

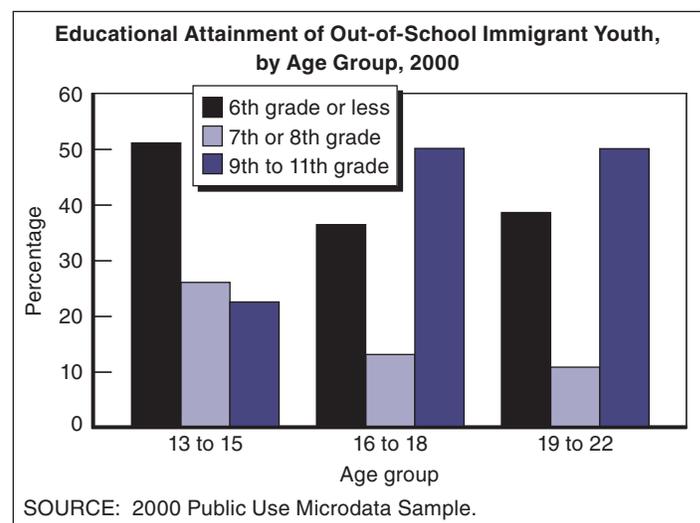
## California's Out-of-School Immigrant Youth: A Vulnerable Minority

Largely hidden from public view, a subset of California's population is also one of its most vulnerable. These are immigrant youth, mainly from Mexico and Central America, who are not receiving any kind of education or schooling. Some of these out-of-school immigrant youth, as they are known, have dropped out of U.S. schools, whereas others have never dropped in. Many of these young people must work to support families and have poor English language skills, high poverty rates, and low rates of health insurance—in short, few prospects for a better life. Although little noticed, their situation could have reverberations for the future of the entire state. The persistent low educational attainment of these young people, many of whom have or will have children born into similar circumstances, could exacerbate the projected shortage of educated workers. These projections indicate that by 2020, California's supply of high school graduates will fall short of the demand for them.

In *Out-of-School Immigrant Youth*, PPIC researchers Laura E. Hill and Joseph M. Hayes paint a detailed portrait of this little-noticed immigrant population group. They also examine the workings of the relevant federal education program, the Migrant Education Program (MEP). Using data both from the program and from the census, the authors find that few educational services that might help these young out-of-school immigrants appear to be reaching them. They suggest that to improve the futures of these youth, policy-makers will likely need to look beyond traditional schools and teaching methods.

### Who Are Out-of-School Immigrant Youth?

Census data show that California has about 265,000 out-of-school immigrant youth—defined as young people born abroad, ages 13 to 22, who have earned neither a high school diploma nor a general equivalency degree (GED). More than 90 percent were born in Mexico or Central America, and this group includes both documented and undocumented workers (who cannot be distinguished by current data). Many



Many out-of-school immigrant youth say they never attended any U.S. school, but also say they want to further their education.

work in agriculture, but many also are found in low-skilled jobs in day-labor and service industries. Many also are here on their own, some at a very early age: More than half of youth ages 13 to 15 in this group live away from their parents. Differences between out-of-school and in-school youth are stark: For example, 62 percent of out-of-school immigrant youth report an inability to speak English “well” or “very well,” but the same is true for only 15 percent of those in school.

Data from two of California's 23 MEP regions allowed the authors to focus on those out-of-school immigrant youth that the program serves, specifically two groups—those who have never attended U.S. schools and those who attended but dropped out. Differences between these two groups are also clear: Fewer than 15 percent of those who have not attended U.S. schools have medical insurance, compared to more than half of dropouts who do. Nearly twice as many immigrant youth who never attended U.S. schools report having vision needs. They also bear heavy financial burdens—80 percent

of those who have never attended school in the United States are supporting families, whereas a much smaller percentage (35%) of the dropouts report doing so.

Just how much education do out-of-school immigrant youth have? Among immigrants ages 13 to 15, more than half report having less than a seventh grade education, and roughly 25 percent completed one or two years of junior high. Older out-of-school immigrant youth are more likely to have started high school (approximately half of those ages 16 to 18 and those ages 19 to 22), but more than a third in this age group completed only the sixth grade or less. Nonetheless, data from the MEP regional programs indicate that among their clients, there is great interest in improving their education. More than 80 percent of Spanish-speaking youth who never attended a U.S. school reported interest in improving their English; nearly a third of those said they were interested in earning a GED.

### *Migrant Education Program in California*

The authors also looked at the workings of two of the MEP regional programs, whose staff members aided their research. MEP's mandate is to provide services to support the education of youth who, because of the transitory nature of their or their parents' jobs in seasonal or temporary agriculture, must frequently move. Much of its energy is focused on supporting migrant youth who are enrolled in school, through grants to school districts and other means. In recent years, MEP's mission has expanded to include the out-of-school group, and spending on them now constitutes a small percentage of the program's \$130 million budget for California.

The federal program appears to be influencing the educational progress of out-of-school immigrant youth only slightly. Three reasons appear likely.

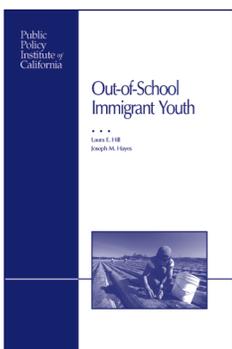
First, MEP cannot serve all of the state's out-of-school immigrant youth. The authors' calculations suggest that only

30 percent of the state's out-of-school immigrant youth meet the MEP criteria for eligibility. This leaves a large number of young people who are not in school and who are not the responsibility of any federal or state program.

Second, MEP is able to provide services to only a fraction of the eligible population. Perhaps only 20,000 out-of-school youth actually receive MEP services. The program's staff members attribute this gap to a lack of resources and to difficulties in keeping out-of-school youth connected to the local regional offices. Spending is lower than it might be because not all MEP funds generated by recruiting out-of-school youth reach them—in many regions throughout the state, some of this funding is spent on in-school immigrant youth served by MEP.

Finally, MEP does not mandate what kinds of services are to be provided to out-of-school youth, nor does it require the tracking of actual services provided in a way that measures their success. As a result, the regional programs of MEP throughout the state have different interpretations of what constitutes service provision and different, nonstandard data collection and recordkeeping procedures. Efforts are under way to improve out-of-school youth data collection across the regions, and this should allow MEP staff members to assess their effectiveness in serving this population. Such data collection standardization could also benefit the program's majority in-school population.

Traditional classroom settings may be optimal for some out-of-school immigrant youth, but not for all—so the exploration of other education techniques seems warranted. More research into this group, many of whom are already motivated to learn, should also help in discovering better ways to serve them. Understanding will be aided by more complete, standardized data collection and information sharing among MEP regions. In addition, policymakers could clarify the mission and funding of the MEP as it relates to out-of-school youth, which would bring the nature and scope of the problem, and potential solutions, into better focus.



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*This research brief summarizes a report by Laura E. Hill and Joseph M. Hayes, Out-of-School Immigrant Youth (2007, 134 pp., \$12.00, ISBN 978-1-58213-124-5). The report may be ordered online at [www.ppic.org](http://www.ppic.org) or by phone at (800) 232-5343 or (415) 291-4400 (outside mainland U.S.). A copy of the full text is also available at [www.ppic.org](http://www.ppic.org). The Public Policy Institute of California is a private, nonprofit organization dedicated to independent, objective, nonpartisan research on economic, social, and political issues affecting California. This study was supported with funding from The James Irvine Foundation.*

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