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Expecting the Inevitable: DACA and Mental Health

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DACA & Mental Health
By Jade R. Gardener - 7 December 2017

Following the end of a shift that started at 5 a.m. at a local coffee shop Karla Mejia, 25, New York, sits for the first time in 8 hours. It's a Friday and she's worked the traditional 40-hour work week. However, now sits scrolling through online ads for part-time jobs in the evenings to fill the gap following her first job. For Mejia all that is on her mind is working as much as possible legally just in case she can't in the near future. "I'm taking a break from school, right now saving so I can buy land back home in Mexico, just in case," said Mejia.

On September 5, 2017, Attorney General, Jeff Sessions announced that the Trump Administration was ending the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, passed into action in 2012 by the administration of former President Obama.

Now one of two DACA recipients in her nuclear family, Mejia feels the added financial pressure to work more to provide and save for the unknown. "My mother risked everything crossing the border for me to be sitting here. It hurts that, that's something people want to take away," said Mejia, as she caresses the tattoo on her forearm created to pay homage to generations of women who risked their lives for opportunity and the American dream.

The opportunity given by the Obama Administration in 2012 to 800,000 young people brought illegally into the United States by their parents, to legally work and attend college has now been eliminated. With the rescinding DACA, many recipients feel like the rug has been pulled out from under their feet and researchers fear the mental health effects it will have in the long run.

A study conducted by Stanford University published in the American Association for the Advancement of Science researchers found that the passing of DACA produced positive mental health effect on children born to undocumented mothers. The study examined 8,610 children born to undocumented mothers in Oregon's Emergency Medicaid Program between 2003 and 2015. The study found that 7.8 percent of children born to mothers that did not qualify for DACA had high rates of mental illness. The same study, however, found a 57 percent drop in mental health disorders probable to develop in children whose mothers had been approved for the program.

Avoidance

Following the repeal school officials began to see the effects of the withdrawal of the act. "You could see that parents were nervous before but now that DACA has been repealed you see it in their eyes more nervous and their children are now stressed and withdrawn at times", said Zoila Gomez, parent coordinator for the New York Board of Education.

Avoidance and withdrawal are the most concerning for many organizers and direct care providers. Avoidance can be seen when one seeks to avoid addressing a stressor. "Avoidance is most common, in immigrant communities at risk for deportation", said Mejia who also works as a family liaison connecting family to detained relatives. "Many people would rather avoid thinking about the possibility of deportation, but they know they eventually have to make a plan about with to do with their finances, legal support and care of their children if and when deportation happens".

Many community organizers reported that the need to provide mental health services surged following the announcement of the repeal of DACA. "Assurance is a difficult thing for many DACA recipients to have because there is presently nothing in place for them," said Ivelyse Andino Founder and Chief Executive Officer

of the social impact organization, Radical Health. “Since the repeal of DACA, we’ve seen an increase of mental health service requests especially with many recipients who initially felt a sense of “survivor’s guilt” or the feeling that now they were the one ones in their family given a glimmer of hope at citizenship, who now are losing the opportunity to legally provide .”

Ella Nimmo, Community Organizing Coordinator at Cabrini Immigrant Services eventually saw her last-minute DACA application extension events actually dwindle in number the closer to the deadline. “I expected a surge especially as the deadline got closer”, said Nimmo. “However, it became apparent that people were losing hope and just providing legal and financial assistance was not enough so we added a meditation to our meetings following the repeal.”

For Mejia, who is covered under DACA until 2019, the mental strain is everywhere and it has forced her to revamp her entire life. Every day she receives text messages sent by friends and other dreamers every time an Immigration and Customs Enforcement (I.C.E.) vehicle is spotted in their neighborhood. The constant alert takes a toll. She also wonders what will happen once DACA is gone and whether or not she will be able to get health insurance. As a result, Mejia made the choice to become a vegetarian. “The stress of this repeal and the protests and not knowing what’s next made me really evaluate my diet and I chose to eat healthier to keep my mind sharper in the midst of all this,” said Mejia.

Social Anxiety

Social Anxiety, the fear of social situations that involve interaction with other people or the fear and anxiety of being negatively judged and evaluated by others, has long been an effect of the “illegal immigrant” stigma.

“I use to avoid going out to bars with friends because I knew my ID was expired and I couldn’t get in. Sometimes I would try and get into a bar to hang out with friends and get turned away,” said Brenda Barsallo, office manager for a local New York immigrant services nonprofit. “ The first times it happened friends would stay with me when I would get turned away but that soon stopped, so I avoided it”.

Since the repeal of DACA, Barsallo like other dreamers have felt the mask come off and social anxiety become even more of a factor even internally in their families. “Before the repeal of DACA, I don’t think the documented side of my family knew that my brother and I were undocumented,” said Barsallo. “Now that I realize I have to fight this, I’ve felt the need to be more open. I post more on social media about the issue and family members who didn’t know we were undocumented before are now realizing that my brother and I are affected.”

As the only DACA recipient in her office, the highs and lows of the passing of DACA and its rescindment are revisited every day as she attends to other immigrants needing assistance. It also affects her co-workers. “It’s hard to know that someone you work with, that works so hard and is college pursuing a career to give back has to face possible deportation,” said Nimmo. “I know when I leave work, deportation is not my reality as a citizen, but when you know people that you care about have to face this and they can’t just leave the concern at work, it makes you anxious, the uncertainty is painful.”

Even more painful are “rights of passage”, such as living on your own or buying your first car that becomes an internal battle between doing what feels right for you as a person vs. what is best financially for your family.

“I just moved out and it was such a hard decision. I needed my freedom but didn’t want to pull that added financial support away from my family”, said Karla Mejia. “My parents, however, understood and were so selfless that they won’t even let me feel guilty, they just want me to live my life”.

800,000 DACA recipients join her in a balancing act of trying to live their best life, in a time of the greatest uncertainty. When DACA was passed it was considered the most significant immigration policy in the past twenty years, now the effects of its withdrawal is the most concerning mental health concern to those affected. For Meija, she's been balancing adult responsibilities as one of the two DACA recipients in her family. Meija born in Mexico and raised in New York fights the daily guilt of removing additional financial support from her nuclear family in hopes of spreading her own wings

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, PTSD, is a mental health condition that's triggered by a terrifying event by experiencing it or witnessing it. Symptoms of PTSD include flashbacks, nightmares, and severe anxiety, as well as uncontrollable thoughts about the event. "People think that the path for immigrants to come to America is easy, it's not, it's a struggle," said Andino. "Imagine leaving the only world you've known, saying goodbye to loved ones, never knowing when you'd see them again and only to then risk your life crossing the border."

Those that serve undocumented college students also, know first hand that the repeal of DACA is now apart of the everyday mental stressors placed on them. Shirley Leyro, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Sociology at Borough of Manhattan Community College conducted a small survey of eighty "DACA-mented", students.

The small study revealed major mental health concerns. "One hundred percent of the students surveyed reported that the fear of deportation was a daily thought," said Leyro. "Much of the language used by participants in the study are known to be systematic of trauma." Moreover, Leyro found that the much of the language used by those in her study are more correlated to the language we see when looking at research regarding PTSD.

Psychological distress revealed in her are in the divulged feelings of frustration, anxiety, anger, rage, feelings, suicidal thoughts, thought of paranoia and self-segregation, in her research and from interviewed recipients. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder arises as a result of this psychological distress. "At home, they flee oppression and persecution only to encounter more of that on American soil," said Leyro.

Researchers are attempting to shine the light on the fact that immigration is a violence and the repeal of DACA is a violent act on undocumented immigrants. "Deportation is legal violence," said Leyro. "We need to look at violence as more than just the physical, we need to look at the psychological impacts of violence. Deportability makes immigrants feel fearful and results in emotional and psychological distress".

"You can not talk about anything and not talk about of race, the immigrant's body through deportation has become racialized," said Leyro. For immigrants of color two things they are aware of are their black or brown skin and then their deportable status."

"There is also a clear initiative to deport men more than women," said Meija. In fact in data collected from Syracuse University in the year 2012 and 2013 men made up 94 and 93 percent of deportees respectively of the nearly 400,000 people deported a year. "It is no coincidence that when you look at the countries with the highest rate of deportees that the countries are predominantly brown and black people," said Leyro. In the same Syracuse study, countries such as Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, the Dominican Republic and Jamaica make up over ninety-five percent of deportees.

Suicide

“Is there a human being on God’s planet that is illegal”, asks Dr. Joseph Connell Esq. “Is there a human being that does not deserve to be here or one that does not deserve to breathe the same air?”

These are questions according to Dr. Connell that are internalized often by “illegal immigrants”. The combination of avoidance behaviors, the social anxiety of feeling like you do not belong, paired with the triggers of PTSD sometimes culminates in life-threatening moments. Getting treatment for mental illness is hard for a population that is often uninsured and stigmatized.

Furthermore, according to research published in the American Journal of Public Health in 2009, “immigrants face stressors unique to the experience of migration that may exacerbate or cause mental health problems but access care at rates far below the general population, leaving them at risk of untreated mental health conditions.” When conditions are left untreated they compound and those afflicted may become suicidal.

Dr. Connell, not only defends his DACA recipients in court but since the rescindment, things have gotten even darker. “Just last week I received a call that a man whose DACA was expiring was ready to take his life,” said Connell.

Suicide has been proven to be a very overlooked issue in immigrant communities but the repeal of DACA makes mental health professionals fearful of what is to come. “Immigrants might have higher rates of psychopathology and suicidal behavior than the host populations, due to exposure to the stress of the migrating process,” according to research published in the Open Journal of Medical Psychology in 2013.

2019

The mental health issues that are beginning to plague DACA recipients are becoming more and more evident. However, the prevalence may not increase until the last of the DACA applications extended in October of 2017 start to expire. It is then that mental health issues have the potential to turn into a mental health crisis.

“Of course it’s hard to think about 2019 and there are moments where you want to cry, but immigrants are strong people and it is only in unifying that we will get through this,” said Mejia.