There are 11.1 million undocumented immigrants in the United States, according to a 2010 Pew Study.

Roberto Gonzales, an assistant professor at the University of Chicago’s Social Service Administration, began his talk mentioning a boy he met named Alex. Gonzales met Alex when Alex was 6 years old.

Gonzales said that Alex spent a lot of his time drawing. Because of his passion, Gonzales and others raised money to enroll him in an art school when he was 14.

However, he couldn’t get into the school because he did not have a social security card.

Alex went from high hopes to neighborhood schools and suddenly losing hope. He soon became a part of a gang and ended up getting murdered by a neighborhood gang.

He did not make it past the first semester of high school.

On Thursday night, Gonzales gave the keynote address for the Cesar E. Chavez Undergraduate Research Symposium for Latino Studies.

This kicked off the beginning of undergraduates presenting their research the next day.

“The talk tonight is based on my book project that I’m finishing up on of ten years of research in Los Angeles,” Gonzales said, “The broad question is what happens to undocumented children as they make a transition through adolescence and adulthood. These are migrant children who come with their parents to America at early ages, some as early as 6 months old.”

Gonzales told his audience that the children grow up legally integrated into the public school system and internalize values of the American dream, that if they work hard enough and dream bold enough they could be something
in society.

However, Gonzales said, they hit a wall by the time that they’re in their middle teenage years.

“Their immigration status doesn’t affect them until about 15, 16, 17 years old when they can’t get driver’s license, they can’t legally work, they’re not eligible for financial aid,” Gonzales said.

Gonzales pointed out that in the 1980s, an immigration reform law made border and immigration laws stricter.

This law made it hard for immigrants to find work and move their families to America legally.

He discussed personal anecdotes from students that were a part of his research in East L.A. for 10 years.

He said there was a process that undocumented young adults go through: First a “protected status” then a “transition to adulthood” and then “awaking to a nightmare” instead of living the American Dream.

He described that there is a diversity of outcomes: either they go to college, or they leave school because of lack of social support and resources.

Aide Acosta, a visiting professor in American and Latino Studies and also one of the organizers of the symposium, said Gonzales was their first choice because of his work with undocumented youth.

“He was very timely especially given the context of some of the political debates that are taking place in the country as a whole, but particularly in Indiana,” Acosta said. “So I thought that it would be a nice choice for just the broader context...He just seemed like a natural fit.”

The Latino Studies Program, along with the Office of Diversity, Equity and Multicultural Affairs, College of Arts & Sciences and La Casa sponsored the keynote as well as the symposium tomorrow.

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