S.I.N. Collective and Improving Dreams, Equality, Access, and Success (IDEAS) at UCLA<sup>127</sup> have accomplished miracles given their limited resources and power, their efforts are no substitute for institutional enforcement of the educational rights of undocumented students.

In addition, student groups in California and across the nation have continued state-level efforts by defending existing state laws, fending off restrictive legislative proposals and lawsuits, and trying to further expand higher education access for immigrants.<sup>128</sup> *Underground Undergraduates*, a book published from a class project at UCLA's Labor Center, was part of an unsuccessful effort to pass the California Dream Act (Cedillo), a bill to extend state and university financial aid to AB 540 students.<sup>129</sup>

Undocumented youth are also central to federal immigration reform efforts including the DREAM Act, a bill to legalize qualified young immigrants who came to the US as children. Many students are involved in DREAM Act organizing because it offers hope that they may someday use their education by working legally.<sup>130</sup> Between 2004-6, immigrant students and their supporters in California organized DREAM Act rallies and engaged in a hunger strike in Los Angeles.<sup>131</sup>

Students and student issues were often marginalized in the 2006 immigration reform protests or negatively depicted in English language news media.<sup>132</sup> However, documented and undocumented immigrant youth and their campus support groups played key roles in the activities.<sup>133</sup> In a special issue of the journal *American Behavioral Scientist* dedicated to these events, Bloemraad and Trost found that

The Border Protection, Anti-terrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act of 2005).<sup>134</sup>

We know less about the participation of undocumented youth in the 2006 immigration reform activities. Their civic education, participation in school activism, and organizing efforts for in-state tuition and the DREAM Act prepared undocumented college students to assume leadership.<sup>135</sup> For example, 22-year old Andrea, an undocumented college student, was a leader of the immigrant rights coalition that coordinated the Orange

e

y

ng

form immigrant residents of their legal rights and a new immigrant hotline number.

*ummary: Undocumented Youth Civic Engagement*

t to illegal

immigration policy or to impro

place in US society. They become active to feel good about themselves despite the stigma of being “illegal immigrants.” By emulating active, model citizens, they try to prove that they deserve a place in US society and to position themselves for future legalization programs.<sup>140</sup> Despite the risks, these students become visible and offer testimony of their life struggles; research and writing that sheds light on the civic contributions of undocumented youth can be part of this activist project.<sup>141</sup>

Undocumented youth are engaged in political organizing on campuses and at local, state, and federal levels to defeat anti-immigrant proposals and enact pro-immigrant policies. Because of the immediacy of these struggles, we have seen a cluster of research and writing on undocumented youth activism despite the difficulties of identifying this population. In-state tuition efforts offer rare cases of successful legislative efforts over the last decade to improve the lives of persons without lawful immigration status. The activism of undocumented youth has significance beyond their numbers because they demonstrate innovative visions and practices of citizenship in a globalized world where children may not fit into legal categories of national membership.

### *Future Directions*

Our knowledge of immigrant youth civic engagement is much greater today than it was a decade ago, yet there is much to learn. **Methods.** Because of the challenges of identifying and studying immigrant youth, most studies have been qualitative and small-scale. The recent use of national data sets is a positive development in the field. Researchers should continue to pursue a range of methods to shed light on this topic, and studies that join quantitative and qualitative analysis should be encouraged. Immigrant education is a rich arena of study that should explicitly incorporate civic education and engagement in schools.

**Studying subpopulations.** In addition to defining the generations in a consistent manner so we can compare studies, Latina/o immigrant youth can be disaggregated in various ways to offer a more nuanced picture. For example, more attention should be paid to the ways that that gender and country of origin makes a difference in the motivations and processes of immigrant youth’s civic and political engagement. Researchers should also be attentive to the impact of immigration status, including the specific patterns of quasilegal youth (e.g., Central Americans with temporary legal status). Given that migrations from Latin America are increasingly indigenous, it is essential to track the civic engagements of youth from these communities, especially whether they are able to maintain indigenous forms of civic life. **Geography.** Most regional studies on this topic look at youth in California. We need to learn more about their civic and political engagement in other traditional and new immigration states. Beyond the urban US, we

---

<sup>140</sup> Martínez-Calderón, "Out of the Shadows: Undocumented Latino College Students."

<sup>141</sup> Madera and et.al., eds., *Underground Undergrads: Ucla Undocumented Immigrant Students Speak Out*. S.I.N., "Students Informing Now (S.I.N.) Challenge the Racial State in California without Shame...!Sin Verguenza!."







Cano, Gustavo. "Political Mobilization of Latino Immigrants in American Cities and the

Coronado, Heidi M. "Voices of Courage and Strength: Undocumented Immigrant Students in the United States."



2006: Latinos, Immigration, and Political Mobilization in the 21st Century." American  
Behavioral and Social Sciences, 10(1), 1-15. doi:10.1177/1526422706288888

ark, Haeyoun. "New to English." New York Times, March 13 2009.

. "Washington, DC: Pew Hispanic Center, 2009.

ard

):

ollective. "Students Informing Now (S.I.N.) Challenge the Racial State in California without Shame..."Sin Verguenza!." Educational Foundations 21, no. 1-2 (2007):

b/8

olis, Jocelyn. "Transborder Violence and Undocumented Youth: Extending Cultura

Villegas, Francisco. "Challenging Educational Barriers: Undocumented Immigrant Student Advocates." San José State University, 2006.

Waters, Mary C. "The Challenges of Studying Political and Civic Incorporation." *Applied Developmental Science* 12, no. 2 (2008): 105 – 07.

Zúñiga, Elena, Steven P. Wallace, Sal:, Santed

s

*ilson  
no Policy Research, UC*

*EXUS, the University of Illinois at Springfield, and above all, the immigrant students who inspire many through their activism. Special thanks to Simón Salinas, Gil Cedillo, and their legislative staffs, and those who worked for Assemblymember Marco Antonio irebaugh in California. This report is dedicated to the memory of Marco Antonio irebaugh (1966-2006), a fierce advocate for immigrant youth.*