

ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS' ACCESS TO AMERICAN HIGHER EDUCATION: Tuition subsidies raise enrolment at low cost to other student groups

Tuition subsidies are effective at increasing US college enrolment among likely-illegal students without imposing large costs on native and legal immigrant student groups. That is the central finding of research by **Catalina Amuedo-Dorantes** and **Chad Sparber**, to be presented to the NORFACE migration conference at University College London this week. Chad Sparber comments:

‘Our findings should help to calm some of the fears of opponents of immigration. It does not look like illegal immigrants are taking university seats away from legal immigrants and native-born citizens.’

State-funded colleges and universities in the US charge lower tuition rates to in-state residents than they charge to foreign and out-of-state residents. Much controversy exists, however, over whether such subsidies should also be granted to illegal immigrants who arrived to the US as children.

Federal law bars states from giving unlawful residents postsecondary education benefits that states do not offer to US citizens, and yet several states have nonetheless passed legislation explicitly allowing illegal immigrants to pay in-state tuition rates.

This study notes that approximately one million children live in the United States illegally. These children are legally entitled to free public schooling through high school, but after graduation, educational opportunities can vary tremendously across states.

Chad Sparber says:

‘Our goal is to understand better some of the costs and benefits of policies granting in-state tuition rates to illegal immigrants.’

‘Advocates of such policies hope that less expensive education will lead to higher college enrolment rates.’

‘Opponents fear they will lead to decreased enrolment and increased costs for legal and native-born groups. We want to know whether these hopes and fears actually occur.’

The study relies on government-collected Current Population Survey data, which does not identify legal status. Instead, the researchers separate college-aged individuals into demographic groups differentiated by place of birth, citizenship, and ethnicity.

They find that non-citizen Hispanics – a group largely composed of illegal immigrants – are six percentage points more likely to be enrolled in college if they reside in states allowing them to pay resident tuition rates. No group experiences reduced college enrolment.

The researchers go on to study whether states granting resident tuition to illegal immigrants have responded to revenue shortfalls by raising tuition costs or cutting aid to other students.

Here the researchers find some mixed results. Though subsidies for illegal immigrants have not affected the overall tuition and fees at comprehensive and community colleges, rates have risen at flagship universities. Furthermore, such policies do not appear to have reduced financial aid or increased indebtedness for most demographic groups.

Chad Sparber adds:

‘I would not say that these policies are costless, but I would say that the costs that we’ve identified in our research are small and limited to relatively few students, whereas enrolment gains for targeted groups are quite large.

‘I hope that information can be useful as policy-makers continue to consider immigration legislation changes.’

ENDS

‘In-State tuition for Undocumented Immigrants and its Impact on College Enrollment, Tuition Costs, Student Financial Aid, and Indebtedness’ by Catalina Amuedo-Dorantes (San Diego State University) and Chad Sparber (Colgate University). Both are external research fellows at the UCL Centre for Research and Analysis of Migration (CReAM).

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