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THE EFFECT OF UNDOCUMENTED STATUS ON LATINX YOUTH IN NORTH AMERICAN POSTSECONDARY SCHOOLING

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis was inspired by my personal experiences growing up in the United States as an undocumented immigrant and being in a community of other undocumented individuals. Those who become fully integrated in schools are presented with the same information as citizen children about the potential of their futures and in turn develop the same dreams. Unauthorized status turns into a defining feature of late adolescence and adulthood as the unspoken barriers of education attainment and workforce possibilities come fully into light. Though raised in the United States, their capacity to move up in the economy and have more fruitful opportunities than their parents is hindered by the same legal status. My ability to leave the country and pursue higher education elsewhere motivated me to look deeper into those that could not and their experiences once their free education comes to an end.

By presenting various studies on the topic, this thesis attempts to shed light specifically on the impact of legal status on the educational pathway of undocumented Latinx students who are able to attend higher education. In the first chapter, I focus on providing a better understanding of who this population is and their experiences growing into their undocumented status, how they are permitted and prohibited from education in the United States, and how differing legal statuses are thought to affect the educational outcomes of individuals. In the second chapter, I focus on those who have pushed forward into college and use an ecological framework to delve into the role of undocumented status in three different levels: individual characteristics of being undocumented, factors within the campus, and the effect of state and national policies and political climate. As a final point, I briefly review the limitations still faced after college as they head into the workforce and conclude with what can be implemented to provide support.

CHAPTER 1

POPULATION BACKGROUND

1.1 Latinx immigrant youth in the United States

In the United States, approximately 98,000 undocumented students graduate high school a year (Zong & Batalova, 2019), making up only two percent of the population that enter postsecondary schooling (Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration, 2023). The majority is considered the 1.5 generation as they came to the United States at a young age, with nine out of ten (85.2 percent) arriving before the age of 10 (Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration, 2023). Undocumented youth who have migrated with their parents at an early age and grow up in the United States experience confusing and contradictory experiences of belonging and rejection as they move through childhood to adulthood. They spend their formative years in the United States and their home culture is mostly derived indirectly from memories or from their older family members, making them more similar to the second generation than the first whose experiences are based on their country of origin (Ellis & Chen, 2013; Gonzales & Chavez, 2012). Many internalize the idea that academic success can lead them to economic rewards and stability just like their citizen counterparts (Abrego, 2006).

Adolescence is a period in which individuals begin to establish their independence and their life course through steps like obtaining their driver's license, enrolling in college, and considering their vocational path. Such acts may not be possible for undocumented students as their opportunities for employment and education are barricaded by national and state laws (Abrego & Gonzales, 2010). Gonzales (2011) highlights a transitioning period between the ages of 16 to 18 where unauthorized students "discover" the complications and setbacks that their

legal status creates and begin to experience shifts in their daily lives and prospects. In the United States, the age of 16 is when adolescents are allowed to get part-time jobs and their driver's license, and the age of 18 is when one becomes of legal age and events like high school graduation, entering higher education or joining the labor force full time tend to happen. As undocumented students prepare to graduate from high school, they are met with the reality that despite their academic success, they are barred from the "opportunity to fully integrate legally, educationally, and economically in US society." (Abrego, 2006, p. 221)

The focus on the Latinx population comes from the fact that out of the more than 11 million unauthorized immigrants that reside in the United States, 78 percent come from Latin America, with forty-eight percent coming from Mexico alone (Migration Policy Institute, 2019). This is also reflected in college and universities, as forty-six percent of undocumented students in postsecondary education are Hispanic/Latinx (Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration, 2023). Additionally, political conversations in the United States about immigration tend to center around Latinx immigrants, making them direct targets of most anti-immigrant rhetoric that labels them as "criminals" and "invaders" who are in turn unworthy of belonging to educational spaces (Miranda, 2022; Vienrich & Stone, 2022).

1.2 Education access for undocumented students

To better understand the context of 1.5 generation undocumented students in higher education, there are policies that need to be addressed. As children they are integrated in K-12 schools through *Plyler v. Doe*, which the U.S Supreme Court ruled on June 15th of 1982 in response to a class action of a Texas Education Code that prohibited the use of state funds for the education of non-legally admitted children. The Court determined that undocumented children and young

adults have the same right to attend public primary and secondary schools freely as U.S citizens and permanent residents, explaining that "education has a fundamental role in maintaining the fabric of our society" (*Plyer v. Doe*, 1982, p. 457).

In addition to this there is also the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), which was signed in 1974 and whose main function is to protect students' educational records. It gave families the right to access information regarding their children's education and, more importantly, the right to privacy of certain personal information and prevention from that information being disclosed with outside entities. For undocumented students, this means that they are not obligated to share their immigration status and that schools are prohibited from inquiring and, as a result, avoiding students being made the subject of discrimination, intimidation, or deportation. As an outcome, these children get to develop the same Americanizing experiences and identities as their citizen peers, allowing them to develop a sense of belonging to the United States and lead to aspirations being built surrounding it.

It is during adolescence that they come to the realization of how their legal status blocks them from participating in the same rites of passage as their peers and have to reevaluate their desired adult lives (Gonzales & Ruszczyk, 2021). In terms of higher education, *Plyler v. Doe* does not extend past the twelfth grade into postsecondary schooling, but there is also no federal law that prevents colleges in the United States from admitting undocumented students. However, there are three states that have laws that prohibit undocumented students from attending public college or universities: Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina (President's Alliance, 2023). No undocumented student is allowed to receive federal financial aid, and the policies for in-state financial aid varies. There is the option of community college, which is more accessible

financially; however, unlike four-year colleges where you get a bachelor's degree, it offers vocational training and associate degrees (Terriquez, 2015).

According to the Higher Education Immigration Portal (President's Alliance, 2023), 24 U.S. states have created legislation that allows undocumented students to pay in-state tuition, including New York, California, Texas and Nebraska. Opposing that, including the ones that already ban undocumented students from attending public college, Indiana, Missouri, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Wisconsin have explicitly prohibited undocumented students from receiving financial aid. Even within the states that permit in-state tuition, the expense of college is still prohibitive for many undocumented youth.

Other important government actions to be aware of are the Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act and the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA). The DREAM Act, which was first presented in 2001, has had at least ten versions introduced to Congress that have never passed. All versions share the same idea of providing undocumented youth that have arrived to the United States as children with a path to legal status (American Immigration Council, 2020). While it has not passed, it has created the term "Dreamer" which is used to refer to young immigrants that are protected under DACA. DACA was created June 15, 2012 and allows a certain group of undocumented youth to have work certification and relief from deportation. However, it does not provide permanent legal status and must be renewed every two years. Some of the requirements for DACA are that the recipient must have arrived in the United States before turning 16, were under the age of 31 on June 15, 2012, and had continuously resided in the United from June 15, 2007 to the present.

After turmoil beginning in 2017, where there were attempts to terminate the program, the current standing is that those who currently have or had it within the last year can file for

renewals of their DACA and work permits. For those who are first-time applicants or whose DACA expired more than one year ago, the federal government is currently accepting, but not granting or processing, applications (U.S Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2022).

1.3 Comparison of legal status

The legality spectrum becomes more complex when considering things like DACA as they are not citizens of the United States, but are provided a buffer from full on illegality. One study's findings suggest a division going one step further from legality and illegality to a division between citizenship and lack of citizenship in influencing educational outcomes (Patler, 2018).

Patler used the 2011 California Young Adult Survey (CYAS), whose goal is to identify patterns of participation in postsecondary education, employment, and civic engagement of 18-26 year olds and also the social inequalities of different demographic groups (UC/ACCORD, 2012). This allowed for statistical comparison of the legal status across 1.5 generation youth. Respondents were selected through a random digit dial telephone survey and had to be currently living in California and had to have attended at least one year of high school before the age of 17. Out of the 2000 respondents, 783 identified as first- or second-generation Latino with at least one parent from Mexico, Central America, or South America. After removing those who were still high school students and whose post-secondary education information was missing, the total sample size was 658 respondents. Legal status was divided into four groups: undocumented, legal noncitizens, naturalized citizens, and second generation (Patler, 2018). Patler (2018) controlled socioeconomic status via parental educational attainment and income background, as well as individual characteristics like sex and age.

The results suggest a penalty for noncitizen respondents in terms of high school non-completion, with the most significant one being for undocumented students. The odds of not completing high school for undocumented youth was 2.76 times higher than those of the second-generation. Legal noncitizens also faced a great penalty, with their non-completion rate being 2.37 times higher. Looking at the control variables like SES background, low-income was not statistically significant while having a parent that did not graduate high school doubled the odds of noncompletion. Additionally, there was an increase in non-completion for participation in English as a Second Language (ESL) classes. In post-secondary enrollment, the same pattern as high school completion was found: undocumented immigrants did worse with a 66 percent probability of enrollment, legal noncitizens did slightly better with a probability of 70 percent, and naturalized citizens and second generation did best with a probability of around 82 percent. Controlled factors showed that, while the SES variables did not have a significant impact, being male reduced the odds significantly, a finding that is consistent with patterns of enrollment and completion found in other studies of both immigrants and native-born citizens (Buchmann et al., 2008; Kao & Tienda 1995; Terriquez 2014).

Qualitative research on Brazilian immigrants in the United States also brought forth that undocumented and DACA beneficiaries experienced the greatest educational disadvantages, followed by legal noncitizens. In turn, naturalized citizens are able to achieve the highest educational levels, suggesting a hierarchy of legal status privilege (Cebulko, 2014). Data came from 42 respondents in the Boston metro area in Massachusetts, who were all 1.5-generation Brazilians between the ages of 18 and 25. The author placed respondents in four categories: 13 who were undocumented, 10 were in liminal legality, 10 had lawful permanent residence (LPR), and 9 were citizens. Liminal legality are those who have a social security number or work

permit, but are still barred from things like federal financial aid and in-state tuition. LPRs are those who have green cards and therefore can apply for some college aid and are eligible for in-state tuition in all states, but cannot vote and are cut off from some benefits. Nearly 66 percent of naturalized citizens and 40 percent of those who were LPRs had attended four-year colleges. In comparison, out of those who were undocumented and liminally legal, 15 percent attended four-year colleges. Involuntary delays and interruptions, especially due to financial constraints, were also more prevalent in undocumented and liminally legal youth.

As previously mentioned there are states that do not provide in-state tuition, and during the time of Cebulko's (2014) study, Massachusetts did not have in-state tuition for undocumented and liminally legal youth. A comparison of the undocumented individuals who are in California is made to illustrate the greater financial barriers experienced by those attempting to attend college with no financial help. Undocumented and liminally legal youth in Massachusetts faced greater barriers than those in California and greater barriers than their LPR and citizen peers in both Massachusetts and California. It is important to note, however, that as of 2023, changes have been made in Massachusetts' financial aid that allow undocumented youth to access it (Massachusetts - Data on Immigrant Students, 2023).

CHAPTER 2

UNAUTHORIZED STATUS IMPACT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

In this chapter I will review the literature on undocumented Latinx students in postsecondary education, including studies on undocumented students with a primarily Latinx sample and those with DACA recipients due to their lack of citizenship. The ecological conceptual framework presented by Suárez‑Orozco et al. (2015), explaining what it takes to make an "undocufriendly" campus, was used as a guide to break down the levels of how legal status impacts educational outcomes. In the first part of this chapter I will present the student-level challenges. The second part will focus on the challenges at campus level and the impact of campus climate. The third part will examine national and state policies and the effect of political climate.

2.1 Student-level factors

While there is great diversity in the characteristics of undocumented students, the majority face the challenge of being the first in their families to attend college (Suárez‑Orozco et al., 2015). Being the first generation to pursue higher education while being undocumented brings up struggles in accessing information about applying to university, accessing financial aid available, and relating to university systems.

These sentiments were found in Enriquez's (2017) study focused on individuals who did not complete high school, completed high school, and attended a two-year college but did not complete Associate's degree. Participants recalled that during high school in their junior and senior years, presentations had information aimed at helping first-generation and low-income

barriers but lacked undocumented-specific education information, which ended up reinforcing the obstacle.

Similarly, twenty-six of the thirty respondents in Negrón-Gonzales' (2017) study faced barriers in accessing and enrolling in community college. All interview participants were undocumented, Latinx, 18 to 26 years old, and were either currently attending or were planning to re-enroll in community college. The majority did not get the needed information about the college process, and their enrollment was marked by misinformation and unhelpful personnel. They were faced with situations where admission offices of their local community college told them that a social security number was needed to apply even though that is untrue in California. In addition, despite being in school communities where many were undocumented, citizen status was not openly talked about, leading many to not discuss their situation and being unaware of their ability to apply to college. The remaining four who did not face significant barriers all reported that having a good mentorship by a caring adult (counselor, teacher, non-profit staff) was a key element in navigating the enrollment process.

Undocumented students can face limitations in getting these resources as their parents do not typically have a college education (Trivette & English, 2017), making the involvement of school officials a key protective factor in their development of resistance and willingness in pursuing higher education (Gonzales, 2011). Gonzalez (2011) compared the experiences of young adults who were college-goers with those who had exited the education system after high school graduation or earlier using semi-structured interviews with 150 individuals between the ages 20 and 34 who were all of Mexican-origin residing in California and were part of the 1.5 generation. A variable that was found in the experience of college-goers but not early-exiters was the trusting relationships that they had with adults in their academic space. For those whose high

school was their ending point of education, they reported feeling disconnected and having an absence of supportive relationships with teachers or counselors. In comparison, most college-goers reported that they had formed trusting relationships with adults in high school, like teachers and counselors. They were able to ask and receive help due to these relationships and when their motivations were low, it served as a point of reference in choosing to continue to college.

Another challenge is that their academic success can be hindered by stress and anxiety due to various concerns related to an unauthorized status. Suárez‐Orozco & Hernández's (2020) study aimed at underlining how legal status, along with stressors and protective factors, may influence anxiety in Latinx undocumented undergraduates. The study was conducted with 486 self-identified undocumented (including those with DACA) Latinx undergraduates from California ranging from 18 to 30 years old with the mean age of 21.60. Only 3.8 percent of the participants attended a private university, forty five percent attended two-year public community colleges and 48.8 attended a four-year public college. Generalized anxiety was assessed using the 7-item Generalized Scale (GAD-7) (Spitzer et al., 2006).

Thirty-two percent of the respondents met the cutoff criteria. Looking at gender, 28 percent of the male and 35 percent of the female respondents met the criteria (Suárez‐Orozco & Hernández, 2020). The figures in this undocumented college sample are substantially higher than that of a general population sample, where 4 percent of males and 9 percent of females met the criteria (Spitzer et al., 2006). Two notable stressors for respondents were financial concerns and deportation worries, with finances being the leading contributor to anxiety (Suárez‐Orozco & Hernández, 2020).

In similar proportion to being the first in their families to attend college, undocumented students tend to come from low-income households, making finances a prominent worry (Suárez‑Orozco et al., 2015). Almost half of the participants in Enriquez's (2017) study suggested their parents' low socioeconomic status as a disruption and reason for not pursuing higher education. Their parents' legal status left them without valid work authorization, making low-wage, unstable employment the only available. This creates the need for their children to work in order to contribute economically to their households, which can factor in their decisions to drop out of school. For those who do pursue higher education, this becomes a major reason why they end up studying part-time or take time off from their studies (Negrón-Gonzales, 2017; Suárez‑Orozco et al., 2015; Suárez‑Orozco & Hernández, 2020).

A difference between undocumented students and their counterparts who also work during college is that under illegality, their pool of job options is extremely limited. This leads them to work in unstable jobs that make them victims of wage exploitation which can be emotionally draining, taking away mental space away from their studies (Hsin & Reed, 2019; Kreisberg & Hsin 2020; Suárez‑Orozco & Hernández, 2020). They also miss opportunities for positions that would allow them to further their knowledge in their areas of interest.

Worry over the possibility of their own and their family and friends' deportation and detention was also significant (Suárez‑Orozco & Hernández, 2020). Studies find that concern over family being deported are more cited by undocumented students than worries about their own potential deportation (Enriquez et al., 2018; Enriquez & Millán, 2019; Suárez‑Orozco et al., 2015; Suárez‑Orozco & Hernández, 2020). Alongside the emotional distress that would come with a loved one being deported, respondents cited practical worries of what it would mean for them, like dropping out of college and becoming the main caretakers and providers of their

siblings (Suárez‑Orozco & Hernández, 2020). Fear of deportation of oneself becomes more salient when met with a situational trigger (Enriquez & Millán, 2019). Most prevalent are police officers, who are associated with the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). Activities that could lead to police contact, like driving, can heighten their sense of alertness and their fear of deportation (Enriquez & Millán, 2019; Suárez‑Orozco & Hernández, 2020).

2.2 Campus level factors

For undocumented students, specifically those at four-year schools, one of the most important considerations in picking a college was how welcoming the campus climate was to undocumented students (Suárez‑Orozco et al., 2015). Campus environment is an important contributor to college outcomes, and experiencing a negative climate is linked with reduced academic engagement and compromised sense of belonging (Franco & Kim, 2018; Shelton, 2019; Valadez et al., 2021). For student minorities, the likelihood of success has been tied to the inclusion that they experience on campus (Shelton, 2019); an exclusionary setting can decrease engagement in campus life and, in turn, shape how students engage academically (Franco & Kim, 2018; Valadez et al., 2021).

Latinx college students as a collective experience an effect on their college GPA due to campus climate. A study conducted with nine universities of California with junior and senior Latinx students analyzed the change in GPA over time as they were more exposed to campus climate (Franco & Kim, 2018). With a total of 4299 participants, different demographic characteristics were considered like being female, a first-generation student, immigrant, and being a native English speaker. Four types of diversity were considered in campus climate: racial/ethnic diversity, socioeconomic diversity, gender diversity, and immigrant background.

Perception of negative climate had a significant effect on GPA on the total sample, but the direction of effects differed based on the type of negative campus climate. Students' GPA was positively affected in perceived negative climates for racial/ethnic diversity and gender diversity, while SES diversity and immigrant background negatively affected students' GPA. Similarly, Valadez et al. (2021) found that negative attitudes towards immigrants were significant in negative academic engagement of undocumented college students.

Note that in Franco & Kim's (2018) study, a negative campus climate for racial/ethnic diversity was more frequent than the others and not all campus climate types had an effect on students' GPA. To illustrate, while there was no effect on GPA for first-generation Latinx college students who perceived a negative campus climate for gender diversity and immigrant background, there was an effect when negative climates for racial/ethnic diversity and SES diversity were perceived.

A critical component of understanding campus climate is social interactions among students (Franco & Kim, 2018; Shelton, 2019; Suárez‑Orozco et al., 2015). Shelton's (2019) study explored how undocumented Latinx students' perception of campus climate, specifically through interactions that they had with other students, affected their sense of belonging. Through a general narrative approach, the experiences of 16 individuals who attended four-year institutions were recalled focusing on their sense of belonging. Choosing participants from four-year institutions was purposeful due to the goal of having "traditional" college experiences that differ from the reality of community college.

Participants described the barriers they faced to belong due to exhibited hostility and racism from other students, not identifying other students who resembled them, and the restrictions that their legal status placed on social opportunities. This connects to Latinx and

undocumented students in general, who report that discrimination and harassment most often emanates from other students, alongside with financial aid officials (Franco & Kim, 2018; Suárez‐Orozco et al., 2015). Feelings of unsafety and isolation can also arise from seeing classmates who are unaware of their status and share anti-immigrant sentiment (Negrón-Gonzales, 2017). Financial struggles that led to pauses in their education was also reflected in maintaining friendships. The broken attendance pattern of some participants meant that they could not move at the same pace as their colleagues in their classes, which made it difficult for them to maintain close friendships (Shelton, 2019).

Challenges were also described in participating in the same opportunities as their peers. Engaging in "campus culture" was not easily done as none of the participants lived on campus, a common reality for undocumented students (Suárez‐Orozco et al., 2015), and attending social activities like parties had the risk of encountering law enforcement. The sensation of being an outsider was also brought out when seeing their peers obtaining jobs and getting the opportunity to study abroad. Not having a social security number or driver's license meant that social opportunities outside of class that required identification or long commutes were out of reach. Besides not participating, participants also felt the burden of coming up with excuses as to why they would not without revealing their immigration status (Shelton, 2019).

2.3 Political climate and policies

Experiences of undocumented youth in pursuing higher education are varied depending on where they reside, as the lack of firm federal policies means that they are left in the hands of policies that their state passes. Silver's (2012) study on the trajectory after high school of undocumented Latinx youth in a small town of North Carolina reveals the story of one participant that was

directly impacted by unstable changing policies. In 2008 after she was admitted, the state community college board passed a resolution that prohibited undocumented students from attending (Bonner & Collins, 2008), subsequently removing her. Even though the policy was reversed in 2009, the interruption changed the trajectory of her life. She had already begun working in a textiles factory and felt that she could not shrink her responsibility to contribute to paying the household bills (Silver, 2012). It is important to note that the overturn of the policy came with the conditions of undocumented students being required to pay out-of-state tuition and in overcrowded classes they could not take the places of legal residents (Gonzales, 2009).

The interaction of federal and state policies is also significant in framing immigrant experiences, as it can create contradictory experiences where inclusive changes are made at the federal level while exclusionary policies are passed at state level (Cebulko & Silver, 2016). A study conducted by Cebulko and Silver (2016) compared how federal and state policies affected DACA recipients' perception of belonging in Massachusetts and North Carolina, two states with different political climates. Following the implementation of DACA, the states followed differing courses of action. While Massachusetts extended its in-state tuition for DACA beneficiaries changing their educational prospects, North Carolina continued to limit educational resource access for those undocumented. The article used data from two studies corresponding to each state. For Massachusetts, in-depth semistructured interviews were conducted with forty-seven 1.5-generation Brazilian young adults between 2006 and 2014. For North Carolina, the sample was composed of 16 Latinx individuals mainly from Mexico and Guatemala with interviews and follow ups from before and after DACA was announced.

Participants in North Carolina found themselves disappointed that DACA did not help alleviate the financial barriers to pursuing higher education and that they were still facing the

same obstacle. The feeling of exclusion even with what was gained was also extended to other aspects outside of education. Driver's license was a key benefit of DACA as it provided a government-issued ID to recipients, but in North Carolina the words “NO LAWFUL STATUS” prominently displayed in red capital letters maintained their fear of interactions with the police and the possible harassment that they may experience.

A further example of how changing political climate has an effect on undocumented students is Trump’s presidency. Trump and his administration relied heavily on blatant, incorrect, anti-immigration rhetoric, and his win in the election gave space for his followers to relay these sentiments comfortably (Muñoz et al., 2018; Vigil & Muñoz, 2023). As threats of deportation for themselves and family members increased and the future of DACA unknown, many undocumented students reported stress and fear (Enriquez et al., 2019).

Studies conducted in Colorado examined the influence of the “Trump effect” on students’ trajectories and the change in campus climate. Muñoz et al.’s (2018) study was conducted with a focus group of 16 Latinx students from two- and four-year colleges all in the age range of 18 to 25 years and all DACA recipients. The article examines undocumented Latinx students’ racialized experiences with campus climate following the election. Vigil and Muñoz (2023) highlighted interviews from 21 students from public, private, and community colleges that were part of a large multi-institutional case study. All participants were part of DACA and the topics discussed surrounded institutional support, anxiety and stress, and what was the current political environment (elections and rescinding of DACA).

Students in both studies expressed that they experienced some form of racist nativism microaggression on their college campus. Racist nativism is defined as “the assigning of values to real or imagined differences, in order to justify the superiority of the native, who is to be

perceived white" (Huber et al., 2008). Xenophobic and racist symbolism infiltrated their educational and community spaces through things like Trump's paraphernalia. The "Make America Great Again" hat was a significant marker of that era, which most participants associated with Trump's rhetoric of "build the wall," a saying that was a clear form of stating contempt towards immigrants, especially Latinx individuals. One participant recalled that after the elections, his predominantly white classes were filled with MAGA hats, turning those spaces extremely hostile (Vigil and Muñoz, 2023). The use of Confederate and American flags was also used as a method by Trump supporters to "mark their territory," leaving participants feeling anxious about their safety in what began to feel like a hostile and aggressive climate. These sentiments were not only represented by symbols, but also actions. In one college, the campus police were called on a group of undocumented students who were gathering for a meeting. Students also witnessed peers who made anti-immigrant celebratory posts after the rescission of DACA (Muñoz et al., 2018). The animosity directly impacted the participants' well-being, to the point that the stress, anxiety, and fear made them severely depressed and/or withdrawn.

The rescission of DACA, which served a sense of stability and belonging to the participants, also had a great impact on the students' college trajectories. The uncertainty of DACA and therefore the uncertainty of their future increased emotional strain, affecting areas like their course load, graduation timeline, transfer plans, and/or their grades (Enriquez et al., 2019; Vigil & Muñoz, 2023). Some participants in Muñoz et al.'s (2018) group began to make plans and arrangements in the fear of deportation. Additionally, participants had to live up to the "dreamer identity" and the expectations to excel academically. Dreamers having to be as close to perfect as possible to maintain the "good immigrant" image in order to be accepted with the pressures of the political climate around them was paralyzing to some.

During this period of time a study examined the relation of legal status and distress due to the announced recession of DACA through the lens of it being a potentially traumatic event (PTE). It was found that DACA recipients particularly had statistically higher prevalence of high clinical levels of distress (Garcini et al., 2023). Compared to a nationally representative study of PTSD symptoms where the prevalence ranges from 6.1 to 9.2 percent in the US population (Sareen, 2020), 40.7 percent of the participants met the clinical cut off for distress from the PTE that is consistent with a probable PTSD diagnosis (Garcini et al., 2023).

Data was collected from a cross-sectional online survey that was conducted from October 2017 to February 2018. With a total of 233 participants, more than half being of Hispanic/Latinx descent (59.9 percent), the criteria was that they were affected by the rescission of DACA, whether it was because they were recipients themselves or related to a DACA recipient and were of the age 18 or higher. Of the sample, 52.4 percent were undocumented with 31.8 percent being DACA recipients and 20.6 percent not having DACA, while the rest were documented.

Of those who were DACA recipients, nearly two-thirds reported clinical levels of distress compared to around a third of those who were undocumented without DACA and those who were documented. While the results served in no means to provide a diagnosis or to generalize the findings, it highlighted the fragility of the liminal status and its inability to fully reduce the sense of legal vulnerability.

CHAPTER 3

CONCLUSION

3.1 Fear of the future

A strong contributor to the overall stress experienced by undocumented Latinx is fear of the future (Enriquez et al., 2018). Those who are able to make it through college are still faced with the barrier that they do not have valid work authorization and are barred from being integrated in their desired fields, even though they have the abilities to do so (Enriquez et al., 2018; Gonzales, 2011).

One of the main reasons why many undocumented youth debate whether they should pursue higher education or make the decision to leave is that little opportunities would come from the degree that they would obtain in terms of economic mobility and employment that is career-related (Abrego, 2006; Enriquez 2017). A participant in Cebulko's (2014) study who attended college revealed how he was blocked from pursuing his desired path into the workforce. Due to his lack of valid work authorization, the offer he had had to intern in one of the top investment banking firms was rescinded and he was left with the option of waiting tables.

Respondents in Gonzales' (2011) third phase of "transitioning into illegality", who were between the ages of 25 to 29, were met with the realization that their completed degrees did not offer much advantage in the labor market and what they had access to was low-wage labor. By their mid-20s, those who were early-exiters and those who furthered their education held similar occupations. While this is one of the biggest deviations from those who have DACA and those who do not, DACA recipients still have to live their life cautiously due to the fear that at any

point the program could be rescinded and they could lose their right to formal employment (Enriquez et al., 2018).

3.2 General comment

The goal of this thesis was to analyze how being undocumented impacts the educational outcomes and experiences of 1.5 generation Latinx students in higher education in the United States and how paradoxically, after receiving an Americanized education and internalizing American values, their attempts to adapt and contribute economically are blocked, making social mobility close to impossible (Abrego & Gonzales, 2010).

It is important to understand that Latinx undocumented immigrants are not a homogeneous group and the effects of illegality can vary based on other demographic characteristics, like race, gender, social class, and place of residence. The experiences that occur pre-immigration, during immigration, and post immigration need to be further explored. Hardships potentially faced in the country of origin, in the travel to the United States, and with acculturation are factors that need to be considered as they can reveal unique stressors (Patel et al., 2016). The hard-to-reach nature of the undocumented population makes it that researchers may opt to conduct studies as they are a homogeneous group, however exploring different dimensions of their legal vulnerability is crucial in order to identify relevant protective and risk factors and develop effectively culturally and contextually sensitive interventions (Gonzales & Ruszczyk, 2021; Pierce et al., 2021).

Moreover, undocumented status is not a fixed individual characteristic, but rather the product of laws and policies, which makes changes in national immigration laws in the United States necessary for undocumented students to achieve parity with their citizens counterpart (Enriquez et.al, 2018; Kreisberg & Hsin, 2020). Implementation of policies like DACA, which

offer temporary and limited protection, in a constantly changing political climate fail to uphold the positive physical and mental health outcomes that can be granted from stability in immigration status and more permanent protections (Pierce et al., 2021).

While legalization would lift the biggest barrier faced by undocumented students, there are other areas that can be of great help in moving them forward to higher education. Undocumented students are especially in need of adult support and guidance as they prepare to transition from high school to college, and that form of support has to extend into college (Abrego & Gonzales, 2010). Positive school-based relationships that provide reliability to these students is a powerful factor in helping academic success (Perez et al., 2009). Groce & Johnson (2021) present a guide for an eight session small group led by school counselors to instill hope and provide assistance with college processes to undocumented students. These sessions include activities like addressing the barriers and understanding the goals of the students, explaining college applications and financial support, connecting them to existing organizations that provide support, and provide feedback on their progress. Other forms of reaching out that school counselors can engage in is by infusing information of colleges, scholarships, and community facilities that are open to undocumented students into the events and resources that are shared with all students (Perez, 2010; Roth 2017).

Colleges can follow by creating campuses that are “undocufriendly” and establishing safe spaces, and by encouraging faculty and administrators to understand experiences of undocumented students and recognize their needs as they navigate postsecondary schooling (Suárez‐Orozco et al., 2015). The use of resources like identity-based centers, academic support services, academic counselors, and basic need services not only are associated with an increase of positive academic engagement, but also with a sense of belonging (Shelton, 2019; Valadez et

al., 2021). Identity-based centers help create a space where participants could connect with other students who were in the same or could emphasize with their situations and created a system of support to help students persevere in their education (Shelton, 2019).

A major area of concern for undocumented students comes from trying to afford college with their own resources; implementation of support nationally or at state level would provide stress relief and lessen its effect on educational outcomes (Enriquez et al., 2018; Hsin & Reed, 2019; Kreisberg & Hsin 2020; Negrón-Gonzales, 2017; Suárez‐Orozco et al., 2015). California currently leads the provision of resources for undocumented students to alleviate some of the financial obstacles faced (Vienrich & Stone, 2022). Not only do undocumented college students in California qualify for in-state tuition, they are able to receive need-based financial aid packages. There is also the California Dream Act and the California Dream Loan program. The California Dream Act allows undocumented students to apply for and receive state-based financial aid and institutional scholarships while the California Dream Loan program grants the opportunity of student loans up to $20,000 a year (Cebulko, 2014; Vienrich & Stone, 2022).

Due to the general political environment of immigration in the United States, the collecting and sharing data about one's legal status is avoided and studies will always face difficulties in achieving large and random samples of the population (Abrego, 2006; Cebulko, 2014; Patler, 2018; Suárez‐Orozco et al., 2015; Suárez‐Orozco & Hernández, 2020). Existing support networks that are trusted by undocumented communities can be used as a resource to find participants and in turn, have more successful random recruitments to reduce selection biases. It is important to note that individuals who see themselves as being highly legally vulnerable and, in turn, feel more anxious and distrustful in disclosing their status are less likely to be willing to participate in studies.(Suárez‐Orozco et al., 2015).

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