



Transcript for “Undocumented Young Adults in the United States and the ‘Transition from Belonging to Illegality’” (11m30s)

Featuring Roberto Gonzales

Hosted by David Chancellor

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[Chancellor] Thanks for tuning in to a podcast from the Institute for Research on Poverty. I’m Dave Chancellor and for this, our December 2013 podcast, we’re going to be talking with Roberto Gonzales of the Harvard Graduate School of Education about the experiences of a group of undocumented, mostly Mexican, young adults in the United States and, as he puts it, their transition from belonging to illegality.

To clarify who we’re talking about here, this group of young people that Dr. Gonzales is looking at came to the U.S as children with their undocumented parents and so they themselves are undocumented—even if they have younger brothers or sisters who are citizens because they were born in the U.S. But because of a 1982 Supreme Court decision – in *Plyler vs. Doe*—that ruled states couldn’t deny children of undocumented parents a K-12 education, Gonzales says that these young people who came to the U.S. as children are integrated from day 1 in this country into the legal framework of public schools.

[Gonzales] So, very differently from their parents who are absorbed into low-wage, clandestine labor markets—and live as migrants in the shadows. Their children are absorbed into a powerfully defining and acculturating institution in the K-12 schools so they grow up side by side with American born peers, they socialize, they pledge allegiance to the flag, they learn American civics in school, they’re taught that if they work hard enough, if they dream boldly enough that they can attain what they want, they can attain their dreams in this country.

[Chancellor] This group has been called the 1.5 generation—they're not the adult immigrant generation and not the American born second generation. In Gonzales' work, he has focused on those who came to the U.S. before the age of 12. And, as he was saying, they've had full access to the Americanizing institution of the K-12 school system.

[Gonzales] But, as they move into late adolescence, they hit 15, 16, 17 years old, as their friends are moving through these important and defining American rites of passage, getting a job, learning how to drive, voting, going off to college, starting careers. As their friends are moving forward, they stay stuck. Because, while they can legally go to school, they can't legally work, they can't drive in most states, they can't legally vote, they can't get financial aid, and so they're shut out of the means through which to make the most of their education, to participate in broader ways in the American Culture and Polity.

[Chancellor] To be clear, we're looking at a population here that is almost universally poor and that doesn't qualify for most of the resources available to very low-income U.S. citizens.

[Gonzales] My research for this book project takes place in Los Angeles and what many migrant families experience in Los Angeles is a mismatch, right? You have a very high cost of living, very expensive rentals, and to purchase a home is really, really difficult for most families in Los Angeles and then you've got a group of people that are shut out of formal labor markets and so have much lower wages than average and that, really, for children growing up in these families and these households and a household sometimes means families at least in the beginning of their journey in the United States means families start out in living rooms and dining rooms and move into a situation where they're living in a bedroom and moving up to getting their own apartment. And for all of the young people in my study, poverty was a huge issue in their family life growing up.

[Chancellor] Gonzales was interested in the way that education mediated the experiences of young immigrants to the U.S. So, he looks at two groups in his study—those that left school early and those that finished high school and went

to college. Today, some of these college-goers have been able to benefit from smaller, state-based versions of the Dream Act, which is a long-stalled federal bill that would offer the promise of citizenship to undocumented young people who, among other things, complete military service or a four year degree. The state versions mostly offer in-state tuition and, in some cases, state financial aid.

[Gonzales] Most everything that's been written in the newspaper about the Dream Act uses as examples the success of these hardworking Americanized young people who have –who are valedictorians of their class, who have achieved really great things in their school and their community and so I wanted to know what was going on with them. In contrast, I also wanted to know what was happening in the lives of their counterparts. Those who have grown up in the same communities and also in the same families who had also come to the U.S. before the age of 12 who did not have legal status but were not going to college. And so, what I found that because undocumented immigrants don't have access to federal financial aid and, only recently in the state of California do they have access to state aid—this is after my fieldwork—that the cost of college, public or private, is prohibitive for most families. When you think that some 65 percent or more of the American public receives some form of financial aid. Arguably the most poor, the most needy of young people and families don't have access to it.

[Chancellor] Given the stark difficulties involved in paying for post-secondary education and the lack of legal pathways open even to those that have graduated with a bachelor's degree, it's more clear why so few young people without legal status aren't in college. Professor Gonzales says that the high achievers he talks about are really the exception—it's probably about five to ten percent of this population that goes to a four year college. And, what might surprise many people is the size of this population— that is, undocumented immigrants that have been in the U.S. since childhood—it's estimated to be around 2.1 million people.

[Gonzales] This is not a huge number but certainly a significant number of young people. A million of these are now young adults and 1.1 to 1.5 million of them

are children making critical transitions through adolescence and young adulthood, under, arguably today harsher contexts.

[Chancellor] Gonzales says that over the last two to three decades, there's been an erosion of rights for noncitizens and at the same time there have been increased enforcement efforts in their communities to the extent that, in 2012, an average of over 1100 people were deported per day in the U.S. For young people that are going, or have gone, through the U.S. K-12 school system, they essentially transition from being fully part of the U.S. school system to, upon graduation, having no more legal status than their undocumented parents.

[Gonzales] What this means for people that don't have legal immigration status is that they are disenfranchised from a host of important access points in the U.S. from economic to educational to social and cultural.

[Chancellor] In terms of workable policy options, there are a lot of challenges here. Gonzales says that at the federal level, some sort of more comprehensive immigration reform, a smaller Dream Act—some form of legalization—is going to be important for these people that came to the U.S. as children to make the most of their U.S. education. But, 2013 was a year in which many thought immigration reform might have passed, and now, in February of 2014, there is little to suggest that we're going to see progress any time soon.

[Gonzales] . . . many people were very optimistic about its chances. And those chances seem to be dwindling. These young people and their families have to carry out their everyday lives. And so beyond the big macro legislative solutions, how do we think about addressing needs on an everyday level. And how do we think beyond the legislative process to efforts on the ground that involve teachers, the involve social workers, that involve healthcare workers, that involve the entire community. And so, how do we think about the empirical reality that, for many undocumented young people, education is the only legally permissible pursuit and so, how do we beyond that think about creating a menu of options—legally permissible options within the community.

[Chancellor] Gonzales says that some of these options might involve thinking about job training programs, internships, and community service. It may also mean that these efforts need to be made relevant to the business community—particularly so that the K-16 pipeline might lead somewhere.

[Gonzales] The Deferred action program—the deferred action for childhood arrivals, or DACA, as it's known, just celebrated a one year anniversary on August 15. And DACA provides the opportunity for these dream act eligible young adults to get a social security number, a two year stay of deportation, and a work permit for two years. And, in some states that then means access to a driver's license, in state tuition and other sources of access. DACA as it stands today is temporary and partial. We don't know what will happen at the end of this congressional cycle. We're not clear on whether or not this is a program that will be renewed. And, we're not sure what will happen, now to these close, now, to 500,000 beneficiaries of DACA and any real solution must be something that's permanent.

[Chancellor] Thanks to Roberto Gonzales for sharing his work with us. You've been listening to a podcast from the Institute for Research on Poverty.