

How Self and Parental Immigration Status Affect College Students' Experiences of COVID-19

College campuses across the United States shut down with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020. As students navigated remote learning, those who were undocumented or had undocumented family members also confronted systemic inequalities that compounded the harsh effects of the pandemic. Specifically, undocumented immigrants have limited access to healthcare, are over-represented among essential workers and in industries hardest hit by shutdowns, and were denied access to federal COVID relief funding.

This brief explores how such legal vulnerability differentiated the experiences of college students during the initial months of the pandemic. We use survey data collected from April to June 2020 with 2,310 University of California undergraduate students with immigrant parents. Nearly all respondents reported that the pandemic negatively affected their finances, academics, and wellbeing. However, comparisons by self and parental immigration status reveal that the severity of these effects are unevenly distributed across the student population. Further, immigration status structures students' and their families' pandemic experiences, leaving undocumented students to confront some of the severest effects, followed closely by their U.S. citizen peers with undocumented parents.

In our sample of UC students with immigrant parents, nearly all reported that the pandemic negatively affected their finances, academics, and wellbeing during Spring 2020.

Over 90% reported negative effects to their attention to their studies, academic performance, mental health, and family financial stability. Slightly less (87%) reported negative effects to both their own financial stability and their physical health.

Negative effects are unevenly distributed across the student population by self and parental immigration status.

Undocumented students report the most severe effects in most areas. U.S. citizens with undocumented parents often reported similar or slightly lower rates of effects. Their citizen peers whose parents have lawful immigration status reported the least effects and the lowest rates of severity on all items.

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UC PromISE is a multicampus initiative at the University of California. It aims to conduct research with the goal of informing policies and practices that will advance equity and inclusion for undocumented and immigrant-origin students.

The most severe impacts of the pandemic were to students' attention to their academics.

Forty-three percent of undocumented students, 48% of citizens with undocumented parents, and 41% of citizen students whose parents have lawful immigration status reported being affected "a great deal."

All three groups of students shared that their ability to pay attention to their academics had been compromised by having to relocate to their permanent homes. Quiet study space was often unavailable, and many students took on additional family responsibility that distracted them from their academics.

One undocumented student shared: "My family doesn't understand that I am still in school. I have chores, have to get groceries, drive people places, get gas, cook, take care of my cousins. ... I have to pause my Zoom lectures more than ten times because someone at my house is talking, yelling, cooking, playing, screaming. ... Sometimes I watch my Zoom recordings at 1am because it is the only quiet hours I get at home." These types of disruptions were shared more frequently by undocumented students and citizen students with undocumented parents.

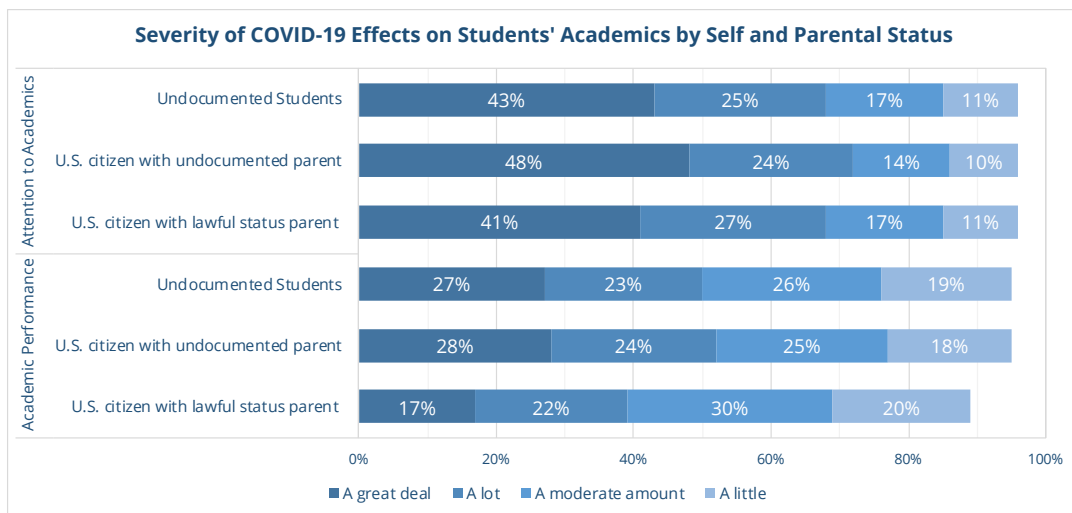
Others reported a general lack of motivation and inability to concentrate. A citizen whose parents have lawful immigration status wrote: "I have greater difficulty in concentrating on longer assignments that need breaking up over time." Another shared, "I'm kind of not motivated to do my classes because they're all online." For undocumented students and citizens with undocumented parents, similar feelings were also layered with parental undocumented status. One undocumented student wrote, "I cannot concentrate. Overthinking many situations...I think of how my mom's work is overworking her with no benefit and no overtime pay just because she is undocumented."

These disruptions appear to have diverging effects on academic performance. A little more than a quarter of undocumented students and citizens with undocumented parents reported their academic performance being affected a great deal. Only 17% of citizen students whose parents have lawful immigration status report such severe effects.

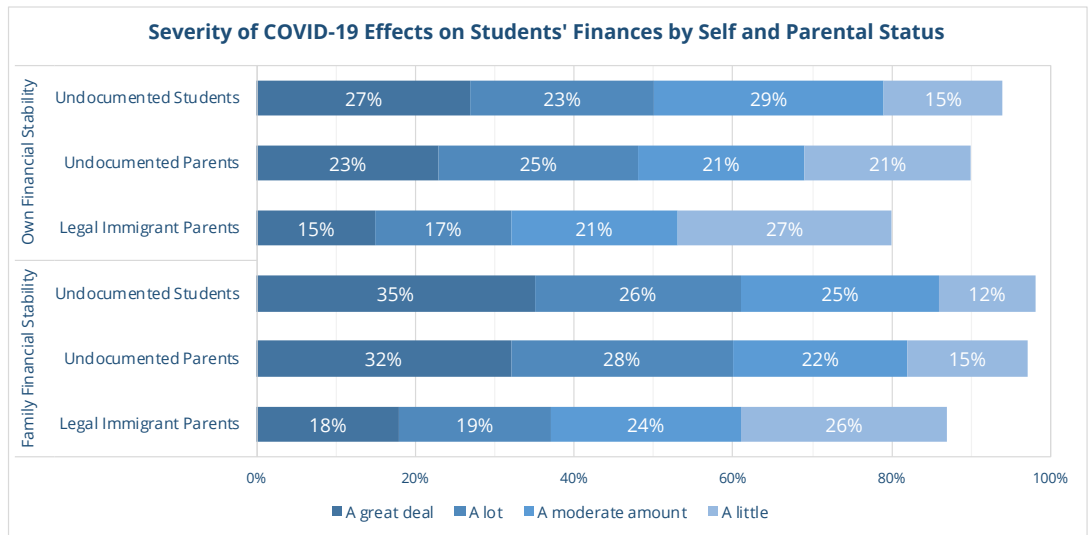
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Undocumented students and citizen students with undocumented parents reported more severe financial effects than their peers whose parents have lawful immigration status.

Family financial stability was the second most severely impacted area for undocumented and mixed-status students. 35% and 32%, respectively, reported being affected a great deal; half as many students whose parents have lawful immigration status reported such severe effects. Effects to students' own financial stability also significantly differs between the three groups with almost twice as many undocumented students being affected a great deal, compared to citizen students whose parents have lawful immigration status.



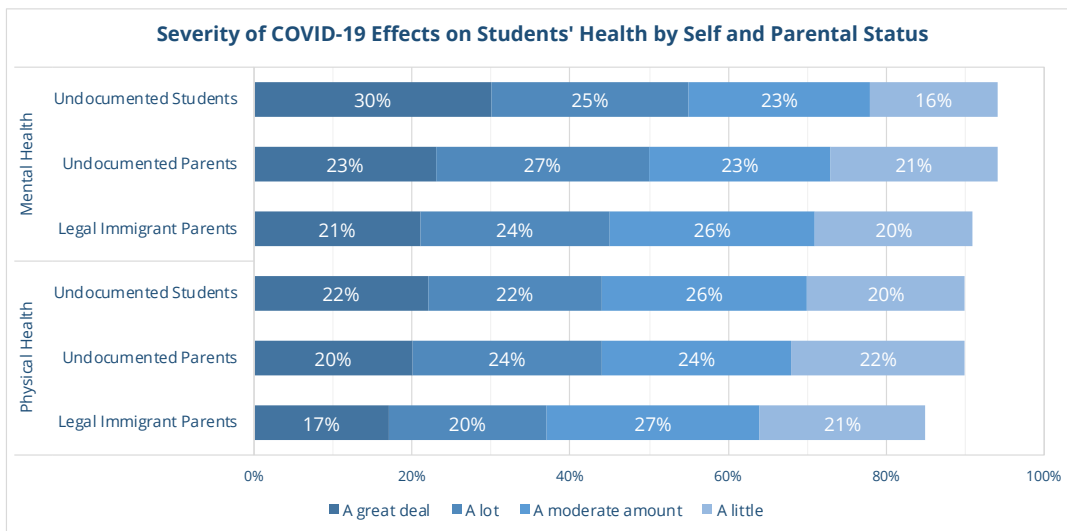
Responses from both undocumented students and citizens with undocumented parents suggest that they shared financial strains due to their parents' legal vulnerability. One U.S. citizen with undocumented parents wrote, "No one in my family is receiving any stimulus checks or government assistance." They were hoping to help manage this, adding, "I have been trying to get money from the school through grants for students." Undocumented students were similarly ineligible for stimulus checks but were barred from obtaining federal emergency COVID relief funds directed toward college students.



Respondents from all three groups shared that they and their family members had experienced financial strains, including losing jobs, working fewer hours, or being furloughed. However, many also worked in essential jobs, allowing them to continue working but requiring them to risk their health. Citizens whose parents have lawful immigration status were more likely to make comments about their parents' ability to work remotely or maintain a steady income.

Undocumented students reported the highest rates of severe mental health and physical health effects.

Mental health effects were the third most severe effect reported by undocumented students with 30% reporting being affected a great deal. This was the second most severely affected area for those whose parents have lawful immigration status, but the percentage reporting being a great deal was significantly smaller than among undocumented students. Citizen students with undocumented parents fell in the middle.



General fear and uncertainty about the pandemic compromised mental health. A student whose parents have lawful immigration status wrote, "I feel my mental and physical health declining not only because of being trapped inside every day, but because the state of our world and how some people are suffering." Social isolation due to lockdowns also inhibited coping: "My mental health [is] declining because I would go outside to help cope and I'm unable to do that now. I miss being on campus."

Undocumented students and citizens with undocumented parents often layered their own and/or their parents' undocumented status onto general pandemic uncertainty. One undocumented student shared that they are, "overthinking many situations 'of what if', thinking of how can I help my undocumented family. Emotions of anger because my people who are undocumented are the essential workers and will never get recognize[d]. ... I fear that I might need to stop school because I might need to work since I am the only adult in my family with a legal work permit. I feel guilty to be in school more than ever."

Finally, physical health effects were the least reported effects. Twenty-two percent of undocumented students reported a great deal of physical health effects. Citizens whose parents are undocumented or have lawful immigration status trailed behind slightly. Students most often discussed physical manifestations of their mental strain, rather than from contracting COVID-19. One student wrote, "I've realized that I have developed more stress [at home] than if I were to have continued studying at [campus]. I feel like I have been overeating more and sleeping at hours so late." Another shared, "My anxiety has escalated to physical symptoms where I want to shake, have trouble breathing, and feel paralyzed."

Policy Recommendations

- 1. Direct resources to the most severely impacted students to mitigate effects on their academics.** Prioritize on-campus housing for those students who are struggling to find study space at home or managing family relationship strain. Establish small grants for educational purchases that will help students study, such as noise-canceling headphones and laptop stands.
- 2. Engage students and parents in discussions about remote learning.** Host events for students to learn about how to talk to their parents. Host events for parents to learn about what remote learning looks like and how to support their child. Events and university messaging to parents should be offered in multiple languages.
- 3. Raise awareness among faculty about student struggles with remote learning.** Promote asynchronous models to accommodate students' new family and financial responsibilities. Encourage faculty to offer alternative activities to make-up for missed synchronous activities. Allow students to turn off their cameras.
- 4. Create resources to buffer against the unique financial strains created by the pandemic.** Replace student employment with grant aid. Make emergency grants and loans available regardless of individual or parental immigration status. Ensure that these grants do not have restrictions, such as exhausting other financial aid awards like loans, that may dissuade students from accessing them.
- 5. Offer programming to help promote mental and physical wellbeing.** Workshops could include breathing techniques, stretching, posture, mindfulness meditation, journaling to process feelings, meal and snack preparation, and how to seek campus mental health services remotely. Informal hang-out sessions could help students engage with each other and ward against social isolation. Consider making these short, student-led sessions, possibly streamed live on social media, to engage a maximum number of students.