



# “I Don’t Belong Anymore”: Undocumented Latino Immigrants Encounter Social Services in the United States

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## Abstract

As undocumented Latino immigrants transition into adulthood, they also transition into illegality. They move from a somewhat protected status under which they had access to education and other social benefits, to the more vulnerable category of undocumented adults without access to social rights. How undocumented immigrants’ interactions with social services contribute to the formation of their ethnic identity and feelings of belonging to the United States is the focus of this research. Drawing on qualitative interview data from undocumented adults who grew up in the United States, this article shows that as undocumented children transition into adulthood, they face a new system that forces them to learn how to become an immigrant if they want to remain part of American society.

## Keywords

undocumented, immigrants, Latino(a)(s), social services, incorporation

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An estimated 11.5 million undocumented immigrants reside in the United States. Most undocumented immigrants are Latinos, and many arrive to the country at a young age. There are 1.3 million undocumented children and 1.6 million youth, between the ages of 18 and 24, currently living in the United States (Hoefler, Rytina, & Baker, 2012).

Undocumented immigrants, who represent 28% of all foreign-born individuals in the United States (Passel & Cohn, 2011), are barred from social benefits (Kullgren, 2003; Siddiqi, Zuberi, & Nguyen, 2009), and do not qualify for public financial aid for higher education (Erisman & Looney, 2007). Fears of deportation prevent most undocumented Latinos from accessing adequate housing, food, or health care (Abrego & Gonzales, 2010; Dang, Giordano, & Kim, 2012; Larchanché, 2012).

Although the growth of the undocumented population in the United States has generated an increased interest for understanding their mechanisms of incorporation (Gleeson & Gonzales, 2012), the role of social services remains understudied. This aspect of incorporation has been neglected partly because few social benefits are available to the undocumented. Yet, most undocumented Latinos interact with providers of social services through the school system, religious organizations, government offices, and voluntary associations (Ortega et al. 2007; Yoshikawa, 2011).

Assimilation is frequently analyzed by examining the socioeconomic status of immigrants through the lens of income, occupation, and educational attainment (Massey, Durand, & Malone, 2003; Rumbaut, 2008). Less has been said about assimilation from the perspective of identity (Massey & Sánchez, 2010), or about how undocumented immigrants' interactions with social services contribute to the formation of their ethnic identity and their subsequent assimilation. Research shows that while some groups gradually assimilate through successive generations and eventually display a diminished salience of ethnic identity, as exemplified by European immigrants, other minority groups experience persistent segregation and discrimination, as it has been the case for African Americans (Sears, Fu, Henry, & Bui, 2003).

The main goal of this study was to explore how encounters with social services affect the ethnic identity of undocumented Latino immigrants who grew up in the United States. We sought to examine how the transition into adulthood, and the consequent loss of protection from social services, affected the identity formation and the feelings of belonging to the United States, of undocumented Latino immigrants.

## Undocumented Immigrants, Ethnic Identity Formation, and the Role of Social Services

Undocumented children come rapidly into contact with educational institutions in the United States. The 1982 Supreme Court decision in *Plyer v. Doe* declared that depriving undocumented children of an education was unconstitutional, and allowed undocumented children to benefit from the same K-12 educational opportunities than are available to children authorized to live on U.S. soil, including free meals and special education services. In addition, under the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (1974), schools are not allowed to report undocumented students to authorities. However, at the age of 18, these undocumented children leave the shelter of this protective legal environment and lose access to the social services that they were once granted.

Ethnic identity is an indicator of immigrants' assimilation (Phinney, Horenczyk, Liebkind, & Vedder, 2001). The concept of identity can encompass various types of identities, such as cultural, racial, or ethnic (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000; Schwartz, Montgomery, & Briones, 2006). Although there is not a universal definition of ethnic identity, the term is considered to be part of the broader concept of cultural identity, and it is often understood through the lens of national identity (Phinney et al., 2001).

Ethnic identity evolves with time (Phinney & Ong, 2007; Tovar & Feliciano, 2009) and in response to social and political contexts (Sabatier, 2008; Tovar & Feliciano, 2009). Although immigrant youth tend to Americanize relatively quickly (Stepick & Stepick, 2002), and adopt many aspects of American cultures and values (Waters, 1990), they seem to retain part of their own ethnic identity (Stepick & Stepick, 2002). Ethnic identity is particularly important during adolescence and the transitioning into adulthood, as immigrants become increasingly aware of their differences with the majority group, and explore their own options of identity (Marcia, 2002; Quintana, Vogel, & Ybarra, 1991; Waters, 1990). Ethnic identity then "seems to operate both to buffer and exacerbate the negative effects of discrimination across a variety of ethnic groups spanning adolescence to late adulthood" (Yip, Gee, & Takeuchi, 2008, p. 3).

As undocumented Latinos transition into adulthood, they also transition into illegality and move from a somewhat protected status under which they had access to education and other social benefits, to the more vulnerable category of undocumented adults who must learn how to navigate a new system (Ellis & Chen, 2013). The passage to adulthood leaves these undocumented children uncertain of their own identity and sense of belonging, as they lose the legal protection they were granted as children (Suárez-Orozco, Bang, &

Kim, 2011). Undocumented children are schooled in the United States to perceive themselves as their documented peers. However, as soon as they leave this cocoon of belonging, that is, the school setting, undocumented adults quickly learn that they are not like the rest of Americans (Gleeson & Gonzales, 2012). Although many have the same career expectations and ambition as their documented peers, as they transition to adulthood, undocumented Latinos lose access to the mechanisms that promote social mobility (Pérez, 2012). They face limitations to find employment, to get a driver's license, and to enroll in higher education (Abrego, 2006, 2008). They can no longer live like their documented peers, for whom nothing has changed and who are rightfully allowed to pursue their ambition and goals. They must embrace their illegal status by readjusting their aspirations, changing their social circles, and learning new skills in order to survive (Gonzales, 2011). Adulthood, for undocumented Latinos, represents a radical change in which they learn how to live "in the shadows." This change is often accompanied by feelings of being an outsider in a hostile environment (Suarez-Orozco et al., 2011).

Transitioning into adulthood also becomes a turning point in the life of undocumented Latinos because they must face new systemic barriers to provide for themselves and their families (Gonzales, Suárez-Orozco, & Dedios-Sanguinetti, 2013). Undocumented immigrants are at greater risk of poverty than other immigrants (Passel & Cohn, 2011), further increasing their need to resort to social services to meet basic needs. However, their transition to "illegality" is accompanied by a recategorization of their deservingness. Undocumented adults are barred from most social benefits, which promote social stratification (Cebulko, 2014), and leave their opportunities to the access mechanisms of social mobility (i.e., health, education, housing, nutrition) to the discretion of bureaucrats and providers of services. This very same discretion is based on discourses of deservingness, which, in the collective imaginary, most undocumented Latinos do not possess (Sargent, 2012; Viladrich, 2012). Public opinion and the media increasingly portray undocumented Latinos in the United States as criminals and lawbreakers, and thus, undeserving of the protection of the state (Waters & Pineau, 2015).

Prior studies have shown that Latinos' experiences with social services have an impact on their sense of belonging and identity formation (Calvo, Jablonska-Bayro, & Waters, 2017). For some, benefiting from services reinforces feelings of belonging, while others see it as a failure and opt for what Philip Warin calls "non take-up" (Warin, 2007). We extend previous scholarship and explore how undocumented immigrants' transition to illegality and the subsequent reidentification as outsiders underserving of the protection of the state influenced their feelings of belonging to the United States.

## Method

Data for this study come from 32 semistructured qualitative interviews of Latino immigrants, 18 to 35 years of age, that were conducted in Boston in 2012. We used grounded theory to uncover the mechanisms at work in the identity formation and assimilation of these immigrants through their encounters with social services. Our approach was to remain as open as possible in order not to stir the interviewees' responses in any particular direction. Our interview guide was designed to collect standardized information as well as to allow the respondents to comment and provide their own subjective opinion about their experiences with social services.

### *Recruitment Process and Data Collection*

The Institutional Review Board of Harvard University approved all the study procedures. Researchers relied initially on exploratory ethnography in selected neighborhoods. Neighborhoods were chosen to achieve the highest degree of socioeconomic diversity. We contacted the Latino community with a recruitment flyer about the purpose of the study. The flyer was posted in Spanish and in English in social service agencies, neighborhood associations, churches, clinics, hospitals, and schools. Then, numerous points of entry were utilized for recruiting respondents. Researchers entered into the Latino communities in Boston by participating in celebrations and festivals and religious services. Through repeated attendance at these events, we recruited a first cohort of participants, who subsequently assisted with the recruitment of more participants. To protect participants, we did not collect personal identifying information. Although immigrants could choose to be informed and interviewed in English or Spanish, most preferred Spanish.

Interviews lasted between 40 and 90 minutes. The interviews permitted in-depth discussion of respondents' immigrant stories. In addition, our exploratory approach gave participants the opportunity to comment on their use of social services, and on their perceived assimilation into American society. We chose this approach because it allowed us to frame the interview, while leaving latitude to interviewees to explore topics they wished. This offered opportunities for in-depth exploration of new paths that opened up in the course of the conversation. This approach gave researchers a better understanding of respondents' subjective views concerning how their ethnic identity was formed by different experiences with social services.

Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. To analyze our data, we use Atlas.ti. We conducted two main rounds of coding. The first round of coding, based on preexisting codes derived from the interview guide, encoded

the main socioeconomic characteristics of the respondents, their immigration story, their current living conditions, and the types of social assistance they had received. A subsequent round of coding explored the data more analytically by creating a database from a thematic rereading of the interviews. The aim of this second round was to codify information that captured the subjective understanding of respondents' identity stemming from their interactions with social services.

## Findings

This article puts forward three sets of findings related to the effect that losing access to social services had on the identity formation and subsequent feelings of belonging of undocumented Latino young adults: (1) alienation from American society and subsequent loss of American identity, (2) learning to navigate the murky waters of the American and ethnic identities, and (3) the enemy is at home: alienation from the Latino community.

### *Alienation From American Society and Subsequent Loss of American Identity*

As immigrants experienced new forms of discrimination associated with their newly acquired undocumented status, they felt gradually alienated from their American identity. The relative protection experienced during childhood and adolescence vanished with the passage to adulthood. This was evidenced by Juan, a young Salvadorian who grew up in Boston and narrated how, for the first time, he experienced that providers of social services adopted a discriminatory attitude upon learning of his migratory status.

. . . I have been in hospitals that when you tell them that you are undocumented they change the conversation style. . . . They start asking some questions that I am pretty sure they don't need [the answer to] . . . A few things happened with people undocumented [*sic*]. What I saw in the places that you go looking for help, they [service providers] seem to say: "we are the people who give you help so you have to do what we say," "we are above, you are below, you want something, do what I say" . . . It makes you feel like the poor immigrant who came here from a third world country.

As a result of this and others' discriminatory experiences, Juan distanced himself from American society and grew closer to his Salvadorian identity. During the interview, Juan expressed that he "didn't belong anymore." The passage to adulthood exposed him to a type of interactions with the

representatives of the state, with America, that made him feel as an outsider. He mentioned that he rarely spends time anymore with the friends he grew up with, mostly Americans. He prefers to be among fellow Salvadorians who are in a similar migratory situation. Furthermore, Juan decided not to have any interactions with social service institutions because he felt uncomfortable asking for help. He wanted to avoid being reminded of what he had lost (his American identity). He did not want to be reminded that he was not part of society any longer.

In my case that's why I don't go to those places [social service agencies]. Because you are always crossing your fingers that you will find a person that is going to be a human person that you can have a conversation with. Not someone who by just seeing you is going to start asking you things.

As the needs of these young adults evolve, they become increasingly aware of the limitations linked to their migratory status and of the negative stereotype associated with being undocumented. This becomes especially clear when they attempt to obtain social services and face social workers, and other service providers, who either refuse to help them or provide inaccurate information. These negative experiences make these undocumented Latino young adults question their sense of belonging to American society. And in turn, they separate themselves from an environment that has suddenly become hostile. For instance, Ana, an undocumented single mother who was born in the Dominican Republic and arrived in the United States as a teenager explains that now that she is an adult, she is no longer entitled to the few benefits that she received when she first arrived to Boston. She describes her adult life as a constant struggle. She no longer feels part of society. She narrated her experiences applying for a nutritional supplement for her newborn daughter.

Ana mentioned that the bureaucrat (the social worker) told her that her daughter was not eligible. Ana knew this not to be true, because her daughter was born in the United States, and, thus, was an American citizen with full access to benefits. In addition to providing false information, the social worker advised her not to apply for financial aid if she did not want to be deported.

. . . the girl [social worker] . . . even threatened me with immigration, . . . she said by telephone: "you have to forget about this case because of what you told us in the application [that you were undocumented] . . ." I didn't say that I was undocumented, illegal, I was just saying that my children had a social security number. I am not lying, and I have the copy, I filled it, because they give you a

copy [at the hospital] . . . Then she said: “but you know illegals do not qualify.” I know illegals do not qualify here, absolutely, but I am eligible because of the children. . . . My kids get it [medical insurance] but they told me that it isn’t through me, it is only because they are under 18, and I am their guardian, you know? . . . Now I am no longer eligible, I don’t belong anymore, now I have to fight a lot, I have to defend myself. I won’t chicken out, and I have to fight. If they [the social service providers] are mean to me and ask for a lot of things, I do it, I give it to them, you know?

Misinformation provided by social workers, abuse of power and discrimination, not only further alienated these undocumented Latino young adults from American society. These experiences also created a sense of having to fight, to battle a society that has suddenly become a threat. Most of our sample used words such as “fight,” “defend myself,” “battle” to describe their new life as undocumented. The transformation of the context of reception into a battlefield further contributes to the negative feelings of belonging that these young adults experience. Social services are no longer a welcoming place, but a hostile environment that questions their belonging into American society.

### *Navigating Between Ethnic and American Identities*

Analysis of the interviews also brought to light how these undocumented young adults perceived the context of reception, and how these perceptions influenced their feelings of belonging. Due to their ethnic phenotype and to the criminalization of Latino immigrants in the United States (Waters & Pineau, 2015), respondents mentioned that they were often perceived as unable to speak English. These interactions with members of the mainstream culture reinforced the disconnect between their self-identity and the identity that others associate with them. Studies have shown that the language ability of immigrants who arrive in the United States at young age is often comparable with that of American citizens (e.g., Pew Research Center, 2013). However, the double exclusion that our respondents experienced because of their phenotypic background and their perceived migratory status excluded them from the country they grew up in and from a society that they had learned to appreciate as their own. For instance, Yohanna, who arrived to the United States at the age of 14 from the Dominican Republic, used to assist nurses at a local clinic. She recalled the discriminatory treatment that she had to endure from her manager. Moreover, she was eventually fired for allegedly not being able to speak English to patients. Raised in the United States throughout her



adolescence, Yohanna speaks English fluently and felt that her manager's actions were the result of racism and xenophobia.

We had this staff lounge and we used to chat in the back and sometimes she [the manager] heard me talking in Spanish with the co-workers . . . and one day she says to me, I will always remember this. It was a Saturday and I was working seven to three and she said to me "Yohanna can you do me a favor? Can you check this person's blood sugar?" . . . So the person declined. They [the patients] have the right to decline the treatment . . . This patient, who was an elderly person, said: "I am sorry" but "I don't want you to take my blood, I want my nurse to do it, because you don't understand me and I don't trust you." I said, ok, that's fine you have the right. So, I went to my manager and I told what he said. You know what she said to me? "What language are you and I talking? We are talking English and you can understand me perfectly, right?" And then she was like "he probably didn't understand what you said because you speak Spanish." She said that, I mean, I said to her, I spoke to the guy in English I did not talk to him in Spanish ok? And all the nurses, all the White nurses they looked like, what is wrong with this person why is she talking back to the manager like that? So, I just got really, really, depressed and I started to cry.

To buffer the negative consequences of these and other discriminatory experiences, and to compensate the loss of access to social services, undocumented Latino immigrants learn to re-embrace their immigrant identity. This strategy was evident throughout the interviews. The passage to adulthood taught respondents how to navigate different social circles. They learned how to go back and forth between the network of peers that they had growing up with and that is mostly formed of American citizens (e.g., peers met at school), and the network of undocumented immigrants who they have discovered navigating at the margins of society (e.g., providers of illegal services). Social capital, thus, seems to play a key role for these undocumented youth, who appear to develop different types of networks to overcome the difficulties linked to their migratory status. Parallels can be drawn here between the findings of this study and the work of Gonzales (2011) who analyzed the "transition into illegality" of undocumented immigrants.

We name "remigratization," to the strategy that undocumented immigrants use to learn how to adapt to their new immigrant identity. As shown by our interviews, this occurs in part because immigrant networks are often better equipped to provide the resources necessary to access services. These networks also provide the resources that undocumented immigrants need to circumvent the limitations imposed by their migratory status and, therefore, compensate for the loss of access to social services accessible to legal

immigrants and citizens. Thus, paradoxically, undocumented young adults seem to rely on ethnic networks in order to maintain their belonging into society. As a consequence, they retain, at least partially, their place in American society. Their perception of self-identity and their attitudes are modified, as they go back and forth between the sense of belonging to American society and the feeling of being excluded from it. They sometimes reinforce their ethnic ties in order to obtain a sense of belonging to a group. For instance, Silvia, an undocumented Dominican immigrant, turned to members of the Latino community in order to circumvent the limitations of her status. She could not receive unemployment benefits and had been recently fired from her job. Her undocumented status made it difficult to find a new job. Thanks to the help of the undocumented community, she learned how to maximize the services she could receive, by modifying her marital status when applying for services. This way, she is able to receive assistance that she would not receive otherwise.

I was working in a bakery but one day they fired all the illegals. They fired me. I was making decent money there; I was working 40 hours a week and was making \$300 a week. . . . I told myself we wouldn't be able to make ends meet even if he [her partner] worked more, so I decided to ask for help from social services. I did not know how to do it, but a Puerto Rican girl told me in the park that I couldn't say that I was married. She told me: "if you tell the truth, they [social workers] will not help you. You have to lie to get more assistance. They [social workers] know all the tricks and won't give you anything."

When asked whether she received similar help or advice from her American friends, the ones she grew up with in school, Silvia explained that she does not talk about these issues with them. This behavior further stresses the unique role of each network, the American network and her own ethnic network:

With my American friends, we don't talk about that [how to obtain more assistance]. It's not the same with them. We are more different now. . . . I feel more Dominican now.

Some of these undocumented youth who find themselves unable to obtain employment or assistance via the legal path when they become adults tap into their ethnic network in order to find employment or to satisfy other needs. These interactions further reactivate their sense of belonging to their Latino ethnic community. At the same time, it further distances them from American society, which is represented by the social service providers who they fear will turn them down. A barrier between "us," the in-group, and "them," the

out-group, is erected, and these undocumented Latino youth seem to progressively learn to navigate between their native and ethnic identities in order to bypass the obstacles that are now part of their daily lives.

### *The Enemy Is at Home: Alienation From the Latino Community*

Going back and forth between these different networks seems to be translated into the adoption of varied identities on the part of these young undocumented Latinos, particularly the reappropriation of their ethnic identity. However, analysis of the interviews shows that the Latino community itself sometimes proves to be hostile too to their undocumented members. As a result, young Latino adults experience a double form of alienation from the American society as well as from their own community. Our respondents stated that they experienced more discrimination from service providers who are themselves Latinos than they did from Anglo or African American service providers. This was well illustrated by Gladys, who arrived as a teenager from the Dominican Republic with a tourist visa. She explained that the misinformation and discrimination that undocumented Latinos experience regarding their eligibility to certain social programs is directly related to their undocumented status.

They [Latino social workers] can probably do it [help people by providing assistance]. But they say that “ah no” . . . that they won’t even give us that, because we don’t have papers. They think than they are better than us. There is this discrimination among us Latinos.

Most of the respondents, who perceived discrimination from documented Latinos, complained that often these social workers deliberately tried to put some distance between themselves and their undocumented customers. Some of the factors that seemed to prompt documented Latino service providers to discriminate against undocumented Latino stem from the stigma that is often associated with being undocumented in the United States. Many of the “legal” Latino service providers tried to deny the shared connection with undocumented Latinos in order to dissociate themselves from a group that they perceive as damaging to their ambitions. The refusal to associate with undocumented immigrants sometimes took the form of discriminatory acts toward undocumented immigrants. These negative experiences lead some undocumented Latino youth to question their own ethnic identity. According to Maria Patricia, an undocumented young immigrant from Colombia who arrived in the United States as a child, people in her situation felt that they do not belong anywhere.

I don't really feel Colombian, but I am not American either, you know. I can't even get a job here! I look different, so people know that I am not from here. I think I can cook Colombian food but that's it, you know? Sometimes people from my own country, they feel that they are better than me. If you tell them you don't have papers, they don't want to talk to you anymore. They [the social workers] won't help you. They make you feel that you don't belong.

The perceived feelings of discrimination from interactions with documented Latino service providers lead some of our respondents to dissociate from their own ethnic group. These young adults experienced a progressive process of alienation from American society. However, they also discovered the enemy at home, especially among documented Latinos who denied their help to them to strengthen the symbolic boundaries between documented and undocumented Latinos (Marrow & Joseph, 2015). As a result, a substantial number of respondents progressively assimilated into the status of undocumented Latino immigrants, thereby reinforcing their seclusion from American society.

## **Conclusion**

Our study explored how transitioning into adulthood and the consequent loss of protection from social services affected the identity formation and the feelings of belonging to America of undocumented Latino youth who grew up in the United States. This article helps to bridge a gap in the literature by showing how the identity of these undocumented youth shifts with time, as they learn to adapt to the restriction of being undocumented adults, vacillating between their identification with the country in which they grew up and the identity bestowed upon them by social services agencies and the society at large.

This article evidences a paradox: In order for these undocumented youth to adhere to their American identity, which they refuse to relinquish, they are forced to learn to become immigrants and adapt their strategies to maintain their belonging in American society.

With adulthood comes a new form of exclusion based on migratory status and symbolized by the prejudicial treatment provided by social service agents. Experiences of discrimination alienate these young adults further from a society in which they grown up and developed a sense of belonging, thus creating ambiguity for the development of their identity. When they reach adulthood, undocumented immigrants have to learn to "regress" and become immigrants like their parents, even though they grew up in the United States, and, paradoxically, use ethnic networks in order to maintain their

assimilation into American society. They begin to distance themselves from American society, in order to find alternative solutions to the limitations of their status.

However, attempts at using their ethnic background to seek help are sometimes hampered as these undocumented Latino youth also face discrimination perpetrated by fellow coethnics in their interactions with social services. They unexpectedly receive better service from non-Latino Whites than from fellow Latino social workers. Indeed, Latino social service providers are more mindful of the social stigma associated with undocumented immigrants and, therefore, refuse to provide help in an effort to distance themselves from these “undeserving Latinos,” thereby replicating some of the behaviors of the dominant group by creating boundaries between whom they consider at the top of the hierarchy and those at the bottom.

This form of secondary marginalization represents one of the multiple barriers and obstacles, which undocumented Latino youth must overcome in order to remain a part of American society. The liminality of their status forces them to readjust and regularly swift their identities back and forth between their ethnic and American identities.

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**Mary C. Waters** is the John L. Loeb professor of sociology at Harvard University. She received her PhD in sociology from University of California, Berkeley, in 1986. Her work focuses on the integration of immigrants and their children, the measurement and meaning of racial and ethnic identity, and the long-run effects of natural disasters and forced migration. Recently, she chaired the National Academy of Sciences report on The Integration of Immigrants into American Society (National Academies Press, 2015).