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Risks Seen for Children of Illegal Immigrants

By **JULIA PRESTON**

Children whose parents are illegal immigrants or who lack legal status themselves face “uniformly negative” effects on their social development from early childhood until they become adults, according to [a study](#) by four researchers published Wednesday in the Harvard Educational Review.

The study concluded that more than five million children in the United States are “at risk of lower educational performance, economic stagnation, blocked mobility and ambiguous belonging” because they are growing up in immigrant families affected by illegal status.

The study is the first to pull together field research by social scientists nationwide to track the effects of a family’s illegal [immigration](#) status on children from birth until they graduate from college and start to navigate the job market. It covers immigrants from a variety of origins, including Latinos and Asians.

About 5.5 million children in this country have at least one parent who is an illegal immigrant, according to an estimate by the Pew Hispanic Center. Among them, about one million children were brought here illegally by their parents, while about 4.5 million are United States citizens because they were born here.

In all, about 9.5 million people live in “mixed status” families that include American citizen children and unauthorized immigrants, Jeffrey S. Passel, senior demographer at the Pew center, said on Tuesday.

“Unauthorized status casts a big shadow that really extends to citizen as well as undocumented children,” Marcelo Suárez-Orozco, a professor of education at [New York University](#) who is an author of the study, said on Tuesday. “It affects their cognitive development, engagement in school and their ability to be emerging citizens.”

The Harvard study reports that “fear and vigilance” guide the home lives of young children whose parents are illegal immigrants, making the parents significantly less likely to engage with teachers or be active in schools.

Parents' fears of deportation led to lower levels of enrollment of their American children in public programs for which the children were legally eligible, including child care subsidies, public preschool and food stamps, the study found.

The other authors were Carola Suárez-Orozco and Robert T. Teranishi of New York University and Hirokazu Yoshikawa of the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

Many illegal immigrant parents work long hours in low-wage jobs, sometimes more than one job. New research on very young children cited in the Harvard study showed that the undocumented parents' difficult work conditions "contribute substantially to the lower cognitive skills of children in their families." This was true even though the children were more likely to be in two-parent families than American children as a whole.

As teenagers, children without legal status face a hard awakening when they apply for jobs, driver's licenses or financial aid for college and discover they are not legally qualified for any of them. Their paths diverge from siblings who are American citizens by birthright.

"In late adolescence, they start to realize their legal limitations, and their worlds turn completely upside down," said Roberto G. Gonzales, a sociologist at the University of Chicago whose research on college-age illegal immigrants is cited in the Harvard study.

Academic achievement does little to lift the prospects of illegal immigrants who have grown up here. Out of 150 immigrants Professor Gonzales studied in depth, 31 had completed college or advanced degrees, but none were in a career that matched their educational training. Many were working low-wage jobs like their parents.

The Harvard study found that many illegal immigrant youths, facing the "reduced promise of mobility," had dropped out of school and begun the search for work they could do without legal papers, "forced deeper and deeper into an underground work force."

The researchers said that a generation of young illegal immigrants raised in this country was moving toward "perpetual outsider-hood."