

CITY AND STATE

Isolated by Language

IT'S ESTIMATED THAT CLOSE TO HALF A MILLION CHILDREN FACE LANGUAGE BARRIERS WITH THEIR PARENTS AND SOCIETY, ACCORDING TO A STUDY.

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Since she was very young, Xulay Morales, 16 years of age, has served as a language interpreter for her parents in school, events, or when her parents need to solicit a service, and even though she gladly performs this task, experts in the county state this is a stressful situation that close to half a million underage children in Los Angeles County face.

"My parents only speak Spanish. My older brothers were not born here and I've had to help them when we go to conferences with teachers or when they need something else. I feel good helping them. It doesn't bother me to translate for them," states the young girl.

A study released yesterday by The Children's Council of Los Angeles County indicates that almost half a million children feel isolated, both from their parents and from society, because of language barriers.

According to Armando Jiménez, representative of the nonprofit organization First 5 LA, the problem with using children as interpreters is that many times these young children are placed in complicated or difficult situations and they are expected to know immigration, medical, or educational terms that are not appropriate for their development.

"If the parents do not speak English, a language barrier is created between the minor and the parent, and the child feels isolated from the parent, not only because the parent does not understand what is happening, but because there is a barrier between the parent and the rest of society," Jiménez points out.

Jiménez adds that minors begin to be used as interpreters for their family between 9 and 10 years of age.

Dr. Sharon Watson, executive director of The Children's Council, explains that underage children face many other challenges that should be the priority in their lives, such as meeting school requirements and dealing with issues relating to being overweight.

More Poverty

The study, titled "2008 Children's Scorecard" and presented



From the ages of nine or ten, many children have been forced to become translators for their parents.

Photo: J. Emilio Flores/La Opinión

yesterday by The Children's Council of Los Angeles County, compiled data from different county agencies that provide services to underage children and their families.

"The levels of poverty have dramatically increased, and we will concern ourselves with how this affects children," says Watson.

Overall, the report indicates that some conditions for children have improved—such as access to health insurance and vaccinations—there has been a reduction of children with asthma, and 90% of pregnant women have received medical care in their first trimester of gestation.

"There are good indicators, and others that indicate that we still have a lot of work to do," explained Watson, referring to the increase of childhood obesity from 58% in 2002 to 62% in 2006 and the number of children who are learning English, which has increased from 5.8% to 11.5% in the same period of time.

Jiménez underscores that the bad news from the report affects high school students, since more than half of these students will not reach graduation.

"The levels of graduation have declined. Only 40% complete the requirements. This signifies that 60% have not. This worries us," says Jiménez.

"I believe that in spite of the problems children face, they are finding ways to survive. They need our help and they need their parents to be involved," added Jiménez.

For his part, Don Knabe, Los Angeles County supervisor, adds that children are the priority of county authorities, who will do everything possible to improve the situation of children.

"This report indicates where we need to focus our efforts," concluded the county supervisor.