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The Undocumented Perspective in California

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A capstone paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for a Master of Arts in
Diplomacy & International Relations at SIT Graduate Institute, USA.

11 April 2022

THE UNDOCUMENTED PERSPECTIVE IN CALIFORNIA

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List of Abbreviations

COVID-19: Coronavirus Disease 2019

DACA: Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals

DREAM: The Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act

DREAMers: The proposed recipients of the DREAM Act

ICE: Immigration and Customs Enforcement

ICESCR: International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights

MPP: Migrant Protection Protocols

PRWORA: Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity and Reconciliation Act

US: United States

USCIS: United States Citizenship and Immigration Services

Abstract

Immigration is one of the most debated issues in the United States. Research on these populations has been limited and often lacks the perspectives of undocumented individuals. Using qualitative research methods through semi-structured interviews, this study explores the perspectives of undocumented young adults in California. The study was guided by the following research questions: What are the identity challenges undocumented young adults face? How do undocumented young adults from Mexico view themselves in the United States today? How has the lack of U.S. citizenship and the discourse surrounding immigration affect the way they view themselves? All participants discussed living in a constant state of fear and uncertainty. Fears contributed to hesitancy to participate in associative citizenship practices resulting in limited political engagement. Lack of access to higher education, financial assistance, and other state and federal programs affected participants negatively. When discussing perceptions of citizenship, views varied among participants. Media and public discourse were observed as negative and affected the participants adversely. This study adds insight to the challenges of navigating life in the U.S. while being undocumented. These findings demonstrate the urgency for the American public to engage in positive productive dialog to change the discourse and culture on this topic to have a positive effect on the policies and laws implemented in the U.S.

Keywords: undocumented immigrants, immigration, associative citizenship, discursive practices, United States

Introduction

The United States has more immigrants than any other country in the world (Budiman, 2020). In 2018, immigrants comprised of 27% of California's population (American Immigration Council, 2021). It has been reported that there are more than 11 million undocumented immigrants living in the United States (Migration Policy Institute). In California alone, there are more than 2 million undocumented immigrants that live and work in the state. The Public Policy Institute of California estimates that in 2014, the year of the most recent data available, California was home to between 2.35 and 2.6 million undocumented immigrants (PPIC, 2019). The American Immigration Council states that one in three workers in California is an immigrant. That means immigrants make up more than 33% of the state's labor force with 9% of the immigrant population being undocumented (American Immigration Council, 2021). As of 2012, the Department of Homeland Security estimated that 59 percent of unauthorized immigrants were from Mexico and the other top countries of origin were El Salvador (6%), Guatemala (5%), Honduras (3%), and the Philippines (3%) (American Immigration Council, 2021). This study seeks to analyze the identity challenges undocumented young adults face in American society. It also seeks to represent an underrepresented but large community in the United States. I attempt to answer the following questions: What are the identity challenges undocumented young adults face? How do undocumented young adults from Mexico view themselves in U.S. society? How has the lack of U.S. citizenship and the discourse surrounding immigration affect the way they view themselves?

Prior to 1965, the United States imposed a quota system that restricted the number of immigrants that were allowed each year with 70% of the visas given to the United Kingdom, Germany, and Ireland. The Immigration Act of 1965 eliminated the quota system which

eliminated the restrictions altogether (Center for American Progress, 2015). Each year after 1965, there was a steady increase of lawful immigrants arriving to the United States. Congress capped the number of people who could enter the U.S. at 20,000 from a single country and has been raised slightly over the years. More than one million immigrants arrive to the U.S. each year and in 2018, Mexican immigrants accounted for 120,000 arrivals (Budiman, 2020). The influx of all immigrants arriving to the U.S. since 1965 has led to backlogs in processing visas for immigrants and has plagued the immigration system for decades.

Funding constraints and policy changes are responsible for the increase of caseloads for the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) (Chishti & Gelatt, 2022). Since 1988, Congress mandated that the costs of immigration applications be funded by applicants' fees. However, certain applicants, including those seeking refugee status and asylum, are exempt from paying USCIS application fees (Chishti & Gelatt, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic has only worsened the situation. It is reported that by the end of the fiscal year USCIS had adjudicated 1.8 million fewer applications than it received (Chishti & Gelatt, 2022). This has led to migrants from all over the world being unable to acquire legal documentation that would allow them to stay in the United States. Their undocumented status leads to issues such as: racial profiling, discrimination, fear of deportation/family separation, and exploitation. The issues that undocumented immigrants face today could be solved if there was legislation to reform the immigration system.

A 2020 Gallup Poll found that 77% of Americans believe that immigration should be kept at its current levels or be decreased. The majority of respondents felt that illegal immigration also posed a significant threat to the interests of the United States. Illegal immigration is often associated with individuals that cross the U.S.-Mexico border, but a Center for Migration Studies

report found that, in 2010–2018, individuals who overstayed their visas far outnumbered those who arrived by crossing the border illegally.

The Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act (DREAM) was introduced in 2010, and it aimed to create a process by which immigrants would be able to apply for conditional residency, leading to permanent residency, based upon their age at the time of entry (before the age of 16) into the United States (Georgetown Law, 2022). The proposed recipients of the DREAM Act have become to be known as “*DREAMers*”. The DREAM Act failed to pass despite it being introduced numerous times to Congress. In response, former President Obama enacted Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) in 2012 that offered two-year deportation deferrals and work permits to undocumented immigrants that had no criminal record and arrived in the United States as children. After two years, recipients are able to renew their deferral under the following conditions: Did not depart the United States on or after Aug. 15, 2012 without advance parole; have continuously resided in the United States since the most recent DACA request that was approved; and have not been convicted of a felony, a significant misdemeanor, or three or more misdemeanors, and do not otherwise pose a threat to national security or public safety (USCIS, 2021). Since then, more than eight hundred thousand people have participated in the program, and 1.7 million more are eligible to participate (Felter, 2021).

Before DACA, undocumented individuals were allowed to attend university but had to pay out-of-state tuition fees regardless of how long they lived in-state but when DACA was enacted, recipients qualified for in-state tuition. Still, they cannot apply for financial aid so they must pay out of pocket for tuition. It has been indicated that more than 49,000 additional Hispanic youth have obtained a high school diploma because of DACA and seems to have positive but imprecise effects on college attendance as well (Mei, 2021). Despite the progress of

enacting policies to advance undocumented individuals' rights in the U.S., in 2014 the Obama Administration faced intense criticism for its enforcement policies at the border that included detaining children and overseeing the deportation of more than three million individuals.

When former President Trump took office, he advocated for a reduction in legal and illegal immigration and implemented a zero-tolerance policy for those that were caught crossing the southern border. Other enforcement measures included ordering an increase in border personnel; sending thousands of active-duty troops to the border; separating minors from their parents and holding thousands of individuals in camps; threatening Mexico with tariffs if it did not increase its own border enforcement; and attempting to cut federal funding to so-called sanctuary cities, or jurisdictions that refuse to enforce federal immigration directives (Felter, 2021). In 2018, his administration enacted the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP) that required asylum seekers to stay in Mexico while their cases were pending. The COVID-19 pandemic led to Trump enacting more anti-immigration policies such as halting all asylum procedures and suspending the processing of foreign work visas and green cards. His Administration was heavily criticized for using a public health crisis to advance and enact more anti-immigration policies.

President Biden campaigned heavily on reversing many of Trump's policies and was able to reverse the suspension of green card processing and reducing the number of immigration enforcement within the United States. Biden also provided Congress with his own comprehensive immigration bill, which would create a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants, expand visa and green card availability, broaden asylum eligibility, and boost border security spending (Felter, 2021). The Biden Administration has received criticism for Vice President Harris' comments during her first foreign trip since taking office. She stated, "I want to be clear to folks in this region who are thinking about making that dangerous trek to the United

States-Mexico border: Do not come. Do not come. The United States will continue to enforce our laws and secure our border” (Naylor & Keith, 2021). Her remarks were a big disappointment for migrant communities and citizens of the U.S. who are in favor of immigration reform especially since the Biden Administration campaigned heavily on positive immigration reforms.

Public debates about undocumented immigrants often involves inaccurate and misleading information about the tax contributions from undocumented immigrants. Research has shown that the undocumented population in California pays more than \$3 billion annually in state and local taxes (Kitson, 2019). Regardless of what undocumented immigrants contribute to the state of California and the United States, the pathway to citizenship is filled with barriers and obstacles due to America’s immigration policies. They are not allowed to vote in elections because they are not American citizens. Their status and access to resources such as education, healthcare, housing, etc., is left in the hands of voters and public representatives. Not being able to vote or participate in local politics can create some challenges for undocumented youth who have lived most of their lives in California.

Immigrants in the United States have always had problems navigating the complex immigration system. The immigration system must be reformed in order to process the backlogs of visa applications that haven’t been processed. Discussions about immigration have become a sensitive issue in American politics in the last 50 years. Research with vulnerable communities must be included and utilized when elected representatives draft policies and laws that directly affect the undocumented community. The overarching goal of this research project is to start a dialog within my own community about the challenges undocumented individuals face. This study seeks to incorporate the voices and perspectives of undocumented young adults for the reason that their voices are rarely heard or noticed in public spaces and discourses. Incorporating

their voices and perspectives will bring awareness to general society about the challenges and struggles of this vulnerable community. Through this study, readers will be able to learn about how daunting and challenging it is to be undocumented in the United States, even in an immigrant-friendly state such as California. This study will add value to the undocumented community as well because it could contribute to the dialog when discussing what policies are implemented that directly affects them, even if they lack the right to vote for those policies. Most often their voices are left unheard, and this study aims to include their input by highlighting the perspectives of individuals in communities that are otherwise utterly excluded.

In what follows I analyze and identify the existing gaps in the literature to provide context about undocumented communities in the U.S. with a focus on those in California. After, I present my qualitative research design and discuss the methods used to gather the data and the process of coding the data to find common themes and phrases. Lastly, I conclude with recommendations for the general public to consider when discussing the undocumented communities, practical applications that should be implemented, and suggestions for future research.

Literature Review

There are numerous aspects and angles to consider when it comes to understanding and analyzing the challenges of undocumented young adults in the United States. I attempt to explore how the media portrayal of these issues has an effect on identity formation by analyzing the current literature available. The theory of associative citizenship (Rocco, 2014) and grassroots citizenship (Meyer & Fine, 2017) was applied as a foundational theoretical framework that was implemented throughout my research to attempt to comprehend how undocumented immigrants perceive themselves in American society. The theoretical framework applied provided a solid foundation that allowed me to analyze the political engagement of participants and potential strategies undocumented communities can utilize to be politically engaged in the United States irrespective of formal legal status.

Theories of Citizenship

Studies that focus on citizenship as status often starts with the observation that citizenship is acquired by three modes: jus sanguinis (a child inherits citizenship via a parent), jus soli (a child inherits citizenship via birth regardless of parentage), or jus domicili (a person acquires citizenship by naturalization in a state other than his or her birth) (Isin, 2009). Such definitions of citizenship are somewhat outdated because of the globalized world we currently live in. People migrate to other countries more now than they have in the past. Now there are other aspects that should be accounted for when considering what constitutes being a “citizen”. The rights (civil, political, social, sexual, ecological, cultural), sites (bodies, courts, streets, media, networks, borders), scales (urban, regional, national, transnational, international), and acts (voting, volunteering, blogging, protesting, resisting, and organizing) through which subjects enact

themselves (and others) as citizens need to be interpreted anew (Isin, 2009). Taking these elements into account has led to new theories of what defines a citizen and citizenship rights.

Discussions of citizenship related to unauthorized immigration is the foundation of new interpretations of what constitutes being a citizen in the U.S. as opposed to older interpretations. Undocumented immigrants lack formal political rights, but various scholars have argued that they are still politically engaged in the U.S. despite their legal status. Political participation of undocumented workers and DREAMers takes place within immigrant organizations, and it relies on three pillars: solidarity, critical analysis, and collective action (Meyer & Fine, 2017). Enacting the three pillars has allowed policy victories for undocumented immigrants across the United States. Meyer & Fine (2017) coined the term *grassroots citizenship* and describes it as the recent mobilizations of the undocumented embodying a different kind of citizenship altogether. They argue that the citizenship struggles of undocumented workers and students are more robust and meaningful than the usual practice of the formal rights of citizenship.

Solidarity in the migrant community is a main foundation pillar for grassroots citizenship. Meyer & Fine (2017) state, “This culture of solidarity is built among people who would not necessarily find connection with each other. But the variety of social cleavages present in immigrants’ countries of origin — economic, ethnic, religious — are ameliorated by common struggles around undocumented status.” Although migrant communities are incredibly diverse, they all face the common struggle regarding their legal status and that brings the community together to become more engaged in politics by utilizing grassroots citizenship.

Critical analysis is vital because it provides the means for individuals to see beyond their individual problems, to place their own and others’ experiences within larger historical, political, and economic contexts, and to be able to imagine alternatives to the status quo (Meyer & Fine,

2017). Using critical analysis helps communities and organizations conceptualize how to make a profound political impact without having the ability to vote. Immigrant worker centers draw upon previous liberation movements in South America while also focusing on the history of migrants in the U.S. They offer workshops, courses, and training centers to provide the migrant community with the skills needed for critical analysis. They also provide classes to teach migrants about the laws and policies and allow migrants to discuss and analyze the realities they are faced with in the U.S. Beyond critiquing specific policies, critical analysis is about taking problems that are experienced as individual troubles and redefining them as collective social problems (Meyer & Fine, 2017). Critical analysis works side by side in relation to solidarity in grassroots citizenship.

The last pillar: collective action, is the last important piece of grassroots citizenship for migrant communities. One of the most salient features of contemporary immigrant organizations is their willingness to engage in mobilization (Meyer & Fine, 2017). Organizations are able to recruit and mobilize people that might not normally participate due to their legal status. The strong reliance on collective action by the undocumented arguably comes from the particularly tenuous position of being unable to make their voice heard through the ballot box and being denied the right to representation by elected officials (Meyer & Fine, 2017). In the past, collective action was left to allies of the undocumented immigrants because of the risks involved if they participated in civil disobedience but the DREAMers have changed that. They have engaged publicly in the National Coming Out of the Shadows Day across the U.S. in an effort to have their voices heard.

Grassroots citizenship has allowed undocumented communities to be successful in changing policies even though they lack the right to vote. The three pillars have also allowed this

marginalized community to exert their power and allow their voices to be heard. Effective engagement politically is just another positive aspect of what immigrants contribute to the United States.

The theoretical framework that will be used throughout my study is based on Rocco's theory of *associative citizenship* that incorporates four dimensions based on T. H. Marshall's (1950) notion of citizenship as "full" membership. It incorporates four factors that have had the greatest effect on the level of Latino membership and belonging in the United States: (1) the relationship between societal and political membership, (2) the pattern of inclusion and exclusion, (3) the sense of belonging, and (4) the effects of racialization (Rocco, 2014). Rocco (2014) argues that mainstream citizenship studies do not account for the "complex relationship between civil society, public sphere, and rights claims and traditional emphases on abstract definitions of citizenship have contributed to discourses that in fact obscure the historical presence, political experiences, and practices of Latino/as in daily life". This framework will be used to analyze identity challenges the participants cope with. Rocco's (2014) theory is applicable to use since my research focuses on undocumented immigrants of Mexican heritage. This will shed light on my interest in how undocumented young adults perceive themselves in American society.

The dominant theories in political theory literature have not included research on Latino/as political participation in the United States. Rocco's book challenges key theorists and offers a new type of framework that is essential to understanding Latino/as role in the United States. Through his book, he argues that the specific processes of racialization have played a determinative role in creating and maintaining the pattern of social and political exclusions of Latinos. While citizenship has often been referenced as a formal legal status, Latino/as have

shown that citizenship is more than just that. Citizenship is not only a legal or political status, but is also a resource for transformational politics, or a politics of empowerment, aimed at achieving the full social and political membership of Latinos (Rocco, 2014). While T.H. Marshall's (1950) framework is a solid foundation for the theory of citizenship, it doesn't consider the diverse groups that don't fit into his framework.

Latino/as must rely on and develop strategies outside the traditional boundaries of electoral politics to create change in the United States. This has been seen and used in the past during protests and sit-ins in federal offices to create political change. By practicing this form of citizenship, marginalized groups develop political awareness, alliances, and interactions in institutional spaces, promoting thus a form of active participation in the life of the nation. In so doing, Latino/as both mark their presence and build political alliances, rooted in networks of trust, mutuality, and solidarity, enabling them both to challenge their location in the public sphere and, more broadly, to help redefine the meaning and practice of citizenship in the United States (Rocco, 2014). Latino/as have a past of being excluded but have found a way to still be an active member in society regardless of their citizenship status. Immigration reform must be addressed to build a more inclusive democracy in the United States.

Discursive Practices

News media has always been an influential aspect on public opinion and discourses worldwide and in the United States too. The way undocumented immigrants are portrayed through the news has influenced the way society reacts to the discussion regarding immigration. Immigration policies have largely been a part of U.S. politics and are often a key issue in Presidential elections. News media portrayal of these divisive issues in the United States impacts the lives of undocumented and mixed-status families. A study conducted by Ruth M. López

analyzed the language news outlets used when discussing and reporting on the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM Act) of 2010. The purpose of this study was to analyze the language of news media because of the influence the media has on society. López's study is critical because it is a comparative analysis of Spanish-language and English-language news channels that identifies their perspectives on immigration. The types of discourses used affect migrant communities in every aspect of daily life including the way educators implement policies in public schools. During President Barack Obama's term in 2009, the DREAM Act lost support from the Republican party. This signaled the beginning of the anti-immigration rhetoric in the United States that is still present today.

Research on media coverage on immigration needs to be included in migrant studies in the U.S. because it often affects migrant communities around the country negatively by the way it influences the public. The past two election cycles in the United States included an enormous amount of anti-immigrant discourse. It was found that English-language news stories often used negative combinations of words and images that were used to dehumanize, criminalize, or problematize undocumented youth (López, 2020). The news used terms such as "illegal immigrants" and "illegal aliens" which dehumanized undocumented youth by criminalizing them. Since then, some television networks have banned the use of the term "illegal immigrant", but the term was and is still widely used when discussing topics on undocumented immigrants (López, 2020). López found that English language channels used the term "illegal immigrant" to describe those that were DREAM Act beneficiaries. Using this type of language gives off the impression that the DREAM Act would be exploited by its beneficiaries because those receiving it have done something wrong.

The language used is an important piece of influence on the public because there are specific subtle undertones the media can use that can influence the way someone views an issue without them realizing they are being influenced. López found abstract and covert racialized discourses in English-language news channels as well. When a news anchor used terms such as “kids like that” and “in that class”, it furthered the notion of undocumented immigrants as the Other and showed how discourse can be racialized even when abstract words are used (López, 2020). Another way for the news media to use covert and subtle ways of influence was by referring to beneficiaries as children while using images of the border fence between the United States and Mexico. In a Fox News segment, multiple frames served to strengthen racialized and criminalized ideas of Mexican immigrants and the United States: Mexico border was communicated in only nine seconds and throughout the long 26-second coverage, the actual content of the DREAM Act was never mentioned (López, 2020). While news channels used subtle language, the images they use also have a lasting effect on the way the public perceives the topic.

According to Lopez (2020), in Spanish-language news stories, undocumented immigrants were often portrayed in humanizing ways. Positive social constructions were much more prevalent on Spanish-language news and the amount of airtime devoted to each story tended to be much longer on Telemundo and Univision; this meant that there were more opportunities for positive frames to appear (López, 2020). López discovered that reporters often referred to beneficiaries of the DREAM act as DREAMers/soñadores or undocumented youth. Using this type of terminology allows individuals to be perceived as humans and showed that the DREAM Act was about the youth population who are often not present in narratives of the Other. On the Spanish news channels, the term “jóvenes” (youth) was used the most, and often times the

reporters did not point out that these young people were immigrants (López, 2020). “Estudiantes indocumentados” (undocumented students) were often used with positive images such as the United States flag or people dressed in graduation clothing (López, 2020). On Spanish-language news, undocumented youth identities are deemed as congruent with American norms and society (López, 2020). Spanish-language news channels often showed how high school and college graduates would have the opportunity to thrive in the U.S. by the language and images they presented during their news segments of the DREAM Act.

Despite the fact that the DREAM Act of 2010 ultimately failed, the comparative analysis of this study showed that the framing of the DREAM Act was often dependent on the language the news channel was using. Negative social constructions were dehumanizing and/or racialized in covert and overt ways, positive social constructions humanized immigrants and allowed them to speak their voice directly (López, 2020). News media is a source of information and could be argued that it is a form of education for the public. This form of education is not just a source of information, but it promotes ideologies about immigrants and can eventually lead to how people (including educators) show support or opposition toward a policy issue such as the DREAM Act and how they think about a group like undocumented students (López, 2020). Education research was largely missing in the 120 stories López examined and that is a critical aspect that needed to be included because the perspective from educators was left out. The academic perspective could be used to influence, change, and challenge the dominant public discourse around policies that impact undocumented immigrants.

Another critical multimodal discourse analysis aimed to examine the public discourse in Nebraska related to unaccompanied minors from Central America. The study found that most of the language used described the children as a threat and dehumanized them. A lack of awareness

about the damaging effects of the language choices people choose when discussing the Central American children has led to advocates, activists, academics, and journalists often echoing metaphors unconsciously themselves, unintentionally furthering the metaphorical conceptualizations that dehumanize these students (Catalano, 2017). Using negative public rhetoric often affected the experiences of these children in school.

Media discourse on these issues influences public perception that then influences, policies, services, and laws that has a direct effect on Central American children. Once the educational community is aware of the damage that anti-immigration ideology and resulting rhetoric can have on the school experiences of these children, they can begin to choose their own language more carefully, while taking care that they are not reproducing dominant anti-immigrant ideologies in their own speech and working toward a more inclusive atmosphere for all students (Catalano, 2017). Educational institutions must educate their own educators and counter the negative discourse that is in the public sphere.

Disclosure of Status

Many undocumented immigrants travel to the United States at a very young age. This leads them to be unaware of their legal status until they are older. They learn about their legal status through either family disclosure or by analyzing childhood memories of traveling to the United States. A study which has analyzed this population through semi-structured interviews with undocumented youth explored the following 3 main areas of questions: (a) their perceptions of how they discovered their undocumented status; (b) their perceptions of the type of information that family members discussed when disclosing; and (c) their perceptions of how their identity changed after learning of their undocumented status (Cornejo et. al, 2021). Understanding the perceptions of legal status can help society support immigrant children when

they are navigating the feelings of disclosure. This study will allow me to understand how they perceive themselves in U.S. society and the challenges they feel they deal with the most based on their perception of learning about their legal status.

According to that study, discovering one's legal status happened in a variety of ways for the participants. Some participants received direct disclosure from their parents while others learned of their status by overhearing conversations. Direct disclosure occurred because youth began to pursue different opportunities (e.g., educational and traveling) and shared these intentions with their family (Cornejo et. al, 2021). Direct disclosure of their status also allowed the youth to be co-owners of this information. Indirect disclosure had the opposite effect. Accordingly, for these youth, not being directly told their parents' story of how or why they came into the United States might have created the notion that being undocumented is a taboo topic (Cornejo et. al, 2021). Some youth stated that they were always aware of their undocumented status. This included those youth that had memories of crossing the border, their parents instructing them to use a fake name, and having to be secretive. Relying on such memories alone might lead youth to feel ashamed of their undocumented status as they infer that they do not have a right to be in the United States or that what they did as young children was 'wrong' (Cornejo et. al, 2021). The study shows that direct communication would help counter any negative interpretations a child might have when they discover their legal status.

After discovering their legal status, the researchers found four themes among the participants: (a) being cautious, (b) identity confusion, (c) dehumanized, and (d) empowered (Cornejo et. al, 2021). The threat of deportation was at the forefront of the participants' minds once they found out about their legal status. Concealing their identity would have negative implications for their identity and their wellbeing. For undocumented youth, having to 'act white'

or ‘remain in the shadows’ may threaten their wellbeing because they are forced to enact an inauthentic self (Cornejo et. al, 2021). Identity confusion was a theme seen in the participants’ answers because many of them grew up in the United States but were not formal citizens. Suddenly learning that they were not American citizens created a sense of confusion because they spend most of their lives exposed to U.S. culture. When youth discovered that they did not hold U.S citizenship – a beacon for Americanness – their identity shifted to one of confusion, and they no longer knew where they belonged (Cornejo et. al, 2021). Some youth reported feeling dehumanized after learning of their undocumented status because it created feelings of inferiority, feelings that others did not see them as people, and feelings of being unwanted in the United States (Cornejo et. al, 2021). The stigma of being undocumented contributed to the feeling of being unwanted and dehumanized. The last theme the researchers found was that some of the participants felt empowered. Several youths reported being stronger and feeling proud because they were able to achieve some of their goals despite being undocumented (Cornejo et. al, 2021). The empowerment they feel is from realizing that although they are undocumented, they are resilient and stronger for overcoming the barriers of being undocumented.

One of the main gaps of this study was that only DACA recipients were included. Undocumented youth who are not eligible for DACA were not included and therefore their perspectives are absent. DACA recipients also have more privileges than those without DACA which is an important factor when analyzing how they perceived their legal status. The parents of the participants were not included in the study, but they could expand the study further by giving insight as to why they decided to disclose their legal status directly or indirectly to their children. I hope to address these gaps by including perspectives of undocumented individuals regardless of if they are a DACA recipient or not.

Mixed Status Families

Americans acquire their citizenship by birthright or being born to an American citizen abroad. Birthright citizenship has been criticized in anti-immigrant discourses because of mixed-status families. A disparaging term used in anti-immigrant discourses is “anchor babies”. Anchor babies refers to the children born of undocumented immigrant women that specifically birth children on U.S. soil in order to be “anchored” to the United States and therefore secure residency or authorized status for themselves (Rodriguez, 2016). This rhetoric has led the American public to believe that immigrant women will abuse social and state services. Mixed status families face unique obstacles that include possible fragmentation due to deportation or even having their birthright citizenship challenged. Research on this issue aimed to understand how mixed-status families experience belonging in the United States given their unique status. Immigration policies and discourses about mixed-status families have a profound effect on communities.

According to one study, some policies specifically seek to target mixed-status families through a focus on immigrant women’s reproduction (Rodriguez, 2016). Migrant women are often targeted in anti-immigrant discourse by hate groups and are accused of hurting “real” American children by abusing resources that should go to “legitimate” children (Rodriguez, 2016). This has caused discrimination against migrant women, especially Mexican migrants. The study shows the effects of the public debate about the reproduction of immigrants during the welfare reform era in the United States in the 1990s. In this welfare reform rhetoric, racialized immigrant mothers and their children were cast as economic problems; sympathy and concern so often extended to children was not the case for the non-White children of non-citizen parents (Rodriguez, 2016). This led to the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity and

Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) of 1996 that restricted undocumented immigrants from being able to receive federal social services. However, the negative rhetoric regarding mixed-status families has not changed over the years. In 2015, former President Donald Trump stated, “I don’t think they [children born to undocumented parents] have American citizenship ... we have to start a process where we take back our country. Our country is going to hell” (Rodriguez, 2016). According to Rodriguez, Trump’s comments are incredibly damaging and only fuels the anti-immigration debate in the United States. In this capstone project, I aim to show how these types of anti-immigrant discourses affect migrant communities negatively.

American citizens in mixed-status families also face an incredibly difficult time accessing their own citizenship rights. In Texas, immigrant parents have sued the state because they were not allowed access to their own children’s birth certificates. A birth certificate is the most important and required documentation to receive basic services in America. While mixed-status families try to overcome the hurdles and obstacles, elected officials continue to try to pass legislation to reform birthright citizenship. Rodriguez (2016) states, “For immigrant parents who may be otherwise assimilated by traditional indicators if birthright citizenship is revoked, their families and their sense of membership would likely be dramatically altered.” These attempts at reforms have been unsuccessful but the arguments made in favor of these laws often create a discourse that draws symbolic boundaries keeping mixed-status families out of the national community (Rodriguez, 2016). While migrant women have been demonized in the past, there has been little research done on the effects of the family, specifically American citizen children.

The racialized ways elected officials discuss immigration also suggests that even citizens in Mexican mixed-status families are constructed and made to feel like outsiders in their own country (Rodriguez, 2016). More research is needed to understand how the negative discourses

on mixed-status families will affect the development of American citizens. Rodriguez makes a convincing argument about the importance of mixed-status families, but it lacks the voice of someone who has grown up in a mixed-status household. Incorporating research that includes this population would contribute significantly to migrant studies.

A second study that was also done by Rodriguez (2019) attempted to analyze how young adults managed their parents' illegality in the United States. The study included interviews of individuals that lived in mixed-status households. The four themes that emerged from the analysis included: parental deportability, financial aid, sponsoring parents for legal residency, and breadwinning (Rodriguez, 2019). While the participants were aware that their parents could be deported, their anxieties were more alleviated because they were able to shield themselves from the emotional toll of the deportability aspect. It was also difficult for the participants to navigate the financial aid system when pursuing higher education. For participants, it was often too difficult and expensive to start the path to documentation for their undocumented family members and so most of them chose to not pursue sponsorship. Adult children were often expected to help the family financially because of the precarious economic circumstances of their undocumented family members.

Pressures to help parents and family are all the more powerful when these young adults have the citizenship status to live up to this family-based bargain (Rodriguez, 2019). Furthermore, contributing to family resources can be necessary for working-class families, but citizens articulate that immigration and citizenship statuses shape how financial responsibilities and pressures are experienced and distributed (Rodriguez, 2019). Young adults face the pressures to perform academically and find professional jobs to support their families. Part of the way young adults manage illegality might be informed by parents' high expectations of their educated

children (Rodriguez, 2019). There's very limited research available that focuses on mixed-status families, but Rodriguez appears to be one of the scholars that has contributed significantly to this area of research. American citizens with undocumented family members are in a unique and precarious situation and should be included in future research.

Research Design and Methodology

Methods

This is an empirical study that surveyed the experiences and perspectives of young adults that are undocumented and/or lived in a mixed-status household. Data was collected over a period of two months. In the first month, I thoroughly reviewed the available literature on undocumented populations to enhance my understanding of a marginalized group of individuals in the United States. This included issues of citizenship rights and actions, news media portrayal, the effects of disclosure, and issues in mixed-status families. The three criteria required for participation in this study included their age, legal status in the U.S., and their location. To participate they were required to be between the ages of 19-35, are/were undocumented and/or come from a mixed-status household, and be living in California. The age range of participants was due to it being imperative that the study did not include minors. It also allowed to include participants that arrived to the United States in recent decades.

To recruit participants, a mixed-purposeful sampling method was utilized in combination with convenience sampling. The two sampling methods were chosen in order to meet the three criteria necessary for participation in the study. The research was done with a small sample of 5 participants due to time constraints and the sensitivity of the topic. During recruitment, I provided potential participants with an informed consent form and emphasized the confidentiality and privacy measures that were put in place. Two participants decided to be interviewed virtually (i.e., Facetime) and the other three participants chose to be interviewed in person.

The set of semi-structured interviews was completed over a two-month period between January and February 2022. When conducting the interviews, I attempted for it to be a fluid

conversation between myself and the participant. This was done by asking open-ended questions and allowing room for follow-up questions throughout the interview. The interviews lasted about 30 minutes, were audio-recorded, and then transcribed by hand in a word document. The transcribed interview was saved with the corresponding labels: Participant A, Participant B, Participant C, Participant D, and Participant E. Following transcription, the documents were then transferred to a qualitative data analysis software. Atlas.ti was used to code the collected data. The data was manually coded to find common themes and phrases in the responses of the participants. Findings were categorized to find insight into the following categories: challenges of being undocumented, citizenship and civic participation, and views on news media portrayal.

Conducting semi-structured interviews allowed me to receive diverse perspectives from the participants. Using semi-structured interviews allowed for the participants to direct the conversation where they felt was necessary. It also allowed them to disclose information that they felt most comfortable sharing. After conducting each interview, I checked in with the participants about their observations of the interview and if they had any feedback, questions, or concerns.

One of the main challenges presented during the data collection was when the participant felt that they didn't have a specific answer to one of the interview questions which led to a broader and indifferent response. The recruitment process was especially challenging because of the subject of the study. Some participants that did choose to participate felt hesitant due to the nature of the study.

To overcome these methodological challenges during the study, I was as transparent as possible with the participants. I ensured them that their responses were completely anonymous and personal information wouldn't be used in the study. If a participant felt they didn't have an

answer to one of the interview questions, I decided to follow up with the next question immediately. I traveled to the three participants that felt more comfortable conducting the interviews in person and conducted the two virtual interviews in a private room.

Positionality

One of the most essential facets of conducting this study is to acknowledge my positionality as the researcher. My positionality in conducting this study contributed to its limitations. As an American citizen, I am unaware of the experiences and challenges undocumented immigrants face regardless of the amount of research I have done surrounding the topic.

Both of my parents are American citizens therefore I do not have the first-hand experience of being raised in a migrant household. I am a multi-ethnic American woman with a Mexican American background but culturally I am American. Regardless of my Mexican American background, I present mostly as an Asian American woman therefore my Mexican American background was unknown until I disclosed it to the participants.

I was not in a formal position of power towards the participants, there still was a possible power dynamic because of my awareness about their legal status. To avoid this, I ensured participants that participation in the study was completely voluntary and if they chose not to participate I understood why they would choose not to and would not be personally offended. I found that being as transparent as possible with the participants about the study built trust between the participants and me.

Privacy, Confidentiality, and Anonymity

Protecting the privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity of the participants is of the utmost importance when conducting ethical research with vulnerable populations. The distressing threat

of possible deportation or family separation has a profound effect on the way undocumented individuals conduct themselves publicly. The privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity of the participants were prioritized in every stage of data collection, analysis, and presentation of findings.

I aimed to maintain a standard of strict confidentiality and privacy with all participants by providing consistent reassurances of the safeguards that were put in place to protect them. Conveying a standard of strict confidentiality measures was key to their decision to participate in the study.

Ethical Concerns

Undocumented individuals in the United States are considered a vulnerable population due to their legal status. This project went under full review by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) to ensure a safe research design and to protect human participants from harm. I ensured that there were safeguards put in place before conducting research to maintain participants' confidentiality throughout the whole process. I also participated in the required CITI Ethics Training course as a supplement before conducting research. Undergoing full review by the IRB ensured that the research would be conducted ethically with the participants' safety as the most important aspect of the study.

It was necessary to address concerns over the positionality I have as an American citizen while ensuring participants that I would not disclose their legal status in any way whatsoever. Participants were aware of the legal implications that could arise if their identity were to be disclosed but I reassured them frequently of the safeguards that were put in place to ensure privacy and confidentiality. I instructed the participants to avoid sharing identifying information while the interview was audio recorded. I additionally refrained from asking questions that could

threaten participants' confidentiality. Some other concerns that arose during this study are the emotional risks of the subject when discussing their experiences of their childhood or past experiences.

To assuage emotional risks that surfaced when participants reflected on certain experiences, I listened respectfully and did not explore further. Other strategies to overcome ethical concerns included implementing safeguards that were approved by the Institutional Review Board in order to maintain the confidentiality and privacy of every person interviewed. The interviews were audio-recorded with the Voice Memo App on my password-protected iPhone and then immediately moved to a password-protected folder on a password-protected computer.

I also informed the participants that at any time they could stop the interview or refuse to answer a question they were not comfortable with. Every participant that was interviewed was informed of the purpose of the research project before participating. I also informed them of possible risks that could arise from the study but assured them that there will be no identifying information used in the paper. I did not include any invasive questions, requested verbal permission to record, and explicitly made sure the participant knew that the interview can be stopped and terminated at any point. I did not include any questions that are intrusive to the experience of them arriving to the U.S. undocumented and allowed the conversation to go whichever direction the participant was comfortable with. All questions were open-ended and led in the direction the participant felt was necessary. Three interviews were conducted in person and two interviews were conducted virtually through Facetime. This was decided by the participants to ensure that it would be done in the most convenient environment for them.

Although the participants were not anonymous to me, I did not record any identifying information of any participant throughout the study. I do not disclose the participants' age, gender, name, or location in California. My previous professional experience working in the immigration department with the International Rescue Committee equipped me with the skills, knowledge, and training to ensure confidentiality and privacy throughout the study. I am accustomed to having conversations about an individual's legal status and keeping those conversations confidential.

Data and Analysis

This study was guided by the following research question: What are the identity challenges undocumented young adults face? The sub-questions that also guided the study included: How do undocumented young adults from Mexico view themselves in the United States today? How has the lack of U.S. citizenship and the discourse surrounding immigration affect the way they view themselves? The interview questions (see appendix) aimed to gather data about how immigration politics affected an extremely vulnerable community in the United States and throughout the study, I focused on hearing their perspectives and experiences living in the United States without inserting my own input into the conversations. After analyzing each interview, the following issues emerged: uncertainty, fear, lack of access to resources, and negative discursive practices. The five participants were labeled as Participant A, Participant B, Participant C, Participant D, and Participant E.

Outlooks on Civic Participation

Before I asked each participant about the challenges they faced living undocumented and how they viewed themselves in American society, I asked them if they were politically active even though they lacked the legal right to vote. Most often the participants stated that while they tried to participate, there still was a fear to speak out publicly in favor of immigration reform for undocumented immigrants. Participant A shared, “We can't really go out here and speak what we want to speak because of being scared of being deported, being taken away from your family. So, it's definitely a huge factor for us, you know, expressing our opinions” (Personal communication, January 2022). I followed with another question asking them what actions undocumented immigrants can do to be included in immigration politics. The answers were similar amongst all participants. Participant E stated, “I think just vocalizing our opinions and talking amongst each

other, educating each other, protesting, and all that stuff is super important. When we can't really vote, I think that's our best next step” (Personal communication, January 2022). Although most were not politically active, participants were aware of the different ways to engage politically regardless of being able to vote.

Another participant emphasized the importance of politicians doing more to understand the challenges in undocumented communities. Participant C stated:

I think, of course, it's going to be more systematic, but I think those in power should definitely take the time to actually step in and see what's going on with these communities, how they're living, understanding their daily experiences, because a lot of the time these decisions are made from a privileged perspective and I don't think they're actually taking the time to hear narratives or getting to see the communities that are affected by these policies (Personal communication, February 2022).

The local level provides an anchor; political participation is tethered to the community yet reaches up to make demands at the state and national level (Meyer & Fine, 2017). Successful mobilizations in local communities have made politicians listen to demands from undocumented communities even without being able to vote. Meyer & Fine (2017) highlight that the more privileged gain the confidence to participate in grassroots citizenship practices. Another aspect that was mentioned was the lack of transparency and confusing language used in policies that are implemented:

The challenging part is just bringing it to those communities and having it either be accessible as in helping them understand in their own language because sometimes some of these policies language is too complicated. I know in the past people were voting for a law because they interpret it to be one way and it was actually not even how they

understood it to be. So, I think those structures are important, just like that transparency of what it actually is (Personal communication, February 2022).

The participants were aware of the different strategies they could use to be politically active but were not as politically active due to the fear of their status becoming known. There are many organizations in California that are focused on undocumented communities, but most participants were unaware of them because of the lack of outreach in their home cities. The conversation discussing their perspectives of what should be done to enhance civic participation opened the door to discussing the rhetoric used towards migrant communities.

Discursive Practices Perspectives

Two of the interview questions probed into how popular discourse affected the participants and if they felt language surrounding immigration was harmful. There was a common consensus between the answers that the language is more harmful than beneficial for undocumented immigrants. Participant A stated:

The terminology and everything can be a bit harsh, especially for kids. I remember growing up and hearing “*illegal immigrant*”, “*undocumented people*” or “*people without papers*”, all that stuff. It just doesn't sound right. It sounds like we're below the rest of society. So yeah, it feels like it could be degrading (Personal communication, January 2022).

Participant B stated:

Definitely, you have the stupid slangs [words] like “*beaners*”¹ and just the harmful words that we get told that we are. It's not us, you know, and like you wouldn't

¹ Dictionary.com describes this word as a contemptuous term used to refer to a Mexican, a Mexican American, or a Latino of other national origin or descent. The place of origin and etymology for this expression remains uncertain. From personal experience, it is used in everyday popular discourse in the U.S.

say that to somebody who's American or a citizen. You wouldn't call him all the kind of language and words that they would say to Hispanics. It's harmful because it's more negative than good. You never hear anything good that a DREAMer or a DACA recipient does. It's always the bad, honestly. So yeah, there's a lot of harmful language that gets thrown into it (Personal communication, February 2022).

Negative discourses about the topic of undocumented immigrants also influenced their view of themselves:

I think it's harmful because I feel there's already a lot of messages being sent to you by society of who you are, without you not even figuring out who you are already. For example, something that comes to mind is when I was in high school I felt like I had to write a pity story to ensure that I got scholarships or just some sort of aid or acceptances [for college] (Personal communication, February 2022).

The responses show that the discursive practices about the topic of immigration have a direct effect on the people in these communities.

The common phrase of undocumented immigrants “*stealing jobs*” was mentioned by every participant. Participant B stated, “They like to say that all we do is we take people's jobs when in reality, that's not the case. We just want to work, and we like the idea of making ourselves better” (Personal communication, February 2022). Participant A’s response included:

Something that always comes to mind is when they say “immigrants are taking jobs” I think there's definitely more to that than maybe that catchphrase that they use because they feel like those words are intended to cause a reaction. I feel like because of that [phrase], a lot of people have reactions of like “what immigrants are doing here?” (Personal communication, February 2022).

When discussing the role, the media plays in discursive practices, the participants felt that the media's language was also harmful. Participant B shared:

I think the media can be very harmful and they don't know the full story. They only choose to bring out the bad and mainly focus on the bad stories that they hear. It never includes the good things that Hispanics, DREAMers, and DACA do and the things we accomplish, it's more of the bad side. They [the media] do play a really big role in it, they could really help but I think they do diminish a lot on DREAMers, DACA, Hispanics, and immigration a lot of the time (Personal communication, February 2022).

Participant C struggled with the accuracy of media reporting, "They obviously try to portray those types of communities in a certain way depending on the bias they have. I feel it's also kind of hard to get information that's accurate and not so biased" (Personal communication, February 2022). Participant D touched on the differing discursive practices between Spanish and English language news sources. They stated:

I think it really depends on the news media outlet because when I first moved here and when I was growing up my family would watch the news in Spanish. The Spanish/Hispanic media stations were more optimistic about a new wave of immigration reform possibly happening. But if you look at CNN, they're more kind of neutral but more on a lighter side. If you look at more conservative media, like Fox News or the New York Post it's the more conservative side, then they kind of make it [immigration reform] like more menacing (Personal communication, February 2022).

This response particularly stood out because of the critical discourse analysis research that I found when conducting my literature review.

Rocco (2014) describes racialization as the configuration of social, cultural, and political processes by which specific perceived visible differences are imbued with racial significance and meaning that then are incorporated in a racial hierarchy both within the macro-level of economic, state, and cultural institutional structures, and within the interstitial nodes of quotidian experience and relations that take place in the sites of civil society. According to him, racialization has been the primary form of establishing both the discursive and material modes of exclusionary belonging that have characterized Latino experience in the United States (Rocco, 2014). Negative slurs mentioned by participants directly corresponds with the negative discursive practices that I attempt to shed light on. The slurs used towards immigrants of Hispanic background contributes to the experience of exclusion that Hispanic immigrants are burdened with in the U.S. The news and media racialization of Hispanic groups has a direct negative effect on the participants and could be the reasoning behind why undocumented immigrants feel news media is mostly harmful towards them.

Challenges of Being Undocumented

Four of the five participants shared that they have been in the country since they were a child and have only known the reality of living undocumented in the United States. When discussing the challenges each participant felt, all of the common themes that were mentioned previously were included in their responses when discussing challenges. Regarding challenges, the issues that emerged included: lack of access to resources and/or higher education, the fear of deportation/disclosure of status, uncertainty of the future, and the pressures of being undocumented. The responses between each question that was asked during the interview seemed to relate to each other.

Participant B shared:

Growing up my biggest challenge that I had was when I was in high school, and I didn't know if I would be able to go to college. It was honestly kind of sad seeing my friends be so happy about applying to whatever college they wanted to go to, and I was like 'oh me too' but it was a big lie that I lived because realistically, that was before DACA was even a thing so I couldn't go to school without paying out of state fees. It was going to be triple the amount. So that was a huge challenge that growing up I struggled with. Wondering will I ever be able to go to school, get a student loan, get scholarships, apply for anything like that because I am not a citizen? (Personal communication, February 2022).

Another felt the lack of legal status affected which jobs they would be able to have even if they pursued higher education. Participant D shared:

I was very worried about what I was going to be doing after I graduated. What's the point of me spending four and a half years at college if I'm just gonna keep working the same job where I'm working at now? Not being able to apply to other jobs or like not being able to move up [in a career]. It just really made me feel like no matter what route I took, I would end up at the same dead-end (Personal communication, February 2022).

Out of all five participants two have completed a bachelor's level education, one has completed vocational training, and the remaining two have a secondary level education. Participant B shared how the difference of social security numbers between citizens and undocumented immigrants affected them:

I tried getting a loan to buy a truck and my interest rate was so much higher than somebody who has a different social security number than me, but because mine is DACA, my interest rate was so much higher than what somebody else's would be. It's not

the biggest thing in the world. But it's little things where if I wanted to buy a house, I wonder can I buy a house? Can I buy a truck? Can I buy a car? You know, the little things in life that you need or would want? I do have that challenge (Personal communication, February 2022).

Living with fear was another challenge participants spoke about openly. Participant E shared:

I think the other big challenge is just being overall scared. You live in fear, honestly. You live with the fear of going to work every day and not know if I am going to get to go home. Do I get to come home and see my family? Not see my family? Because you just never know (Personal communication, February 2022).

Consistently being aware of not accidentally disclosing their legal status contributed to that fear:

When people would ask me if I go to Mexico on holidays and stuff and I'd respond 'ah no my family doesn't'. It wasn't something that I would say [being undocumented] to everyone because you live in fear that someone will one day say something, and then the cops are at your door. And it's somebody deporting you or taking you away or your parents away (Personal communication, February 2022).

Participant A stated, "Being scared is something that I always think about, like the consequences that can be faced if someone found out our status" (Personal communication, February 2022).

Discussing these fears led into the discussion of having their futures hanging in the balance. On the uncertainty of the future, Participant D revealed:

I would like to get a nicer, more reliable car because that car that I had was getting stolen once every couple of years because it did not have the best security mechanism for that particular model, but I couldn't get a bank loan or car loan. Even getting the car that I'm driving now, I was like, do I really want to put myself in like this

five-year thing, when I don't know where I'm gonna be five years? I don't know what's going to happen to me next year. I'm not saying like acts of God, or accidents, or like me moving, or anything like that. I'm talking about the political climate, maybe it becomes even more extreme, and I would [possibly] just get kicked out for no reason, right?

Because DACA is not a permanent solution (Personal communication, February 2022).

Pressures from the public and family pressure was shared as a challenge as well. Participant A stated:

For me, the pressure of not making a mistake because your whole life can be ripped from you is harsh. You always have this huge pressure that you can't mess up, that you have to be perfect, and you have to work hard, and you got to think about your family.

They continued:

You would wish that you could have one night without having all these responsibilities tied to you, but you do. I have friends who were born here, and they do whatever they want to do, and they don't really care about the consequences. Growing up, I always had to care about the consequences, always, because that could be fatal for me and my family. That's something that is taken away from immigrant youth (Personal communication, January 2022).

Participant C shared:

I struggled with the high expectations. Especially that transition from high school to college was hard, because in high school, it was easy for me to be an overachiever but then in college, it changed for me. And then finding that balance [was challenging] as well in college of calling my parents and being able to support them.

The pressure of having to support their parents affected the way they viewed themselves,

Participant C continued:

I definitely felt, to some extent, I was just an extension of my parents. Like I was an additional parent or adult growing up, just because I was the one who knew some English, so I had to help my parents filling out documents, translating, or interpreting for them and just kind of being there as support for my parents (Personal communication, February 2022).

There was one participant that discussed a physical challenge of being an immigrant from Mexico that I was not previously aware of. They stated that they had the “*famous shot*” on their right arm that indicated they were from Mexico. They shared:

Everyone would always make fun of it at school. A lot of them would be like, “Oh, that's the shot” and I never took offense to it because I never understood what it was until I asked my mom, and my mom has it. She was like, “Yeah, you know, when you live in Mexico you get a shot in your arm”. A lot of people say that it's when you're undocumented, that's how you know you don't have papers (Personal communication, February 2022).

It is important to recognize that the challenges shared by participants cannot account for undocumented communities as a whole. We must account for the very significant differences in perspectives, class position, cultural identities and focus on addressing those aspects of social and political relations that produce and maintain the forms of structural inequalities that position Latinos within a hierarchy of power and privilege (Rocco, 2014). While these challenges are significant and contribute to understanding what the community deals with, more factors and experiences must be included. In what followed after this portion of the interview, I proceeded to

move the conversation towards understanding how they identify themselves given all of these issues that arise due to their legal status.

Perceptions Of Citizenship

Towards the end of the interviews, I asked the participants about how they would identify themselves when they take their legal status into account. The answers among the participants varied. Some participants felt a connection and belonging to America. For example, Participant A stated:

I am a huge representation of what America is and should be. Americans don't fit in a specific figure. We come in all shapes, sizes, and colors and I'm only one-fourth of what America is. Immigrants are a huge part of what America is but at first, it was like, "No you're not really American, because you don't have the right to vote". So yeah, that was hard, but as of now, I definitely do identify myself as an American and as a huge contribution to American society (Personal communication, January 2022).

Participant D shared:

I would like to consider myself as an American, but not in the traditional American sense. For a lot of people, being American is either black or white. I guess I am an American from Hispanic descent, but I don't necessarily have a close relationship with my cultural background, I guess (Personal communication, February 2022).

Participant B felt the opposite and shared:

I did grow up here, so I do have a lot of the American culture in me but I'm still very much Hispanic. When someone asks, "What's your nationality?" I never say, "Oh you know I'm American". It's my Mexican citizenship. I never tried to push myself away from that because that's who I am at the end of the day and that's what I'm proud to be.

Even though I do have the American culture in me because I have lived here and experienced all the different culture shocks and changes that we [public society] go through, but it's never “*I'm a DREAMer*” or “*I'm DACA*” it's just the American culture that I live (Personal communication, February 2022).

Participant C stated:

I usually say my parents are from Mexico, so I guess I identify more with the Mexican nationality. However, sometimes I overthink it because there are two sides to it. One can say “Oh, you're Mexican” but then there's the other side that says “Well, you're not from Mexico, your parents are, you're Mexican American”. I feel like for me, it's Mexican (Personal communication, 2022).

Participant E's response was indifferent to the question and didn't include a perspective on citizenship:

I personally view myself in American society as being the same. I'm the same as everyone else. If I'm honest, the only thing that makes me different from someone is a social security number and that's just a couple numbers (Personal communication, February 2022).

The importance of the federal program, DACA, was emphasized by one of the participants.

Participant D shared:

DACA definitely, really changed my life. It improved the way I see myself, like my place in society. I felt like the rewards will reflect my efforts. Whereas before, no matter how hard I worked, I would be stuck in the same place. When I went and applied for my legit social security card, I was really excited and like lightheaded. I couldn't believe it when I

went to DMV and got my license and it [DACA] just made me more optimistic about my future (Personal communication, February 2022).

The participants that participated in the DACA program briefly touched on the topic but for one it really affects their life in a positive way. DACA was the first sign of positive progress for undocumented young adults. DACA gives recipients a sense of stability, albeit a very short period. There has to be a political first step in a direction different from traditional political approaches because the kind of structural change that is required is simply not, nor will it be, on the political agenda within traditional electoral politics (Rocco, 2014). Implementing associative citizenship practices could provide an alternative basis for building the kind of counterhegemonic consciousness based on the grounded, material interests of not only Latino communities but the larger society as well (Rocco, 2014). This approach to citizenship would also allow undocumented individuals to feel a sense of belonging to the country they have called home for most of their lives.

Conclusion

Anti-immigration rhetoric has been prevalent in U.S. politics for the last several decades. Nonetheless, undocumented immigrants continue to be an integral part of society while their futures are often left in the hands of American citizens. The overarching goal of conducting this research was to contribute to a productive pro-immigration dialog while also highlighting the perspectives and giving voice to undocumented young adults. This study aimed to answer the following questions: What are the identity challenges undocumented young adults face? How do undocumented young adults from Mexico view themselves in American society? How has the lack of American citizenship and the discourse surrounding immigration affect the way they view themselves? Many of the responses from the participants reflected similar findings that were discovered in previous literature done in the past. Most of the studies analyzed in the literature review did not include the perspectives of people in undocumented communities and I aimed to contribute some of those absent perspectives through this research. Although the sample population used in this study was small, their perspectives and experiences significantly bring awareness to the struggles and challenges of living undocumented in the United States and shed light on the way they view themselves in American society.

Several findings emerged throughout the course of this study. Harmful discursive practices often have a negative effect on these individuals. It can lead to confusion or negative feelings about oneself in response to their legal status. Biased language is used depending on the media outlet. It was perceived that more harmful language was used on conservative media outlets such as Fox News.

One of the most significant challenges participants dealt with was living in a constant state of fear and uncertainty. Participants often feel hesitant to plan their futures because of the

ever-changing political climate in the United States. Fear and uncertainty also contribute to the hesitancy of participants to participate in associative citizenship practices such as protesting or vocally critiquing immigration policies. Familial and public pressure was also challenging for participants. Undocumented young adults often feel that they must never make a mistake because it could lead to life-altering effects for themselves and their families. They also experienced the pressure of high expectations from their family while continuing to be a support system for their parents.

Federal programs such as DACA were viewed favorably among the participants because it provides legal protections, but the main challenges remain as it is a temporary program for undocumented young adults. To this day, DACA does not offer a solution or a pathway to citizenship for these individuals who have been in the United States since they were children. Having the opportunity to receive a driver's license, social security number, and a valid work permit drastically improved self-observations. DACA has provided recipients of the program with a sense of stability and belonging to the United States. While the program may have provided some relief and temporary stability for undocumented immigrants, they continue to live in limbo. Every four years when a new President is elected, there is a chance that DACA could be revoked. This was seen in 2017 when former President Donald Trump announced the end of the program which led to district courts not being allowed to receive or process new DACA applications (Mathema, 2021). Views varied on the topic of citizenship. Some participants felt that they were "American" even though they lacked formal citizenship while others did not due to the lack of formal citizenship. This could result from the participants' own interpretations of what constitutes being an "American citizen".

Further research is needed regarding the physical characteristic of the “*famous shot*” that one of the participants discussed during the interview. It is unknown whether this physical characteristic contributes to discriminatory practices towards Hispanic migrant communities in the United States. Further research should be conducted with individuals from mixed-status families since there is very limited research available, their unique experiences would provide valuable insight to future migration studies. Research on undocumented immigrants is also limited due to the constant changing political climate that drastically affects this population. This leads to fear and hesitancy to participate in research including in immigrant-friendly states such as California.

Recommendations

There have been ongoing discussions about the importance of reforming the immigration system yet little progress has been made. Former President Obama made significant progress when he created DACA in response to the DREAM Act failing. The DREAM Act was introduced in 2001 and provided a path to citizenship for recipients but it was never signed into law because it didn't receive enough support in the Senate. The creation of DACA in 2012 is a temporary solution for many individuals that spent a majority of their lives in the U.S. Changing immigration policies have proven to be difficult and almost impossible due to the opposing political views of Republicans and Democrats. To make any progress, the subject of immigration must somehow not be viewed as a divisive issue.

The starting point to do this should be started at a grassroots level such as starting one on one conversations about the subject. Attempting to change the discourse and language about this sensitive issue can change the culture and public perception in a positive manner. Starting the

dialog should not aim to persuade people to take a side, it should be to inform people of the issues that are present in undocumented communities.

Overcoming and combatting negative discursive practices and racism is at the forefront of protecting undocumented communities. Negative attitudes and assumptions about undocumented immigrants should be challenged by acknowledging the positive contributions and influence the community has accomplished in American society. Misinformation about undocumented immigrants must be addressed and denounced publicly through public advocacy initiatives. Utilizing positive discursive practices would influence the public perception that would lead to more pro-immigrant policies implemented nationally.

Organizations with expertise and knowledge on the advancement of protections for migrants should be working in conjunction with the federal government. Collaborating with governmental agencies, such as informing them about undocumented workers' rights, and making government officials aware of the fact that the legal status of workers is irrelevant in many instances could contribute to the immigration debate positively. This also improves the possibility for undocumented workers of gaining access to government services without fear of being deported. Participating in public hearings and meetings on a regular basis with government officials enables organizations to affect policy developments and to improve labor enforcement (PICUM, 2012).

Empowering undocumented workers is an important step in strengthening the protection of their rights. It enables workers to become involved in the decision making that affects their lives. This can be done by organizing locally or by forming separate unions in the community and workplace that will allow undocumented immigrants to come together and work on relevant issues. There are some obstacles to organizing a union for undocumented workers, but there are

several reasons why unions should include undocumented workers: the only way of solving the problems of undercutting wages and working standards is by including undocumented migrants and thereby building strength as a workers' movement; undocumented workers are workers, regardless of their legal status; and they contribute to the economy of the host country and therefore also have inherent rights as workers (PICUM, 2012).

Undocumented immigrants should have equal access to higher education, financial assistance, healthcare, state and federal programs regardless of status. Research has shown that they contribute to the country's economies and therefore they should have access to the programs they contribute to. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) states that universal access without discrimination to healthcare, social security, and an adequate standard of living are all human rights. As of today, the United States has signed but not ratified the Covenant. The Carter Administration signed the Covenant in 1977 but every administration since has refused to ratify it into law. The most recent acknowledgment of the Covenant was by the Obama Administration. The Obama Administration affirmed that it was "committed to not defeating the object and purpose of" the ICESCR (The Four Freedoms Turn 70, 2011). The Covenant should be ratified by the Biden Administration immediately so marginalized communities have access to these essential services.

To mitigate the backlogs of processing applications, permanent legal status should be given to all undocumented immigrants that have not committed serious crimes. It is important to consider that undocumented communities in the United States consists of a diverse set of people with varying wants and needs. Congress should offer undocumented immigrants seeking to legalize their status the option to choose between an onerous path to citizenship and a simple

path to permanent residence without U.S. citizenship (Bier, 2020). Immigration court is one of the few parts of the U.S. legal system in which a person's freedom is at stake, but the person has never had the right to government provided counsel at any proceeding (Bier, 2020). Those detained by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) should be provided with legal representation. A professional and independent immigration court would be more efficient and would encourage immigrants to trust that the system will produce fair results, incentivizing their appearance in court (Bier, 2020).

The recommendations to improve and protect undocumented communities are endless. In conclusion, I hope these findings will contribute to the advancement of positive discursive practices and future collaboration of all stakeholders that aim to protect undocumented communities in the United States.

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Appendices

Interview Guide

1. What is your age?
2. How long have you lived in the United States?
3. Do you participate in American political discourse?
 - a. If yes, what topics do you feel strongly about?
 - b. If no, why?
4. What role do you feel the media plays in the political discourse surrounding immigration?
5. How do you view yourself in American society?
6. Why do you think the topic of immigration is contentious?
7. Do you feel the language surrounding immigrants is harmful?
8. How can undocumented immigrants be included in immigration politics?
9. What are some challenges you deal with being undocumented?
10. How does political discourse surrounding immigration affect the way you view your role in American society?
11. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Participant Informed Consent Form**Participant Informed Consent****TITLE OF THE STUDY:** The Undocumented Perspective in California**RESEARCHER NAME:** Sahar Sandoval

My name is Sahar Sandoval I am a student with the SIT International Relations and Diplomacy program. I would like to invite you to participate in a study I am conducting for partial fulfillment of my MA in Diplomacy and International Relations. Your participation is voluntary. Please listen to the information, and ask questions about anything you do not understand, before deciding whether to participate. If you decide to participate, please give consent orally at the beginning of the recording.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to analyze the identity challenges of undocumented adults in California.

STUDY PROCEDURES

Your participation will consist of an in person or virtual meeting through facetime that will be audio recorded and will require approximately an hour of your time. If you do not wish for the interview to be recorded, you will still be able to participate in the interview.

POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

The risks of participating in this study is possible deportation if there is public disclosure of a participant. To avoid this there will not be any information included in the research that can be used to identify a participant. During the interview you have the right not to answer any questions or to discontinue participation at any time.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY

I hope the knowledge learned throughout this study will contribute to the inclusion of undocumented adults within America. The knowledge learned from this study may also teach those who are citizens in America about the challenges and struggles faced in undocumented communities and can open a conversation about how to improve the immigration system in America.

CONFIDENTIALITY

All participant's information collected in this study, will not be used for future research studies or distribution.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

Your participation is voluntary. Your refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty. You are not waiving any legal claims, rights, or remedies because of your participation in this research study.

RESEARCHER'S CONTACT INFORMATION

If you have any questions or want to get more information about this study, please contact me at sahar.sandoval@mail.sit.edu or my advisor at orli.fridman@sit.edu.

RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT—IRB CONTACT INFORMATION

In an endeavor to uphold the ethical standards of all SIT proposals, this study has been reviewed and approved by the SARB or SIT IRB. If you have questions, concerns, or complaints about your rights as a research participant or the research in general and are unable to contact the researcher please contact the Institutional Review Board at: irb@sit.edu
School for International Training, Institutional Review Board, 1 Kipling Road, PO Box 676, Brattleboro, VT 05302-0676, USA irb@sit.edu, +001-802-258-3132

Consent Statement:

"I have read the above and I understand its contents and I agree to participate in the study. I acknowledge that I am 18 years of age or older."