

## Article

# "I CAN'T GO TO COLLEGE BECAUSE I DON'T HAVE PAPERS": INCORPORATION PATTERNS OF LATINO UNDOCUMENTED YOUTH

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## Abstract

*Undocumented immigration has gained unprecedented prominence in many of the world's wealthiest nation-states. In the United States, a substantial population of undocumented youth is growing up with legal access to public education through high school, but facing legal and economic barriers to higher education, even when attaining college admission. The legal and social contradictions associated with undocumented status limit these youths' chances for upward mobility through traditional means. Based on ethnography and in-depth interviews, this article examines the experiences of documented and undocumented children of working-class Latino immigrants in Los Angeles. Because their educational and home environments are not differentiated, undocumented youth undergo similar social incorporation processes as their documented peers early on. However, their legal protections end after high school, greatly limiting their chances for upward mobility through education. In some cases, knowledge of future barriers to college attendance leads to a decline in educational motivation. Existing assimilation theories need to be expanded to include this novel and sizeable phenomenon.*

## Keywords

undocumented migration; education; assimilation; second generation; Los Angeles



## Introduction

Alisa is articulate and poised as she shares her life story. She was five years old when she and her family fled the civil war in her native Guatemala. They have since been living in Southern California – the only place Alisa knows well enough to call home. Her education has taken place entirely in Los Angeles public schools where she has excelled academically. When I interviewed her, she had been admitted to the University of California, but was disheartened that due to her undocumented status, she was barred from financial aid and would be unable to attend. Like Alisa, 65,000 undocumented students nationwide graduate from high school every year (Passel, 2003).<sup>1</sup> Undocumented youth are a sizeable population and their status makes them explicitly different from prior waves of migration that rarely faced similar exclusionary immigration policies. It is important to consider how their undocumented status affects their available paths to socioeconomic mobility and therefore their incorporation patterns in this society.

Making up fully 20 percent of the child population in the United States, immigrant children and children of immigrants have a “transformative potential” on the country (Alba *et al.*, 1999; Jensen, 2001; Portes and Rumbaut, 2001, xvii). Through their level of educational attainment, the 1.5 and second generation will help determine the class status of their ethnic communities (Portes and Rumbaut, 2001; Myers *et al.*, 2005).<sup>2</sup> The 1.5 generation includes undocumented youth who, like other children of immigrants, plan to live in the United States permanently (Gardener and Quezada-Aragón, 1984; Seif, 2004). Yet, unlike their documented and US citizen counterparts, undocumented youth’s transformative potential may be severely limited by legal barriers (Carrera, 1989; Valdivieso, 1990).

## Available incorporation patterns for undocumented immigrants<sup>3</sup>

Classic assimilation theory posits that after two or three generations in the host society, the descendants of immigrants become indistinguishable from the rest of society in their behaviors and socioeconomic characteristics (Park, 1950; Gordon, 1964). However, given the demographics of the current wave of immigrants and the new contexts of reception, this perspective fails to explain the diverse experiences of today’s immigrants after only one or two generations (Portes and Zhou, 1993). The segmented assimilation framework better captures the diversity of experiences by emphasizing the interaction between the economic and human (including family structure and community organization) capital of different groups, the context of exit from their homeland, and the context of reception (including racial stratification, spatial segregation, and government policies) in determining groups’ outcomes (Portes and Zhou, 1993; Portes and Rumbaut, 2001). Southern, Central, and Eastern (SCE) European

1 It is estimated that there are 80,000 undocumented youth who have lived in the United States for 5 or more years by age 18 years, but only 65,000 go on to graduate from high school (Passel, 2003).

2 Although the delineations between the different generational categories are not strictly defined, there are flexible guidelines to describe each layer. Immigrants who arrive in the US in their late teens or as adults are first generation; those who come as children, before the age of 14 years, are considered members of the 1.5 generation; and those born here to at least one immigrant parent are second generation (Zhou, 1997).

3 Given its popular association with Anglo-conformity, the concept of “assimilation” can be

problematic (Romero, 1997). Here, I use the term “assimilation” to refer only to specific theories that use this term (i.e., classic assimilation theory and segmented assimilation theory). Otherwise, I use the term “incorporation” to refer to the process of economic adaptation, whether upward or downward in nature. “Incorporation” leaves room for “selective acculturation,” in which linguistic retention and cultural pride may be valued alongside economic incorporation (Romero, 1997; Zhou and Bankston, 1998).

immigrants who arrived during the late 19th and early 20th century faced relatively open immigration policies that helped shape their upwardly mobile incorporation patterns (Steinberg, 2001). Unlike them, contemporary immigrants face different, often harsher, policies and contexts of reception (Portes and Manning, 1986; Rumbaut, 1997). While it may be too early to determine whether contemporary immigrant outcomes will parallel those of earlier cohorts (Waldinger and Perlmann, 1998; Alba and Nee, 1999), it is possible that current demographic and economic conditions will lead some new immigrants into the permanent underclass (Portes and Zhou, 1993; Portes and Rumbaut, 2001).

The segmented assimilation perspective suggests that structural and socio-cultural factors explain why immigrant groups, even after only one or two generations in the United States, fare differently (Portes and Zhou, 1993; Portes and Rumbaut, 2001). For example, while Indian, Korean, and Chinese immigrants generally reach socioeconomic parity with native-born whites within one or two generations (Lai and Arguelles, 2003), Mexican, Salvadoran, and Guatemalan groups remain trapped in the lower rungs of the economy and their futures look bleak (Hamilton and Chinchilla, 2001; López and Stanton-Salazar, 2001). Unlike the economic opportunities available to SCE European immigrants at the turn of the last century (Lieberson, 1980), the current economic structure no longer includes low-status positions that offer a foothold into upward mobility (Danziger and Gottschalk, 1993). Today, then, children of immigrants must move a giant step forward to escape poverty and disadvantage that may otherwise be reproduced into future generations (Raijman and Tienda, 1999; Portes and Rumbaut, 2001).

Governmental policy is particularly important in determining the incorporation patterns of different national-origin groups (Portes and Manning, 1986; Reitz, 1998). Those groups afforded refugee status are better positioned to create strong co-ethnic communities that, in turn, positively influence the academic achievement of their youth (Zhou and Bankston, 1998). Groups with high levels of human and economic capital, even with only neutral governmental policies, are also often able to transfer their skills through strong co-ethnic communities or by moving directly into the middle class sector (Portes and Manning, 1986; Ong, 1996). On the other hand, those who face exclusionary state policies that deny them legal status experience greater structural and economic limitations and must adapt to limited economic options, weak co-ethnic networks, and general disadvantage – often regardless of human capital (Chavez, 1998; Coutin, 2000).

### **The category of undocumented immigration**

Undocumented immigrants, particularly those with little human capital, face the worst possible context of reception upon arrival in the United States (Rumbaut, 1995, 1997; Chavez, 1998). Large proportions of Mexicans, Salvadorans, and

Guatemalans are undocumented and together account for roughly 80 percent of the undocumented population (López, Popkin, and Telles, 1996; Passel, 2005). There is a long history of exclusionary policies directed against Mexicans, who compose by far the largest group of undocumented immigrants (De Genova, 2004). Although they escaped war and death squads, Salvadoran and Guatemalan peasants were also denied the benefits of refugee or legal status (López, Popkin, and Telles, 1996; Hamilton and Chinchilla, 2001), and are vulnerable, despite their incorporation into the economy as cheap and disposable labor. Besides their extraordinarily low human and economic capital, discriminatory policies fail to grant them legal status and therefore other benefits such as resettlement assistance, legal residency, and most social protections – including welfare and unemployment benefits.<sup>4</sup>

The “undocumented” or “illegal” migration category has a long history in the United States. It was officially created through US immigration policies in the 1920s (De Genova, 2004; Ngai, 2004).<sup>5</sup> However, it has gained greatest relevance since the middle of the 20th century (Calavita, 1992; De Genova, 2004).<sup>6</sup> Since the 1950s, immigration policies have progressively criminalized undocumented immigration, expanded the powers of the Border Patrol, increased enforcement at the border, implemented requirements to prove work eligibility before starting a job, and created sanctions for employers knowingly hiring undocumented immigrants (DeSipio and de la Garza, 1998). Today, undocumented immigration is a sizeable phenomenon largely created by restrictive immigration policies and militarization of the US-Mexico border, especially since the passage of the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) in 1986 (Cornelius, 2001). The militarization of the border heightens dangers of entrance into the US and restrains previously common circular migration streams (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994; Massey *et al.*, 2002). Current policies disproportionately affect Latin American immigrants (De Genova, 2004; Passel, 2005). With nearly 11 million undocumented immigrants residing in the United States (Passel, 2005), the examination of the incorporation paths of immigrant groups must include the particular experiences of these undocumented immigrants.

### Undocumented youth and education

The segmented assimilation framework has been used to examine the educational achievements and incorporation patterns of children of immigrants from various national-origin groups (Portes and Rumbaut, 2001; Rumbaut and Portes, 2001). These studies implicitly include undocumented youth in their sample, but because they combine undocumented with documented immigrant youth, and US citizen children of immigrants, they cannot explicitly analyze the effects of undocumented status (Portes, 1996; Fernández-Kelly and Curran, 2001; Stepick *et al.*, 2001).<sup>7</sup> By leaving the structural effects of undocumented

4 For a history of how immigration policies have discriminated against Mexicans, see De Genova (2004). Similarly, Hamilton and Chinchilla (2001) as well as Coutin (2000) detail the discriminatory policies against Salvadorans and Guatemalans.

5 Prior to this, the “illegal alien” category was created through laws excluding Chinese laborers and other marginalized groups. The Immigration Act of 1924 established massive illegal immigration and deportation (Ngai, 2004, 57).

6 For a detailed history of US immigration policy and the creation of the “illegal” or “undocumented” category see Ngai (2004) and De Genova (2004).

7 To be fair, the Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study (CILS) – the survey used for all of the referenced studies – did not measure immigration status and thus could not directly address the effects of undocumented status on the incorporation process.

8 Education scholars have focused more centrally on undocumented youth. However, their emphasis is typically on the enrollment and graduation numbers of undocumented students in high school, with suggestions for the improvement of learning environments in grades K-12 (Gardener and Quezada-Aragón, 1984; First and Carrera, 1988; Carrera, 1989; Valdivieso, 1990; Morse and Ludovina, 1999; Petronicolos, 1999). It is unclear how undocumented status affects students' aspirations, educational progress, and incorporation patterns *after* high school.

9 It is important to note that there are different types of undocumented and “quasi-legal”

status on the incorporation process largely unexamined, these studies tend to underemphasize the importance of undocumented status for the life chances and educational motivations of undocumented youth.<sup>8</sup>

Educational attainment is crucial to the future success of the most recent Latino immigrants. The vast majority of Central American and Mexican immigrants in Los Angeles are incorporated into menial low-wage service occupations with little to no opportunity for upward mobility (López *et al.*, 1996; Cranford, 1998). Children of immigrants, then, must achieve entrance into the upper sectors of the economy through educational attainment if they want to avoid reproducing the same difficult living conditions that their parents faced upon arrival (Portes and Rumbaut, 2001).

Although many have spent most of their lives in this country, undocumented immigrant youth are children born outside of the United States who reside here without legal permission from the federal government. For the purposes of this paper, I also include “quasi-legal” immigrant youth in this category (Costanzo *et al.*, 2002).<sup>9</sup> Despite their undocumented or “quasi-legal” status, these youth have legal access to public education from kindergarten through high school graduation. Since 1982, a Supreme Court ruling, *Plyler versus Doe*, has barred public schools from excluding undocumented children. Undocumented status, however, precludes them from various other public services. One critical service denied to them is federal financial aid. This becomes important after high school because in most states, both public and private universities classify them as international students and charge them tuition which is three to seven times higher than that of legal residents or US citizens.<sup>10</sup> The costs of attending college, then, are often prohibitive.<sup>11</sup> The sheer size of this population and the novelty of this phenomenon demand that we pay closer attention to what awaits these students as they reach college age (Passel, 2003).

Legal vulnerability makes undocumented immigrants difficult to access, which in turn results in a lack of reliable data (Cornelius, 1982; De Genova, 2002). This study focuses on the hard-to-study but crucially important issue of the effects of undocumented status on access to higher education, and the development of human capital among undocumented immigrant youth. I examine a small but central piece of how undocumented immigrants become incorporated – the question of access to higher education for undocumented Latino immigrant youth in Los Angeles, California, arguably the most important destination for the current wave of immigrants.<sup>12</sup> In particular, there are more Mexican, Salvadoran, and Guatemalan immigrants – both documented and undocumented – in the greater Los Angeles area than anywhere else in the country (Waldinger and Bozorgmehr, 1996, 14; Hamilton and Chinchilla, 2001).

This article analyzes how legal status can influence the educational attainment of undocumented youth. I focus on the time period just before and after high school graduation, because it represents a critical stage in these

students' lives, when undocumented status may be particularly consequential. Drawing upon participant observation and in-depth interviews, I compare their lived experiences with those of documented Latino immigrants (1.5 generation) and native-born Latino children of immigrants (second generation) in low-income families. I find that while all youth in my sample face similar socioeconomic challenges, undocumented youth confront legal barriers and contradictions that often lower the aspirations and impede educational attainment of even the most eager students. Thus, by examining the narratives of undocumented Latino immigrant youth and comparing them to documented Latino children of immigrants in Los Angeles,<sup>13</sup> I address the question of how legal status affects the incorporation patterns of immigrant youth.

### Data and methods

This essay combines ethnographic and interview data collected during one year of continued research at two immigrant rights organizations. I conducted fieldwork from January to December 2001, using methods of participant observation and informal interviews. I spent several hours each week volunteering as a teaching assistant and mentor in an art class and an immigrant rights youth group where I interacted with anywhere between 15 and 40 students during each session. I also spent time with local high school teachers and community organizers who sporadically joined our sessions. In all of these cases, I make no claim to representative sampling. When speaking to informants, I purposefully sampled for variation by country of origin, migratory status, neighborhood of residence, and high school or college. I attended meetings, rallies, marches, two program graduations, and two weekend-long retreats. I also accompanied over 100 students on a two-day bus trip to Sacramento to conduct legislative visits.

The most important sources of data for this study are 24 tape-recorded interviews with students.<sup>14</sup> I gave every student the option of conducting the interview in English or Spanish. All but one, a documented immigrant, chose to speak English. I located 15 of the 24 respondents through my volunteer work (nine in an art class, six in a youth immigrant rights group), nine through snowball sampling, and conducted all of the interviews in the Summer and Fall of 2001. Each group includes both documented and undocumented students. The sample is, therefore, strategic in its inclusion of both youth who are active supporters of immigrant rights and those who were not politically active.

With the exception of one student who came when she was 14, most immigrant respondents (both documented and undocumented) arrived in the United States between very early childhood and the age of eight years. Their ages at the time of the interviews range from 15 to 22 years. All currently attend, or recently attended, public high schools in and around Los Angeles. The students' migratory statuses and national origins are as follows: 12

(Costanzo *et al.*, 2002) statuses. The students in my sample fall into different categories that include Temporary Protected Status, family reunification applicants for legal residency, and undocumented without any foreseeable means of legalization. It is possible that some of them will regularize their status in the future. However, in this paper I focus on this critical stage in their lives when they must transition from high school to either work or higher education. Undocumented and "quasi-legal" youth – regardless of future options for legalization – all share the inability to access financial aid and are therefore unable to pursue opportunities for upward social mobility. For example, although a few students have some legal protections through the Temporary Protected Status program, they must apply for renewals every 18 months and worry about possible deportation each time. Furthermore, TPS does not constitute full legal residency and therefore does not

qualify them for federal financial aid (and in most cases, state financial aid). Even students who applied for residency through family reunification programs cannot say how long it will take them to regularize their status and in the meantime, do not have access to financial aid.

10 This was still the case throughout the data collection for this project in California as well.

11 Assembly Bill 540 was passed in 2001 and became law in January 2002. It qualifies long-term California residents, regardless of legal status, for a waiver of out-of-state tuition at California public institutions of higher education. Since 2001, comparable bills were also passed in Texas, Utah, Washington, New York, Oklahoma, Illinois, Kansas, and New Mexico; and other states have considered following suit (National Immigration Law Center, 2005). But in most cases, these bills do not give undocumented students access to federal or state financial aid.

12 Undocumented youth come from

undocumented (six Mexican, four Guatemalan, and two Salvadoran) and 12 documented (nine Salvadoran, two Guatemalan, and one Mexican).<sup>15</sup>

Regardless of current legal status, all but one set of parents has lived in the United States illegally. The single exception is a family who arrived in 1992 from El Salvador with legal residency as a result of family petitions. The majority of parents entered the country illegally, with a few overstaying their tourist visas. This highlights the underlying similarities in negative context of reception for the respondents' families across current migratory status and across national origin. It is also noteworthy that all parents of documented and native-born youth have since achieved legal residency. Clearly, undocumented status is not a permanent characteristic.

### **Families, neighborhoods, schools, and mentoring of undocumented youth: Similarities and differences with other children of immigrants**

Beginning with their length of residency in the country, informants and their families represent a continuum of possible experiences for Latino children of immigrants growing up in Los Angeles. The parents of undocumented youth arrived as early as 1983 and as late as 1993, with the bulk coming between 1985 and 1989. Documented immigrant youth reported that their parents came beginning in 1982 and as late as 1992. Second-generation students did report that their parents arrived earlier, between 1979 and 1985. Surprisingly, the average length of residency for parents of undocumented children was only three years less than that of documented parents. This suggests that other differences are not simply artifacts of length of residency in the country. Twenty-one of the 24 respondents reported that at least one of their parents had entered the country illegally. Thirteen (10 undocumented and three documented immigrants) are members of mixed-status families (Fix and Zimmerman, 2001; Passel *et al.*, 2004). The mean parental education for the undocumented group is 6.4 and 8.1 years for the documented group.

Given their generally low socioeconomic status, it is not surprising that most students, both documented and undocumented, live in crowded apartments and unsafe neighborhoods. Students, both documented and undocumented, often reported feeling unsafe in their neighborhoods, and shared stories about violence near their homes in different parts of the city. Working-poor families share crowded living conditions and experiences of violence in their neighborhoods whether or not they have legal migratory status.

Documented and undocumented students also share educational environments. For example, violence was common in many of my respondents' schools. For the majority of the students who attend regular public school, poor funding and lack of resources often frame their educational experiences. Regardless of status, several students attended poorly funded inner city high schools where

less than 10 percent of their peers go on to four-year colleges and universities. Students described their frustration with the torn books and the violence that surrounds them. On the other hand, magnet schools and relatively well-funded schools, typically more conducive to learning than regular public schools, are available to students across legal status.<sup>16</sup> The lottery system that determines admission into magnet schools is another structural way in which documented and undocumented students share similar experiences. And in general, at both poorly- and well-funded schools, half of the students reported relative academic success.<sup>17</sup> Documented and undocumented youth attend the same schools and are exposed to similar environments. In this sense, then, legal status does not appear to play a definitive role in determining the academic success of my respondents in grades K-12.

Family members play a critical role in the students' academic achievement. Students partially construct their aspirations based on the level of educational attainment of their parents and older siblings. Lisa,<sup>18</sup> a staff member at one of the organizations, highlights the limited cultural capital of these students, most of whom have never seen their parents read a book – regardless of migratory status. And even when the parents verbally stress the importance of an education, they are too often unequipped with the skills to provide academic support. This is true for both documented and undocumented students.

However, legal status can play an important role in differentiating youths' outlooks when older cousins and siblings who are also undocumented become guides to the future. Ernesto, an undocumented student, told me the story of his older brother who was unable to attend college due to his undocumented status. Ernesto's brother who "got straight A's all the time" in high school and even received a small scholarship for his achievements, but was unable to attend college because he could not afford the non-resident tuition. He traveled to Mexico City to try to enroll in architecture school, but was unsuccessful. He was unable to find a job to adequately support himself and he faced a complicated college admission process there. Because he did not graduate from the Mexican educational system, universities would not easily admit him. Ernesto detailed what happened to his brother upon his return to the United States:

He got a job in a restaurant. He hated it so much... he came to the first day and they only paid him like 20 bucks for an 8-hour doing-everything kind of job... If it wasn't because of his status, he would've gone into college right away. Cuz that's what he wanted to do, I mean, he was always active in school. He got "Student of the Month" like two months in [West L.A. II High]... I hope I don't go through the same thing (undocumented).

For undocumented students like Ernesto who saw older siblings excel in school and then be stuck in undesirable jobs with few options, the biggest fear is that they will have the same fate. Having witnessed the harsh consequences of

various countries and backgrounds (Passel, 2005). My focus here, however, is solely on the experiences of Latino undocumented youth who account for the majority of the undocumented youth population.

13 By "documented" I am referring to both 1.5 and second generation youth. For the second generation, nativity in the US guarantees citizenship. For the 1.5 generation, some were able to legalize their status through family reunification and asylum laws. I do not mean to homogenize important differences between the 1.5 and second generation (see for example Rumbaut, 1994), but because the basis of the comparison is legal status, I consider them a single group for the purposes of this paper.

14 The direct quotations I include in this paper are either from transcripts of tape-recorded interviews or from field notes I recorded immediately after the conversations took place. I have edited some excerpts slightly for clarity. These edits are not significant for my interpretive purposes.



15 These further break down as follows: six documented immigrants (five Salvadoran and one Mexican); and six native-born children of immigrants (four Salvadoran and two Guatemalan).

16 “Well-funded” schools offer Advanced Placement courses, efficient college counseling, and at least a quarter of their student population is expected to go on to four-year colleges and universities. “Poorly funded” schools, on the other hand, only send 10 percent or less of their students to four-year colleges.

17 This is based on requirements for admission into the California State University System.

18 I use pseudonyms throughout the paper to preserve anonymity.

undocumented status, his brother’s experiences serve as a disturbing model for his own future.

Adrian, who migrated at the age of seven years and performed well in school as a child, describes the disbelief when he learned from older relatives that he would not be able to attend college:

[*What has high school been like for you? ...*] Uh, it’s pretty good. I had dreams of being a doctor, just like anybody else would. And I was doing pretty well. It wasn’t hard. I did all my homework. And I got almost straight A’s my freshman year. So I was doing pretty well at school, and then I found out, somebody told me, “Ey dude, you can’t go to college.” I was like, “what?!” [*Who told you that?*] It was my cousin. He was two years older than me and he was doing pretty well in school too, but then he found out and he started going down (undocumented).

Interestingly, Adrian takes my general question about high school as an opportunity to speak specifically about the negative effects of being undocumented. Learning of his cousin’s fate became directly relevant to him because they share undocumented status. Adrian later went on to tell me about his sudden drop in grades and his subsequent struggle to get back on track:

And then after that, I just felt really messed up. I didn’t concentrate on school as much as I used to. [*So what happened with your grades?*] My freshman year I had almost straight A’s. My sophomore year I had one B, a C, D’s mostly. And then, once I got to junior year, I said, okay, get over it, try to recover... I have recovered emotionally, but I’m trying to be the same guy I was before, hardworking and everything. Cuz I always promise myself, “this semester I’m gonna get straight A’s.” But then, no, I get D’s. [*Why?*] I don’t know, laziness I guess (undocumented).

Sadly, rather than blaming the policies that cheat him out of college, he blames himself. He learned of the fate that awaited him from an older cousin and understood immediately that his status would be a barrier.

Thus, many of the educational and professional models undocumented youth follow, especially among family members, are also undocumented and have already had to face the legal barriers of their own status. The undocumented status of close role models can trump the aspirations of undocumented youth in a way that does not apply to documented students.

## What happens after high school

Undocumented youth must face the most difficult challenge associated with their status upon high school graduation, when educational expenses make college inaccessible. Up until this point, their social and economic experiences – and therefore their incorporation processes – have been very similar to those of

their documented peers in both their neighborhoods and their schools. Many have internalized the US values and expectations that equate academic success to economic rewards and stability. Ironically, their social incorporation sensitizes them further to the contradiction that, despite their academic success, they are barred from the opportunity to integrate legally, educationally, and economically in US society.

During one of my earliest exposures to the challenges faced by undocumented students, I was conversing with two students and an instructor at a community-based organization. We talked about college and how best to prepare. Unaware of their undocumented status, I persuaded them to consider four-year colleges straight out of high school. A seemingly standard conversation about college leads these two students, Jackie and Jovani, to talk about some of the barriers they face. In the following example, Kim, who teaches the art course at the community-based organization, the students and I are all just getting to know one another during a short break:

Jovani asked me what other colleges were nearby. I mentioned all the Claremonts and then I mentioned Occidental. "Isn't that a private college?" he asked. "Yeah," I told him. Then he asked, "Those are more expensive, aren't they?" "Yeah," I said, "but you really shouldn't let the money thing stop you from applying because private schools generally have a lot of money for scholarships." He looked down at that point and Jackie looked up at him and asked, "Do you have papers?" Kim and I looked at each other, suddenly realizing that we hadn't stopped to think about that during the conversation. Jovani looked up at Jackie and hesitated, then shaking his head, "no." "Me neither." She told him quickly, almost in an upbeat tone. "But aren't you Nicaraguan or Guatemalan or something? Can't you get NACARA?" He shrugged his shoulders and she just continued talking, "Because they have a lot more stuff for you guys. They don't have anything for Mexicans because they say that we supposedly don't have as many reasons to be here." (fieldnotes) (undocumented).<sup>19</sup>

Not only are they forced to be aware of economic limitations, "Those are more expensive, aren't they?" but they also have to be concerned about documentation problems. Although Jackie is only beginning to get to know Jovani, she clearly knows enough about this problem to guess correctly that his physical reactions are related to documentation. By asking directly, "Do you have papers?," and later declaring she too is undocumented, "almost in an upbeat tone," she demonstrates some level of comfort with the issue. Jovani, on the other hand, hesitates and only responds non-verbally, expressing the difficulty and embarrassment that can also be associated with being undocumented. Jackie, more confident, presses the issue and reveals her knowledge in this area by bringing up NACARA, a law that grants asylum to certain Central American immigrants. When she presents her own more precarious position as a Mexican

<sup>19</sup> For example, the Nicaraguan Adjustment and Central American Relief Act (NACARA), asylum applications under the American Baptist Churches (ABC) Settlement Agreement, and Temporary Protected Status may be options only for certain Central American groups.

20 Asylum applicants and temporary protected status recipients, while not categorized as legal residents, have greater protections than full undocumented immigrants.

national, it becomes clear that these students are forced, even at their young age, to be aware of rules, policy, and consequences.<sup>20</sup> It appears, then, that these concerns about structural and legal barriers affect students' behavior and decisions regarding their education.

Raquel, a second-generation student, poignantly presents the dilemmas facing her undocumented friend as graduation nears. Without papers, her friend will not be able to attend college, nor can she work legally. Raquel wonders,

What is she gonna do? I mean, she's gone to school all this time, and she won't even be able to get a job! Cuz she's not gonna want to get a job cleaning houses or whatever. Then what did she go to school for all this time? (fieldnotes) (2nd generation).

There is a sense of urgency in her friend's situation as high school comes to an end. This account highlights the indignation of learning that despite having followed the rules, this student, like many other undocumented students, will have few opportunities available to her. For Mexican and Central American women who migrate as adults, getting "a job cleaning houses" is common and even acceptable (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001), but not for young women who were largely raised and educated here.

Andres, a member of a mixed-status family who was granted legal residency only a month before high school graduation, was completing his third year of college when I interviewed him. He reflects on how being undocumented shaped his older brother's experience:

I feel bad for him. He worked even harder than I did in high school, and he should've been graduating from college by now. He even got better grades than me, but just because of his papers he can't go. [*What is he doing now?*] He works at a warehouse, packing and unpacking things from a truck all day... It makes me feel really bad, guilty because he deserves it as much as I do... but I'm the only one who gets to go [to college] (documented 1.5).

This narrative highlights that undocumented status is not a fixed characteristic, however, it can play a crucial role in the lives of students if they are not able to regularize prior to high school graduation or soon after. Andres' older brother, unable to regularize his status in time, was unable to transfer his high school academic success into higher education and is instead forced to perform menial labor. Andres, on the other hand, was granted residency at a critical moment in his life, allowing him to pursue higher education.

A lack of desirable opportunities after high school is not uncommon among my respondents. Children of immigrants do not look forward to becoming mechanics, housekeepers, and dishwashers like their older siblings and parents. With proof that nothing they deem worthwhile awaits them after high school, many students find it difficult to remain motivated, regardless of legal status. Unlike their documented peers, however, undocumented students face

diminishing opportunities after high school. Because they are not eligible for most scholarships or loans, few can afford to attend even community college; a four-year degree is virtually unattainable. Furthermore, their undocumented status complicates their ability to get what they consider desirable jobs. Less visible but no less important are the large numbers of students who, even with promising educational records, drop out of high school when they learn of their likely fate (Leovy, 2001).

Upon learning that their undocumented status can limit their future, these students often struggle with the contradictions. In most cases, they have been in the United States since childhood and have incorporated as much as their legal resident peers. The academic experiences and expectations have been the same, but upon graduation, the options for undocumented students are greatly reduced. This can often create disillusionment for undocumented students, many of whom have already internalized US values that guarantee upward mobility for those who succeed academically.

I kind of envy those people who are legal, who qualified for a four-year [college]. Because I remember seeing them in class, especially in math class. I mean, they were less competitive than I was, and you know, you just feel like, why are they going [to college] and not me? Why can't we both go? (undocumented).

Ernesto notes his own merits in comparison to his documented and US citizen peers to emphasize the irony in the situation. Undocumented status is the direct barrier to fulfilling his academic goals.

Undocumented youth expressed frustrations that are specific to their undocumented status. They elaborated on the various legal and economic limitations they confront most notably upon leaving high school. Five of the interviewees who had already graduated from high school were still undocumented upon graduation. Two of them decided not to bother applying to college because they knew they could not afford the higher tuition even if admitted. The other three applied and were admitted to several campuses of the University of California and the California State University, but were unable to attend because they were not legally eligible for financial aid and their families could not afford tuition. All three had to settle for the more affordable community college in hopes of one day transferring to a four-year college or university.

Amanda, who had been admitted to the most selective campuses of the University of California, had already completed a year at community college when I interviewed her. Frustrated that she was unable to attend a four-year college straight out of high school, she had this to say about community college:

It's like a repeat of high school. I'm taking 6 classes this semester, getting straight A's. And I work like 30 hours a week! It's not hard! [*How does that*

*make you feel?]* (long silence, still crying) Oh my god, like I wasted my years in high school! Cuz I'm basically doing it all over again! (recently was granted legal residency).

The lack of an academic challenge was a reminder of the experience that had been robbed from her. Janet, who was also admitted to college out of high school but could not attend due to legal status, spent three years at a community college before she was granted legal residency. She reapplied for admission and is currently a stellar student at the University of California. These students' experiences are painfully common. I found that many undocumented youth are highly aware of these experiences and therefore of the limitations in their futures.

Documented students, on the other hand, do not feel as constrained. Even students who did poorly in high school but managed to graduate were able to go on to college and receive federal and state need-based financial aid. Raquel, a second-generation student who did poorly in high school, is very happy with her current academic experience at a private art institute. Despite graduating with a self-reported 1.0 GPA, her family's low income helped her qualify for financial aid in the form of federal loans to pursue further education. Anthony, another second-generation student, has a similar story. Despite his poor academic performance, Anthony is now attending a trade school, receiving financial aid, and working in retail. He is much more focused on academics than he ever was in high school, especially because he knows that a promising career awaits him. Had he or Raquel been undocumented, they would not have had a chance to pursue these opportunities without financial assistance.<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, for high-achieving undocumented students still in high school, their status creates uncertainties about whether their efforts will pay off and what alternative routes will eventually lead them to college.

Although adolescents commonly think about and discuss future goals and aspirations, these were sensitive topics among undocumented youth. Without a valid social security number or legal residency, they are unable to apply for jobs or internships, they do not qualify for social services, and if they choose to leave the country, they risk not being able to re-enter. It is not surprising, then, that for most undocumented students, thoughts about their future are automatically connected to their legal status. Only after resolving documentation problems can these students think about pursuing their goals.

### **Undocumented students: Doomed to long-term poverty?**

These students' stories are not unique. Los Angeles-area high schools are populated with large numbers of undocumented students in similar situations, as confirmed by personal accounts of many teachers. All the students face socioeconomic hardships, regardless of legal status. Dependent on low-wage

21 This is not to say that documented Latino youth will always easily and automatically proceed to upward mobility through traditional means. The alarmingly low educational attainment levels of Central American and Mexican students is manifested in their dropout rate of about 40 percent in California and as much as 70 percent in certain inner-city Latino-dominated high schools in Los Angeles (Rumbaut and Cornelius, 1995).

unskilled labor, their families are restricted to crowded living conditions in often dangerous working class neighborhoods. The local high schools tend to be highly neglected sites of violence and general apathy. Magnet schools and relatively well-funded public schools, however, are equally available to students regardless of their legal status. In general, given the comparable socioeconomic backgrounds, documented and undocumented students experience academic barriers and opportunities similarly in grades K-12. Prior to high school graduation, then, incorporation patterns of all children of immigrants tend to be parallel.

One aspect distinguishing some undocumented youth from their documented and US citizen peers concerns family role models for educational and professional success. Although all the youth in the study reported a lack of positive educational and professional role models, undocumented youth were particularly disadvantaged in this respect. Cousins and older siblings who share undocumented status often modeled the concrete limitations of their status and stunted any possibility of a positive effect. Specifically, witnessing the harsh post-high school consequences of undocumented status in the lives of close family members can disillusion undocumented students and lower their aspirations.

Although undocumented status leads to a decline in educational motivation for some students while still in high school, it has the greatest negative effects upon high school graduation. Documented students, regardless of school performance, are able to attend community college or work legally, even if only in the low-wage service sector. Undocumented students, on the other hand, must struggle economically to attend community college or to obtain menial jobs. Even when admitted to selective universities, they rarely attend because, without financial assistance, their families cannot afford tuition. Promising and previously high-achieving students – many of whom have internalized the US values of meritocracy and upward mobility through hard work – are forced instead to lower their aspirations, gain unlawful employment in low-wage industries, and often end their educational pursuits.

### **Conclusions: Context of reception and incorporation**

Immigrants' incorporation into US society has long been a central sociological concern, with particular attention paid to the second and subsequent generations (Gordon, 1964; Park, 1950; Portes and Rumbaut, 1996). The children of today's immigrants are once again an important and sizeable population. Much like for their turn-of-the-century counterparts, various factors – including socioeconomic status and neighborhood resources – will influence the progress and incorporation patterns available to different groups (Portes and Rumbaut, 2001). Undocumented status, however, distinguishes contemporary immigration (DeSipio and de la Garza, 1998; De Genova, 2004;

Ngai, 2004). Because it establishes an exclusionary context of reception that heavily limits groups' social, political, educational, and occupational opportunities, undocumented status deserves closer examination as a central determinant of contemporary incorporation patterns (Portes and Manning, 1986; Rumbaut, 1997; Portes and Rumbaut, 2001).

In their segmented assimilation framework, Portes and associates define context of reception to include racial stratification, spatial segregation, and government policies of the host society (Portes and Zhou, 1993; Portes and Rumbaut, 2001). Here I focus only on governmental policies that specifically negate opportunities to immigrant groups. I argue that despite various similarities with other children of immigrants, undocumented immigrants face the worst possible context of reception because their status keeps them from incorporating legally, if not socially, in to the institutions of this country. The lack of legitimate paths toward higher education and professionalization establishes bleak futures for undocumented youth. Segmented assimilation theory predicts that without these legitimate structural paths, undocumented youth will remain in the lower segments of the economy. And even though the second and third generation will be documented simply by virtue of being born here, as descendants of current undocumented youth, it is also difficult to be optimistic about their future.<sup>22</sup> The current bifurcated labor market may limit future generations to reside in impoverished inner cities where several factors will continue to limit their prospects (Portes and Zhou, 1993; Wilson, 1997; Portes and Rumbaut, 2001). A more positive context of reception, through legalization, must be established to increase their life chances in this country.

The legalization process for undocumented youth is a complicated one that depends on their parents, the Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services, and public policy makers. Under current law, many undocumented children of immigrants have no means of obtaining legal status, despite having lived in the United States for many years. Some of the students in my study, however, are mobilizing around issues of access to higher education. Arguably, their personal narratives helped ensure the success of Assembly Bill 540 that qualifies many undocumented youth in California for a waiver of out-of-state tuition (Seif, 2004).

Assembly Bill 540 has increased undocumented students' access to higher education. However, most students are attending community college despite earning admission to the University of California and the California State University systems (Abrego, 2004). Without financial aid, their families still cannot afford tuition at four-year institutions. AB 540 in California and similar legislation in other states are important first steps toward justice for these students, but more needs to be done. The Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act, is a federal bill aimed to provide immigration relief to undocumented students. The passage of this bill would grant many youth access to legal residency and federal financial aid – thus removing legal

22 However, I want to stress that my data cannot speak directly to this question as I have only interviewed 1.5 and 2nd generation youth.

and economic barriers to higher education and increasing the likelihood of incorporation patterns that lead to upward mobility.

Socially, undocumented youth are indisputably full-fledged members of US society – even if only at the lower rungs of the economic ladder. After having been educated in our schools, they speak English (often with more ease than Spanish), envision their futures here, and powerfully internalize US values and expectations of merit. However, there are no available structural paths for those who excel academically. Paradoxically, their efforts to adapt and contribute economically are met with legal obstacles. Rather than valuing these youth as important societal resources, current policies restrict their options and curb the transformative potential undocumented youth have in their communities. Without full legal rights, undocumented youth will be barred from the traditional paths of upward mobility available to other immigrants throughout US history.

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