

Out of School Immigrant Youth: Paper Summary

Immigrant youth who do not attend schools in the United States fare poorly on many standard measures of well-being such as poverty status, earnings, educational attainment, health insurance coverage, and English language ability. Most federal and state dollars spent on youth do not reach these young people because the dollars go through educational institutions where they are not in attendance. Therefore, if policy makers wish to improve the well-being of this immigrant population, traditional school systems are not likely to be a place to reach them. However, one program, Migrant Education, does aim to serve out-of-school immigrant youth.

This paper describes the population of out-of-school immigrant youth in California and the subset of this group served by Migrant Education. The paper uses census data to describe the population, and then turns to program data from two regions of California's Migrant Education Program. Migrant Education program data not only help us understand the educational backgrounds, socioeconomic needs, and academic goals more thoroughly than the census data, but also are suggestive of the ways which the two populations may differ. Using logistic regression, we predict returns to school among out of school youth served by Migrant Education in two California regions.

Out-of-school Immigrant Youth: Census Profile

California has nearly 265,000 out-of-school immigrant youth – young people born abroad who are currently ages 13 to 22, are not in school, and who have not earned either a high school diploma or general equivalency degree (28 percent of the nation's total). Over 90 percent of these young people were born in Mexico or Central America. These immigrant youth who are not in school are at a serious disadvantage relative to foreign-born youth who are either enrolled in school or who have already earned a high school diploma (or equivalent). For example, 62 percent of out-of-school immigrant youth report not being able to speak English “well” or “very well,” while the same is only true for 15 percent of in-school immigrant youth.

Out-of-school immigrant youth are more likely to be living away from their parents than are in-school immigrant in every age group. Even the youngest out-of-school immigrant youth are more likely to live away from their parents than with them – 52 percent live without their own parents (Figure 1). Out-of-school immigrant youth are three times more likely to have become parents themselves than are in-school immigrant youth. As measured in the Census, these youth earn less, have higher poverty rates, and have lower rates of public assistance use than either in-school immigrant youth or native-born youth.

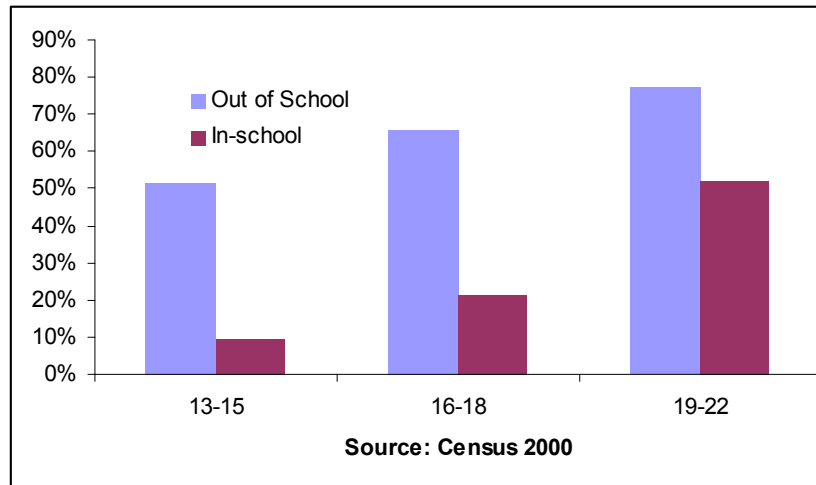


Figure 1
Percent of Out-of-school Immigrant Youth living away from their parents

Educational attainment levels for out-of-school immigrant youth are very low. Among those currently ages 13 to 15, over half report having less than a seventh grade education, and roughly 25 percent completed at least one year of junior high (Figure 2). Older out-of-school immigrant youth are more likely to have started high school (approximately half of those 16 to 18 and those 19 to 22), but more than one-third of each in these age completed only 6th grade (or less). Educational attainment is so low that it suggests many of these out-of-school immigrant youth never enrolled in schools in the United States.

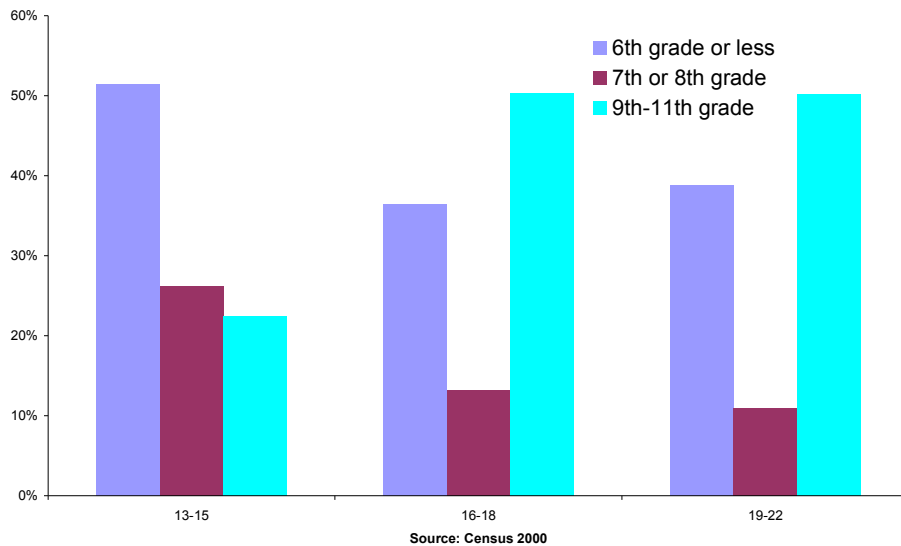


Figure 2
Educational Attainment by Current Age
Out-of-school Immigrant Youth

There is much we do not know about these young people from census data, such as why they left school, their level of interest in returning to school, and what their barriers to doing so might be. To understand these questions better, we turn to program data from Migrant Education.

Out-of-school Youth: Migrant Education Profile

Program data from Migrant Education reveals that out-of-school immigrant youth have a desire to learn. The popular perception that these seasonal laborers are here only temporarily and therefore are not interested in learning English is not accurate. When we focus on just those speaking Spanish (the overwhelming majority), we find that most (more than 80 percent) report an interest in improving their English, and nearly a third who have never attended school in the United States are interested in earning a GED here (Figure 3). Among youth served by Migrant Education, youth speaking Spanish are more likely to report high educational motivation than English-speaking youth served by Migrant Education. Furthermore, more than one third of out-of-school youth have long-term plans to stay in the area, or at least within reach of the Migrant

Education Program. Interviews with Migrant Education staff and our own data analysis suggest that targeting educational services, such as GED preparation, to highly motivated youth with at least an 8th grade education might prove fruitful.

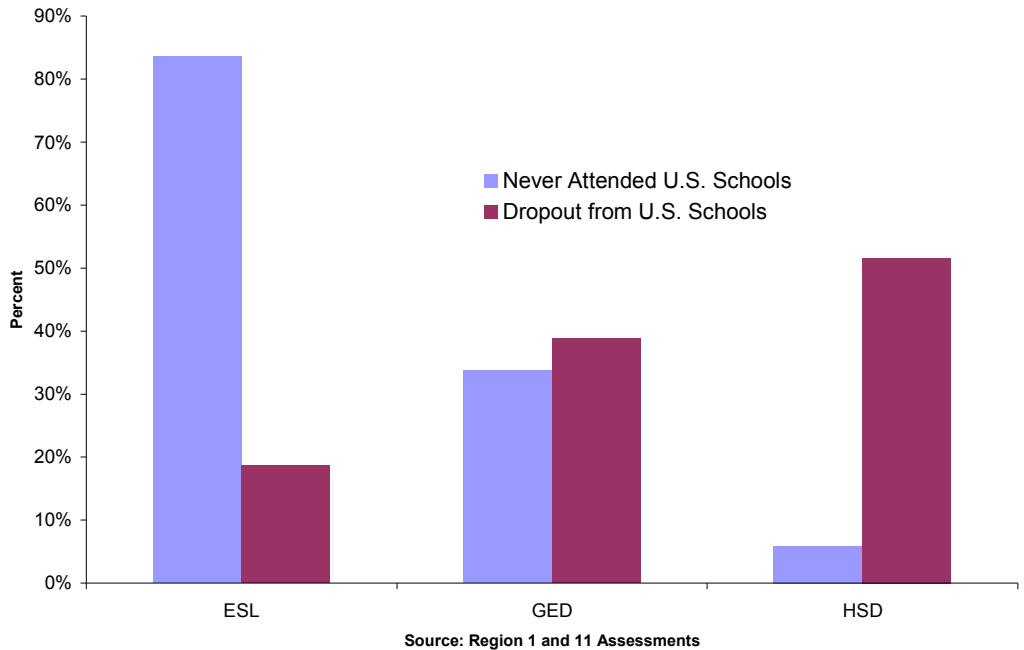


Figure 3
Interests among Spanish-speaking Out-of-school Youth

The most popular reason for being out-of-school among those who have not attended U.S.-schools is the need to work. It is clear that the financial responsibilities faced by these young people are serious – 80 percent report that their families depend on them for income. We know from the census that very few are able to rely on public assistance despite their high level of need. Migrant Education program staff have long suggested that this is the case, and have discussed the challenges in getting interested youth linked with educational programs which recognize the costs youth would face if they reduced their work effort.

In addition, Migrant Education staff report that out-of-school youth have health needs that may interfere with school attendance. Indeed, out-of-school youth recruited by two Bay Area regions report having medical, dental, and vision needs with some frequency, and those who have never attended U.S.-schools are more likely than dropouts from U.S.-schools (hereafter referred to as dropouts) to report them. For example, nearly twice as many of those who have not attended U.S.-schools report having vision needs than do dropouts. Health insurance levels are low – fewer than 15 percent of those who have not attended U.S.-schools have medical insurance and slightly more than 50 percent of dropouts do. Other socioeconomic needs were assessed, and more than one third of out-of-school youth reported needing assistance with transportation, childcare, clothing, counseling, and drug and alcohol interventions. Logistic regressions reveal that being younger and having better spoken English are associated with returning to a high school diploma granting program, as are greater numbers of contacts with Migrant Education staff.

Policy Recommendations for Serving Out-of-school Immigrant Youth

Migrant Education serves only a portion of the 265,000 out-of-school immigrant youth in the state, but only a relatively small gap could be filled by expanding Migrant Education funding. Many regional programs in California estimated that they could double the number of out-of-school youth they recruit if they had unlimited resources, but most report that they serve only about half of those they have recruited. Thus, their own estimates suggest that Migrant Education only serves one-quarter of the eligible population.¹ The approximately 20,000 served through Migrant Education leaves a large gap between those getting services in the state and those who might need them. This rough approximation leaves 180,000 out-of-school immigrant youth in the state who would not be served by Migrant Education even if the program's resources were increased dramatically. Thus, the state should consider ways to expand outreach to these youth to involve them in ESL courses, GED programs (both in English and Spanish), and strengthen relationships to Mexican Consulates, some of which offer education programs for their expatriates.

For the approximately 40,000 out-of-school youth identified and recruited by Migrant Education, there may be ways to improve their outcomes. The program's funding structure encourages the recruitment of out-of-school immigrant youth, but not necessarily the provision of services to them. Additional dollars are allocated to regional programs based on larger numbers of this at-risk population, but there is no requirement that the dollars generated by out-of-school youth be spent on them. Incentives should be aligned to both recruit *and* serve these young people. Doing so, however, will be difficult. The paper elaborates.

¹ Out of school youth are eligible for Migrant Education if they or their parent(s) sought seasonal or temporary work in agriculture, fishing, or logging in the preceding 36 months.