

# WHO ARE UNDOCUMENTED KOREAN YOUNG ADULTS?

A REPORT ON THE EXPERIENCES AND  
CHALLENGES OF DOCUMENTED KOREAN  
AMERICANS LIVING IN THE NEW YORK CITY AREA



**MINKWON CENTER**  
For Community Action

## WHO ARE UNDOCUMENTED KOREAN YOUNG ADULTS?



Minkwon Center for Community Action

136-19 41st Avenue, 3rd Floor  
Flushing, NY 11355

Tel 718.460.5600

Fax 718.445.0032

[minkwon@minkwon.org](mailto:minkwon@minkwon.org)

Report created by Haegi Kwon and Sungmin Oh

Special thanks to Jake Dong, Jungrae Jung,  
James Hong, Stephanie Park, and Sherry Jiang

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Today, there are approximately 11 million undocumented individuals in the U.S.<sup>1</sup>

While the debate over undocumented immigration in the U.S. largely centers on Latino, or more specifically, Mexican migration, the reality is that undocumented immigration affects individuals and families of all races and ethnicities – including those in the Korean American and Asian American communities.

This report serves to raise awareness of the experiences and challenges of DACAmented<sup>2</sup> members of the Korean American community in the New York City area.

The MinKwon Center, an advocacy and social services organization that serves the needs of Korean American, Asian American, and immigrant communities, conducted two studies – one quantitative (in the form of a survey) and one qualitative (in the form of focus groups) – in this effort.

The key findings are:

- 86% of survey participants viewed increasing access to healthcare as critical.
- 82% of survey participants viewed improved scholarship opportunities for undocumented students as a key issue.
- 77% of survey participants believed that it was important to build power with other Asian Americans to achieve more equality and fairness.
- 77% of survey participants viewed fighting for driver's licenses for undocumented persons as important.
- Survey respondents and focus group participants expressed concern over issues on immigration and pathways to a more stable legal status.
- Survey respondents and focus group participants stressed a need for increased employment and educational access.

In conclusion, the MinKwon Center urges policy makers and legislators to address these key concerns. Doing so would not only help undocumented individuals and families, but also benefit the New York City area by making it a more equitable region for all. Furthermore, these findings suggest that DACAmented Korean Americans are interested and concerned about political processes and outcomes; thus, they have the potential to play a greater role in the debate over comprehensive immigration reform.

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<sup>1</sup><http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/11/19/5-facts-about-illegal-immigration-in-the-u-s/>

<sup>2</sup> DACAmented refers to undocumented people who received Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA).

# FULL REPORT

## PURPOSE

The purpose of this report is to contribute to our understanding of undocumented Korean Americans with DACA in the New York City area.

## METHODOLOGY

Data collection occurred in two concurrent phases as a two-pronged effort to gather quantitative and qualitative information about undocumented Korean Americans.

### QUANTITATIVE DATA COLLECTION

In the first phase, MinKwon Center staff contacted DACA clients from 2015 to 2016 to fill out a survey, either online through Google Forms or in-person. This phase of the data collection period lasted from April 22, 2016 to July 29, 2016. A total of 115 respondents completed the survey.

### QUALITATIVE DATA COLLECTION

In the second phase, MinKwon Center staff facilitated several focus groups and one-on-one interviews with DACA clients served in the summer of 2016. This phase of the data collection period lasted from June 2, 2016 to July 14, 2016. A total of 24 individuals participated. Focus groups lasted from 45 to 75 minutes.

For analysis, the authors organized participant responses from all focus groups by question and then by date. The authors then tracked recurring words and themes throughout the text and distilled them into specific categories. The authors did not use coding software (e.g. Atlas.ti) due to lack of access; however, this methodology offered a systematic way of examining the focus group data.

## DEMOGRAPHICS

94% of all participants were from New York City and New Jersey (with the majority from New York City); consequently, findings from this report are most applicable to undocumented individuals and DACA recipients in this area, though some findings may be broadly relevant to the larger undocumented population.

The ages of survey respondents ranged from 15 to 33 years, with the majority falling between 19 to 27 years. 56% were female and 44% were male. 70% of survey respondents were students. 29% were employed full-time.

The ages of most focus group participants ranged from 19 to 32, with the majority under 30 years old. 48% were female and 52% were male.



## CONCERNS OF DACAMENTED KOREAN AMERICANS

Based on their experience with working with undocumented individuals, MinKwon Center staff identified four common issues and asked survey respondents to rate their level of concern for each. The four issues were:

- Increasing access to healthcare coverage for undocumented persons
- Fighting for driver's licenses to be issued to undocumented persons
- Increasing scholarship opportunities for undocumented students
- Building power with other Asian Americans to achieve more equality and fairness

The four levels were:

- I don't worry about this
- I care about it, but not too much
- It's important - I think about it sometimes
- It's very important to me - I really want to do something about it!

The results are presented in Figure 1, and the key findings for each issue are listed below:

### *Access to Healthcare*

- An overwhelming 86% of survey respondents viewed increasing access to healthcare as critical (combination of 40% and 46% who thought the issue was important and very important), making this issue a primary concern among respondents. Only 1% of survey respondents did not worry about this issue.

### *Driver's Licenses in the New York City Region*

- 77% of survey respondents viewed fighting for New York driver's licenses for undocumented persons as important (combination of 39% and 38% who thought the issue was important and very important).

### *Scholarship*

- 82% of survey respondents viewed increasing scholarship opportunities for undocumented students as a key issue (combination of 48% and 34% who thought the issue was important and very important).
- Focus group data support these findings. Participants frequently mentioned financial hardship and ongoing difficulty in paying for college tuition due to limited scholarship and financial aid opportunities.

### *Building Power with Asian Americans*

- 77% of survey respondents believed that it was necessary to build power with other Asian Americans to achieve more equality and fairness (combination of 48% and 29% who thought the issue was important and very important).



- Focus group data also suggests that many participants recognized a strong association between political and individual outcomes. Participants often acknowledged that the results of the 2016 presidential election could have a direct impact on their future, including the possibility of their having a more stable legal status.

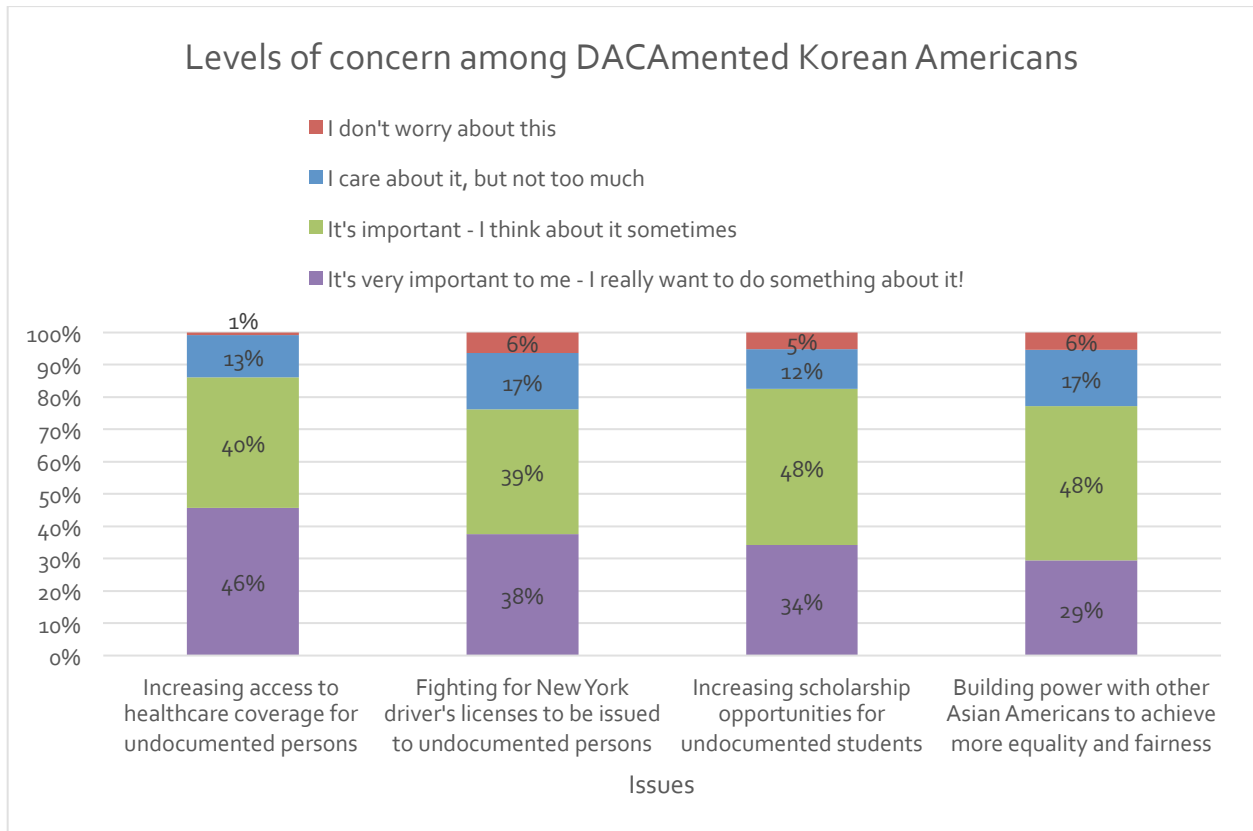


Figure 1: Levels of concern among DACAmented Korean Americans. NOTE: Numbers may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

## CONCERNS RAISED IN OPEN-ENDED SURVEY QUESTION AND FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS

This section represents findings from (1) an open-ended question from the immigration survey asking respondents to list additional concerns, and (2) the DACA focus groups. Similar to prior sections, qualitative data from the focus groups are used to elaborate quantitative findings from the survey. Figure 2 lists the breakdown of participants' responses and we focus on the top three issues raised from this portion of the survey.

### IMMIGRATION & STABLE LEGAL STATUS

- 33% of survey respondents who listed additional concerns on the online survey expressed interest in and concerns over issues on immigration and pathways to a more stable legal status (e.g. DACA recipients to legal permanent residents and/or to citizens). Focus group responses corroborate with these results.

- Focus group responses suggest a strong relationship between legal status and an individual's life chances (particularly related to employment and to educational opportunities). More specifically, legal status impacts and limits the kinds of opportunities and resources available to individuals in all stages of their lives.
  - *"Being undocumented... It's a barrier for a lot of the things we wanted to do. It's a limitation of who I wanted to be."*
  - *"When you are young, you are faced with school and career. When you are older, you face challenge of marriage and career goal. When even older, you face the challenge of family well-being. It is always problematic."*
  - *"Status is always the problem for my future. I feel it daily even when I think about travelling. I am currently going through sponsorship process, and I think about my future. I am at age when I have to think about retirement for my mom. I have to get loan for the house but my status hampers it. I face the challenge of status in situations like getting car or getting loan."*
- Data from the focus groups also suggests that there may be a strong relationship between undocumented status and emotional and mental health.
- Many focus group participants experienced varying levels of stress. The various issues mentioned here may have both caused and exacerbated stress in participants.
  - *"...You are living in a stressed situation so you don't have a peace of mind..."*
  - Alternatively, one focus group participant explained that he was able to "sleep better at night" after receiving DACA.

## EMPLOYMENT

- 19% of survey respondents expressed concern over employment.
- Focus group participants explained that employers often turned down undocumented applicants; many who could find employment often struggled to find jobs that offered competitive wages.
  - *"Work used to be hard. Before I had to work at manual labor to make money due to lack of DACA."*
- More generally, survey respondents and many focus group participants expressed concern over issues related to employment opportunities prior to and with DACA.
  - One focus group respondent stated that her main challenge was *"getting... a good job..."* She continued, *"I mean with DACA we get work authorization and get a better job than we used to. But we still can't get certain jobs. Certain people require you to state your status and if you do, you can't get it. I think that's biased and unfair."*

## EDUCATION

- 14% of survey respondents expressed concern over educational issues.
- While scholarship opportunities are a key concern of Korean American DACA recipients, several focus group participants expressed concern over educational accessibility, more generally.



- Focus group responses suggest that some educational institutions continue to reject applicants, regardless of DACA. For institutions that do accept DACA applicants, some may lack streamlined and comprehensive approaches to processing applications from DACA recipients and undocumented individuals.
  - *"Most schools don't know what to do with DACA."*
  - One participant noted how one school *"doesn't accept this social security number."*
- Staff may also offer ad hoc and misinformed advice, leading to additional hardship for individuals seeking access to higher education.
  - One mother described her daughter's experiences: *"My daughter wasted one year and lots of money because the school didn't have right information."*

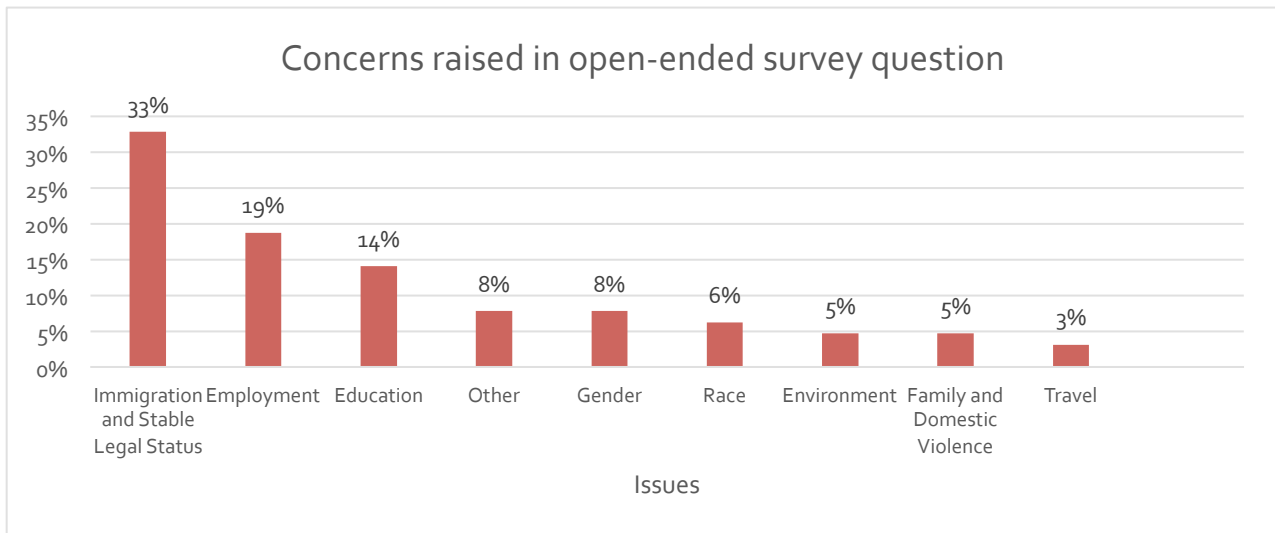


Figure 2: Concerns raised in open-ended survey question. NOTE: Numbers may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

## ASIAN AMERICAN IDENTITY

We asked 57 respondents<sup>3</sup> how strongly they identified as Asian American on a scale of not at all (1) to very strongly (5). The results are presented in Figure 3, and the key findings are listed below:

- Almost three-fourths of survey respondents (combination of 33% answering 4 and 40% answering 5 on the scale) answered that they strongly identified as Asian American.
- While this is similar for focus group participants, they usually identified as Korean American when asked to choose between the two options. This tendency may be partly explained by two focus group participants' views that "Asian American" was too "broad" as an identifier.
- We may infer that these identities may be dependent on different social contexts. At the same time, participants' identities may also be contested.

<sup>3</sup> Response rates for this question are lower than those of others because it was significantly reworded at a later point in the data collection period. We have only included responses for the revised question.



- "I don't know man... I want to say Korean American but I don't feel Korean but I am Korean."
- "I would choose Korean American... [but] I don't really fit with Korean American as well."

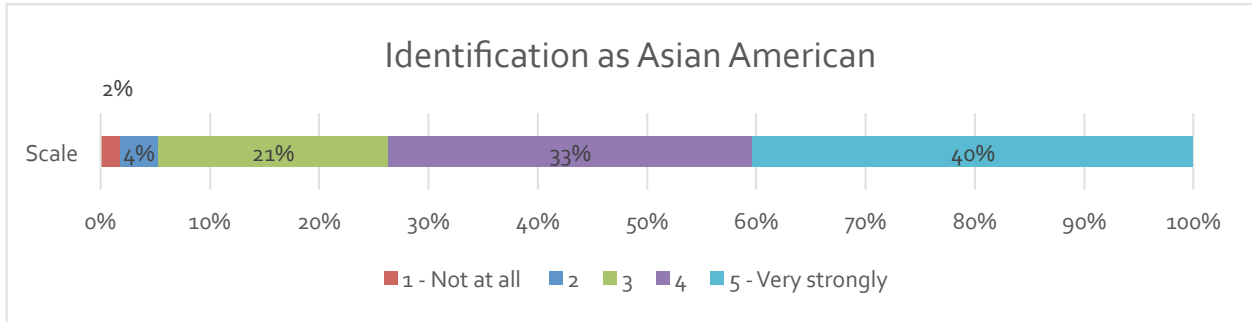


Figure 3: Identification as Asian American.

## NETWORK

In order to understand undocumented individuals' social networks, MinKwon Center organizers asked survey respondents about the number of undocumented immigrants they knew. Figure 4 shows the findings, and the key results are highlighted below:

- 50% of survey respondents (combination of 37% who answered 10+ and 13% who answered seven to nine) knew seven or more undocumented individuals. Only 6% did not know anyone who was undocumented.
- Most focus group participants avoided and/or were extremely reluctant to share information about their legal status, often treating it as a closely guarded and burdensome secret. Consequently, participants usually shared their status with a limited circle of individuals, usually comprised of family members, other undocumented individuals, and boyfriends or girlfriends.
- One participant avoided sharing this information with friends altogether: "*I mean, are there reasons to tell friends?*"
- In other cases, participants declined sharing this information for fear of being misunderstood and taken advantage of.

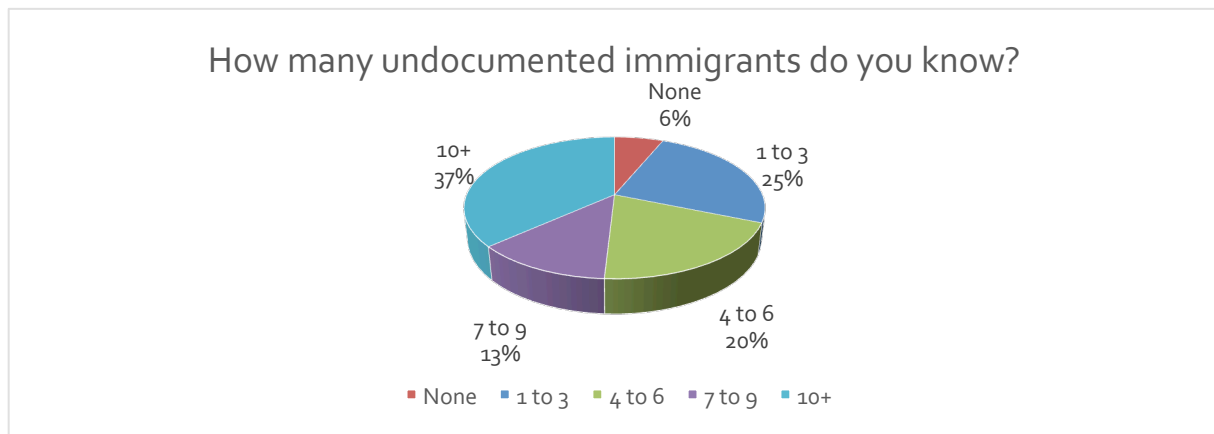


Figure 4: How many undocumented immigrants do you know? NOTE: Numbers may not add up to 100% due to rounding.