

Housing Challenges Faced by the Undocumented Immigrant Population

1. Introduction:

Children of undocumented immigrants are 1.5 times more likely to live in poverty than children of U.S. citizens⁴. Unfortunately, this poverty status carries a lot of implications into the children's future opportunities, and psychological and physical wellbeing. An issue of particular impact associated with poverty among undocumented immigrants in the United States is lack of adequate housing that can potentially have a negative impact in their short and long term health⁵.

This population experiences a disparity in risk for poor health outcomes due to poor housing conditions while they also face unique challenges in finding access to consistent and culturally appropriate health care and treatment². Since there is a disproportionately higher lack of access to effective health care interventions to mitigate the damage to their health, the risk faced by undocumented immigrants living with poor housing conditions could impact in their health outcomes, especially if they receive little medical interventions.

Lower quality housing conditions are associated with poor health outcomes⁵. Since undocumented immigrants have decreased access to health care services, they are less able to deal with the repercussions of poor housing quality⁷. This has an impact on documented and undocumented children with undocumented parents

and creates inequities in their ability to succeed academically and economically in American society.

2. Background & Research Findings:

Housing is a very important component of mental and physical health and socioeconomic well being in a society⁵. However, undocumented immigrants and African Americans suffer from disparities in the quality of their neighborhoods and housing⁵. This is incredibly concerning because it can serve to maintain these groups in the bottom of the social structure and prevent upward mobility into society. There have been several studies documenting this racial and ethnic stratification through disparities in neighborhood satisfaction and housing quality of undocumented immigrants compared to white U.S. citizens and documented immigrants.

Research on the housing and neighborhood quality among undocumented Mexican and Central American immigrants has found distinct inequalities in the housing situation of undocumented immigrants compared to other racial groups³. Only one in four undocumented immigrants are home owners, which is half the rate of documented immigrants and U.S. born African Americans, and one third the rate of white Americans. This research uses self-rating measures and showed that undocumented immigrants also report higher rates of dissatisfaction with

the physical housing quality (such as holes in walls, pests, exposed wires, etc.), environment and safety of their neighborhoods, and higher levels of housing crowding (people per room) than their white counterparts³. In addition, there are even more subjective measures of neighborhood satisfaction in this research which showed that undocumented immigrants also report a higher concern about lacking availability of public services in their neighborhoods than the other groups. This lack of resources may affect their ability to mitigate disadvantage. The lack of resources may be due to the lack of access to sources and/or to lack of awareness of available. It is important to note that these self-rated measures are subjective and depend on each persons' perception of their circumstances. Nevertheless, undocumented immigrants ranked at the bottom or near the bottom of the list compared to all other racial groups in terms of most housing quality measures used in the study.

Research documents concerning levels of exposure to potentially harmful conditions in the undocumented immigrant population. Undocumented immigrants experience higher rates of lower quality housing, which is shown through research on the health risks of immigrant children who are undocumented. As high as 67% of the homes of undocumented immigrants had at least one of the following environmental conditions that are potentially harmful for health such as dampness, mold, pests, and low ventilation⁶. In fact, children in homes that reported lower quality measures also reported higher rates in symptoms of respiratory diseases. This is

particularly concerning because this population has lower chances of accessing medical care to be diagnosed and treated. In fact, many of the children in the study who presented with wheezing had no previous asthma diagnosis. However, it is also important to note that the children in the study still show the "healthy immigrant" effect. This means that even though their respiratory disease symptoms were correlated to the negative exposures in their household, they still show lower rates of asthma diagnosis than the national average.

3. Policy implications and recommendations.

Undocumented immigrants face seemingly unsurmountable challenges such as low wages, stigma, discrimination, and lack of cohesiveness in housing policy and protection. In addition, they also face 1.5 more poverty than U.S. citizens⁴. They also lack access to several policies and social programs design to lessen the effects of poverty².

Renting a place to live is an incredible challenge in several places in the country because of current federal policy. However, undocumented immigrants that have arrived after 1970 are less likely than U.S. citizens to use rental housing assistance¹. This means that even though they face challenges due to their documentation status, they receive less assistance renting homes. Additionally, there are wide discrepancies and lack of cohesion among local, state, and federal law about the housing rights of undocumented immigrants, which affects their ability to find housing⁸. The

Fair Housing Act, which is federal legislation, prevents discrimination for any person seeking shelter. However, there is also a federal harboring statute that makes harboring undocumented immigrants unlawful. Cities around the country, for example Escondido, CA, attempted to criminalize landlords that rented property to undocumented immigrants. However, the city agreed to not enforce these policies after negotiation in federal court. Nevertheless, this lack of cohesion in policy leads to a lot of confusion and stigma about housing rights among undocumented immigrants. Policy makers at a city, county, state and federal level need to collaborate to create more cohesion among their policies which impact undocumented immigrants access to housing and rights to living in safe spaces.

The lack of cohesion in policy and lack of protection by the law can lead complacency from landlords who might exploit undocumented tenants³, ignore bad conditions and violate housing codes. Meanwhile, undocumented immigrants who will in turn feel unprotected by the law will fail to come forward and demand better housing

conditions. They may feel less compelled to demand better housing conditions despite paying rent and can live in constant fear of losing their housing. It is especially concerning that policy can make undocumented immigrants more vulnerable to maltreatment by their landlords when you consider the disparity they experience in household quality compared to their white counterparts⁵. In addition, regardless of the political climate surrounding immigration, it is also important to note that these policies also have an impact in U.S. citizen children with undocumented immigrant parents. The failure to act puts these American children incredibly vulnerable position in our society.

When thinking about policy action to address the disparity in housing for undocumented immigrants, there must be interdisciplinary collaboration between researchers, doctors, lawyers, and policy makers so that our country can come to a consensus about the rights and protection given to this vulnerable population. The housing issue includes questions of housing rights, health concerns, and access to health care.

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Additional Sources of Interest:

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