

Contested Membership over Time

It was what many had been hoping for: some sort of relief. But did it come too late? And was it enough? On the evening of Thursday, November 20, 2014, US president Barack Obama went on live television to announce a new administrative action to reform the US immigration system. Obama began, “Today, our immigration system is broken, and everybody knows it. . . . It’s been this way for decades. And for decades, we haven’t done much about it.” Responding to growing discontent among immigrant rights groups, the president and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) together issued a memorandum expanding the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program of 2012. DACA—instituted by a DHS directive rather than congressional action—provided temporary work permits and deportation relief to more than 664,000 young undocumented immigrants who had lived in the United States since childhood.¹ The 2014 expansion announced by President Obama eliminated DACA’s upper age ceiling of thirty-one years and introduced a new program, Deferred Action for Parents of Americans and Permanent Residents (DAPA), to provide deportation relief and work permits to an estimated 3.5 million undocumented immigrants with US-born children.

The president’s actions followed a series of aborted legislative attempts to provide the nation’s eleven million undocumented immigrants with a pathway to legalization. Legislation targeting undocumented immigrant youth, formally known as the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act, had gained some

political traction since first being introduced in 2001 but had not been able to pass Congress.² As time passed without congressional action, immigrant communities grew increasingly desperate for reform. Their world was shrinking. Ramped-up deportations sowed fear across the country. Every passing day presented another blocked opportunity to get an education or to work, to connect with family members in one's country of origin, and to make a true home in the United States.

These actions also came more than thirteen years after the initial introduction of the DREAM Act and many years of disappointment that young people and their families had experienced watching time go by without legislation being passed. Policy makers like to say that change takes time and occurs incrementally. But legislative decisions take place at a great distance from people's lived reality. For those waiting for immigration reform, time has been cruel and unyielding.

I was wrapping up this book and trying to figure out what these administrative changes would mean for a group of undocumented young adults in Los Angeles whom I had been following for nearly twelve years. I was especially curious about what this new program would mean for them, how they would respond, and who would be left out.

Back in Los Angeles, Maria Betancourt, one of the young people whose lives I had followed between 2003 and 2014, reacted to the president's announcement with mixed emotions.³ In 2012, she had been an undocumented resident eligible for the DACA program, and she had been excited to apply, saving for over six months to come up with the \$465 application fee. But now, as a thirty-one-year-old with only a high school diploma, her DACA status was not sufficient to raise her standard of living. With her work permit, Maria was able to apply legitimately for a cashier job at a local drug store, but her hourly wage was not enough to lift her family out of poverty.

When she was younger, Maria had aspired to become a dental assistant. She had enrolled in community college but had quit by the end of the semester because her studies would be useless without "those nine digits." Now, even with the nine-digit social security number granted by DACA, Maria did not expect to be able to return to school. She had two children and was expecting a third. Her husband Ramon, also undocumented, was unable to apply for immigration relief or a work permit because of the long shadow cast by previous gang ties and crimes he had committed as a teenager.

In the November 2014 announcement, Obama forcefully argued, "We're going to keep focusing enforcement resources on actual threats to

our security. Felons, not families. Criminals, not children. Gang members, not a mom who's working hard to provide for her kids." But the distinction between "criminals" and caring, productive family members was not so clear for the Betancourts. Ramon had worked hard over the years to establish a life removed from gang ties and to be a good husband and father. He had severed ties with many of the guys from his old neighborhood, he had begun volunteering at his church, and he had worked very hard so he could help to financially support his family. But the president's words provided no offer of relief for people like Ramon, no notion of rehabilitation. Though his crimes had been committed long ago, these new programs provided Ramon with little hope for the future. Despite his connection to his church, his many years of hard work, and the steps he had taken to get his life on track, Ramon was structurally locked out.

Across the country in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Esperanza Rivas was firmly situated among the politically "deserving"—with the exception of her undocumented status. In contrast to Ramon's criminal past, Esperanza's teen years made her a poster child for the proposed DREAM Act legislation. She had been adored by teachers and classmates alike when she was in high school in Long Beach, California, where she was at the top of her class, ran cross-country, and was a member of the marching band.

But time was not on Esperanza's side. When she graduated from the University of California in 2006, no federal programs existed to provide her with a legal work permit. She was forced to take a job from a narrow range of bad choices. She kept her hopes up by advocating for the passage of the DREAM Act with a group of friends, but her advocacy could not provide an escape from the strains of low-wage work and life "under the radar."

In 2012 Esperanza moved to Milwaukee to be close to her mom and sister. Even after receiving DACA status later that year, Esperanza struggled to support her one-year-old son as a single mom. She used her work permit to secure one job at a bank and another at a hotel—jobs similar to those she had held as an undocumented worker. At age thirty-two, her work history did not allow her to compete for jobs commensurate with a University of California education. "What sucks about this," she told me, "is yeah, I have a work permit. So what? I've missed out on so much time. While my friends have been busy building their careers with internships and entry-level jobs that have given them real experience, on the job, I've got to start from scratch. Nobody is going to hire a thirty-two-year-old for those jobs. Besides, it's hard to make any

long-term plans. [DACA] isn't legal status. It's not citizenship. I don't know when it might end. I might get my hopes up and then I'm back where I was before. This is so tiring."

A change in immigration status years ago might have made a huge impact on Esperanza's life, but after years of lost opportunities its arrival is less consequential, as it is for many others like her. And for those like Maria, and especially Ramon, it just may have come too late. Now that they are in their early thirties, DACA fails to meet their fuller needs. What they require is an entire set of policies that would support and integrate them. Policies based on the deserving/undeserving distinction disadvantage far more of the population than they benefit, and do not even adequately address the life complexities of those singled out as "deserving."

Why do high-achieving undocumented young adults like Esperanza ultimately share similar work and life outcomes with their less educated peers, even as higher education is treated as the path to integration and success in America by politicians advocating for immigration reform? And what is the function of school if all of these young people are destined to be laborers? Drawing on interviews and fieldwork over nearly twelve years with 150 undocumented young adults in Los Angeles, this book provides some interesting answers.

EXCLUSION AND BELONGING FOR THE 1.5 GENERATION

Maria, Ramon, and Esperanza have much in common. All three were born in Mexico but migrated to the United States before the age of twelve and have spent most of their lives in Los Angeles. Their time lived in the United States provides them important experiences from which to make claims about their social membership, but their immigration status dramatically shrinks their everyday lives. Scholars refer to these young people as "Americans in waiting" and as "impossible subjects,"⁴ but their experiences of belonging are far more complex than indicated by political or academic discourse. Indeed, a complex web of polarizing rhetoric regarding the place of immigrants in American society entangles the lives of these young undocumented Mexican immigrants. Descriptions such as "innocent" and "deserving" vie with ones such as "illegal" that conflate nationality, immigration status, and outsiderhood.

Current academic debates on immigration focus on questions of membership and rights, joining a long tradition in social science that

examines borders and exclusion from formal citizenship within the boundaries of liberal democratic states.⁵ The general public is also keenly interested in immigration issues and questions of inclusion and exclusion.⁶ Formal and informal, public and private conceptions of citizenship are tied to questions of belonging.

Historically, national membership has been defined in relation to a bounded community where the rules of legal citizenship set the parameters of belonging and exclusion. But recent work in the field of immigration studies takes a different view of membership, treating citizenship as “the rules and meanings of political *and* cultural membership.”⁷ More and more scholars have been challenging the long-standing belief that the nation-state is the sole actor to determine membership and endow rights. Recent trends in globalization, human rights, and multiculturalism have made national boundaries less consequential for determining membership, and as persons with a long-term presence in receiving states undocumented immigrants like Maria, Ramon, and Esperanza enjoy spaces of belonging that supersede legal citizenship.⁸ Differing old and new views of membership raise critical questions about the relevance of territorial presence for belonging—they beg the question: is residing within a community sufficient grounds for asserting membership, or does one first need to be recognized as a member?

Scholarly debates around the definition of “citizenship” are not just abstractions; these debates have real consequences for the lives of non-citizens. Migrants today cross national borders in almost every Western nation, not only to work but also to make their homes. Increased global interdependence of capital and markets for goods, services, and workers has led to unprecedented levels of settlement of undocumented migrant populations in traditional immigrant-receiving countries as well as countries that have not historically seen significant levels of immigration. Undocumented migrants create families and establish homes in territories where they have come to work yet do not have full legal rights. Regulating undocumented (also known as unauthorized, irregular, or illegal) populations is a high-priority objective of national policy in host countries,⁹ with each nation finding its own answers to the questions of political inclusion and social welfare provision for undocumented residents.

Throughout my many years of community and academic work I have met hundreds of undocumented young people struggling to reconcile these conflicting meanings of membership. Despite wide acceptance of children as a protected class, countries like the United States face the

growing challenge of how to best provide for children's well-being given the political popularity of strong enforcement stances and stringent policies against undocumented immigration.¹⁰ This tension has produced a broad range of responses, with implications for local communities, services, and protections. In many countries, the scales tip more toward enforcement than protection.¹¹ Since the mid-1990s in the United States, immigration laws and enforcement practices have diminished noncitizens' rights and have made neighborhoods and public spaces insecure.¹² Even mundane acts such as driving, waiting for the bus, or socializing in a public park can lead to police questioning, detention, and deportation. These trends instill fear and anxiety within large, settled immigrant populations that include citizens, legal immigrants, and undocumented residents. At the same time, however, policies aimed at integrating immigrants have increased their access to higher education, given them means to participate in local elections, and allowed them access to a baseline of services such as health care. These inclusionary acts provide important opportunities for undocumented residents to establish connections, form relationships, and participate in the day-to-day life of their communities.

Many immigrants living in the United States today belong to mixed-status families, where some members have some form of immigration status while others do not, and some members are adults and others are children. In this book I focus on undocumented members of what sociologist Rubén G. Rumbaut termed the 1.5 generation, young people who were born in Mexico and who began their American lives as children.¹³ Together, undocumented immigrants like these number 2.1 million people;¹⁴ almost half of them are now adults.¹⁵

Young people in the 1.5 generation were raised with the expectation that as adults they would find better opportunities than those afforded to their parents.¹⁶ Their schooling prepared them for better jobs. Instead, as undocumented Americans, they must reconsider their basic assumptions about the link between their efforts to acculturate and the rights they have as adults and must revise their long-standing expectations about their futures while watching their documented and American-born friends advance, weighing options and beginning careers. They must negotiate membership in the national community as part of a group that is culturally integrated but legally excluded. As sociologists Richard Alba and Victor Nee point out, "Assimilation . . . happens to people while they are making other plans."¹⁷ The limitations faced by undocumented young people make clear that successful assimilation

and full membership depend on the host country's willingness to include them.¹⁸ As the saying goes, "It takes two to tango."

This book wrestles with conflicting understandings of undocumented immigrants to reveal the gap between individual feelings of belonging and the exclusion enforced by the society in which they live. It focuses on undocumented Mexican young adults living in Los Angeles, California. Mexicans constitute the largest immigrant group in the United States. They also make up the largest share among undocumented immigrants. And more undocumented immigrants—the majority of whom are of Mexican descent—live in Los Angeles than any other place in the country. Given the racialized history of Mexicans in the United States, this book's framing questions of belonging and exclusion play out in complex ways. However, while the circumstances of undocumented Mexican youth merit special attention, it is important to point out that many of the issues raised in this book relate to the broader population of undocumented immigrant youth and young adults living in the United States.

For twelve years, I listened to the stories and observed the daily activities of young men and women with "roots on the wrong side of their lives."¹⁹ Their stories of being *ni de aquí ni de allá* (from neither here nor there) describe personal experiences of belonging and exclusion under the contemporary US immigration system. Sitting on factory benches, living room couches, and folding chairs in community centers across the five-county Los Angeles metropolitan area, I listened to personal narratives of belonging and exclusion and how these conflicting experiences often changed over time. Despite painful experiences of exclusion in their own lives, many of my respondents maintained faith in the American dream. And despite vitriolic public discourse and government practices designed to keep them at the margins, these young people found or fashioned ways to engage in the social and political life of their communities.

During my visits with these young people over the years, I have observed changes in their lives—different partners, new jobs, accumulated debt, and flattened aspirations. I have often been surprised by the ways in which they have responded to change. Despite the differences in their educational trajectories, they now view illegality as the most salient feature of their lives, trumping all of their achievements and overwhelming almost all of their other roles and identities.

The narratives of 1.5 generation undocumented Mexican young adults teach us about the double-edged nature of citizenship. Their life histories show how young people sustain a sense of belonging in community even as they are excluded from opportunities to step into adult

roles, and denied many privileges and rights. To account for the contradictions between official policy and actual lived experience, we need theories that, as sociologists Irene Bloemraad, Kim Voss, and Taeku Lee put it, “disentangle the meaning and implications of new narratives outside formal, legal citizenship.”²⁰

INVESTIGATING THE TRANSITION TO ILLEGALITY

How do young people who migrate to the United States as children experience undocumented status as they transition into adulthood? This book moves away from a political debate on the terms for the legal inclusion of undocumented young people like Maria, Ramon, and Esperanza to focus instead on how these young people perceive and experience membership over time. The young people I profile straddle the worlds of their immigrant parents and their native-born peers. As they move toward adulthood, they struggle with the widening gap between their identity as “Americans” and their legal designation as undocumented immigrants. Their immigration status prevents them from fully participating in adult pursuits, yet they cannot afford to linger in a prolonged childhood. They try to reconcile competing messages about (social and cultural) belonging and (political and legal) exclusion. And as they strain to cope with contradictory messages, anti-immigrant animosity, and the stigma of exclusion, they seek ways to balance their identities as Mexican immigrants and de facto Americans.

Liminal Lives

The concept of liminality draws attention to the various transitions that occur as people move from one life stage to another. Immigration scholars have found liminality useful for understanding the experience of immigration in general and the lives of migrants with uncertain or undocumented status in particular. Arnold van Gennep, an ethnographer and folklorist, originated the concept. In his classic work *Rites of Passage*, van Gennep emphasized the importance of transitions along the life course—birth, coming of age, marriage, beginning an occupation, and death—whereby individuals move from group to group and from one social status to another.²¹ Three important stages are involved in each transition. There is a period of segregation from the individual’s previous way of life (the preliminary stage); a state of transition from one status to another (the liminal stage); and a process of introduction

to the new social status and new way of life (the postliminal stage). Anthropologist Victor Turner elaborated on van Gennep's concept of transition, stating that individuals or entities in the liminal stage are "neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremony."²² The liminal stage is characterized by ambiguity, which ends when the individual reaches the new social status.

In her study of Central American immigrants living in uncertain legal status and caught in the legal limbo of Temporary Protected Status (TPS), sociologist Cecilia Menjívar introduced the concept of liminal legality to highlight the gray areas of immigrant lives.²³ Menjívar observed that many immigrants live in a state of legal limbo that can persist indefinitely, in some cases without ever leading to citizenship or permanent legal status. This long-term uncertainty, or "permanent temporariness," is characterized by ambiguity, endowing immigrants with characteristics of both legal *and* "illegal" statuses. This real-life condition underscores the inadequacy of binary approaches to membership.

The state of living across national borders without legal recognition as an undocumented adult can be considered a form of *legal liminality*—a concept that inverts Menjívar's term to draw attention to the socio-legal construction of immigration status. When immigrants leave their country of origin, they also leave behind the roles that define their membership in that national community—citizen, community member, neighbor. Migrants possessing visas can move into van Gennep's third stage and develop new membership. But migrants without any form of legal immigration status remain stuck in the second liminal stage. Their new lives are characterized by uncertainty and instability in many realms, including employment, housing, and physical, and emotional well-being. Even the length of their stay in the host country is uncertain. For many, this liminality—this tenuous life in the shadows—is long term and indefinite.

Children who cross into the United States without legal residency status have a different experience of liminality. Their legal integration in K-12 schools allows them a more stable point of entry into American society. Open access to public school affords them the important opportunity to integrate into the country's legal and cultural framework, albeit temporarily. As members of a community of students, many young immigrants achieve a social status that has profound implications for their transition into new identities as American children. Their (temporary) integration provides positive messages about belonging,

and their cultural, social, and political lives are rooted *inside the circle*. During the life stage of preadolescence, their exclusion from the American way of life is temporarily suspended. In effect, young undocumented immigrants are able to leave the liminal phase, crossing over socially and culturally although still not legally.

Coming of Age Undocumented

Research on immigrant children's transition to adulthood is important and timely. At no other point in the last century have immigrants represented such a significant percentage of the nation's population. What's more, their children are the fastest-growing segment of children under the age of eighteen. They are diverse in their backgrounds and the places where they grow up. As they come of age, academics and policy makers are concerned with measures of their productivity, including their educational attainment and employment.

We typically think about becoming an adult as the process by which young people assume the tasks and responsibilities of adulthood. Traditionally, this process entails the transition from full-time schooling to full-time work and from living with one's parents to establishing a separate home and starting a family of one's own. Moreover, we have come to associate the transition to adulthood with a normative time line—certain milestones should be achieved by a certain age—despite considerable evidence that this time line is slowing for the current generation of young adults.

In the twenty-first-century United States, a college degree is a major determinant of future success. Young Americans, especially those from middle- and upper-middle-class families, spend more time in postsecondary schooling and delay major transitions, including exiting the parental household, beginning full-time work, and starting families of their own.²⁴ By extending time in the parental home to acquire additional education and training, young people build human capital to compete in the high-skilled labor market. Some parents provide financial support to their young adult children to aid this process, paying college tuition, providing down payments for their children's first homes, and defraying some of the costs associated with having children.²⁵

These parental strategies allow postadolescent children to delay assuming adult responsibilities. But young people from less-advantaged households do not have these same opportunities. Instead, some defer college because their families' financial needs and expectations of their contribu-

tions make it impossible for them to afford tuition and the time required to be a student.²⁶ For undocumented youth, the transition to adulthood is accompanied by a *transition to illegality*.

Difficult transitions stem from conflicting and contradictory laws that provide undocumented children access to K-12 schools but deny them the means to participate in the polity once they become adults. In 1982 in *Plyler v. Doe*, the Supreme Court struck down a Texas statute that denied funding for the public education of children who had not been “legally admitted” into the United States, and the Court voided a municipal school district’s attempt to charge these students tuition to compensate for lost state funding. The justices ruled that the Texas law violated the equal protection provisions of the Fourteenth Amendment and that states could not discriminate against children on the basis of immigration status in the provision of public elementary and secondary education. Citing the “pivotal role of education” in the life of a child and the nation, Justice William Brennan noted that, while education is not a fundamental right, denying K-12 education to undocumented children amounted to inflicting a “lifetime of hardship on a discrete class of children not accountable for their disabling status.” Brennan also stated that “by denying these children a basic education, we deny them the ability to live within the structure of our civic institutions, and foreclose any realistic possibility that they will contribute in even the smallest way to the progress of our Nation. In determining the rationality of [the Texas statute], we may appropriately take into account its costs to the Nation and to the innocent children who are its victims.”

The Court’s decision in *Plyler v. Doe* was a watershed moment in immigration policy. By establishing the legal inclusion of “innocent” undocumented immigrant children in the American public school system, the ruling laid the groundwork for them to benefit from the same opportunities for inclusion that had existed for generations of immigrant schoolchildren before them.

Though the *Plyler* decision mandated the inclusion of hundreds of thousands of undocumented children “within the structure of our civic institutions,” its reach was limited. It guaranteed access only to K-12 education. Beyond that, support in schools, counseling, and other critical services are not guaranteed and are very hit-or-miss. Moreover, the ruling did not address education beyond K-12, nor did it provide any means for individuals to change their immigration status. Given that undocumented children have no practical way to adjust their immigration status, as they near the end of high school and begin adult lives

their lack of legal citizenship closes off access to good jobs, creates barriers to enrolling in college, and heightens the chances for detainment and deportation.

In Western societies, adolescence marks a liminal phase both culturally *and* legally. Adolescence is arguably the most “betwixt and between” stage of life. In most US states, turning eighteen represents a crucial legal threshold of adulthood. All young people in the United States must reposition themselves when they reach the age of majority, adjusting to the responsibilities and consequences that accompany legally defined adulthood. It is the age at which a child ceases to be considered a minor and assumes responsibility for his or her actions and decisions. Eighteen-year-olds with legal immigration status generally have the right to vote, to make a will and exercise power of attorney, to become an organ donor, to obtain medical treatment without a parent’s permission, to enlist in the armed forces, and to apply for credit. When individuals cross this legal threshold, they can be tried as adults, they are eligible for jury duty, and, if they are male, they must register with the Selective Service. In most states, even before adolescents reach eighteen, they are eligible to undertake certain adult activities, such as working and driving.

But for undocumented youth turning eighteen is a profoundly different experience. Most aspects of childhood do not require legal residency status as a basis of participation; most adult pursuits do. For documented and native-born adolescents, the age of majority marks a time of opportunity. Driving, voting, going to college, and working are markers of their increasing maturity, autonomy, and adult standing. For an undocumented eighteen-year-old, they are at least problematic, at worst prohibited, blunt reminders of their tenuous status. The interaction among age, cultural milestones, and state and federal law means that as undocumented youth come of age they transition to illegality, a process that not only shapes their lives socially and emotionally but also redefines their rights, access, and ability to stay in the country.

As children, undocumented youth learn the rules of society, discover the world around them, and form attachments to people and institutions and places. But time brings changes that are unexpected, unwanted, and often cruel. As they come of age, they experience dramatic ruptures in their expectations and their possibilities. Adolescence initiates a period of intense turmoil, uprooting their identity, their future goals and plans, and their sense of belonging. Youthful feelings of belonging give way to new understandings of the ways that they are excluded from possibilities they believed were theirs. As they watch their peers’

lives expanding, in work and education, in autonomy and relationships, undocumented young adults must learn to navigate a severely reduced arena of safety. Conflicting terms of inclusion leave them feeling out of place, longing for the protected status that they enjoyed in school.

The Role of Schooling in Shaping the Transition to Illegality

These processes do not unfold evenly. The range of experiences among my respondents shows that belonging and barriers to belonging are shaped by local laws and practices. Adult immigrants typically become incorporated into their new homeland through the world of work. For children, however, school is usually the primary institutional introduction to their new lives as Americans.²⁷ Indeed, the connection between schooling and the training of a standard citizenry is well established.²⁸ But, as Justice Brennan's opinion in the *Plyler v. Doe* case reinforces, schools also importantly shape the parameters of *social membership*. They determine how pupils are incorporated into the larger community, they control access to scarce resources, and they make their own decisions about deservingness, setting terms of their own for inclusion and exclusion.

Historically, public schools have wielded the power to either replicate societal inequalities or equalize the playing field. However, many large urban school districts across the country lack the human resources—the number of teachers and counselors and their workload—to meet the needs of the entire student body. In these schools, adults' decisions are often influenced by differential access to information, their own personal prejudices and beliefs, and scarcities of time, materials, staff, and space. Teachers and counselors often expend their limited resources on students they have designated as “worthy.” School stratification is especially disadvantageous for students in the lower tracks, who constitute the vast majority in most schools.²⁹ Highly differentiated curricula and de facto tracking are particularly harmful for disadvantaged students.³⁰ A general perception that tracking is based on meritocracy, rather than racial or class-based discrimination, normalizes the achievement gap.

Children from poor and minority families have consistently lagged behind their white, middle- to upper-class peers in schooling outcomes.³¹ Sociologist Karolyn Tyson argues that despite desegregation efforts in the post-*Brown v. Board of Education* era, contemporary American public high schools use racialized tracking practices to segregate students.³² However, scholars have also found that student outcomes remain diverse,

even within schools with high concentrations of poor and minority students.³³ Relationships with school officials and high-achieving peers, some researchers argue, can provide low-income students of color with access to important sources of social capital and resources necessary for school success.³⁴ By fostering young people's integration into school-based networks, nurturing positive school relationships, and providing access to institutional resources (e.g., academic counseling and honors and advanced placement classes), school personnel play a vital role in facilitating students' sense of belonging.³⁵

Students who are "chosen" early on for better classes and smaller learning communities have access to a wider range of resources, including teacher time and visits to college counselors. Their positive positioning allows them greater opportunities to form trusting relationships with adults in their schools. Those on the wrong side of tracking decisions must contend with larger classes, outdated materials, more competition for attention, and fewer adult advocates. Some students receive adult support and resources; others are ignored, negatively labeled, and pushed out of the educational system.

School decisions—though structured by school inequality, tracking processes, and resource constraints—have the effect of presenting school failure as the result of individual actions.³⁶ Moreover, what is and is not provided to these students has a strong bearing on future educational and occupational paths.

Though school curriculum tracking decisions affect all students, poor positioning within the school curriculum hierarchy can be a double disadvantage for undocumented students. Placement in the lower or middle curriculum tracks of their schools undercuts their ability to form trusting relationships with high-achieving peers, teachers, and other school personnel. As a result, many students never receive the support and guidance they need to seek out information critical to school success. Whether these students exit the school system before high school graduation or fail to make the transition to college, their entry into the world of low-wage work and their early struggles with their legal limitations have consequences for their adult options and their ability to define themselves as included members deserving of rights.

Once undocumented youth leave school, their experiences set them on different pathways. High achievers who make successful transitions to college find a productive pursuit in higher education that allows them to expand their learning and develop skills that would enable them to

do the kind of work they hoped to do. It provides them positive and affirming experiences that buoy their hopes for the future.

Those who either drop out of school or do not continue schooling after graduation face a dramatic shrinking of their worlds. Without the protection or pretext of being in school, they face frequent exclusions and a growing number of encounters that drive home their status as outsiders.

Ultimately, for these undocumented young adults, at some point in adulthood their illegality dominates their feelings of belonging in most situations and interactions. Illegality becomes a *master status*.

Undocumented Status as a Master Status

The concept of master status was introduced nearly seventy years ago by sociologist Everett Hughes, who noted the tendency of particular human traits, labels, or demographic categories to dominate all other statuses and to prevail in determining a person's general social position.³⁷ Hughes argued that while some statuses carry prestige and honor, others mark individuals more negatively. He also observed that particular statuses or traits carry a degree of stigma that can dominate and subsume all other traits. In the United States, race and gender are statuses that play key roles in ranking social position and shaping access.³⁸ These are also statuses that physically mark individuals. Despite attempts to legislate an end to social inequalities based on race and gender, certain practices remain. Race, for instance, can affect whether and to what degree an individual is suspected of taking part in illegal activity and labeled as a criminal, is passed over for promotions, and is denied loans.³⁹

For undocumented 1.5 generation young adults, undocumented status, while less consequential in childhood, becomes a master status in adulthood. It frames their lives in such a way that years lived in the United States, acculturation to American norms and behavior, and educational attainment are all inconsequential to their everyday routines as undocumented immigrants. This is the case because much of what they need to carry out adult lives—driver's licenses, jobs, valid forms of identification—require legal immigration status. Moreover, the stigmatizing mark of illegality means that they find themselves increasingly associated with the common perceptions of criminality and outsidership, pushing them further out onto the margins.

RESEARCHING UNDOCUMENTED MEXICAN YOUTH

Drawing on participants' narratives of their lives and my own observations of their everyday routines, this book provides an intimate account of the conflicting processes involved in living both inside and outside the circle of belonging. This perspective reveals the cruel and damaging flaws of our contemporary immigration system. I show that while undocumented young people are substantively integrated into American society and can make certain claims to belonging, full membership is denied them by capricious immigration policies. Ultimately, the experiences of my study participants challenge long-standing assumptions among academics and policy makers about the link between acculturation and political and economic incorporation.

This book draws from a longitudinal research study of undocumented young adults in the five-county Los Angeles metropolitan area conducted between 2003 and 2014, involving participant observation, 150 in-depth interviews, and detailed field notes of my engagement with respondents, particularly those with whom I met on more than one occasion. All 150 young people I interviewed were undocumented for most of their childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. They grew up in one or more of the five counties—Los Angeles, Riverside, San Bernardino, Ventura, and Orange—that make up the Los Angeles metropolitan area, and they went to large high schools. With the exception of eight Central Americans (from Guatemala and El Salvador), all were born in Mexico. Most respondents had parents who were undocumented (92 percent) and who had fewer than six years of schooling (86 percent). Most respondents were raised by two parents; thirty-eight were raised by single parents; and six were raised by other family members.

This study is the most comprehensive effort to date to understand the experiences of young undocumented immigrants of the 1.5 generation, and it is the first to follow them as they transition into their adult lives.⁴⁰ My sampling strategy involved theoretical and snowball sampling.⁴¹ Because of the delicate nature of my study and the precarious immigration status of respondents, the work of building long-term, trusting relationships was central to my research process. As anthropologist Philippe Bourgois points out, such relationships are necessary “to ask provocative personal questions, and expect thoughtful, serious answers.”⁴² To build trust, I made multiple contacts with each person before I raised the possibility of audio-recording our conversations, and I was careful to avoid asking potentially intrusive questions early on.

My broad plan included recruiting Mexican immigrants who came to the United States at twelve years or younger and who were undocumented as a result of clandestine crossing or visa overstay. Their ages at the time of the first interview ranged from twenty to thirty-one. I understood from my previous work with youth that many potential participants in my study had experienced severe setbacks in their lives at the hands of adults and institutions and were generally distrustful of them. I knew it would be crucial to gain their trust and support for my project. I also knew that it would not be accomplished in a short time. To the community stakeholders and the young adults alike, I presented myself as an outsider with a sincere interest in the lives of immigrant families, but also as an insider who had the community experience and sensibility adequate to initiate and navigate relationships of trust. My ten years working with youth in Chicago during the 1990s gave me some currency with community members. Staff of organizations often treated me as a colleague, introducing me to program participants, taking me on neighborhood tours, and sharing their own insights.

My initial fieldwork strategies led me to contact with undocumented young adults at community meeting places—job training programs and support groups for troubled young people, soccer fields and basketball courts, continuation schools and GED classes, after-school enrichment programs and DREAMer clubs. To generate a sample that included a broader range of coming-of-age experiences, I sought out ways to find young adults who were not connected to mainstream community organizations. Generating snowball samples outside community institutions also allowed me to find young people who were not at the educational extremes.

Interviews focused on respondents' experiences growing up undocumented in Los Angeles. They included questions about family, community, education, work, and civic participation as well as broad themes of belonging and illegality. I also asked about respondents' hopes and expectations for the future. The interviews form the basis of the project.

THE LAW AND THE CLOCK: CHANGES IN THE POLITICAL CONTEXT OVER TIME

What I learned from undocumented Mexican young adults made clear that the illegality-belonging dynamic is profoundly shaped by time. Historically, studies of immigrant incorporation have viewed time as a

given. After all, it takes time to learn the language, customs, and culture of the host society. There has been much debate about whether time lived in the United States (even if it takes several generations), as opposed to structural conditions, is the recipe for incorporation. Nevertheless, time has been undertheorized, particularly as it relates to the here-and-now experiences of immigrants and their children.⁴³

Time allows young people to accumulate experiences that shape their identities and to define the world around them. Time turns innocent playful children into adults with greater responsibilities. It alters the institutional landscape that young people rely on, and it changes the requirements for participation. Time moves immigrant children in and out of legal categories and legalization channels.⁴⁴ It distorts youths' visibility within in their local community and the perception that they are innocents who deserve protection. But time also plays out on a grander scale.

Contemporary Mexican Migration

The plight of America's estimated 2.1 million undocumented young people can best be understood in the broader historical context of migration from Mexico.⁴⁵ Their presence and their vulnerability are the result of a long history of labor migration dating back to the end of the Mexican-American War in 1848 and legislative attempts to crack down on undocumented migration. Mexicans have long been viewed as a source of cheap, flexible labor, meeting labor demands in America's railroads, factories, mines, and fields. While this dependence on Mexican labor reached an apex during World War II, the legal character of Mexican migration began to change dramatically in the mid-1960s.

In 1964, the burgeoning civil rights movement put an end to the Bracero Program, a twenty-two-year-old guest-worker initiative that supplied cheap and flexible Mexican labor to America's farms. Southwestern growers who had become accustomed to a cheap Mexican labor force nevertheless continued to rely on Mexican migrants to harvest their crops.⁴⁶ A year later, in 1965, Congress passed the Hart-Celler Act, eliminating restrictive immigration policies and creating new family and skilled-worker preference categories for entry. These changes opened up immigration from Asian and African countries and refueled debates about immigration, membership, and belonging.⁴⁷ New ethnic enclaves emerged in several US cities, and existing ones expanded. Meanwhile, migration from Mexico also surged. However, as sociolo-

gists Douglas S. Massey and Karen Pren argue, this increase in migration occurred *in spite of* rather than because of the new system.⁴⁸

Before 1965, there were no numerical limits on immigration from the Western Hemisphere. But the 1965 amendments to existing immigration law, including changes in the Hart-Celler Act, marked an end to open borders and made the likelihood of illegality even greater for newly excluded Mexicans. When the law went into effect in 1968, it limited annual immigration from the Western Hemisphere to 120,000 and established country quotas of 20,000.⁴⁹ These changes, which came shortly after the Bracero Program ended, led many employers to view undocumented migration as their only source of cheap labor.⁵⁰

The restrictions under Hart-Celler also altered the legal auspices under which Mexican immigrants arrived to the United States. Between 1965 and 1986, twenty-eight million Mexicans entered the United States as undocumented migrants.⁵¹ These legally vulnerable migrants met a growing demand for unskilled labor in the service, retail, and construction industries fueled by the growth of cities and suburbs.⁵² These jobs required little English-language proficiency and were well suited for immigrants willing to work for low pay, often in poor working conditions. As the Mexican population grew in US cities, undocumented Mexicans became more visible and the public reaction became more hostile. Mexican migrants were characterized as criminals who were inherently outsiders and as a threat to public safety, health, and the American way of life.⁵³

By the early 1980s, unauthorized immigration from Mexico was a hot political issue in the United States. In 1986, Congress passed the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) in an effort to curb unauthorized migration in the face of growing public hostility. IRCA legalized 2.7 million migrants. This was a major success as a vehicle for bringing migrants out of the shadows and for promoting economic mobility opportunities. However, IRCA did nothing to grant legal visas to subsequent cohorts of workers, thus perpetuating the problem. Moreover, IRCA was the first in a series of laws to impose an increasing number of immigration restrictions that dramatically changed migration patterns. In response to calls for tighter security, efforts to fortify the nearly two-thousand-mile US-Mexico border produced a longer and taller fence, a greater number of agents along the border, and an increased use of technology to detect migrant crossings.⁵⁴ But IRCA failed to address the underlying causes of unauthorized immigration, and the undocumented population continued to grow over the next three decades.

Effects of the Legal Context on Immigration Flow

With immigrants' shift to permanent settlement, the number of undocumented children living in the United States grew rapidly. Prior to the 1980s, undocumented Mexicans were mostly seasonal labor migrants whose families remained back home. However, greater militarization of the border made the act of crossing much more difficult, costly, and dangerous. Instead of returning home to their families in Mexico, migrants started bringing their spouses and children to the United States to live with them.⁵⁵ Throughout the 1990s and into the twenty-first century, the number of undocumented immigrants residing in the United States grew substantially, as did the number of children who would grow up in the United States without legal immigration status.⁵⁶

The passage of IRCA and associated militarization of the border is the most frequently cited explanation for this change in migration patterns. But at least two additional processes contributed to the growth of the undocumented Mexican child population in the United States. In 1996, the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRAIRA) established new and far-reaching grounds of inadmissibility. These include three-year, ten-year, and permanent bars to reentry for persons unlawfully present in the country.⁵⁷ Under IIRAIRA, if a migrant spends more than 180 days in the United States and lacks an appropriate visa extension, he or she is automatically prohibited from legally immigrating for at least three years. The bars are activated upon *departure* from the United States—a provision that is especially draconian given the expiration of another legal provision, known as 245(i), just before IIRAIRA went into effect. Under 245(i), individuals were allowed to adjust their status while they were still within the United States.⁵⁸ With that provision no longer in effect, undocumented residents are required to return to their countries of origin to apply for legal status. But leaving the United States triggers bars to reentry, making it impossible for undocumented immigrants to maintain their lives in the United States while regularizing their status.

This Catch-22 produced a population of settled and now highly vulnerable migrant families—one consisting mainly of Mexicans—with few rights and no practical way to legalize their immigration status. It also stunted the long-term prospects of undocumented children as they come of age. Twenty years ago, many undocumented young people who grew up in the United States eventually legalized their status through employment sponsorship or marriage. Now, because of the immigration

bars, pathways to legal status are far more limited, and the population of undocumented young adults has grown to unprecedented levels.

In less than two decades, the number of undocumented immigrants living in the United States increased ninefold, from 1.3 million in 1990 to a peak of 12.1 million in 2007.⁵⁹ The population of Mexicans in the United States also increased during this time, by roughly half a million people per year. Undocumented immigrants accounted for 80 to 85 percent of the increase.⁶⁰ At an estimated 2.1 million, the children of undocumented immigrants constituted close to one-fifth of the overall 11.2 million undocumented immigrants living in the United States in 2012.⁶¹

As political discourse around illegality has grown increasingly vitriolic, legislative efforts have focused disproportionate attention on enforcement as the chief means of addressing unauthorized migration.⁶² These measures have had particularly disastrous effects on children of deported parents and on undocumented children as they transition to adulthood with greater fears of their own safety.

Blurred Boundaries between Immigration and Crime

In 1996 Congress amended the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952 by passing the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act (AEDPA) and the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRAIRA).⁶³ Taken together, AEDPA and IIRAIRA greatly expanded the number of crimes to be considered deportable offenses and made deportation mandatory for all immigrants sentenced to a year or more. In addition, the 1996 laws eliminated a “suspension of deportation” practice, which had previously allowed immigrants without a criminal history protection from deportation.⁶⁴ As a result, the 1996 laws increased the number of noncitizens who could be removed and sharply reduced the number of noncitizens eligible for any form of relief from removal proceedings, thus subjecting both noncitizens convicted of crimes and those with past criminal convictions to mandatory detention and deportation without the avenues of relief previously available. Equally consequential, the deportation provisions of these laws are applied retroactively to immigrants who would not have been deported under the laws in place at the time of their original convictions. Under these laws, immigrants are left with no recourse to judicial review or appeal. And since immigration courts are civil rather than criminal, the right to counsel does not apply.

Today, not only are noncitizens vulnerable to retroactive convictions of deportable offenses—including minor crimes like shoplifting committed

years earlier—but these convictions trigger an irreversible chain of events that ends in permanent banishment from the United States. Hence, a one-time offense and youthful indiscretion committed years ago automatically results in detention without bond, restriction from access to counsel, no appeals process, deportation, and a lifetime separation from one’s family—no matter how long ago their crime was committed and regardless of time served. Factors such as an immigrant’s ties to the community, lawful good behavior, and tax-paying work history are no longer considered grounds for relief.

Growing Up in a Hostile Environment

Today, undocumented Mexican children are coming of age amid a storm of anti-immigrant discourse and activity.⁶⁵ As hate crimes directed largely against Latino immigrants have gained increasing visibility, federal immigration enforcement activity has also intensified. Since 1997, formal agreements between federal Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and local law enforcement created a climate of racial profiling and community insecurity.⁶⁶ In the first five and a half years, the Obama administration deported over two million people, with deportations reaching a peak of over four hundred thousand in 2012.⁶⁷ Over 90 percent of those deported have been of Latino descent.⁶⁸ And nearly all of these recent deportees have been Latino men.⁶⁹

In April of 2014, the *New York Times* reported that nearly two-thirds of the two million deportations during the Obama presidency involved either people with no criminal records or those convicted of minor crimes.⁷⁰ That same month, researchers at Syracuse University cautioned that ICE’s broad definition of criminal behavior included very minor infractions such as exceeding the speed limit.⁷¹ Given the scope and intensity of enforcement efforts, Latino families and communities have experienced disproportional anxiety and disruptions.

While the federal government sets a general framework based on immigration categories that bestow rights to some while denying access to others, it also grants limited local authority to states. This provides possibilities for pockets of inclusion or exclusion, depending on how such authority is exercised. In other words, success or failure is a matter of chance. Where a person lives matters a great deal. Whether a child grows up in a place with harsh or lenient enforcement is highly consequential to his or her outlook and life outcome. Between 2005 and 2011, state legislative activity focused on immigration increased more

than fivefold, from (in 2005) legislators in twenty-five states considering approximately 300 immigration-related bills and enacting 39 of them, to (in 2011) legislators across forty-two states and Puerto Rico introducing 1,607 immigration-related bills and resolutions and passing 306 of them.⁷² The stances of states, counties, and cities have ranged from unsympathetic, unwelcoming, and even inhospitable to very supportive and favorable. However, the more hostile measures have received the most attention.

In 2010, Arizona passed Senate Bill 1070, an unusually broad and harsh immigration law. Its controversial enforcement provision—commonly known as “Show me your papers”—conflated Mexican, immigrant, and “illegal,” resulting in a legal justification for racial profiling.⁷³ Following the lead of Arizona, several other states levied sanctions against employers and empowered local police to check for citizenship status.⁷⁴ Lawmakers in Alabama went considerably further in 2011.⁷⁵ They sought to deny immigrants access to virtually every facet of regulated life, from water utilities to rental agreements to dog tags.⁷⁶ Across the country, an even larger number of municipal and county ordinances attempted to cut off access to a wide array of common services.⁷⁷

Meanwhile, several states have attempted to restrict the participation of undocumented immigrant students in public two- and four-year post-secondary educational institutions.⁷⁸ In 2008, South Carolina became the first state to ban undocumented immigrants from enrolling in any college or university that receives state dollars. That same year, the Alabama State Board of Education passed a policy barring undocumented students from the state’s two-year public colleges. In Georgia, in 2010, educational officials similarly voted to bar undocumented students from attending the state’s five most selective public universities.⁷⁹

Taken together, these trends have produced a hostile climate, ratcheting up levels of alarm and fear in immigrant communities.⁸⁰ According to the Pew Hispanic Center, more than one in two Latinos worries about discrimination and deportation.⁸¹ Law professor Michael Olivas, noting increased levels of hostility and prejudice at the community level, warns of “an ethnic and national origin ‘tax’ that will only be levied upon certain groups, certain to be Mexicans in particular.”⁸²

California’s Varied Immigration Stances

The young people in my study came of age during a time of intense turmoil and anti-immigrant sentiment in California. In the early 1990s Republican

governor Pete Wilson fanned nativist flames by evoking images of “floods of Mexicans,” “hostile takeovers,” and “uncontrollable” and “unchecked” “illegal” migration.⁸³ This rhetoric portrayed Mexican migrants as unwanted criminals who were outsiders and a threat to public safety, health, and the American way of life. In 1993 Wilson signed into law a measure that required driver’s license applicants to provide a Social Security number, effectively excluding undocumented immigrants. In 1994 California residents voted in favor of the controversial Proposition 187 ballot initiative, which aimed to prohibit undocumented immigrants in the state from using health care, public education, and other social services. In 1996 Californians voted in favor of Proposition 209 to abolish the state’s public affirmative action program in employment, contracting, and public education. And in 1998 they effectively eliminated bilingual education in California with Proposition 227.

After growing support to allow undocumented immigrants in the state to drive, Governor Gray Davis signed a bill giving undocumented immigrants access to driver’s licenses in 2003. However, his actions caused a public outcry that helped spur his recall from office. Arnold Schwarzenegger, who was elected in the recall, persuaded the state legislature to repeal the never-enacted driver’s license bill. He later vetoed subsequent attempts at legislation in 2004 and 2006.

By the time my research was nearing its end, changed demographics and public opinion favored increased access for undocumented immigrants, and the state began to take great strides toward integrating them.⁸⁴ These efforts, signed into law by Governor Jerry Brown in 2013, included the TRUST Act, which sets minimum standards to limit immigration hold requests in local jails; A. B. 60, legislation that allows undocumented immigrants to receive California driver’s licenses;⁸⁵ two measures (A. B. 263 and S. B. 666) that target employers who retaliate against workers by threatening to report their immigration status; A. B. 1159, a measure that imposes regulations to protect consumers from being defrauded by unqualified individuals who charge a fee to help immigrants gain legal status; and A. B. 1024, a bill that allows undocumented immigrants who pass the state bar exam to be licensed as attorneys. Also, local ordinances have created “sanctuary cities” and have targeted unfair towing practices.

While most of my respondents did not receive any institutional financial assistance while in college, eligible students in the system in 2012 began to receive state-level financial aid. The California Dream Act—divided into two bills, A. B. 130 and A. B. 131—made undocumented

students who qualify for in-state tuition under A. B. 540 eligible for institutional scholarships and state-based financial aid such as Cal Grants, State University Grants, and Board of Governor Fee Waivers. The bills went into effect in 2012 and 2013 respectively.

California has taken giant steps to integrate undocumented immigrants. Nevertheless, federal immigration enforcement continues to exacerbate levels of fear and vulnerability. And old convictions, like those of Ramon, render many immigrants ineligible for many of these programs. Furthermore, while immigrants in California may enjoy certain benefits, the circumstances of those in states like Alabama and Arizona have arguably worsened.

Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals

On August 15, 2012, DACA went into effect, providing undocumented young people a temporary reprieve from deportation and giving them legal access to work permits. For those who had come to the United States before the age of sixteen, had been in the country continuously for the previous five years, and had not turned thirty-one prior to the president's announcement, this policy change represented an important step forward and a chance to begin to realize deferred dreams. As of March 31, 2015, more than 664,000 applications had been approved.⁸⁶

For many college graduates, the program's work permit allows beneficiaries to make the most of their advanced degrees in jobs that match their educational preparation and credentials. For college-bound and students currently enrolled in postsecondary institutions, DACA provides an additional incentive to invest in education and skills.

In California, DACA has had tremendous reach. With over seventy-one thousand approvals, California is home to the greatest number of DACA beneficiaries.⁸⁷ In 2012, DACAmented Californians became eligible for driver's licenses when A. B. 2189 was signed into law. In addition, they are eligible for Medi-Cal, a health program serving low-income families.⁸⁸ Beginning in 2012, many Californians were poised to take advantage of increased access to driver's licenses, health care, jobs, and opportunities to travel.

By mid-2015, a significant segment of those estimated to be eligible for the program nationwide had not applied. Explanations vary. Many older individuals may not have been aware that community organizations were able to assist them with the application process; older individuals also may have had more difficulty proving their continuous

residence, given that they arrived in the United States earlier and have been out of school for many years.⁸⁹ The low uptake rates by DACA-eligible youth may also be attributable to educational barriers. An earlier analysis of what might happen if legislation aimed at legalizing undocumented immigrant young people was enacted suggested that barriers to postsecondary education, especially its high cost and family poverty, would lead as many as 62 percent of those eligible under a DREAM Act bill not to pursue it.⁹⁰

Many of my respondents have not welcomed DACA with the kind of enthusiasm it has received among a younger demographic. Time away from school, dreams deferred many years ago, and strained personal budgets have deterred many from applying. In addition, a lack of experience in relevant job sectors has weakened the impact of the status among my respondents who received DACA.

Deepening Divisions between Deserving and Undeserving Immigrants

DACA has highlighted the growing distance between the college educated and the rest of the undocumented youth population. But it should not be surprising that such a divide exists. Increasingly, immigrant integration proposals and legislation have exacerbated divisions between high achievers and other undocumented youth, rewarding the meritorious with an easier pathway to access while leaving others further behind.

By 2015, eighteen states had in-state residency tuition policies for undocumented immigrant college students.⁹¹ In 2011, California joined Texas and New Mexico in allowing undocumented immigrant students to receive state financial aid.⁹² These measures provided undocumented students increased access to institutions of higher education and boosted their enrollments. However, they also signaled a troubling trend: policy proposals during this time have been driven by a singular focus on undocumented youth qua students, with little consideration of their experiences outside school. DACA is an excellent example. The main criterion for eligibility is graduation from high school or attendance in an educational program.

Conversely, the federal government has shown zero tolerance for immigrants who commit even the slightest offense or infraction. Since 1996 the government has increasingly expanded the definition of immigrant criminality, using standards that do not apply to US citizens. An

immigrant pulled over today for an improper lane change or a broken tail light—crimes that might result in a fine or suspended sentence for nonimmigrants—could face arrest, detention, deportation, and a bar from returning to the United States if he or she pled guilty to a misdemeanor that has since been defined a deportable offense.⁹³

In the early stages of advocacy for undocumented students, educators, legislators, and lobbyists tried to paint a portrait of undocumented students that would appeal to all who love the American dream. The prevailing image of undocumented immigrants had been that of lawbreaking, inassimilable, and uneducated masses using public benefits, lowering wages, and having babies in the United States.⁹⁴ This uncontrollable tide, led largely by Mexicans, was said to be a threat to US culture, politics, the economy, and national security. To gain public sympathy for DREAM-eligible youth, advocates began to distance them from the familiar characterizations of undocumented immigrants. They depicted undocumented youth as innocent of the “criminal” decision to break US laws by crossing the border. They were framed as clean-cut, college-bound youngsters who spoke fluent and largely unaccented English. Images of valedictorians, class presidents, and model citizens wearing business suits or caps and gowns, the trappings of academic and professional success, multiplied in the media. Stories of educational achievement and American dreaming humanized the plight of undocumented immigrants.

However, these depictions also deepened divisions not only between “innocent” youth and their “lawbreaking” parents but also between high-achieving students and the more general population of undocumented youth unable to go to college. By framing the issue around school, they moved the discussion away from immigrant rights to one that distinguishes “worthy” immigrants from “unworthy ones,” “innocent” and “deserving” immigrants from felons and gang members. While a fraction of the population was successfully navigating the education system, those out of school faced greater odds of being ensnared by immigration enforcement, contributing to what legal scholar Jennifer Chacon has called a “school-to deportation” pipeline.

But college-going immigrants too enter the low-wage workforce and find that the target is also on their backs. One then must ask: What, ultimately, is the value of characterizations emphasizing undocumented youths’ high achievement and youthful innocence? Do they benefit only a dwindling number of high-achieving adolescents, while leaving the majority behind?

STUDYING UNDOCUMENTED ADULTS OVER TIME

Undocumented immigrants who begin their lives in the United States as children represent a significant share of the nation's undocumented immigrant population. It is imperative that researchers develop a better understanding of how this group negotiates liminal lives between belonging and exclusion. Both early exiters and college-goers bear powerful witness to the human costs of a broken and inhumane immigration system. Long-cherished national ideals underlying belief in meritocracy and the American dream rest on the assumption that US institutions—including the immigration system—operate fairly and predictably. But the system is rarely consistent or just. The politically and culturally marked lives of undocumented young people starkly reveal its cracks and contradictions.

When I began my study, many of my respondents were in their late teens. Most are now in their late twenties and early thirties. Robert Courtney Smith calls this kind of endeavor “life-course ethnography,” an oxymoronic categorization that defies the logic embedded in these different approaches to research because it requires focused, in-depth immersion in the culture and everyday life of research subjects but also entails a longer, sustained view of their lives across time. Like Smith, I argue that this kind of deep and long engagement not only is possible but is an effective way to understand how vulnerable populations make sense of, contend with, and respond to the material conditions of their lives. By deeply immersing myself in the worlds of these young people I was able to gain an on-the-ground view of the big questions of migration and membership as they unfolded in the more personal themes of home, time, and place.

My twelve-year engagement with undocumented young adults in the Los Angeles metropolitan area began as an ethnography in 2003 of young adults in Santa Ana, California, the county seat and second most populous city in Orange County. After spending several months in community organizations and observing 1.5 and second-generation Mexican young adult participants, I conducted the first set of interviews with thirty adult children of undocumented immigrants, twenty-two of whom were undocumented. Then, from 2003 to 2006, I expanded my ethnographic fieldwork to the five-county Los Angeles metropolitan area to learn more about how young adults who came to the United States as children were affected by their undocumented status. In 2007 I interviewed seventy-eight undocumented young adults,⁹⁵ and then in 2009 I

interviewed an additional fifty. This third wave of interviews gave me the chance to refine questions about adult transitions and to further diversify the sample. Social media and relationships with community members have allowed me to follow up with most of my respondents through the years.

In the first few years of my study I spent countless hours in community spaces. I tutored, volunteered, attended group meetings and town hall forums, and presented workshops. I also advertised my project to clubs and at community meetings, and I explained my project to potential research subjects. This field experience served as the basis for my ethnography and the foundation of my study. I located participants through participant observation and through referrals from community and family members I had met. My early research entailed following young people throughout their daily lives. I observed them in home, at school, in their local communities, and at work. I was present for many of their accomplishments, and I listened to their stories of frustration and sometimes desperation. I watched them earn GEDs and graduate from college, struggle to find and keep jobs, enter graduate schools, have children, and face deportation. I explored how respondents internalized, critiqued, and responded to contradictory messages about belonging and membership.

By the end of my study, there were dozens of undocumented immigrant student groups in almost every state in the country as well as national organizations composed of undocumented young adults. But during the early stages of my research, little public attention was paid to the plight of undocumented young people. Locating undocumented student groups and gaining their trust took time. And enlisting the participation of out-of-school undocumented young adults required a great deal of community immersion and ongoing contact with potential study participants.

Given the respondents' immigration status, I have gone to great lengths to establish and maintain confidentiality. Respondents provided verbal consent rather than leaving a paper trail with a written consent form. Having gone through a thorough human subjects process, I took several measures to avoid any identifiers that would directly link data to specific respondents. I gave pseudonyms to all respondents at the time of the initial meeting, and I never collected home addresses. I have replaced the names of respondents and their family members, schools, workplaces, and residences. I have also altered other types of identifying information, including gender, year of arrival, and birthplace,

during multiple phases of deidentification to protect confidentiality. I also destroyed all audiotapes immediately after transcription.

Methodological Considerations

One long-standing difficulty in developing a better understanding of undocumented children is the lack of reliable demographic and empirical data. Large-scale surveys do not ask about immigration status, so we know very little about this population's earnings, expenses, mental and emotional health, and other important characteristics.⁹⁶ High-achieving undocumented college students are an attractive convenience sample for university researchers, politicians, and journalists, but this group is not representative of the undocumented population as a whole. Efforts to evaluate the potential impact of proposed DREAM Act legislation have generated more reliable data on the numbers of undocumented young people and where they live. But researchers are still unable to generate a detailed picture of trends in undocumented youths' academic trajectories.

Immigration scholar Nancy Foner makes a persuasive case for ethnography as a method to engage and understand hard-to-access populations. While acknowledging the important role large-scale survey research has played in the field of migration studies, she draws attention to the uniquely valuable, and often complementary, insights that ethnographies can provide. The in-depth study of a smaller number of people, carried out over a longer period of time, produces denser, deeper knowledge of individuals and reveals subtleties in meaning and behavior that large-scale surveys often miss or, in some cases, get wrong.⁹⁷ To move beyond conjecture, this study takes an ethnographic research approach that yields deep familiarity with the lives of the undocumented 1.5 generation. As Agnieszka Kubal notes, inquiry into the power of the state is most fertile at "the level of lived experience, where power is exercised, understood, and sometimes resisted."⁹⁸ Understanding how young adults experience power required a methodology deeply rooted in their lives.

My research on the 1.5 generation involved multiple ethnographic methods, including participant observation, in-depth life-history interviews, and unstructured interviews. This triangulation generated a "thick description" that situated the study participants' lived experiences, everyday processes, and subjective realities within their broader socioeconomic and historical contexts.⁹⁹ The research approach was grounded in daily and weekly contact, which enabled me to observe

young men and women as they engaged in practices and interactions rather than to rely solely on verbal reports.

Unlike the few existing studies of this population, my own study deliberately sought undocumented young adults who were not high academic achievers.¹⁰⁰ There are dangers inherent in telling only one story about the lives of many people.¹⁰¹ Limiting the study of any group to an investigation of its most successful members runs the risk of obscuring the bigger picture. To be sure, the dominant media narrative—of undocumented students' school achievement and exemplary civic participation—is an important one. It underscores their perseverance and remarkable ability to overcome obstacles. Ultimately, however, such depictions reify the Horatio Alger story, highlighting triumphs and ignoring the contextual forces that shape, constrain, and promote inclusion and mobility.¹⁰²

The inclusion of young people who left school at or before their high school graduation in my study makes clear the effects of undocumented status on individuals who do not have the protections afforded by school involvement and by accumulated social and cultural capital. Well-intentioned descriptions of undocumented youth as “American at heart” ignore the multiple ways they are prevented from feeling American. The young people I met all contended with significant troubles: family poverty, exclusion, constant fear of apprehension, stigma, daily stress, and worry. To frame their experiences solely in terms of college access and career advancement neglects the serious cumulative effects of these broader issues. Through deeply involved ethnography with undocumented youth with a wide range of educational experiences, this research questions the structures that position this group outside the American community. In doing so, it reveals these actors' capacity to resist their circumstances and presents a fuller view of their agency.

Representing Liminal Experiences

President Obama's rhetorical use of “felons, not families” in his November 20 speech reflects and expands on efforts to present undocumented immigrants in a binary fashion: as innocents and high achievers or as undeserving threats to an American way of life. Indeed, the former depiction has emerged only recently as a political counternarrative to portray undocumented youth as worthy of membership. However, this dichotomization is equally problematic. It excludes and marginalizes many undocumented youth and adults not captured by this narrow vision of innocence, and it obscures their nuanced and similar experiences.

The young people I came to know came of age in complex social worlds, and their personal stories are highly nuanced. I share the concern Philippe Bourgois expressed regarding the possible misinterpretation of his ethnographic account of young men enmeshed in a drug culture.¹⁰³ Like him, I worry that the life stories and events presented in this book may be misread as negative stereotypes of young adults at the margins.¹⁰⁴ But I believe that the depth of my research process provided me with the ability to humanize my subjects, departing from the one-dimensional caricatures of undocumented youth as either superstar students or dangerous criminals. Any up-close exploration of a socially marginal population risks problems of representation. However, resisting binary depictions of these young men and women requires moving beyond sanitized and decontextualized sound bites that obscure the everyday realities of being undocumented, poor, and a racially marked other.

Avoiding a one-dimensional depiction of educational success can lead to a different problem—that of perpetuating the narratives of inferiority commonly used to characterize those on the margins. To avoid this trap, I constructed an alternative narrative that draws from a rich set of comparisons to present a critical interrogation of the US immigration system, the public school system, and poor, segregated, urban communities of concentrated poverty. This approach allows me to (re)tell stories of struggle and agency alongside a wider narrative of structural inequality and exclusion. Accompanying the many accounts of struggle in this book are diverse examples of individual triumph, resistance, and difficult choices made in the face of mounting obstacles.

The book addresses the varied levels of inclusion experienced by undocumented young adults who have been blocked from full legal access to membership in American society. Subsequent chapters draw on data from my larger sample of interviews as well as field notes from the time I spent interacting with and observing a smaller group of respondents. My analysis primarily focuses on young people's interpersonal experiences of their undocumented status, with attention to the influence of social structures at the local level, including schools, families, communities, and labor markets. I explore critical transition points that move college-goers and early exiters in and out of spaces of inclusion and exclusion. I pay close attention to the choices they make under sometimes conflicting circumstances. The participants' experiences of commonality and of difference have much to do with individual characteristics, but examined together they also demonstrate the force of the law in constricting immigrants' day-to-day worlds and limiting adult lives.

PLAN OF THIS BOOK

Chapter 2 presents the college-goers and early exiters in their social world of Los Angeles. It examines their social, political, and legal circumstances and how they understood those circumstances. This chapter provides a glimpse into the legal and economic challenges that the two groups faced in early adulthood, as well as the mechanisms that shaped their daily lives and future aspirations. While the college-goers enjoyed institutional protections that buffered experiences of illegality, early exiters bore the brunt of legal limitation and poverty. College-goers' ongoing presence in the academic world allowed and encouraged them to continue to dream and to plan bright futures. In contrast, early exiters had trouble looking past immediate needs of survival and making ends meet.

In Chapters 3, 4, and 5 I examine young adults' transitions from spaces of belonging to spaces of exclusion, from acceptance to rejection, from protected lives to illegal ones. In tracing the transition to illegality, I outline three stages: (1) integration; (2) discovery; and (3) learning to be illegal. I also show how factors outside the formal immigration system shape experiences of belonging.

Chapter 3 explores the issue of belonging through the early life experiences of undocumented youth. My respondents' narratives support claims of belonging based on presence, place, relationships, and accumulated experiences in communities. But undocumented young people did not experience belonging uniformly. Chapter 4 focuses on the primary and secondary school experiences of college-goers and early exiters. I explore how teachers and counselors included some young people while casting out others.

Chapter 5 examines the tumultuous discovery stage in the transition to illegality. I incorporate a life-course perspective to understand the role of adolescent and adult transitions in defining liminality, belonging, and exclusion. As respondents reached their late teenage years, the contradictions between laws that provided educational access and laws that denied their participation came into sharp relief. Almost overnight, feelings of inclusion and belonging were replaced by experiences of rejection and a heightened awareness of their unauthorized status. For many respondents, legal barriers brought a profound experience of stigma. The chapter highlights the divergent responses of college-goers and early exiters to experiences of exclusion.

For generations, scholars have touted education as the primary means of upward mobility. But my respondents experienced the rewards

of educational attainment differently. By their mid- to late twenties, college-goers had finished higher education pursuits and early exiters had settled into work and family routines. In Chapters 6 and 7, I show how the two groups responded to exclusions, narrowed access, and everyday lives of illegality.

Chapter 6 draws on observations and interviews to describe the post-high school experiences of the early exiters. As they entered the world of low-wage clandestine work, they “learned to be illegal,” a transformation that involved the almost complete retooling of daily routines, survival skills, aspirations, and social patterns. As they underwent this transformation, early exiters endured hardships, but they also demonstrated agency and resilience—forming relationships, taking part in social activities, and interacting with community institutions.

Chapter 7 turns to the college-goers, who, in contrast to the early exiters, enjoyed a seamless transition from high school to the legal pursuit of postsecondary education. On their college and university campuses, many found support from caring staff and undocumented peers. These relationships helped them secure the resources needed to move out from behind their stigmatized identities. Some asserted claims of membership through local and national activist efforts. However, the condition of illegality overwhelmed many college-goers as they struggled to finance college and reconcile their dual identities as students and undocumented immigrants. Even after completing college and attaining degrees, many college-goers experienced a regressive slide into a life of limited choices and the fear of deportation.

While the trajectories of college-goers and early exiters diverged during their late teens and early twenties, they ultimately and dramatically converged as these undocumented young adults approached their thirties. Chapter 8 builds on the evidence provided in the preceding chapters to describe illegality as a master status. In a legal environment that promoted enforcement and punishment at the expense of integration, all respondents’ adult lives were framed by illegality.

Chapter 9 revisits the key issues raised in chapter 1 and uses the study’s findings as a basis for recommendations for national and local policies to address the untenable position of undocumented youth. This chapter also discusses the potential reach and limitations of the DACA program, assesses the possibilities for federal legalization, and examines local-level integration efforts and their limitations.