Depression, Suicide Affect Undocumented Latino Youth

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Grassroots organizations are using protests and outreach to help young undocumented immigrants suffering from depression, The Huffington Post reports. The November 2011 suicide of 18-year-old Joaquin Luna Jr., whose efforts to attend college were thwarted by bureaucratic obstacles, brought national attention to the difficulties and stigma these young people face.

“We see barriers we didn’t see when were young,” said Martha Vasquez, 23, an organizer with the Inland Empire Immigrant Youth Coalition (IYC). “A lot of us go through depression in the transition from high school to college and adult life when we see the barriers of our undocumented status.”

On January 24, the Inland Empire IYC staged a rally in Los Angeles, both to protest the deportation of 22-year-old Yanelli Hernandez and as part of a wider effort to protest anti-immigrant groups and U.S. deportation policy and the effect those have on the psychological well-being of immigrants and their communities. Specific concerns raised by the group included the continued failure to pass the DREAM Act, which would give permanent residency to many undocumented youth who arrived in the United States as minors, and the effects of Secure Communities, an initiative directed by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) to increase information-sharing between state and federal agencies for the express purpose of deporting illegal immigrants. Ten of the activists were arrested at a pair of peaceful immigration rights sit-ins held that week in California’s nearby San Bernardino County.

“When it came to my legal status, it definitely brought depression,” said Alex Aldana, 25, a Los Angeles HIV prevention and education counselor for LGBT Latino youth, who was arrested at one of the sit-ins. “It was a sense of hopelessness about not knowing what was going to happen with my life.”

Yanelli was deported despite a national campaign to secure her release. Efforts to achieve a stay on mental health grounds were denied even though she attempted to commit suicide twice while in immigration detention.

The National Immigrant Youth Alliance has launched a website, undocuhealth.org, to provide mental and emotional support to undocumented immigrants facing deportation. The Inland Empire IYC has posted a YouTube video wherein members talk about dealing with problems like depression, bullying and substance abuse.

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