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Ever-Present "Illegality:" How Political Climate Impacts Undocumented Latinx Parents' Engagement in Students' Postsecondary Access and Success

Authored by
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ABSTRACT

Using the ecological systems theory, this study highlights the significant impact the political climate in the United States (i.e., anti-immigrant sentiments and violence) has on undocumented Latinx parents' engagement in their children's education. Drawing from a larger qualitative, interview-based study that explored how undocumented Latinx parents were involved and engaged in their children's postsecondary access and success (Cuevas, 2019; 2020), this study focuses on undocumented parents' experiences and processing of the 2016 Presidential Election. Findings illustrate how the explicit racist, anti-immigrant, and nativist narratives then-Republican Presidential Candidate Donald Trump campaigned under and won forced undocumented Latinx parents to (re)evaluate how their undocumented immigration status impacted their parenting behaviors. Specifically, the election results caused parents to (1) increase their hyperawareness of the repercussions of their immigration status; (2) reconsider what their deportation would imply for their children; and (3) reflect what DACA and a college degree meant for their undocumented children. In a time of constant anti-immigrant sentiment and racialized nativism, it becomes important to consider the impact these messages have on parents, and consequently, their children and their educational futures.

Keywords: parent engagement, undocumented immigrants, postsecondary access, undocumented students

Introduction

Parental engagement is one of the most essential and often underutilized strategies to support Latinx students' pathway to higher education. Like other measures of student success—including grade point averages (GPAs), test scores, and college acceptances—research has found that the more parents are engaged with their children's postsecondary aspirations and planning, the more likely students are to successfully apply to, be accepted by, and matriculate into higher education institutions (Savitz-Romer, 2012; Tierney & Auerbach, 2005).

Parents engage in students' postsecondary access and success by developing and supporting students' college-going identities, monitoring their grades and classes, and having explicit conversations about college (Savitz-Romer, 2012; Tierney & Auerbach, 2005). Additionally, studies have found that parental motivation for higher education is the most significant factor for students to apply to colleges successfully (Auerbach, 2006; Paulsen, 1990; Tierney & Auerbach, 2005). Motivational support is especially crucial for children of immigrants and

students whose parents did not attend college in the United States; when parents cannot directly help their children with the college application process, they provide motivation and advice that helps their children persevere through challenges (Auerbach, 2006, 2007).

Immigrant parents and parents of color face several challenges when engaging with their children's postsecondary aspirations. Challenges include language barriers, negative relationships with school personnel, and unfamiliarity with the U.S. education system (Auerbach, 2006, 2007; Zarate, et al., 2011). Yet, for undocumented Latinx parents, these barriers are further exacerbated—their interactions with American social structures are shaped by the intersection of factors such as race and class and the marginality and stigma created by an undocumented status, or their "illegality" (De Genova, 2002). Given the significant impact undocumented status has on parents' everyday lives, it is important to consider the additional barriers and forms of resilience developed by this status and how these shape their engagement with their children's postsecondary access and success.

While the overall number of undocumented immigrants migrating to the United States has declined over the last couple of years, the number of mixed-status families has increased; mixed-status families are families with at least one undocumented member (Capps et al., 2020). This increase is not only a result of undocumented immigrants having U.S. born children, but also a direct consequence of a volatile and inconsistent immigration system where an individual could have some form of legal status one day and then find themselves undocumented the next (De Genova, 2002; Menjívar, 2011; Sigona, 2012). Roughly 11 million undocumented immigrants currently reside in the United States (Capps et al., 2020). An estimated 16.2 million people live in mixed-status families, with an estimated 6.2 million U.S. citizen children with at least 1 undocumented parent (National Immigration Forum, 2020). Thus, as the number of children raised in mixed-status and undocumented families increases, there is an increasing need to consider their access to educational opportunities, including college access.

Using the ecological systems theory, this paper highlights the significant impact the political climate in the United States (i.e., anti-immigrant sentiments and violence) has on undocumented Latinx parents' engagement in their children's education. Drawing from a larger qualitative, interview-based study that explored how undocumented Latinx parents were involved and engaged in their children's postsecondary access and success (Cuevas, 2019, 2020), this paper focuses on undocumented parents' experiences and processing of the 2016 Presidential Election. Findings illustrate how the explicit racist, anti-immigrant, and nativist narratives then-Republican Presidential Candidate Donald Trump campaigned under and won forced undocumented Latinx parents to (re)evaluate how their undocumented immigration status

impacted their parenting behaviors. The ecological systems theory illustrates that it is imperative to address the issues and challenges anti-immigrant sentiment creates for undocumented parents. To best support students with undocumented parents, both documented and undocumented, we need to understand the context these parents parent in and the circumstances that shape their engagement.

Literature Review

Parental Engagement in Postsecondary Access and Success

Existing literature has overwhelmingly underlined the importance of parental engagement in children's education for student wellbeing and success (Boonk et al., 2018; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Van Voorhis et al., 2013). When parents are engaged in their children's education, and schools and communities develop opportunities for parents to engage, students are more likely to perform better in tests and earn higher grades, pass their classes and grade levels on time, attend school regularly, have better social skills and adapt to school more easily, and graduate from high school and enroll in postsecondary education. This is true, no matter the family's income or background (Boonk et al., 2018; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Van Voorhis et al., 2013).

Similarly, parental engagement in students' postsecondary planning and success is vital (Conklin & Dailey, 1981; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Hossler, et al., 1999). Yet, like other exchanges with schools, studies have documented different barriers low-income families, families of color, and immigrant families face when they attempt to engage in their children's postsecondary planning (Auerbach, 2006, 2007; López, 2001; Perna, & Titus 2005; Savitz-Romer, 2012; Tierney & Auerbach, 2005; Zarate et al., 2011). Across this literature, immigrant Latinx parents note that the primary barrier for their engagement in their children's postsecondary planning is a lack of access to resources and information (Oliva, 2008; Tornatzky, et al., 2002; Torres, 2004). When parents did not attend college, they do not have the personal experiences their college-educated peers use to support their children. Parents of first-generation students are often unfamiliar with the requirements needed to apply to college, including required high school courses and examinations and are unfamiliar with financial aid options, which may lead them to over or underestimate college costs (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000).

Nevertheless, Latinx immigrant parents do engage in supportive behaviors that help their children access their postsecondary aspirations. Latinx immigrants support their children by discussing the importance of education and using their own lived experiences and stories of struggle to motivate their children. They also develop their children's dreams and aspirations and provide moral support for their postsecondary goals (Auerbach, 2006, 2007;

Delgado-Gaitan, 1994; López, 2001; Tierney & Auerbach, 2005; Zarate, et al., 2011). When parents cannot help their children navigate the application process and requirements, they seek resources to support them. Parents reach out to schools and encourage their children to join college access programs (Tierney & Auerbach, 2005). While informative about Latinx's differential (and valid) forms of parenting and engagement, available research often categorizes *all* Latinx immigrant parents' experiences together and does not differentiate between those who are undocumented with those who have legal immigration status.

Parenting as Undocumented Immigrants

Just as their ethnic, racial, and economic social locations shape parents' interactions with schools, and thus their engagement with their children's education, it is important to consider how an undocumented status impacts these interactions. Their *deportablity,* or the notion that they are vulnerable to detention and deportation at any time, leads them to live fearful, marginalized, and hyper-vigilant lives. They live in fear of being deported and the repercussions that result such as family separation and loss of family income (De Genova, 2002; Menjívar, 2011; Sigona, 2012). Additionally, undocumented immigrants have minimal access to social services. Studies have found that legal status impacts immigrants' access to health care (Holmes, 2007; Menjívar, 2002), housing (Asad & Rosen, 2018; McConnell & Marcelli, 2007; Painter et al., 2001), higher education (Abrego & Gonzales, 2010; Abrego, 2006; 2008), and employment (Fortuny, Capps, & Passel, 2007; Walter, Bourgois, & Loinaz, 2004). Even when they are eligible for social services, such as health services at local community clinics, they are not likely to take advantage of these resources for themselves or their children (Holmes, 2007; Menjívar, 2002; Yoshikawa & Kalil, 2011). Furthermore, a more recent body of literature has documented how Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign and eventual election impacted the lives of undocumented immigrants, heightening stress, anxieties, and fear of deportation, and increasing anti-immigrant discrimination (Andrade, 2021; Gomez & Pérez Huber, 2019; Muñoz et al., 2018; Valdivia, 2019).

As a result of the aforementioned limitations, undocumented parents experience and navigate structures, such as schools, differently from their documented peers (Dreby, 2015; Valdivia, 2019). In addition to barriers they have to navigate as a result of their racial/ethnic and socioeconomic identities, undocumented parents often have to consider how their immigration status may or may not impact their relationships with their children's schools (Dreby, 2015; Valdivia, 2019). This may limit their interactions with them, limiting their access to resources for their children. Often because of their deportablity, undocumented parents are less likely to move beyond their home-work-school perimeters physically (Cuevas, 2019; Dreby, 2015).

In addition to the barriers undocumented parents themselves face, studies have found that the stress and anxiety parents experience caused by these conditions can also be passed on to their children (Brabeck & Sibley, 2016; Enriquez, 2015; Yoshikawa & Kholoptseva, 2013). For instance, undocumented parents' children experience similar manifestations of stress as their parents—migraines, toothaches, high blood pressure (Yoshikawa, 2011). Additionally, parents often have conversations with their children at a young age about what being undocumented means. This further adds stress, anxiety, and trauma to young children’s lives (Balderas, Delgado-Romero, & Singh, 2016; Dreby, 2015; Enriquez, 2015; Rendón Garcia, 2019; Valdivia, 2019). Regardless of their immigration status, children with at least one undocumented parent must also learn to navigate this status.

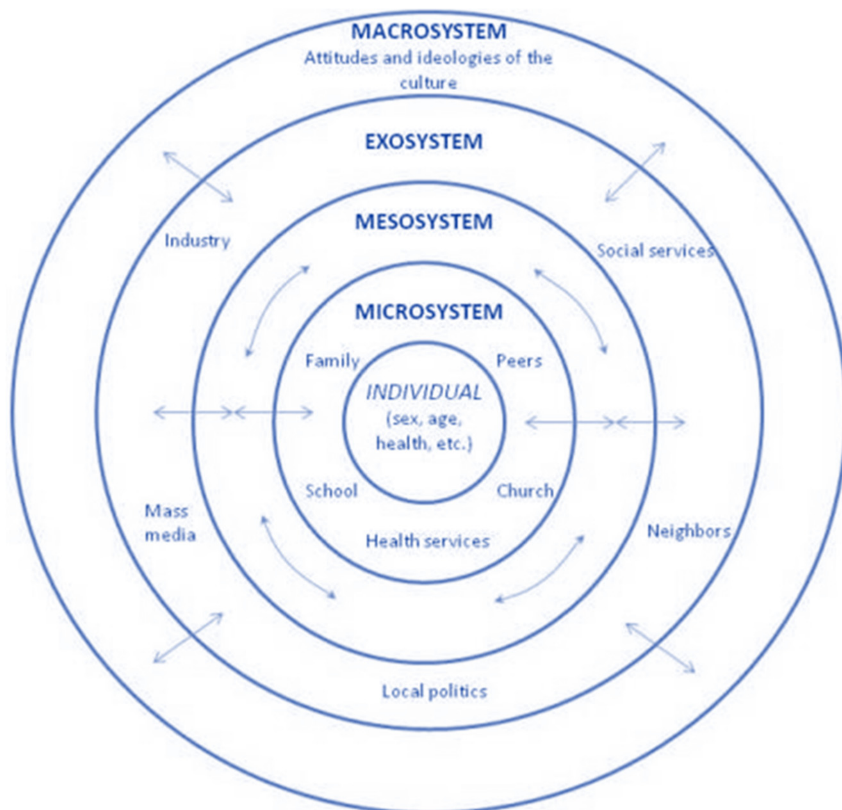
Theoretical Framework

Psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner (1992) posited that children are enmeshed in five different, intersecting ecosystems. According to Bronfenbrenner, the interaction between these different ecosystems inevitably shapes children's lives. Known as the Ecological Systems Theory, this theory (also referred to as a framework) is widely used in education and family engagement research to identify the different individuals, systems, and factors that shape children's lives. Figure one illustrates the relational nature of these ecosystems: (1) the microsystem describes the different institutions and individuals that have the most direct and immediate contact with the child, including family, school, neighborhood, peers; (2) the mesosystem describes the interactions between the different microsystems the child is exposed to such as family-school relationships or school-neighborhood conditions; (3) the exosystem describes interactions or links between social settings that do not directly involve the child but still shape their lived realities, such as parent's job; (4) the macrosystem describes beliefs and values of the society the child lives in and their cultural context, such as their family's socioeconomic status or ethnicity/race; and (5) the chronosystem which takes into account time and the socio-historical context the child is in (Bronfenbrenner, 1992).

The ecological systems theory helps take into account the context in which children find themselves developing and learning (Bronfenbrenner, 1992). This includes the circumstances their parents and families face. As the literature outlined above illustrates, the context undocumented Latinx parents parent in is significantly impacted by their undocumented immigration status. The ecological systems theory postulates that these conditions inevitably impact children’s lives, education, and overall wellbeing. Thus, for this study, as it is focused on the impact of immigration policy and anti-immigrant sentiment has on parental engagement in student's education, I specifically analyze the interplay between the microsystem, the exosystem, and the macrosystem. The family

unit is found in the microsystem, immigration policies in the exosystem, and anti-immigrant sentiment in the macrosystem.

Figure 1.
Bronfenbrenner (1992)
Ecological Systems Theory



Methodology

This study draws from a larger qualitative, interview-based study that explored how undocumented Latinx parents were involved and engaged in their children's postsecondary access and success. Data were drawn from thirty in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 15 undocumented Latinx parents. All participants had children enrolled in Coast University (CU)[1], a selective public university in California.

Sample

The study's sample consists of 15 Latinx parents representing 10 families—10 mothers and 5 fathers—who reside in California and have children enrolled in CU; Table one summarizes the sample's demographics. All parents interviewed were undocumented and were born in Mexico (n= 13) or El Salvador (n=2). At the time of the interviews, no parents were engaged in legalizing their immigration status. Participants had lived in the United States for an average of 28 years. If families lived in dual-parent households, it was requested that both mother and father be interviewed together. Five of the 10 families interviewed included both spouses (one couple was separated). Two mothers were married, but their husbands were unable to participate in the study. Two mothers had re-married (their spouses were not part of the sample), and one was a single mother. Half of the sample were parents of college-aged undocumented CU students who applied to and received the benefits of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) (or were "DACAmented"); the other half included parents of college-aged documented students (e.g., lawful permanent residents, citizens). In addition to their college-aged, CU-attending

[1] All names are pseudonyms. Participants chose their pseudonyms.

children, most families had younger children enrolled in primary and secondary schools.

Data Collection

Data collection occurred from May 2016 through January 2017, before and after the 2016 Presidential Election. Each parent was interviewed 3 times—interviews 1 and 2 took place in Summer 2016, and interview 3 took place in Winter 2016. All interviews were conducted in Spanish, per participants' request, and were audio-recorded; the author completed the English translations presented here.

During interviews one and two, the country's political climate was present in conversations with participants. Parents implicitly and explicitly alluded to the racist, anti-immigrant, and nativist narratives then-Republican Presidential Candidate Donald Trump campaigned under. Since the first two interviews took place before the election, parents mentioned these narratives, noting they believed there was no possibility he would win the presidency. On the other hand, the third interview occurred after the 2016 Presidential Election, which declared Donald Trump as the next president of the United States. Although the election and the election results were not considered during the design of the bigger study and initial interview protocol, due to the election results and their impact on the country's culture, questions about it were included in the third interview.

Data Analysis

The first step of data analysis identified when participants discussed the nation’s anti-immigrant political climate and how their undocumented immigration status limited their parenting behaviors. These codes were predominantly descriptive (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Once the data was identified, it was coded in accordance with the Ecological Systems Theory, noting when parents discussed elements of the microsystems (e.g., describing how they were engaged in their children’s education), the exosystem (e.g., immigration policies) and the macrosystem (e.g., anti-immigrant sentiment and environment). During this stage, it was noted if the interview data was from pre-or post-the 2016 Presidential Election.

Next, codes were refined and similar open codes were grouped and examined, moving beyond descriptive codes to codes that implied a relationship. For example, the open codes "avoiding children's schools" and "distrust of non-Latinx people" were grouped as "avoiding social interactions." This "axial coding" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) described the relationship between parents' perceptions and behaviors and the anti-immigrant context they resided in. When the axial coding was complete, data from before and after the election was compared and contrasted. The themes presented below are an analysis of this process.

Table 1.
Demographics of Study Sample.

Participant(s) Name(s)	Age, country of origin, year of migration	Location	Highest level of education	Occupation type	Marital status/ No. of children	CU child's name, age, gender, immigration status
Elia	41, Mexico, 2000	Bay Area	College graduate (Mexico)	Service (elderly care)	M/3	Andrea, 22, F, undocumented
Alejandra & Angel	51, Mexico, 1999; 53, Mexico, 1999	Los Angeles	High school (Mexico); middle School (Mexico)	Service (childcare); service (management)	Sep./2	Jessica, 20, F, undocumented
Luz & Ricardo	51, El Salvador, 2005; 54, El Salvador, 2003	Los Angeles	College graduate (El Salvador); College graduate (El Salvador)	Not employed outside home; Service (mechanic)	M/2	Emiliano, 19, M, undocumented
Julie & Mike	52, Mexico, 2002; 56, Mexico, 1986 (back and forth, permanent in 2002)	Bay Area	High school (Mexico); middle School (Mexico)	Not employed outside home; service (sales)	M/5	Gabriela, 19, F, undocumented
Cynthia & Adrian	41, Mexico, 1994; 46, Mexico, 1998	Los Angeles	High school (Mexico); high school (Mexico)	Service (fast food); service (maintenance)	M/2	Diego, 20, M, U.S. citizen
Diana	44, Mexico, 2001	Los Angeles	High school (Mexico)	Service (sales)	S/3	Elias, 19, M, U.S. citizen
Yuri	43, Mexico, 2005	Central Valley	High school (Mexico)	Service (agriculture)	M/2	Rafael, 21, M, undocumented
Maria	43, Mexico, 1995	Central Valley	College graduate (Mexico) & associate's degree (U.S.)	Service (domestic worker)	M/4	Carmen, 21, F, undocumented
Mireya & Javier	52, Mexico, 1992; 55, Mexico, 1992	Los Angeles	College graduate (Mexico); some college (Mexico)	Service (domestic worker); service (maintenance)	M/2	Mateo, 21, M, U.S. citizen
Lily	47, Mexico, 1995	Central Valley	College graduate (Mexico)	Service (agriculture)	M/3	Enrique & Emmanuel (twins), 20, M, U.S. citizens

Limitations

One of the intentions of the larger study was to explore the ways undocumented parents navigated the barriers they faced, including those caused by their legal status, and how those influenced their engagement with their children's education. Yet, the sample successfully overcame these barriers, in one way or another: this study focuses on the experiences and perspectives of undocumented Latinx parents whose children have all successfully applied to, been accepted, and have matriculated into the same institution of higher education. Thus, a limitation of this study is that I am not able to speak to the ways in which the barriers they faced may have prevented their children's academic success, including their postsecondary enrollment. The perspective of my sample is a particular one that helps begin to explain how undocumented status shapes parental engagement in students' postsecondary planning and success. Yet, it is important to acknowledge that this is not the complete story and serves as an invitation for future research. This includes but is not limited to exploring the experiences of undocumented Latinx parents whose children enrolled in community college, enrolled in a less selective public school, or chose to not attend an institution of higher education.

Findings

All parents in this study wanted their children to go to college, graduate, and experience the upward social mobility they associated with a college degree. In other work (Cuevas, 2019), I documented how the parents in this study explicitly shared that they migrated to the United States to provide better opportunities to their children. Furthermore, parents were well aware they would transition into becoming undocumented immigrants and understood its limitations. Yet, they were willing to sacrifice their personal, emotional, and financial wellbeing for their children's education and future (Cuevas, 2019).

The 2016 Presidential Election and the anti-immigrant, nativist, and racist rhetoric it harbored significantly changed how the parents in this study understood their roles as undocumented parents. The election led parents to (1) rethink the limitations of their immigration status; (2) reflect on what their deportability meant for their children; and (3) if they had undocumented children, question their future.

Hyperawareness of Undocumented Status

After the election, parents became more explicitly aware of the limitations of their immigration status. Specifically, the election results changed their perceptions of their personal and family safety. The strong anti-immigrant environment parents experienced led them to limit their time outside their homes and workspaces. Parents avoided traveling beyond their home-to-work parameters. They wanted to avoid interactions with racist people or Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents. Families also reported an increase in ICE sightings.

Ever-Present "Illegality"

In addition to limiting their interactions and travel outside their homes and work, the political climate and the fear the election created also impacted parents' engagement in their children's education. Parents reported feeling distracted, unable to focus on their parenting responsibilities. Most parents experienced an increase in anxiety, panic attacks, and migraines after the election. They did not have the mindset to help their children with their homework, monitor their extracurricular activities or, more broadly, plan for their educational futures.

Parents also grew paranoid about interactions with K-12 schools. Parents wondered whom in schools they could trust. Before the election, about half of the sample shared they made sure that no one in their children's schools knew about their undocumented immigration status. These families explicitly instructed their children never to disclose this information to anyone. As Julie noted, it was her family's "best-kept secret." The other half of the sample was more nonchalant about their immigration status and what their children's schools did or did not know: they either trusted schools to have their children's best interests or found relief in the fact that public schools could not ask about immigration status.

Yet, after the election, all parents reported growing more paranoid about what their children's schools did or did not know about their immigration status; parents wondered what schools could actually do to protect them from deportation. While some schools did make public statements in support of immigrant populations and declared themselves sanctuary spaces, parents preferred to limit their interactions with them. Additionally, parents also shared they were made aware of immigration checkpoints near schools and ICE officers detaining parents on their way to drop off children in schools. They learned this information from social media posts, including Facebook and Instagram, and from conversations with neighbors. For parents with younger, school-aged children, the possibility of ICE being near schools significantly impacted their in-school engagement: they limited their in-person interactions with schools. Elia, who had a younger, elementary school-aged son, noted, "Schools and the areas around them are no longer safe… [ICE agents] hang around, near schools, and wait to snatch us up. It is scary." Parents were conscious of the change in their parenting behaviors after the election: they were aware that their distracted state of mind and poor mental health impacted their engagement in their children's education. They reported feeling limited in their capacity to adequately support their children's education, expressing guilt and frustration. They wanted to be the best parents to their children as they could but felt that the anti-immigrant sentiment they witnessed and perceived did not allow them to do so. This included their engagement with their children's education.

Impact of Parental Deportability on Children

After the election, parents expressed living in a reality where they perceived that their deportation was more probable. The election results and the political climate thereafter made them realize that, as Adrian put it, "we are not every really safe [from deportation]. To this country, we are disposable." As such, parents often imagined what life would be like if they were deported. While the logistics and finances were stressful to consider, their greatest worry was how it would affect their children. All participants wanted their children, regardless of age or immigration status, to stay in the United States—they wanted their children to take advantage of the country's educational resources. This would be easier for their college-aged children, those who were enrolled at Coast University at the time of interviews, as opposed to their younger children. Their college-aged children were young adults, enrolled in a prestigious university. That in itself was a relief for parents: as CU students and eventually alumni, their college-aged children had access to social networks of support (e.g., friends, mentors) and could obtain a full-time job upon graduation. While their deportation and family separation could emotionally affect their college-aged children, parents believed they would eventually be okay, both emotionally and financially.

On the other hand, their school-aged children, who were still in primary and secondary school, would suffer the most. Parents were willing to separate from their children for them to access American schools and the resources and social services (e.g., health care, after-school programs) available in the United States. Furthermore, parents explicitly stated that they wanted their younger children to remain in the United States to attend college, just as their older siblings had. Parents acknowledged the negative impact on their children's wellbeing this family separation would have. For some, it was a risk they were willing to take. They took comfort in access to technology (they believed that social media and web calls would make the situation a little easier) and in the bonds they had with their children, hoping they would understand their reasoning.

The perception of increased deportation possibilities and the impact this would have on their children led parents to have conversations about possible deportations with each other and their partners (for parents who were interviewed by themselves). Before the election, only a few parents reported having had explicit conversations with their families about the possibilities of their deportation or having "deportation plans," or a plan of action for their children if they were to be detained and put into ICE custody. Nevertheless, when parents were asked the same question—have you had conversations with your family about what would happen if you get deported? —after the election, the answers drastically changed. The election forced a conversation amongst adults about their immigration status: parents explicitly

and implicitly created deportation plans. For instance, Julie and Mike, whose youngest son, Marcos, was 6 years old at the time of interviews, reached out to family members to care for him if something happened to them. Their first preference was that Marcos went to live with one of his two older brothers, who had their own families and children. But since her older sons were also undocumented, Julie had a back-up plan: she asked a close family friend, a U.S. citizen, to adopt Marcos if necessary. Her friend agreed. Other parents reported having similar plans—asking U.S. citizen family members or friends to adopt their children if they were to be deported. Again, parents wanted their children to remain in the United States for the resources and opportunities available, including a higher education degree.

Parents also noticed how the election results and the eventual conversations they had with their children about them impacted their children's mental health. Regardless of age, parents shared their children verbally expressed fear of their parents' deportation and family separation. Some parents reported worries that their children were depressed: after families had discussed the election results together, parents observed their children eating less, seemed distant and thoughtful, and had trouble sleeping at night. Maria's college-aged daughter, Carmen, for example, had nightmares about her parents being deported. Since Carmen was away for college and lived on the CU campus, this concerned Maria. She knew her daughter was having trouble focusing in classes. Carmen told Maria about an increase in headaches and hair loss. Additionally, Carmen was also undocumented. Maria knew the anti-immigrant sentiments and stress these caused also worried her about her safety, wellbeing, and deportability. Similar patterns to those of Carmen were observed in children of all ages. Parents worried the political climate and culture would further make these symptoms worse for their children, impacting their development and schooling.

Parenting Undocumented Students

Parents of undocumented students faced additional stress; they were concerned about how the election results and a Trump presidency would impact their children. Specifically, they worried about the receding and cancelation of the DACA program. Parents associated DACA with better higher education and employment opportunities for their undocumented children. In this study, parents shared that DACA gave them and their children a "small break" from deportation anxiety and a sense of financial security, which they attached to the work permit eligibility. Thus, DACA offered their undocumented children hope for a better future. The idea that this hope could be taken away by the Trump Administration worried parents.

Nevertheless, parents also believed their DACAmented children were less likely to be apprehended and deported than their own circumstances. While the fear that DACA

could be rescinded was present, they noted that undocumented students, as a sub-group of undocumented immigrants, had much more public support than they did. Parents described the "Dreamer" narrative, which places academically high achieving undocumented students as assets to the American society (Gonzales, 2015). Using this narrative, they noted that it would not be in president-elect Trump's political interest to cancel the program: he would gain a lot of enemies. Parents also noted that the U.S. government made a lot of money from DACA applications—the application costs almost $500 every two years (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services [USCIS], n.d.). When their college-aged DACAmented children expressed frustration and fear of deportation and family separation, parents reminded them of CU's prestige and the protection they had due to being students at the university. Protections included student organizations, counseling services specifically for undocumented students, legal clinics and services, and emergency financial assistance access. For example, after the election, Luz and Ricardo noted their son Emiliano grew depressed and often talked about taking time off from school to be at home with his family. While this sounded appealing to Luz, having her son live back home, she refused to let him interrupt his schooling. Additionally, she wanted him to continue to access the resources CU offered him.

Angel and Alejandra, on the other hand, worried about their daughter’s response to the election results for a different reason: Jessica wanted to travel to Mexico under the advanced parole premise of her DACA eligibility; advance parole is a permission granted to DACA-holding immigrants that allowed them to re-enter the United States after temporarily traveling abroad.[2] Jessica worried that DACA would be taken away, threatening what she felt was her only opportunity to visit her relatives in Mexico. This included her grandmother, who was very ill. At the time of our interview, Jessica had submitted her advanced parole application. The legal team at Coast University had informed Jessica that she was likely to be granted advanced parole. Jessica planned to go to Mexico for the Christmas holidays with plans to return before Trump's inauguration in January 2017. Angel and Alejandra did not support their daughter’s decision to go to Mexico. Alejandra connected her fears of her daughter traveling under advance parole to the anti-immigrant climate she perceived. She worried that an immigration agent might discriminate against her daughter, and upon seeing that she had the "advanced parole" permit with her traveling documents, may deny her re-entry to the United States. While she wanted to support her daughter's life choices, she believed traveling abroad under such

[2] On August 24, 2020, the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) released a memo announcing that, under the Department of Homeland Security’s (DHS) reformed DACA guidelines announced July 28, 2020, the department would only grant parole to DACA recipients for "urgent humanitarian reasons or significant public benefit in keeping with the governing statute (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services [USCIS], 2020).

conditions was not smart. She and Angel wanted to make sure that Jessica remained in the United States and completed her college degree.

Like other parents, the election results forced Luz and Alejandra and Angel to modify the nature of their support and engagement with their children’s education. Like other parents of DACA recipients, they wanted to make sure their children were safe and able to finish their higher education, regardless of who was president. Further, these examples illustrate the fluidity undocumented immigrants’ experiences and what Golash-Boza and Valdez (2018) calls the “nested context of reception,” or the intersection of local, state, and federal level factors and societal reception. The combination of these contexts shapes how undocumented immigrants experience the repercussions of their immigration status, both in supporting and inhibiting ways (Golash-Boza & Valdez, 2018).

Discussion

This study shows how the interplay between the microsystem, exosystem, and macrosystem impact student outcomes. Specifically, it illustrates how the country’s anti-immigrant policies and political culture impact undocumented parents' children vis-à-vis their parents; anything that impacts parents' psyche may inevitably impact students (Bronfenbrenner, 1992). While the findings of this study are based on a specific period of time in a particular geographical context—the experiences of undocumented Latinx parents in California before and after the 2016 Presidential Election—findings illustrate how much immigration policy and political climate, or the exosystem and macrosystem respectively, shape parenting behaviors, which are embedded in the microsystem. Put differently, the study invites us to think about the contexts in which parents parent and how these impact student outcomes and wellbeing.

The participants' perspectives and experiences in this study demonstrate the additional barriers that complicate undocumented parents' lives in the United States. Undocumented parents have to organize and navigate their lives considering their deportability diligently. They have to negotiate how much information and details about what their deportability means they should share with their children and often have to decide whom to share such personal and private information. Furthermore, parents' responses to the political climate created by the 2016 Presidential Election are further evidence of how much political climates and ideologies impact undocumented immigrants and their families. Parents' descriptions of their physical manifestations of stress and anxiety, their avoidance of public spaces after the 2016 Presidential Election, and the development of deportation plans are examples of how parents experienced their "illegality" within this particular context.

Ever-Present "Illegality"

In addition to the emotional toll the 2016 Presidential Election results created for parents themselves, the parents in this study had to also consider how the results impacted their children. As noted in the findings, parents' main concern was their children, their safety, and their futures. Regardless of what would happen to them under a Trump presidency, the parents in this study wanted the best for their children. This entailed ensuring their children remain in the United States, regardless of what happened to them, and had access a good education. To the parents in this study, educational access included a college education.

To best support Latinx students' postsecondary aspirations, including undocumented students, it is essential to consider the context they and their parents are embedded in. Repeatedly, research has documented that when parents and schools have strong relationships and partner, students are successful (Boonk et al., 2018; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Van Voorhis et al., 2013). Yet, as this study shows, the promises of these partnerships are complicated for undocumented parents and their children. Findings show how parental engagement and parent-school relationships are compromised by immigration policies and laws and anti-immigrant sentiment. The interactions between these ecological systems—in the form of parents' fears and avoidance of schools, for example— pose challenges to undocumented Latinx parents.

To support parents as they support their children's education, including their postsecondary access and success, educators must understand the context students are in. In the case of students being raised by undocumented parents specifically, educators must understand (1) how the microsystem, exosystem, and macrosystem shape their educational opportunities and outcomes, including their postsecondary access and success, and (2) address the barriers these interactions create. Research on family-school partnerships shows that the most successful way to understand students' lives is to develop strong and trusting relationships with their families (Boonk et al., 2018; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Van Voorhis et al., 2013). The following section provides recommendations for practice based on these premises and the findings of this study.

Recommendations for Practice

Pro-Immigrant School Culture and Family-School Partnership Work

As the findings show, the anti-immigrant sentiment experienced in the broader society trickles down and impacts how parents perceive and experience their direct contexts, including schools. As such, more than ever, it is essential for schools, including K-12 and higher education institutions, to proactively and unapologetically announce they are in support of immigrant populations. Schools can declare themselves as sanctuary spaces, meaning that they, to the extent possible, will not cooperate with ICE agents (Patel, 2018).

Additionally, they can train their teachers, faculty, staff, and leadership on undocumented immigrants' circumstances (Cisneros & Cadenas, 2017). Known as undocuAlly training, this professional development is essential to ensuring that people working in educational spaces are informed about undocumented immigrants' unique circumstances, including undocumented students, and are knowledgeable of and connected with resources to support them. Increasing capacity around this work benefits individual students and their families and promotes a pro-immigrant culture in school environments. These environments, if developed intentionally, may mitigate some of the fear and distrust undocumented parents face (Cisneros & Valdivia, 2020). In other words, when there is a strong pro-immigrant culture and environment in school spaces, parental engagement is more likely to be successful.

Consider the Impact of Anti-Immigration Policy on Student Mental Health

This study clarifies how anti-immigrant sentiment and policy impact mental health, both for parents and their children. Additionally, as research has found, parents' manifestation of stress is passed on to young children—even when they are not explicitly discussing it with their parents, children internalize stress (Gulbas, et al., 2016; Yoshikawa, 2011). These conditions and circumstances pose a challenge for educational spaces: what is the responsibility of schools K-12 and institutions of higher education in accounting for and treating students' mental health? Put differently, how are students expected to focus on their schooling when they may be worried about their parents being deported?

There certainly is no easy answer to this question. Schools are both limited in their resources and capacity to respond to possible deportations. Yet, some steps can be taken at the institutional and individual levels. Institutionally, schools should provide access to mental health services. For K-12 schools, this may have to include partnerships with mental health services organizations. For institutions of higher education, this means having enough staff to meet with students. Yet, all entities should be informed and trained in working with students and families who may face the threat of deportation (Cisneros & Cadenas, 2017). Experiencing this threat is traumatic, and therefore trauma-informed practices are required. Mental health providers should be trained on the particular issues undocumented immigrants face and their particular needs.

Acknowledge the Uncertainty of DACA

For the parents in this study with undocumented children, the uncertainty around DACA was particularly pressing. These parents worried that the privileges the policy had provided their children were going to be revoked. At worst, they worried that the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) had their children's and their family's

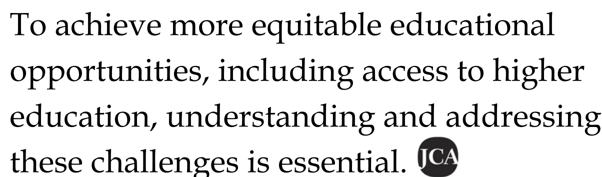
information in a master list of undocumented youth. These fears were significantly elevated after the 2016 Presidential Election. After the election of Donald Trump, parents worried their DACAmented children were no longer safe. The threat of the program ending and the uncertainty this created further enhanced parents' fears.

Educators and other service providers are not expected to have all the answers and solutions for undocumented immigrants' issues and barriers. Instead, they (educators) need to acknowledge the stress undocumented immigrants and their families face, validate it, stay informed with up-to-date information, and use their networks and connections when applicable. Specifically, in regard to DACA, educators need to stay informed with the most up-to-date information, regardless of whether they are aware that they are working with undocumented students. The logistics and sustainability of the program are constantly changing— educators must stay informed and share information with students and families to avoid the dangers of misinformation.

"In a time of constant anti-immigrant sentiment and racialized nativism, it becomes important to consider the impact these messages have on parents, and consequently, on their children, and push back on them."

Conclusion

The educational experiences of Latinx students in mixed-status families are compounded by the repercussion of an undocumented immigration status. While the relationship between Latinx students' postsecondary access and success and their parents' immigration status may initially appear irrelevant, this study shows how context, or the intersection of the microsystem, ecosystem, and macrosystem, shape parental engagement and thus students' educational opportunities and outcomes; this study helps us further understand the way undocumented status influences parenting decisions and educational engagement. Additionally, and most importantly, the narratives presented also illustrate the essential the role of undocumented parents in student success. These narratives contradict negative and vilified portrayals of undocumented Latinx immigrant parents as being the ones "who broke the law," for example. Instead, these stories show the resilience of this population, how parents strategically navigate barriers to support their children. In a time of constant anti-immigrant sentiment and racialized nativism, it becomes important to consider the impact these messages have on parents, and consequently, on their children, and push back on them.



To achieve more equitable educational opportunities, including access to higher education, understanding and addressing these challenges is essential.

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