

Overview Of Undocumented Students

Who Are Undocumented Students?

An undocumented student is a foreign national who: (1) entered the United States without inspection or with fraudulent documents; (2) entered legally as a nonimmigrant but then violated the terms of his or her status and remained in the United States without authorization; (3) has Deferred Action Childhood Arrival (“DACA”) status or has previously had DACA; or (4) is otherwise currently in the process of legalizing.

Most undocumented students:

- Have lived in the United States most of their lives
- Have learned English
- Have attended elementary, middle, and high school in the United States
- Have completed high school and want to pursue a college education
- Currently lack a way to become legal residents or citizens of the United States

The Undocumented Population

11.5 million	Undocumented immigrants of all ages live in the United States. ¹
840,000	Undocumented immigrants ages 18-24 live in the United States. ²
578,680	Active DACA recipients. ³
1.2 million	Undocumented youth in the United States are potentially eligible for the DACA federal policy directive, which provides deferral from deportation and a work permit. ³
98,000	Estimates of Unauthorized Immigrant Students (15-19) graduating from U.S. High Schools Annually. ⁴
408,000	Undocumented immigrant youth and adult learners are enrolled in school (e.g. college) throughout the United States. ⁵

State Demographics: California is the state with the largest number of undocumented immigrants (2.7 million). They represent 24% of all undocumented immigrants nationwide and 6% of the total CA population.⁶

Challenges Undocumented Students Face in Pursuing a College Education

Financial Obstacles

The primary obstacle for a college-bound undocumented student is financial. Based on current government policies, undocumented students cannot qualify for federal and most state-based financial aid, including grants, work study jobs, or loan programs. The cost of full-time enrollment at a public college or university ranges from \$9,737-\$27,381²¹ per year. Without financial aid, the costs of attending a college can often be prohibitive for undocumented students and their families.

¹ <https://immigration.procon.org/us-undocumented-immigrant-population-estimates/#2022>.

² https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/immigration-statistics/Pop_Estimate/UnauthImmigrant/unauthorized_immigrant_population_estimates_2015_-_2018.pdf.

³ <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/programs/data-hub/deferred-action-childhood-arrivals-daca-profiles>.

⁴ <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/unauthorized-immigrants-graduate-us-high-schools>.

⁵ <https://www.higheredimmigrationportal.org/research/undocumented-students-in-higher-education-updated-march-2021/>.

⁶ <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/data/unauthorized-immigrant-population/state/CA>. See also, <https://www.ppic.org/publication/undocumented-immigrants-in-california/#:~:text=Nearly%20a%20quarter%20of%20the,a%20slight%20decline%20after%202007>.

In-State Tuition & Financial Aid

Generally, to receive the in-state tuition discount, undocumented students must attend a school in a state for a certain number of years and graduate from high school or obtain a GED in that state. The chart below shows tuition equity laws and policies that allow undocumented students to qualify for in-state tuition in their state of residence.

State Policies Affecting Undocumented Students in Higher Education⁷

States offering in-state tuition through legislation	Arizona, California, Colorado, Connecticut, District of Columbia, Florida, Hawaii, Illinois, Kansas, Kentucky, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Nebraska, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Oklahoma, Oregon, Rhode Island, Texas, Utah, Virginia, Washington
States offering state financial aid or institutional scholarships at public colleges or universities	California, Colorado, District of Columbia, Hawaii, Illinois, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Nevada, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Oklahoma, Oregon, Texas, Utah, and Washington
States that provide DACA recipients with access to in-state tuition at some public institutions	Arkansas, Idaho, Maine, Mississippi, and Ohio
States that provide access to at least some public institutions	Michigan, Delaware, Iowa, and Pennsylvania
States that actively bar enrollment in all or certain public institutions <i>*may allow DACA</i>	Alabama*, Georgia*, Indiana*, Missouri, New Hampshire, North Carolina, South Carolina*, and Wisconsin
States without explicit legislation on tuition or state financial aid	Alaska, Arkansas, Louisiana, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Tennessee, Vermont, West Virginia, and Wyoming

Private Colleges and Universities

Private colleges and universities each have their own system of determining admissions for undocumented students. However, nationwide, a growing number of schools are developing policies for the admission and funding of undocumented students. While the costs of attending a private college or university are much higher than public institutions, they can also have broader financial aid packages based on merit and financial need. For more information, consult [Top 30 Highly Ranked Institutions](#).

Current Federal Policies Affecting Undocumented Students

Plyler vs. Doe

In 1982, this Supreme Court ruling determined that K-12 education is a fundamental and protected right and will be provided to all children in the United States, regardless of citizenship or residency status.⁸

⁷ <https://www.higheredimmigrationportal.org/states/>. See also, <https://www.nilc.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/table-access-to-ed-toolkit.pdf>.

⁸ <https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/plyler-v-doe-public-education-immigrant-students>.

Family Educational and Privacy Act (“FERPA”)

This federal law protects the privacy of student records at educational institutions, including elementary and secondary schools, colleges, and universities.⁹

Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (“DACA”)

Announced on June 15, 2012, this policy grants temporary administrative relief from deportation to undocumented young people. Individuals who are granted DACA are considered to be lawfully present in the United States and are eligible for work authorization and a social security number. DACA is a temporary program that can be renewed but falls short of granting undocumented young people a pathway to citizenship.¹⁰ On September 5, 2017, the Trump administration attempted to end DACA. A series of lawsuits that were filed against the administration for terminating the program unlawfully has resulted in the U.S. Supreme Court ruling to restore the DACA program. However, a July 2021 ruling in another lawsuit filed in the Texas district court has limited the DACA program yet again.¹¹ Only DACA renewals are currently being accepted at this time.¹²

Since September 2012, 912,137 people have applied for this temporary benefit.¹³

Affordable Care Act (“ACA”) Health Care Reform

Unfortunately undocumented immigrants (including DACA recipients) were excluded outright from federal health care reform. However, all Californians with low incomes between the ages of 26 and 49 can now enroll in Medi-Cal—the state’s Medicaid program—regardless of their immigration status.¹⁴

Current California State Policies Affecting Undocumented Students

Assembly Bill (“AB”) 540 as expanded by Senate Bill (SB) 1141

This law allows certain non-resident students who complete at least three years of full-time attendance or the part-time equivalent at a CA high school, adult school, or California Community College (credit & noncredit), and degree requirements to receive reduced in-state tuition at public colleges and universities.¹⁵

California Dream Act

This law, composed of AB 130 and AB 131, allows qualifying AB 540 students to access state and institutional funds to finance their college/university education. Students are able to access non-state funded scholarships directly through their colleges and state-funded financial aid.¹⁶

AB 1024

This law permits the California State Supreme Court to admit as an attorney any applicant that fulfills the requirements for admission to practice law, regardless of immigration status. AB 1024 makes California the first state to grant law licenses to undocumented aspiring attorneys if they meet all other eligibility requirements.¹⁷

SB 1159

This law requires all 40 licensing boards under the California Department of Consumer Affairs to consider applicants regardless of immigration status. In effect, SB 1159 allows undocumented individuals to obtain professional licenses.¹⁸

⁹ <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/fpco/ferpa/index.html>.

¹⁰ <https://www.uscis.gov/archive/consideration-deferred-action-childhood-arrivals-daca>.

¹¹ <https://www.dhs.gov/news/2021/07/19/update-deferred-action-childhood-arrivals>.

¹² <https://www.nilc.org/issues/daca/>.

¹³ https://www.uscis.gov/sites/default/files/document/data/DACA_performancedata_fy2020_qtr2.pdf. See also, <https://www.npr.org/2017/11/16/564655140/oops-we-lost-your-daca-application>.

¹⁴ <https://www.chcf.org/blog/celebrating-expansion-medi-cal/>.

¹⁵ https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=20210220SB1141.

¹⁶ <https://dream.csac.ca.gov/>.

¹⁷ <https://cliniclegal.org/resources/professional-licenses-undocumented-immigrants>.

¹⁸ https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=201320140SB1159.

AB 2184

This law requires cities in California to accept a California driver's license or identification number, individual taxpayer identification number, or municipal identification number in lieu of a social security number if the city otherwise requires a social security number for the issuance of a business license.¹⁹

SB 183

This law extends existing protection regarding equal rights and opportunities in postsecondary educational institutions in California from being subjected to discrimination on those bases of immigration status.²⁰

Resources for Additional Information

College Board	collegeboard.com
Immigrants Rising	immigrantsrising.org
Mexican American Legal Defense Education Fund	maldef.org
National Immigration Law Center	nilc.org
Pew Hispanic Center	pewhispanic.org
Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education & Immigration	presidentsalliance.org
Public Policy Institute of California	ppic.org
United We Dream	unitedwedream.org

About Us

Founded in 2006, Immigrants Rising transforms individuals and fuels broader changes. With resources and support, undocumented young people are able to get an education, pursue careers, and build a brighter future for themselves and their community. For more information, visit immigrantsrising.org. For inquiries regarding this resource, please contact Nancy Jodaitis, Director of Higher Education, at nancy@immigrantsrising.org.
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¹⁹ https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=201720180AB2184.

²⁰ https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=201720180SB183.

²¹ <https://educationdata.org/average-cost-of-college#california>.