

To Reveal or Conceal: How Diverse Undocumented Youth Navigate Legal Status Disclosure

Sociological Perspectives

1–17

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DOI: 10.1177/0731121418775092

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Abstract

Existing literature illuminates the multiple barriers young undocumented immigrants face, yet we know little about how these challenges vary among undocumented youth. This article explores variation in how undocumented youth “manage” their legal status in the educational context. Drawing on interviews with Latina/o, Asian American and Pacific Islander (API), and black undocumented young adults in California, I analyze the factors influencing when and how youth decide to reveal or conceal legal status from school personnel or peers, and the educational consequences of such decisions. I find undocumented students’ decisions to hide legal status, while practical, can constrain social network formation and limit access to academic resources. However, decisions to reveal or conceal legal status are not made uniformly but vary by political and social context, and access to support within co-ethnic social networks. Finally, knowing other undocumented immigrants is an important resource for undocumented youth as they navigate the educational system.

Keywords

racial and ethnic minorities, education, undocumented youth, immigrants

More than 11 million undocumented immigrants live in the United States, around 20 percent of whom came to the country as children and adolescents (Passel and Cohn 2011). These “1.5-generation” (Rumbaut 2004) undocumented young people often spend their formative childhood years in the United States, including attending K–12 schooling. An important body of qualitative literature calls attention to the challenges and barriers faced by undocumented youth (e.g., Abrego 2006, 2011; Clark-Ibáñez 2015; Gonzales 2011, 2016). However, we still know relatively little about how the social and political factors shaping immigrants’ arrival and settlement in the United States vary among undocumented young people.

This paper seeks to shed light on some of the heterogeneity in undocumented young people’s experiences through an analysis of how undocumented youth “manage” their legal status in educational settings. I examine when and under what circumstances diverse undocumented youth reveal or conceal their status from school-based adults (teachers, counselors, and administrators)

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and peers, what factors influence these decisions, and how these decisions shape social and educational outcomes. Drawing on interview data from 112 undocumented Latina/o, Asian American and Pacific Islander (API), and black young adults in California, I find that daily decisions regarding status disclosure can vary based on several inter-related factors, including the political and social context into which undocumented children arrive and integrate into U.S. society and the level of perceived support from their co-ethnic social networks.

These findings build on and expand several areas of literature. First, I draw from theories of immigrant incorporation, which describe the key individual and structural characteristics that influence immigrants' mobility. I utilize the concept of "modes of incorporation" from segmented assimilation theory (Portes and Zhou 1993) to address how the context of reception (including the manner of arrival to the United States and the local political and social context) shapes undocumented youths' relative comfort with revealing and/or concealing their status, thereby contributing to differences in access to educational resources and institutional participation. Youth who experience hostile social and political contexts of reception are more likely to conceal their legal status, which in turn can lead to negative educational consequences, including lack of information about how to continue education, fear of seeking out resources, and even educational desistance (Jefferies 2014). Second, my study extends research on undocumented youths' social networks (e.g., Cebulko 2014; Enriquez 2011; Patler 2014) by demonstrating that undocumented young adults from different national-origin backgrounds have distinct experiences of being undocumented: Some youth are insulated by their co-ethnic social networks while others are isolated. Third, and relatedly, I show that undocumented people can be a critical resource for one other, perhaps especially for youth from national-origin groups in which undocumented legal status is less common. Finally, by presenting a qualitative study of legal status across different undocumented immigrant groups (Latina/o, black, and API-identifying), I make an empirical contribution to a field that has focused mainly on Latina/o undocumented immigrants.

Given the role of schools as integrating institutions and drivers of social mobility, my focus here is on educational experiences. However, my findings have applications outside of the educational context. For instance, lessons from youth's decisions to reveal or conceal their status in educational settings could also be applied to their labor market experiences or expressions of civic engagement. My results suggest that undocumented youths' experiences are shaped much more significantly by their diverse backgrounds and social position than has been previously understood. Although my study design does not allow generalizability, the results suggest that researchers and educators should consider not only the broad impacts of legal status but also how experiences of being undocumented may vary across diverse groups of individuals. In an era of increased anti-immigrant sentiment and criminalization of undocumented immigrants, understanding how undocumented youth respond to the challenges imposed by their legal status may be more important than ever before.

Theoretical and Empirical Background

Contexts of Reception

Segmented assimilation theory predicts that multiple factors shape immigrants' trajectories in their pursuit of mobility (Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Portes and Zhou 1993). One component of the modes of incorporation is the context of reception, which includes the manner and context of arrival to the host country and the policies and levels of prejudice of the host society. Cecilia Menjivar (2006, 2008) extends this concept to argue that legality and legal status structure immigrants' arrival and reception—including their educational experiences—and must be considered in analyses of immigrant integration.

A key component of the context of reception is the social and policy context into which immigrants settle. Within this framework, a prejudiced social reception—such as that generally experienced by undocumented immigrants—and/or “hostile” policy context can lead to downward mobility (Portes and Rumbaut 2006). Existing studies have analyzed how varying local policy contexts differentially shape undocumented youths’ opportunities and sense of belonging (Cebulko and Silver 2016; García 2013; Gonzales and Ruiz 2014). However, it is unclear whether the lived experience of being undocumented, including decisions to reveal or conceal status, is experienced uniformly *within* local policy contexts.

In the present study, I analyze data from youth who settled in the same place—California—during two very different political periods. In this way, I expose how the impacts of legal status are not static, but can vary by structural circumstances, even in the same geographic location. Study participants grew up during two very different policy climates, the first characterized by a vastly exclusionary local policy climate and the second by relatively inclusive policies. The first group of children were attending K–12 education in California during the era of Proposition 187. This ballot initiative, passed by voters in 1994, sought to require police, health care professionals, and teachers to verify and report the immigration status of all individuals, including children, among other provisions. Although a federal district court judge barred its implementation, Proposition 187 created pervasive fear in immigrant communities and “set the tone for many laws that followed” (García 2013:1852). In contrast, a second group of respondents in the present study grew up in a subsequent era of pro-immigrant policy in California. These respondents’ schooling experiences took place after the implementation of Assembly Bill (A.B.) 540, which passed in 2001 and allows undocumented students to pay instate tuition rates in public colleges and universities in California.

It is likely that these differing policy contexts shape the experiences of undocumented youth. For instance, restrictive policy contexts can alter the ways that immigrants engage with institutions, even causing them to change the course of their daily lives to avoid detection (Núñez and Heyman 2007). What is more, we might expect undocumented youth whose lives have been directly impacted by immigration enforcement measures to experience additional fear about revealing their status (Brabeck and Xu 2010). In contrast, pro-immigrant policies such as instate tuition laws could give young immigrants a sense of legal legitimacy (Abrego 2008), which may make them more comfortable disclosing their status and therefore increasingly able to seek resources.

Importantly, age of arrival can also influence this process: That is, young people who came to the United States as small children may be less likely to be externally identified as immigrants (let alone undocumented immigrants) and therefore also less likely to be put into positions in which they have to make decisions about whether to reveal or conceal their status. Conversely, many undocumented immigrants, including many 1.5-generation immigrants, settle in the United States after surviving treacherous and life-threatening journeys (Urrea 2005). In her research on Central American immigrants, Leisy J. Abrego (2011) documents that *adult* undocumented immigrants (but not 1.5-generation youth) vividly recalled their precarious migration journeys to the United States and made them fearful of speaking up about their struggles or making claims for their rights. I build on Abrego’s important work to examine how fear of discovery can also shape the 1.5-generation’s feelings about revealing and concealing status in the educational context.

The Educational Context and Co-ethnic Social Networks

Schools are an important site in which to contextualize the experiences of immigrant youth, given their role as integrating institutions and drivers of social mobility. The Migration Policy Institute (2014) estimates that 355,000 undocumented children and young adults between the

ages of three and 24 are enrolled in California schools. A growing body of survey research on undocumented youth's educational outcomes has demonstrated educational penalties for undocumented youth in terms of high school dropout rates and college enrollment (Greenman and Hall 2013; Patler, 2017; Terriquez 2014), leading to the conclusion that "legal status may act as a stratifying force at multiple stages in the educational pipeline" (Greenman and Hall 2013:1486–87). Qualitative research focused primarily on undocumented college students who are affiliated with immigrant rights groups has zeroed in on the mechanisms that might explain disparate educational outcomes (Abrego 2006, 2011; Clark-Ibáñez 2015; Gonzales 2011; Jefferies 2014; Menjivar and Abrego 2012). This research has documented that legal status can cause undocumented youth to feel isolated and unable to participate in social life. For example, Gonzales finds that students' decisions to "conceal or reveal" their status to high school personnel can impact teacher-student relationships (Gonzales 2010:279). Likewise, in a study of undocumented youths' experiences moving through the educational pipeline, Marisol Clark-Ibáñez (2015) describes how some undocumented youth were so fearful of discovery (and the corresponding threat of deportation) that they did not participate in extracurricular or social activities.

As is the case with most students, undocumented youth likely benefit from access to "really significant others" who can provide educational guidance and mentorship and "possess the necessary knowledge and experience to guide the student in the right direction" (Portes and Fernández-Kelly 2008:26). Really significant others include teachers, counselors, or leaders of educational programs who can provide "exceptionally good mentoring" (Smith 2008) and information about higher education. In an analysis of undocumented youth in a new immigrant destination, Alexis Silver (2012) finds that undocumented youth report mostly positive experiences of support from trusted teachers or counselors. Yet even the most supportive mentors may lack the necessary information to provide *legal status-specific* resources such as information about scholarships available to undocumented students, or information about how to submit the necessary paperwork to apply for college as an undocumented student. In these circumstances, undocumented youth may become invaluable resources *for each other* by providing sympathy, support, and status-specific information about educational opportunities (Cebulko 2014; Enriquez 2011; Patler 2014).

However, access to other undocumented immigrant significant others likely varies across diverse groups of immigrants. While Mexicans and Central Americans make up 71 percent of the undocumented population in the United States, only about 13 percent are from Asia, 3 percent from Africa, and 2 percent from the Caribbean (Zong, Batalova, and Hallock 2018). In a study of API, black, and Latina/o undocumented and formerly undocumented young adults, Caitlin Patler (2014) found that API and black undocumented youth tended to have fewer undocumented co-ethnic peers, compared with Latinas/os, and as a result reported feeling more isolated in educational settings. Patler advances the concept of "racialized illegality" to describe the ways in which undocumented young adults can have distinct experiences of being undocumented based on the intersections of their race and legal status.

Data and Method

This paper draws on 112 structured and unstructured interviews with undocumented young adults, developed across three research studies between 2009 and 2016. All three studies attempted to recruit participants from diverse racial and national-origin backgrounds as an important additive to the literature which has mainly focused on the experiences of Latina/o undocumented young adults. Due to the sensitive nature of information about individuals' legal status, the first sample ($n = 32$), like the majority of studies of undocumented young adults, relied on snowball sampling originating with members of undocumented youth organizations. Given that organizational members may share particular sets of educational experiences, I made efforts to

recruit participants who were not involved in advocacy work. Still, by virtue of their social networks (*vis-à-vis* the recruitment method), participants in this sample may have more access to information about resources available to undocumented youth than other unauthorized immigrants in the same age group.

The second sample included 18 interviews with undocumented youth participants of the 2011–2012 California Young Adult Study (CYAS). The CYAS explores the educational, employment, and civic engagement trajectories of California's diverse young adult population with the goal of identifying social inequalities and institutional resources that might ameliorate these inequalities (Terriquez 2014). The CYAS was one of the earliest surveys to include undocumented young adults as part of a random sample. The first phase of the study was a random digit dial phone survey of 18- to 26-year-olds in California who had completed at least one year of schooling in California before the age of 17. Fifty-four survey respondents were undocumented and many agreed to participate in in-depth follow-up interviews. I was able to recontact and complete an interview with 18 respondents.

The final sample ($n = 62$) included individuals recruited after attending one or more workshops about the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program,¹ hosted by legal service providers, immigrants' rights organizations, and consular offices in Los Angeles. These workshops were free, open to the public, and advertised widely on both Spanish and English news. Following the workshops, 502 undocumented individuals completed a telephone survey and nearly 90% agreed to a follow-up interview. With the goal of helping to illuminate the diversity within the undocumented population, interviewees were selected based on quota sampling of individuals with at least one of the following characteristics: (1) below age 20 or above age 26, (2) no college degree, (3) no activist or community organization experience, or (4) not of Mexican origin.

Across all three studies, participants had attended at least one year of high school in the United States and many were high school graduates and had attended some type of postsecondary education (defined as at least one semester of community college or university). However, few completed a degree beyond high school due to financial constraints imposed by their legal status. All participants were between the ages of 18 and 30 and approximately half were female. Most participants self-identified as Latina/o within the context of U.S. racial categories, with 15 participants identifying as Asian or Pacific Islander, and five as black or African American.² Importantly, these sample sizes are too small to allow broad generalizations. However, they do allow me to generate hypotheses about the impacts of legal status in different co-ethnic social networks. All participants live in California. This local context is important, given California's high density of immigrant and racial minority communities, as well as its history of oscillation between anti- and pro-immigrant policy contexts.

All interviews were conducted in person or over the phone and lasted from 45 minutes to more than two hours. I followed a general interview protocol across all three studies, with questions about family, high school and postsecondary experiences (civic and academic engagement), work experiences, and immigrant background. Interview questions were developed based on existing literature on immigrant integration (e.g., educational outcomes) as well as my own experiences, stemming from over a decade of participation in immigrants' rights organizations in California. Given the legal vulnerability faced by undocumented students, I took several measures to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. For example, interviewees chose the time and location of the interview and all were given the option of a phone interview if they preferred. In advance of the interviews, I provided interviewees with my full name and contact information, a link to my Web site, and information about my background in immigrants' rights work and academic trajectory. In the first and third studies, I worked with members of immigrants' rights organizations to help conduct the interviews. All study procedures were approved by the institutional review board.

The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and anonymized, and then coded and analyzed using Dedoose software. Transcripts were first coded into broad categories and then recoded inductively based on emerging themes, with a particular focus on identifying specific educational challenges and opportunities faced by undocumented youth. In particular, I coded for instances of undocumented youths' decisions to disclose or conceal their status at school (whether from teachers and counselors or from peers). I also coded for the quality of participants' interactions with school-based adults and peers, and instances when legal status might have influenced these interactions. Nonidentifying descriptors (e.g., race, sex, age of arrival to the United States, and other characteristics) were attached to each transcription so I could explore patterns across and between interviews.

Findings

Nearly all respondents reported feeling the need to hide their legal status from school personnel or peers at some point. However, a series of patterns emerged in the data which indicate that several factors influence the likelihood of revealing or concealing status. The context of reception and the co-ethnic social networks influenced these decisions. Finally, for most respondents, knowing other undocumented immigrants is an important resource for navigating the educational system. I describe these findings below and conclude by documenting some of the academic and social consequences of hiding legal status.

Context of Reception

The local policy context, and how it changes over time, influences participants' feelings about talking about their status. Participants who recalled going to school in the era of Proposition 187 learned at a young age to be fearful of revealing their status. Twenty-three-year-old Dolores, from Mexico, fought back tears as she recalled being in elementary school when Proposition 187 passed in California:

I was in elementary school . . . I remember my teachers telling anyone that if you don't have papers you're going to be required to carry some. Everyone was talking about it, so since then I knew that if you're undocumented that means you have to carry stuff.

Proposition 187 made Dolores realize that she was different from other children and solidified her understanding of the potential danger of her status. As an elementary school student, Dolores learned to be afraid to talk about her status. She recounted "practicing" with her mother and brother what to say to avoid discussing her status if it came up with teachers or school administrators.

However, for some younger participants who grew up with pro-immigrant policies like A.B. 540 and the California Dream Act,³ these challenges have changed over time. Nineteen-year-old Jessica, from Mexico, describes how undocumented students who came before her helped educate school personnel about the rights available to undocumented students:

By the time that we got to school . . . people had already educated the counselors in the school and the teachers. But I know of people before me . . . who didn't know what the A.B. 540 was. Counselors would tell students that they couldn't go to school because of their immigration status. . . . [The students] had to educate their counselor what their possibilities were. So I haven't been treated different because I think there were other people that came before me who kind of educated the people in school.

Jessica was able to benefit from a policy context in which California's in-state tuition law had gone into effect and high school counselors had information about it, which made them much more aware of the challenges undocumented students face. In turn, Jessica says, counselors were better prepared to advise undocumented students. That made Jessica more willing to go to those counselors with questions about her postsecondary options as an undocumented student.

The manner of arrival to the United States also influenced decisions to reveal or conceal status. Participants who could recall traumatic border-crossing experiences, or whose families had experienced detention and deportation, described how these experiences influence the ways they approached school and interacted with school personnel and peers. Many participants who came to the United States as adolescents were able to vividly recall traumatic memories of their journeys. In particular, their memories of border-crossing experiences led them to be wary of law enforcement in general, as they had very real fear of ever having to cross the border again. Like the adult Central Americans in Leisy Abrego's (2011) research, these young people reported trying to keep their heads down and their mouths closed to avoid discovery. Consider the following description from Enrique, who crossed the border at age 14 with his mother and two younger sisters:

We weren't really sure where we were going . . . At some point we got to a dirt road . . . the guy told us to run across it, and to hide behind the bushes near the other side. When we finally hid, the guy took a small bush and swept the road erasing our tracks, and his at the same time. He then started to walk faster and told us to keep up, he said he saw the Border Patrol coming, and then he pointed to a big cloud of dust coming towards us. We started to walk faster than before. My mom couldn't carry my sister anymore, and had to make her walk, [but she] couldn't keep up, and [she] fell. The second time she fell, I picked her up and put her in my shoulders just to keep up. I don't know how much time we spent walking, I just know that the trip seemed forever . . . We finally got to small area full of bushes. In the middle of it you could find a lot of empty water bottles. You immediately notice that more people had pass by this area before.

This passage, recounted 12 years after it had occurred, reveals how vividly Enrique remembers his border-crossing experience. He choked up when describing how the *coyotes* (smugglers) leading his family to the United States had treated his mother and sister. He emphasized that he never, *ever*, wanted his family to go through that experience again. Especially during high school, Enrique's memories of his migration experience made him very cautious of revealing his legal status to his friends:

My friends didn't know until we were seniors that I was undocumented . . . I would lie at first. They started planning trips, they started planning activities outside the state . . . I had this feeling like I can't go because what if I fall into a check point, what if the police get me, what's gonna happen? So it was to the point where I sometimes would [lie].

Acutely aware of the dangers of being apprehended, and fearful of the ever having to reenter the country again, Enrique felt safer choosing not to disclose his status.

In a similar manner, participants who had experienced detention or deportation of family members once they had settled in the United States were also quite wary of revealing their own status and often changed the course of their daily lives to avoid exposure. Twenty-four-year-old Sandra, from Mexico, described how her father was stopped by police as he drove home from picking up balloons for his grandson's (Sandra's son) birthday party. When Sandra's father could not show proof of legal residence, he was arrested, detained, and deported a few months later. The family was emotionally and financially devastated by his absence. When Sandra's father attempted to come back into the United States, he was held by a smuggler who demanded thousands of dollars to release him. Sandra spent weeks worried about her father. She recalled:

Sandra: When [my dad] was trying to come back, he called us a couple times that they had kidnapped him over there and that they needed some money to let him go . . . [and when] my dad came back, [he was] like, really skinny. [*Pauses, and then quietly, with sadness*] Like really, really skinny.

Interviewer: Did that make your family scared?

Sandra: Yes. We actually—I mean, we’re all driving without license . . . So we’re still precautions about it, so we try not to drive a lot unless it’s like an emergency, stuff like that, or to work. But every day, once we step out of that house, we pray. My mom does the cross [*signals sign of the crucifix*] and everything.

The experience, and even the threat, of immigration law enforcement can be considered part of a negative context of reception. In Sandra’s case, she and her family changed the course of their daily lives to avoid detection (Núñez and Heyman 2007). This encounter with immigration law enforcement, and the corresponding fear and insecurity it brought to Sandra’s family, negatively impacted her educational aspirations: “it hit me to where I was giving up on everything [in school].”

The impacts of the context of reception were also influenced by age of arrival to the United States. Undocumented youth who came to the United States as babies or very young children were more easily able to “blend in,” and therefore felt they could avoid talking about their status. They regularly mentioned that they could speak English with no audible accent and were able to blend in with their documented peers, therefore escaping confrontations that might come up about immigration status. The following quote illustrates how 21-year-old Wilbur, who came to the United States from El Salvador as a young child, kept his status a secret:

Even though I am not American, I feel American, simply because I’ve been here all my life . . . I studied here, I know my constitutional rights . . . I could name you [U.S.] presidents . . . So, like I said, I mean, normally, most people think I have my documents and everything. Maybe it’s the way I express myself, or the fact that I’m able to just talk to someone without complications or anything like that.

Wilbur associated acculturation (education, understanding of rights, English abilities) with a sense of belonging. His young arrival to the United States impacts both how he views himself—as “American”—as well as his understanding of how others perceive him. He was able to “pass” for being documented because of this cultural fluency.

In contrast, participants who arrived to the United States as teenagers were less able to use acculturation as a tool to avoid detection. They often reported having accents and speaking very little English at first. This often led to certain types of institutional tracking, such as being placed in English Language Learner classes where they felt their immigrant status was more obvious or likely to be revealed. For example, Enrique recalled starting ninth grade (his first year in the United States) and being told by his high school guidance counselor, “Hispanics [in ESL] don’t graduate”. Given Enrique’s general fear of discovery, this counselor’s discriminatory comments only made matters worse. Enrique became increasingly uncomfortable with her knowing anything about his status, and lamented that he would have to go to greater lengths to conceal it.

Co-ethnic Social Networks

Segmented assimilation theorizes the co-ethnic social network as an important source of support for many immigrant youth (Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Portes and Zhou 1993), though structural inequality can limit some networks (Menjívar 2000). In the present study, undocumented students who reported a peer group made up mostly of co-ethnics or of other undocumented people were

more likely to be open about their status among friends (Cebulko 2014; Patler 2014). Take the case of 19-year-old Meliza, who came to the United States from Mexico as a small child:

Interviewer: Did most of your friends [in high school] have their papers?

Meliza: Yeah, they do. I'm the only one [undocumented].

Interviewer: Do you feel comfortable telling them?

Meliza: Yeah, but like only with them. With other people, I don't like to talk about it. It's just like my personal stuff . . . Well, some of my friends are Hispanics . . . and one or two of their family, they don't have papers, like their parents. Maybe they were born here, [or] their siblings [were born here], but their parents were not, so they can understand. I feel more comfortable with people that can understand me.

In this case, Meliza felt that although she was the only undocumented person in her group of friends, they were able to understand her because of their shared ethnic background and the relative composition of undocumented immigrants within it. Nora and Sylvia, both from Mexico, expressed similar sentiments. Twenty-two-year-old Nora explained:

I have friends that are undocumented, but most of them are citizens of the United States, but *they're still Latinos*. It's the same, we go through some of the same challenges but I just have to work harder sometimes. (Emphasis added)

Twenty-eight-year-old Sylvia echoed this sentiment:

I need to trust the person in order to tell her . . . I'm not just gonna be talkative, "oh you know, I'm undocumented!" . . . Once I get to know them, I tell them, like my friend . . . maybe because she was *Latina también [also Latina]*. Yeah, just *más confianza [more trust]*.

In contrast, 23-year-old Jeremiah came to the United States from Panama as a child and was the only undocumented person in his family. He grew up in a black community, spoke English at home, and identified racially as black, though described also feeling "connected" to Latino culture given his Central American origin. He lamented that no one he knew could relate to his situation. Looking down at his hands, he confessed that he had never told anyone in high school or college about his status, and even stayed away from activities because of it:

I was never really trying to get involved that much at the school . . . I didn't trust nobody, so I didn't ever try to do anything. I was just trying to go to school, get my education, and get out.

Jeremiah described his life in high school as a "web of lies" that he felt he had to tell to avoid discovery:

To tell you the truth, I've been lying for a long time . . . even my best friend—my best friend ever since preschool, I didn't even tell him until a year or two ago. . . . Yeah, it's like, I would think that would be my best friend and I would tell him, but I'm just so embarrassed of it.

Although his best friend now knows about his legal status, Jeremiah can still count on one hand the people with whom he has shared this information.

Many non-Latinas/os reported similar feelings of isolation. Samuel, a 24-year-old undocumented student from Indonesia, told me, "I know there have been some Asians that are more understanding, but when it comes to undocumented status, it's something you don't say, it's just—you don't talk about it." Colleen, an undocumented university student from South Korea,

agreed. She cried as she told me that besides her family and one best friend, she had never told anyone about her status; she had even hidden it from her boyfriend and friends in her church group. She expressed deep dismay about feeling like she constantly had something to hide, like she was the only one in her situation, with no one to talk to.

Co-ethnic Networks and the Role of Undocumented Peers

Access to other undocumented people can be a critical resource in the social networks of undocumented youth, helping them access particular forms of social capital (Enriquez 2011). This is especially important for undocumented youth who come from racial and ethnic groups in which undocumented status is less common. Several participants described other undocumented people as mentors and bridges to resources who can help them navigate the tough waters of their legal status. This often softened the fears of discovery, especially when these individuals had succeeded academically, and provided hope that educational or employment success is possible. Twenty-one-year-old Nancy, from Mexico, identified a friend who was able to go to college and therefore was an important source of inspiration and information:

She's a manager at McDonalds. She also doesn't have papers. But she managed to go to college and was able to juggle both things at once effectively. So she was able to take her courses and get a job and earn enough money to do certain things.

Nineteen-year-old Dulce, from Mexico, described her mentor similarly:

I think she has made a very positive influence because she's like me: she doesn't have papers. She was born in Mexico. She went to [Community College]. She just graduated from there . . . She has taught me things [about college] that I never knew.

Often these mentors provided resources that specifically helped undocumented students think about their options for postsecondary education. For example, Meliza graduated from high school and wanted to take classes at a local community college. After going to a guidance counselor who could not provide any resources specific to undocumented students, Meliza turned to her undocumented cousin:

Meliza: [The counselor] never talked about the programs that they have. Nothing.

Interviewer: How did you find out about [A.B. 540]?

Meliza: My cousin, she went before me. She's like twenty-three, so she knows already. And since she goes to the same community college I go to, she told me about A.B. 540 . . . she had the same problem as me, she was not born here.

Most Latina/o respondents recalled co-ethnic mentors who were also undocumented and therefore could provide specific advice for navigating educational resources. However, as Jeremiah, Samuel, and Colleen's stories demonstrated above, this was not often the case for API and black respondents who described feeling very alone within their co-ethnic social networks. The same was true for Benjamin, an 18-year-old black undocumented immigrant from Belize, who reported feeling extremely isolated from his co-ethnic peer group. He went to a mostly African American high school and knew no other undocumented people from his country. He described trying to hide his immigration status on his enrollment paperwork:

Benjamin: When I was in high school I was asked to [fill out some forms], when they ask you about your family and stuff. I didn't want to give no information out.

Interviewer: Why not?

Benjamin: ‘Cause my family, they’d say “don’t be telling anyone [about your immigration status], they’re not gonna help you . . . things are supposed to stay in the family.” . . . Like I said, I knew some [people from my country] there [at my high school] but a lot of them, a lot of them had papers from their families.

Benjamin went on to describe being teased and ridiculed by the few peers he decided to tell about his experiences. Finally, he sought out a community organization where he met other undocumented youth—all Latinas/os—who were “in the same situation” as he was:

I had a whole bunch of messed up experiences [at school]. I had to shut down. I only told people when it was getting really overwhelming and I had to get it off my chest or *it was somebody who was here from a different country or was maybe in the same situation as me.* (Emphasis added)

Ultimately, Benjamin was able to find support, mentorship, and friendship from Latina/o students who shared his legal status background even though they did not share his racial background.

Benjamin, Dulce, Nancy, and Meliza’s experiences are examples of how undocumented youth benefit from the guidance and support of other undocumented immigrants. They often discussed these individuals as equally or more important to their future planning than teachers or counselors who either did not have the information necessary to mentor them or whom they did not trust with information about their legal status. Access to other undocumented immigrant youth was an especially critical resource for non-Latina/o students who feel they cannot draw support from their co-ethnic network.

Constraints on Academic Resources

I have shown that legal status influences youth’s daily decisions about revealing their status. In this final section, I describe how decisions to hide legal status—while practical to avoid detection—can lead to an array of negative consequences (Clark-Ibáñez 2015). Indeed, these decisions can ultimately constrain social network formation and access to academic resources. I begin with the story of Jayson, a 20-year-old from Indonesia who confessed that he was so fearful of the consequences of revealing his legal status (and that of his family) that he did not seek out any academic counseling during high school, even though it was available:

I’m almost positive [my immigration status] has an impact on every aspect of my life. It’s not about these stuff like not having a job or anything. It’s in my everyday interactions, it’s in my vocabulary, it’s in my everything . . . Honestly, in high school I spoke to no counselor, I had no counseling in anything about college.

Too scared to reveal his legal status, Jayson never discussed his options for college with any teacher, counselor, or friend. As a result, he felt vastly unprepared to apply for college when he finished high school. Nancy is another example. She described herself as a student who “everyone expected to go to college.” However, while in high school she was so concerned about revealing her status that she lied to teachers and peers about why she did not enroll in college after high school. She became increasingly less confident asking for college resources from her teachers; in the end she described the college application process as “going out to sea with no map.”

For many youth, the feeling of needing to hide status extended past high school and into post-secondary education. Consider the case of Sylvia, a 28-year-old undocumented college graduate, originally from Mexico. Unable to afford a four-year university directly out of high school, Sylvia attended a community college and was eventually able to enroll in a four-year university.

Afterward, she enrolled in a joint credential-master's degree program to become a teacher. However, one of the program's requirements was to work as a student teacher. During the application process for student teacher positions, Sylvia discovered she would have to submit fingerprints to work in a K–12 school. Too afraid to reveal her legal status, Sylvia felt that she was left with no choice but to drop out:

I feel sad sometimes because I can't teach, although I have my credential . . . I really can't do anything . . . I really got frustrated and I just quit everything . . . why am I going to school if I'm going to end up working in a factory? You don't really need an education to go and work in a factory or be a cashier . . . most of those jobs that others—like my dad or my aunt or my uncles—used to do because they didn't have documents either . . . so I was thinking “what do I need to go to school for?”

At the time of the interview, years after leaving the credential program, Sylvia was working in a low-wage job, struggling to support herself and her family. She still had been unable to achieve her dream of becoming a teacher.

Discussion

Drawing on 112 interviews with undocumented young adults in California, this study analyzed one type of response to the challenges of undocumented legal status—youths' decisions to reveal or conceal their legal status to educators and peers in school settings—and how these experiences vary by context. Consistent with previous research, my results indicate that the need to conceal legal status—while practical for many youth—can ultimately constrain social network formation and access to academic resources for undocumented students (Clark-Ibáñez 2015; Enriquez 2011; Gonzales 2010; Jefferies 2014; Patler 2014). Undocumented youth described going to great efforts to avoid talking to teachers and counselors about legal status. Some went as far as lying about their goals and aspirations so they could avoid the topic altogether. Others concealed their status from peers and even from best friends, leading some to describe their social life as a “web of lies.” The fear of revealing legal status kept some participants from actively participating in internships and other school-based programs. Others, like Sylvia, quit school altogether. Although most respondents felt the need to hide their status at one point or another, my results suggest that decisions to reveal and conceal legal status vary across different contexts.

The segmented assimilation hypothesis, developed in the early 1990s, suggests that immigrant integration and mobility will be influenced by micro-, meso-, and macro-level factors (Portes and Zhou 1993). These modes of incorporation include individual background characteristics, the relative strength of the co-ethnic social network, and the political and social context in the host country. Scholars have built on the segmented assimilation framework to argue that legal status itself is a master status that impacts all other areas of life for immigrants (Gonzales 2016; Menjívar 2006, 2008; Menjívar and Abrego 2012; Menjívar and Lakhani 2016). However, few studies have explored variation in undocumented youths' experiences. I find that immigration laws (and their real and perceived repercussions) shape undocumented youths' contexts of reception and relationships to their co-ethnic social networks in profound, but nonuniform ways. By examining how schooling experiences are impacted by legal status, and also by how legal status interacts with other components of the modes of incorporation, my results help to expand the way migration researchers can think about theories of immigrant integration.

Immigration laws (and, therefore, legal status) shape the integration trajectories of the undocumented 1.5-generation. In anti-immigrant policy contexts, undocumented youth can feel much more fearful about revealing their status, which can influence the ways they interact with peers and school-based adults. Even though the right to K–12 schooling is protected under *Plyler v. Doe*, undocumented youth may feel socially and politically isolated in anti-immigrant policy

contexts and in situations in which their families have experienced detention or deportation. In contrast, in policy climates characterized by more inclusive policies like in-state tuition laws, undocumented youth may feel less fearful accessing resources that might require them to reveal their status.

Yet, undocumented young peoples' experiences are far from uniform. In one of the first studies to examine the heterogeneity within the undocumented community, Abrego (2011) argues that undocumented immigration status is experienced differently by social position—for instance, by differences between the first and 1.5-generations. I have built on this work to underscore the diversity of experiences even within the 1.5-generation. Like the adults in Abrego's study, undocumented youth in the present study who could recall frightening or difficult border-crossing experiences were much more likely to hide their status from others. Similarly, youth who had experienced the impacts of immigration law enforcement in their own families were also more likely to go to greater lengths to avoid detection (Núñez and Heyman 2007). In contrast, other respondents, especially those who came to the United States as young children, could use their acculturation to "blend in" and avoid revealing their status.

Legal status also profoundly shapes immigrants' social networks. Menjívar (2008) has argued that immigrants in stages of liminal legality often "find themselves in a vacuum of bridges that might connect them to the appropriate [educational] resources to advance themselves" (Menjívar 2008:183). To be sure, undocumented youth, as a marginalized group, require access to information specific to their legal status. Yet many youth in my sample were so concerned about revealing their status to teachers and counselors that they hid their status altogether which, for many, led them to miss out on educational opportunities (Cebulko 2014; Gonzales 2010). In some cases, as Laura E. Enriquez (2011) has demonstrated, other undocumented youth often become bridges to information and resources. Indeed, as I show here, undocumented youth often rely on each other as "really significant others" who can provide educational guidance and mentorship (Portes and Fernández-Kelly 2008:26).

Yet, not all undocumented youth have equal access to undocumented "really significant others" (Patler 2014). On one hand, undocumented Latinas/os were more likely to report being relatively open about their legal status within their co-ethnic peer group, largely due to their perceptions that even documented or U.S. citizen Latina/o friends could relate to the challenges of legal status. This allowed some to feel more supported as they made their way through school, though it did not eliminate all the barriers they faced. On the other hand, nearly all undocumented API and black respondents reported feeling isolated in their co-ethnic social networks, and therefore too scared or embarrassed to seek support from friends. In these instances, knowing other non-co-ethnic undocumented youth became an important resource. Although these conclusions are not generalizable, they provide some initial hypotheses about the heterogeneous role of legal status in affecting the lives of undocumented immigrant youth in California.

Conclusion

This study sought to lay out the diverse experiences of undocumented young people in ways that may be instructive not just to academics but also to educators, policymakers, and to organizing efforts in immigrant communities. Although the present analysis has focused in part on differences across youth's co-ethnic social networks, more research is needed to dissect and interrogate the diverse intersections of racialization and immigration status (Asad and Clair 2018; Patler 2014). In addition, future research should examine other important axes of stratification, including but not limited to gender and sexual identity, as well as the complex intersections of these identities in the lives of undocumented youth. In addition, longitudinal and representative studies, as well as larger case studies with racially and ethnically diverse respondents would contribute to a field of research composed largely of work on Latinas/os.

Understanding the multiple and intricate ways that legal status intersects with other components of youths' experiences and social positions may be particularly important in the current federal policy context, which has created distinct penalties for undocumented immigrants. In September 2017, the Trump administration announced plans to phase out of the DACA program. Scholars have documented DACA's role in improving educational outcomes, employment and poverty rates, and psychological well-being among program participants (e.g., Amuedo-Dorantes and Antman 2016; Gonzales, Terriquez, and Ruszczyk 2014; Patler and Laster Pirtle 2018; Pope 2016). Future research should continue to explore DACA's impacts on young people's daily lives over time, while also documenting the individual, household, and community-level consequences of the program's termination.

Finally, the experiences of undocumented young people discussed herein may be instructive for educators and educational institutions. The results suggest that many undocumented students continue to feel unsafe or underserved in their educational environments, a finding that is likely to be greatly amplified in the current political context. Educators and educational institutions must therefore do more to support and protect undocumented students. For instance, in the wake of the U.S. presidential administration's initial threats to dismantle DACA and ramp up deportations, many universities put forth statements committing to protecting students' confidential information. Others announced expansions of psychological and other support specifically for undocumented students. Some universities, including the University of California, have begun offering free immigration legal services for undocumented students as well as for students' undocumented family members. Individual educators must also take responsibility for informing themselves about the barriers and opportunities faced by undocumented students on their campuses, especially given the uncertain future of the DACA program. These visible acts of inclusion can go a long way toward making educational institutions more inclusive of undocumented community members.

Acknowledgments

I thank Veronica Terriquez for guidance and early access to California Young Adult Study (CYAS) data. I am grateful to Hiroshi Motomura, Jeffrey Sacha, Veronica Terriquez, Roger Waldinger, Edward Walker, and Min Zhou for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of the manuscript. I thank Maria Abesa, Carlos Amador, Jose Beltran, Yesenia Capellino, Alma Castrejon, David Cho, Samantha Contreras, Deisy Del Real, and Fabiola Santiago for their outstanding research assistance with the first sample; the CYAS research team for assistance with transcription and initial coding of interviews from the CYAS; and Dream Team Los Angeles for collaboration on the DACA Study.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: Support for this research was provided by the American Sociological Association's Sydney S. Spivack Program in Applied Social Research and Social Policy Community Action Research Award, Ford Foundation, National Science Foundation (grant number DGE-0707424), Sociological Initiatives Foundation, University of California Center for New Racial Studies, University of California Institute for Mexico and the United States, University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) Institute of American Cultures and the Chicano Studies Research Center, and UCLA Institute for Research on Labor and Employment.

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Notes

1. President Obama announced the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program in June 2012 to provide eligible undocumented young people with a temporary (and revocable) reprieve from deportation as well as work authorization and other related benefits. Undocumented youth who apply for DACA must meet the following criteria: came to the United States before age 16, were younger than 31 in June 2012, have continuously resided in the United States from June 2007 to the present, are current students or high school/General Equivalency Development (GED) graduates, or honorably discharged veterans; and have no criminal record. According to the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS, the entity responsible for processing DACA applications), as of September 2016, more than 861,000 undocumented youth had taken advantage of this unprecedented program. However, on September 5, 2017, the Trump administration announced it would phase out the program over the next six months. As of this writing, no new program has been announced. Although DACA has certainly influenced undocumented youths' lives (see, for example, Patler and Laster Pirtle 2018; Pope 2016), the present analyses focus on respondents' high school experiences, all of which occurred prior to DACA. I therefore do not include a pre- and post-DACA comparison of their experiences.
2. Respondents were asked how they identify racially and all individuals identified with just one race. One individual who identified racially as black also expressed that he felt culturally affiliated with Latinos by virtue of being from Panama.
3. Assembly Bills 130 and 131, collectively known as the California Dream Act, passed in 2011. These bills opened up certain types of financial aid to undocumented college students, including Board of Governors fee waivers, Institutional Aid, Cal Grants, and privately funded scholarships.

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