

# Learning to Be Illegal: Undocumented Youth and Shifting Legal Contexts in the Transition to Adulthood

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## Abstract

This article examines the transition to adulthood among 1.5-generation undocumented Latino young adults. For them, the transition to adulthood involves exiting the legally protected status of K to 12 students and entering into adult roles that require legal status as the basis for participation. This collision among contexts makes for a turbulent transition and has profound implications for identity formation, friendship patterns, aspirations and expectations, and social and economic mobility. Undocumented children move from protected to unprotected, from inclusion to exclusion, from de facto legal to illegal. In the process, they must learn to be illegal, a transformation that involves the almost complete retooling of daily routines, survival skills, aspirations, and social patterns. These findings have important implications for studies of the 1.5- and second-generations and the specific and complex ways in which legal status intervenes in their coming of age. The article draws on 150 interviews with undocumented 1.5-generation young adult Latinos in Southern California.

## Keywords

immigrant incorporation, life course, unauthorized status, Latinos, illegality

During the past 25 years, the number of undocumented immigrants in the United States has grown substantially, from an estimated 2.5 million in 1987 to 11.1 million today (Passel 2006; Passel and Cohn 2010).<sup>1</sup> Scholars contend that this demographic trend is the unintended consequence of policies designed to curb undocumented migration and tighten the U.S.–Mexico border (Nevins 2010), transforming once-circular migratory flows into permanent settlement (Cornelius and Lewis 2006; Massey, Durand, and Malone 2002). Making multiple migratory trips back and forth became increasingly costly and dangerous throughout the 1990s and the first decade of the twenty-first century, so more unauthorized migrants began creating permanent homes

in the United States. And they brought their children with them. According to recent estimates, there are more than 2.1 million undocumented young people in the United States who have been here since childhood. Of these, more than a million are now adults (Batalova and McHugh 2010). Relatively little is known about this vulnerable population of young people, and their unique circumstances challenge

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assumptions about the incorporation patterns of the children of immigrants and their transitions to adolescence and adulthood.

Building on prior scholarship about immigrant incorporation and the life course, this article offers an up-close examination of the ways in which public schooling and U.S. immigration laws collide to produce a shift in the experiences and meanings of illegal status for undocumented youth at the onset of their transition to adulthood. I am interested in how these young people become aware of, and come to understand, their status under the law—that is, when they begin to notice their legal difference and its effects, and how they experience this shift as they move through late adolescence and young adulthood. The multiple transformations that undocumented youth experience have important implications for their identity formation, friendship patterns, aspirations and expectations, and social and economic mobility, and they also signal movement of a significant subset of the U.S. immigrant population into a new, disenfranchised underclass. In developing a conceptual and theoretical map of how undocumented youth learn to be illegal, this article identifies important mechanisms that mediate transitions to adulthood for the children of immigrants. Therefore, it helps us understand the consequences of non-legal status for undocumented youth as they move from protected to unprotected status, from inclusion to exclusion, and from de facto legal to illegal, during their final years of secondary schooling.

## UNDOCUMENTED YOUTH AND SHIFTING CONTEXTS

### *Assimilation and Public Schooling*

As today's children of immigrants come of age, contemporary immigration scholarship challenges the conventional expectation that they will follow a linear generational process of assimilation into mainstream U.S. life (Gans 1992; Portes and Rumbaut 2006; Portes and Zhou 1993). Much current theorizing has moved away from a singular focus on human

capital toward nuanced approaches that more fully appreciate the context of reception (Portes 1981; Portes and Bach 1985; Portes and Rumbaut 2006). This approach stresses that multiple factors channel the children of immigrants into different segments of society (Portes and Rumbaut 2001, 2006; Portes and Zhou 1993). Studies suggest that increasing fault lines of inequality along race and ethnicity, poor public schools, and differential access to today's labor market may cause recent immigrants' children to do less well than the children of previous waves (Gans 1992; Portes and Rumbaut 2001, 2006; Portes and Zhou 1993; Rumbaut 1997, 2005, 2008; Zhou 1997).

Given the changes in the U.S. economy and labor market, educational attainment has become critical to the social mobility of all children, and the link between school outcomes and future success is a thread that runs throughout much of the literature (Kasinitz et al. 2008; Portes and Rumbaut 2001, 2006; Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco 1995; Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, and Todorova 2008; Waters 1999; Zhou and Bankston 1998). While some young people with modest levels of education manage to find skilled blue-collar jobs, most need a college degree to qualify for jobs that offer decent wages, benefits, job security, and the possibility of advancement. Children from poor and minority families, however, have historically experienced difficulty attaining significant levels of education (Alba and Nee 2003; Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Telles and Ortiz 2008). Disadvantaged students are particularly harmed by highly differentiated curricula and de facto tracking (Lucas and Berends 2002; Oakes 1985), although scholars have found that supplementary educational programs (Zhou 2008), extrafamily mentors (Portes and Fernandez-Kelly 2008; Smith 2008), and positive support networks (Stanton-Salazar 2001) can help overcome these disadvantages.

For generations, the public school system has been the principal institution that educates and integrates the children of immigrants into the fabric of U.S. society. This is especially true today, as more immigrant children spend

more waking hours in school than ever before. Suárez-Orozco and colleagues (2008:2–3) identify public schools' critical role in shaping immigrant youths' understanding of their place in society: "It is in school where, day in and day out, immigrant youth come to know teachers and peers from majority culture as well as newcomers from other parts of the world. It is in schools that immigrant youth develop academic knowledge and, just as important, form perceptions of where they fit in the social reality and cultural imagination of their new nation." Certainly, the role of public schools is increasingly critical, as the returns on education have sharply increased over the past few decades. But public schools' socialization mechanisms are also powerful catalysts for promoting the acculturation processes of the children of immigrants. Schools foster what Rumbaut (1997:944) calls a "unity of experiences and orientation" among their pupils that aid in the development of a "community of purpose and action" with "primary social contacts." This assimilating experience is profoundly different from what most adult immigrants encounter. While their parents may be absorbed into low-wage labor markets and often work with co-ethnics who speak their language and share their cultural practices, children are integrated into the school system, where they grow up side-by-side with the native-born (Gleeson and Gonzales forthcoming). Their "unity of experiences" with friends and classmates promotes feelings of togetherness and inclusion (Rumbaut 1997:944), and these feelings, in turn, shape immigrant youths' identification and experience of coming of age.

### *Today's Children of Immigrants Come of Age*

Scholarly consensus on contemporary transitions to adulthood suggests that the process of coming of age is taking much longer today (Furstenberg et al. 2002). In particular, young people are spending more time in postsecondary schooling and are delaying exit from the parental household, entry into full-time work, and decisions about marriage and children (Settersten, Furstenberg, and Rumbaut 2005).

Life-course scholars traditionally define the transition to adulthood in terms of five milestones or markers: completing school, moving out of the parental home, establishing employment, getting married, and becoming a parent. The developmentally dense period of transition entails a large number of shifts out of roles that support and foster childlike dependence and into roles that confer adulthood in a relatively short time (Rindfuss 1991). Drawing from Erikson's (1950) early work, life-course scholarship views the transition to adulthood as composed of adolescence (ages 12 to 17 years) and young adulthood (ages 18 to 35 years). Yet recent decades have brought significant shifts in the roles of social institutions as well as changes in the opportunities for entry into the labor market. By delaying entry into the workforce in favor of additional education, young adults build human capital that will make them more competitive in the high-skilled labor market. Some parents aid this process by assisting children over a longer period and using financial resources to help pay for college, providing down payments for their children's first homes, or defraying some of the costs associated with having children (Rumbaut and Komaie 2010). Theorists have responded to these changes by conceptually disaggregating young adulthood into shorter periods of time that better define contemporary transitions and permit a better understanding of the relationship between broader contexts and life transitions. Arnett (2000) adds emerging adulthood, a stage between adolescence and young adulthood, roughly between ages 18 and 25 years, and Rumbaut (2005) differentiates between the early transition (18 to 24 years), the middle transition (25 to 29 years), and the late transition (30 to 34 years).

Within the larger national context of coming of age, scholars have uncovered key differences by social class, country of origin, nativity, and immigrant generation (Mollenkopf et al. 2005; Rumbaut and Komaie 2010). Many youngsters from less-advantaged immigrant households put off postsecondary schooling because their parents are not able to provide financial

assistance or because they carry considerable financial responsibilities in their households that make it impossible for them to make tuition payments (Fuligni and Pedersen 2002; Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco 1995). Many of the 1.5 and second generations of certain immigrant groups are in reciprocal financial relationships with their parents, often even supporting them (Rumbaut and Komaie 2010). As a result, they do not enjoy the same degree of freedom from the stresses and responsibilities of adult roles. These differences suggest that we should expect the children of immigrants—documented and undocumented alike—to experience coming of age differently from the native-born.

### *Conceptualizing the Transition to Illegality for Undocumented Youth*

For undocumented youth, the transition into adulthood is accompanied by a transition into illegality that sets them apart from their peers. Undocumented youngsters share a confusing and contradictory status in terms of their legal rights and the opportunities available to them (Abrego 2008; Gonzales 2007). On the one hand, because of the Supreme Court ruling in *Plyler v. Doe* (1982), they have the legal right to a K to 12 education.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act prevents schools from releasing any information from students' records to immigration authorities, making school a protected space in which undocumented status has little to no negative effect. On the other hand, undocumented young adults cannot legally work, vote, receive financial aid, or drive in most states, and deportation remains a constant threat. Unauthorized residency status thus has little direct impact on most aspects of childhood but is a defining feature of late adolescence and adulthood and can prevent these youth from following normative pathways to adulthood. Therefore, coupled with family poverty, illegal status places undocumented youth in a developmental limbo. As family need requires them to make significant financial contributions and to assume considerable

responsibility for their own care, they become less likely to linger in adolescence. At the same time, legal restrictions keep them from participating in many adult activities, leaving them unable to complete important transitions.

Researchers studying immigrant incorporation and the life course have not systematically considered the effects of the legal context on the children of immigrants, that is, the specific challenges facing undocumented immigrant youth and their complex and contradictory routes to adulthood. Current scholarship is limited to conjecture based on what is known in general about children of immigrants from low-skilled groups. Failure to focus on legal status also limits what we know about the linkages between important mechanisms such as education and social mobility. K to 12 schooling certainly plays an important role in the development and integration of immigrant children, but significant questions remain about how undocumented status shapes educational trajectories and how, in turn, it affects the link between educational attainment and social and economic mobility. The scant existing research on undocumented youth notes that undocumented status depresses aspirations (Abrego 2006) and sensitizes them to the reality that they are barred from integrating legally, educationally, and economically into U.S. society (Abrego 2008).

For conceptual help, I turn to recent advances in the literature that move beyond the binary categories of documented and undocumented to explore the ways in which migrants move between different statuses and the mechanisms that allow them to be regular in one sense and irregular in another. In describing the experiences of Salvadoran migrants caught in the legal limbo of Temporary Protected Status, and their feelings of being legally and socially in-between, Menjivar (2006) introduced the concept of liminal legality. This phrase underscores that documented and undocumented categories do not adequately capture the gray areas experienced by many migrants. Menjivar's analysis builds on Coutin's (2000) exploration of the contradictions that lie

between migrants' physical and social presence and their official designation as illegal. Several other scholars have called for a shift from generally studying unauthorized migrants and migrations to a more deliberate investigation of the mechanisms that produce and sustain what they term migrant illegality (Coutin 2000; De Genova 2002; Ngai 2004; Willen 2007). This deliberate shift in focus allows us to pay attention to the effects laws have on migrants' day-to-day lives, revealing the ways in which undocumented persons experience inclusion and exclusion and how these experiences can change over time, in interactions with different persons, and across various spaces. It also points to the two-sided nature of citizenship, which can allow the same person, citizen or not, to experience belonging in one context but not in another.

Portes and Rumbaut (2006) emphasize that it is the combination of positive and negative contexts that determines the distinct modes of immigrants' incorporation. While school contexts foster expectations and aspirations that root undocumented youngsters in the United States (Abrego 2006), they leave these young people grossly unprepared for what awaits them in adulthood. This article focuses on the interactions between such favorable and unfavorable contexts during what I call the transition to illegality. I conceptualize this process as the set of experiences that result from shifting contexts along the life course, providing different meanings to undocumented status and animating the experience of illegality at late adolescence and into adulthood. The transition to illegality brings with it a period of disorientation, whereby undocumented youth confront legal limitations and their implications and engage in a process of retooling and reorienting themselves for new adult lives. But this process is not uniform among undocumented youth. Previous qualitative work on youth populations coming of age has uncovered key mechanisms within the school setting that shape divergent trajectories (MacLeod 1987; Willis 1977). Because comparisons between differently achieving youth may help to more

clearly identify mechanisms that mediate undocumented status during the transition to adulthood, I compare the experiences of college-going young adults (i.e., college-goers) with those who exit the education system after high school graduation or earlier (i.e., early-exiters).

## METHODS

While many recent immigrants have dispersed to new destination states in the South and the Midwest (Marrow 2009; Massey 2008; Singer 2004; Zúñiga and Hernández-León 2005), California remains home to the largest undocumented immigrant population in the country. The numbers of undocumented immigrants from countries outside of Latin America have risen slightly since 2000, but immigrants from Mexico continue to account for the majority. In fact, no other sending country constitutes even a double-digit share of the total (Passel and Cohn 2009). I thus focus on Mexican-origin immigrants in California, drawing on 150 individual semi-structured interviews with 1.5-generation young adults ages 20 to 34 years (who migrated before the age of 12). The interviews focused on respondents' experiences growing up in Southern California without legal status. Such close study of the 1.5 generation permits an examination of the unique ways in which undocumented status is experienced in childhood and adolescence (Rumbaut 2004; Smith 2006).

Until very recently, it has been difficult to study undocumented young adults like those interviewed for this study because their numbers have been prohibitively small. Researching hard-to-reach populations adds layers of difficulty, time, and cost to any study. While previous large-scale efforts have been successful at locating and interviewing undocumented Mexicans on both sides of the U.S.–Mexico border, and have provided useful direction for random sampling,<sup>3</sup> today's anti-immigrant climate and localized immigration enforcement present challenges to finding respondents in the United States.



**Table 1.** Educational Attainment of Study Participants by Gender (*N* = 150)

	Male		Female		Total	
	<i>n</i>	Percent	<i>n</i>	Percent	<i>N</i>	Percent
High School Dropout	16	22.5	15	19.0	31	20.7
High School Graduate	21	29.6	21	26.6	42	28.0
2+ Years Community College	9	12.7	11	13.9	20	13.3
University Enrollment	12	16.9	14	17.7	26	17.3
Bachelor's Degree	10	14.1	12	15.2	22	14.7
Advanced Degree	3	4.2	6	7.6	9	6.0
Total	71	100	79	100	150	100

These conditions lead many unauthorized migrants to be more fearful in their everyday lives, thus posing significant challenges to random sampling efforts. Data collection for this study involved nearly four and a half years of field work in the periods 2003 to 2007 and 2008 to 2009, during which I conducted interviews and did additional ethnographic research in the Los Angeles Metropolitan Area.<sup>4</sup> I began conducting interviews after spending lengthy periods of time in the field gaining a rapport with respondents and community stakeholders. I recruited respondents from various settings, including continuation schools, community organizations, college campuses, and churches. After gaining trust, I accompanied respondents throughout their school and work days, volunteered at local schools and organizations, and sat in on numerous community meetings. I built on the initial group of respondents by using snowball sampling to identify subsequent respondents.

All 150 1.5-generation respondents interviewed spent much of their childhood, adolescence, and adulthood with undocumented status. With the exception of eight Central Americans (Guatemalan and Salvadoran), all were born in Mexico. I drew the sample from the five-county Los Angeles Metropolitan Area, and respondents come from all five counties. Most had parents who were undocumented (92 percent) and had fewer than six years of schooling (86 percent). Most respondents were also raised by two parents; one-quarter were raised by single parents and six were raised by other family members.

I designed the sampling process to include relatively equal numbers of males and females (71 males and 79 females) and equal numbers of individuals who dropped out of or completed high school (73) and those who attended some college (77) (see Tables 1 and 2). Of the 77 college respondents, nine had advanced degrees at the time of the interview, 22 had earned bachelor's degrees, 26 were enrolled in four-year universities, and 20 were enrolled in or had attended community college. The majority attended a California public college or university. Of the 73 respondents who exited school at or before high school graduation, 31 had not earned a high school degree at the time of interview, and 42 had high school diplomas.

The life history interviews included questions regarding respondents' pasts and their present lives as well as future expectations and aspirations. Interviews ranged in length from 1 hour and 40 minutes to 3 hours and 20 minutes. To analyze interview transcripts, I used open coding techniques. I placed conceptual labels on responses that described discrete events, experiences, and feelings reported in the interviews. Next, I analyzed each individual interview across all questions to identify meta-themes. Finally, I examined responses for common meta-themes across all interviews.

## THE TRANSITION TO ILLEGALITY

To better conceptualize the ways in which legal status affects the transition to illegality,

**Table 2.** Age Distribution of Study Participants by Educational Attainment ( $N = 150$ )

	Early-Exiters		College-Goers		Total	
	<i>n</i>	Percent	<i>n</i>	Percent	<i>N</i>	Percent
20 to 25 Years	30	41.1	31	40.3	61	40.7
26 to 30 Years	34	46.6	39	50.6	73	48.7
31 to 34 Years	9	12.3	7	9.1	16	10.7
Total	73	100	77	100	150	100

I focus on three transition periods—discovery (ages 16 to 18 years), learning to be illegal (ages 18 to 24 years), and coping (ages 25 to 29 years). While the life-course literature defines the early and middle transitions as ages 18 to 24 and 25 to 29, respectively, I add an earlier period to capture the awakening to newfound legal limitations, which elicits a range of emotional reactions and begins a process of altered life-course pathways and adult transitions. Next, as undocumented youth enter early adulthood, they engage in a parallel process of learning to be illegal. During this period, many find difficulty connecting with previous sources of support to navigate the new restrictions on their lives and to mitigate their newly stigmatized identities. At this stage, undocumented youth are forced to alter earlier plans and reshape their aspirations for the future. Finally, the coping period involves adjusting to lowered aspirations and coming to grips with the possibility that their precarious legal circumstances may never change.

### *Discovery: Ages 16 to 18*

Most life-course scholars focus on age 18 as a time of dramatic change for young people. In the United States, 18 is the age of majority, the legal threshold of adulthood when a child ceases to be considered a minor and assumes control over his actions and decisions. This is traditionally the time when young people exit high school and enter college or full-time work. Yet young people adopt semi-adult roles, such as working and driving, while still in high school. Most respondents in this study

began to experience dramatic shifts in their daily lives and future outlooks around age 16.

Because public schooling provided respondents with an experience of inclusion atypical of undocumented adult life in the United States (Bean, Telles, and Lowell 1987; Chavez 1991, 1998), respondents spent their childhood and early adolescence in a state of suspended illegality, a buffer stage wherein they were legally integrated and immigration status rarely limited activities. Through school, respondents developed aspirations rooted in the belief that they were part of the fabric of the nation and would have better opportunities than their parents (Gans 1992). They learned to speak English, developed tastes, joined clubs, dated, and socialized—all alongside their U.S.-born and legal resident peers. During this period, school-based relationships with peers and adults provided key sources of support and identity formation (Portes and Fernandez-Kelly 2008). As Marisol, a college-goer, explained, relationships with teachers and friends provided a comfortable space for many like her to learn and develop: “School was an escape from home. I felt happy, calm. . . . I could be myself. I could be recognized at school. My teachers encouraged me to keep going. And my friends, we believed in education and pushed each other. We helped each other with homework and talked about college.”

Such positive relationships, however, were not uniformly experienced by respondents. Many early-exiters (those who left the school system at or before completion of high school) recounted feeling disconnected from school and lacking significant relationships with

teachers or counselors. They felt they were left to fall through the cracks and cut off from important services; they also reported having limited visits with counselors. Juan, for example, did not meet with a college counselor until late in his junior year. "I wanted to go to college," he told me, "but the counselors didn't let me know the requirements for four-year colleges. I tried to go to see them, but they didn't have time for me." Nevertheless, even respondents who reported having trouble in school believed they would have more options than their parents. Eric, an early-exiter who grew up in Riverside County, told me he had grown up thinking he was going to have a "better life": "I saw my older [U.S.-born] cousins get good jobs. I mean, they're not lawyers or anything like that, but they're not in restaurants or mowing lawns. I thought, yeah, when I graduate from school, I can make some good money, maybe even go to college."

Respondents uniformly noted a jolting shift at around age 16, when they attempted to move through rites of passage associated with their age. Life-course scholars refer to critical events in one's life as "turning points" that "knife off" past from present and restructure routine activities and life-course pathways (Elder 1987:452). These turning points can enable identity transitions and set into motion processes of cumulative advantage and disadvantage (Rumbaut 2005). For undocumented youth, the process of coming of age is a critical turning point that has consequences for subsequent transitions. Finding a part-time job, applying for college, and obtaining a driver's license—all markers of new roles and responsibilities—require legal status as a basis for participation.

As respondents tried to take these steps into adult life, they were blocked by their lack of a Social Security number. These incidents proved to be life changing and were often accompanied by the realization that they were excluded from a broad range of activities. Rodolfo, an early-exiter who is now 27 years old, spoke of his first experience of exclusion:

I never actually felt like I wasn't born here. Because when I came I was like 10 and a half. I went to school. I learned the language. I first felt like I was really out of place when I tried to get a job. I didn't have a Social Security number. Well, I didn't even know what it meant. You know Social Security, legal, illegal. I didn't even know what that was.

Until this time, Rodolfo had never needed proof of legal residency. The process of looking for a job made the implications of his lack of legal status real to him for the first time. Like Rodolfo, many early-exiters (a little over 68 percent, see Table 3) made such discoveries while applying for jobs or for driver's licenses.

On the other hand, as Table 3 shows, most college-goers (almost 60 percent) reported finding out they were undocumented in the course of the college application process. Jose, for example, was on the academic decathlon and debate teams. He did well in school and was well-liked by teachers. During his junior year, he attempted to enroll in classes at the community college to earn college credits. But without a Social Security number, he could not move forward.

While most respondents did not know of their unauthorized status until their teenage years, some reported knowing in childhood. This was more true of early-exiters (almost 30 percent, compared with a little over 9 percent among college-goers), many of whom lived in households where older siblings had gone through the process of discovery before them. But even these respondents did not realize the full implications their illegal status would have for their futures until much later. Being undocumented only became salient when matched with experiences of exclusion. Early-exiter Lorena started cleaning houses with her mother and sisters at age 12. Even before she began working, reminders from her mother made her aware that she did not have "papers." But she explained to me that "it really hit home" when she tried to branch out to other work in high school and was asked for her Social Security number.



**Table 3.** Study Participants' Discovery of Illegal Status, by Educational Attainment (N = 150)

	Early-Exiters		College-Goers		Total	
	<i>n</i>	Percent	<i>n</i>	Percent	<i>N</i>	Percent
Knew as Children	21	28.8	7	9.1	28	18.7
Discovered through Work	42	57.5	9	11.7	51	34.0
Discovered through Driving	8	10.9	3	3.9	11	7.3
School Activity	1	1.4	7	9.1	8	5.3
College/Financial Aid	0	.0	46	59.7	46	30.7
Other	1	1.4	5	6.5	6	4.0
Total	73	100	77	100	150	100

Discovery of illegal status prompted reactions of confusion, anger, frustration, and despair among respondents, followed by a period of paralyzing shock. Most respondents conveyed that they were not prepared for the dramatic limits of their rights. They struggled to make sense of what had happened to them, many feeling as though they had been lied to. "I always thought I would have a place when I grew up," David, an early-exiter, told me. "Teachers make you believe that. It's all a lie. A big lie." They often blamed teachers and parents for their feelings of anger and frustration. Cory, a college-goer, locked herself in her bedroom for an entire week. When she finally emerged, she moved out of her parents' house, blaming them for "keeping [her] in the dark during childhood." Cory said: "They thought that by the time I graduated I would have my green card. But they didn't stop to think that this is my life. . . . Everything I believed in was a big lie. Santa Claus was not coming down the chimney, and I wasn't going to just become legal. I really resented them."

Respondents reported that soon after these discoveries, they experienced a second shock as they came to realize that the changes they were experiencing would adversely affect their remaining adult lives. As they came to grips with the new meanings of unauthorized status, they began to view and define themselves differently. Miguel, a college-goer who has been caught in the part-time cycle of community college and work for six years, told me: "During most of high school, I thought I

had my next 10 years laid out. College and law school were definitely in my plans. But when my mom told me I wasn't legal, everything was turned upside down. I didn't know what to do. I couldn't see my future anymore." Miguel's entire identity was transformed, and the shift placed him, like many other respondents, in a state of limbo. Cory put it this way: "I feel as though I've experienced this weird psychological and legal-stunted growth. I'm stuck at 16, like a clock that has stopped ticking. My life has not changed at all since then. Although I'm 22, I feel like a kid. I can't do anything adults do."

Respondents' illegality was paired with a movement into stigmatized status that reinforced their legal exclusion. While laws limited their access to grown-up activities and responsibilities, fears of being found out curbed their interactions with teachers and peers. Ironically, while many respondents believed they had been lied to in childhood, they adopted lying themselves as a daily survival strategy that separated them from the very peer networks that had provided support and shaped a positive self-image. Many reported they were afraid of what their friends would think or how they would react if they learned of their illegal status. These fears were validated by observations of friends' behavior. Chuy, a college-goer who played sports throughout school, explained that after he saw a teammate on his high school soccer team berate players on an opposing team as "wetbacks" and "illegals," he was reticent to

disclose his status even to good friends. “I grew up with this guy,” he said. “We had classes together and played on the same team for like four years. But wow, I don’t know what he would say if he knew I was one of those wetbacks.”

Frustration with the present, uncertainty about the future, and the severing of support systems caused many respondents to withdraw, with detrimental effects on their progress during the last half of high school (see also Abrego 2006; Suárez-Orozco et al. 2008). In my interview with Sandra, an early-exiter, she recalled her struggles during junior year: “I felt the world caving in on me. What was I going to do? I couldn’t ask my parents. They didn’t know about college or anything. I was kind of quiet in school, so I didn’t really know my teachers. Besides, I was scared. What would they do if they knew? I was scared and alone.” Throughout high school, Luis, an early-exiter, hoped to attend college. During the latter part of his sophomore year, his grades fell considerably. As a result, he did not meet the requirements to gain entrance into the University of California system. His girlfriend convinced him to apply to the lower-tier California State University, but when he found out he was not eligible for financial aid, he gave up: “It took a while to get accepted. But I ended up not going (because of) financial aid. . . . It just kinda brought down my spirit, I guess.” Like Sandra and Luis, many respondents had done moderately well in school before the cumulative disadvantages resulting from the transition to illegality caused them to lose motivation to continue. Lacking trusting relationships with teachers or counselors who could help them, they ended up exiting school much earlier than they had planned (Gonzales 2010).

Nationally, 40 percent of undocumented adults ages 18 to 24 do not complete high school, and only 49 percent of undocumented high school graduates go to college. Youths who arrive in the United States before the age of 14 fare slightly better: 72 percent finish high school, and of those, 61 percent go on to

college. But these figures are still much lower than the numbers for U.S.-born residents (Passel and Cohn 2009). The combination of scarce family resources and exclusion from financial aid at the state<sup>5</sup> and federal levels makes the path to higher education very steep for undocumented high school students. Estimates reveal that as few as 5 to 10 percent of all undocumented high school graduates ever reach postsecondary institutions (Passel 2003), and the vast majority attend community colleges (Flores 2010). In several states, laws allowing undocumented students to pay in-state tuition have increased the number of high school graduates matriculating to college over the past decade (Flores 2010). Nonetheless, steep financial barriers prohibit many undocumented youth from enrolling in college.

While depressed motivation contributed to many respondents’ early exit from the school system, limited financial resources within their families and a general lack of information about how to move forward also played a part in causing early departures. Karina, an early-exiter, maintained a B average in her general-track high school classes. When she applied to college, she had no guidance. Unaware of a California provision that should have made it possible for her to attend school at in-state tuition rates, Karina opted not to go to college: “I didn’t know anything about AB 540.<sup>6</sup> Maybe if I knew the information I could have gotten a scholarship or something. That’s why I didn’t go. I don’t know if my counselors knew, but they never told me anything.”

The experiences of successful college-goers, by contrast, unlock a key variable to success missing from the narratives of early-exiters: trusting relationships with teachers or other adults. Portes and Fernandez-Kelly (2008:26) find evidence linking school success to the presence of what they call “really significant others” who “possess the necessary knowledge and experience” and “take a keen interest in [their students], motivate [them] to graduate from high school and to attend college.” When Marisol began to exhibit decreasing levels of motivation, for

instance, her English teacher was there to intervene. Although Marisol felt embarrassed, she was able to talk frankly with her teacher because they had developed a trusting relationship. As a reward for her trust, Marisol's teacher helped her obtain information about college and also took up a collection among other teachers to pay for her first year of tuition at the community college.

Most college-goers reported they had formed trusting relationships with teachers, counselors, and other mentors in high school. These respondents were concentrated in the advanced curriculum tracks in high school; the smaller and more supportive learning environments gave them access to key school personnel. Compared to early-exiters, they disclosed their problems more easily and were able to draw on relationships of trust to seek out and receive help. At critical times when the students' motivations were low, these relationships meant the difference between their leaving school or going to college. When difficulties arose during the college admissions process for college-goer Jose, for instance, he went straight to his counselor, with positive results. The counselor called the college and found out about the availability of aid through AB 540, which neither he nor Jose had been aware of.

### *Learning to Be Illegal: Ages 18 to 24*

For the children of unauthorized parents, success means improving on the quality of jobs and opportunities. Many youths end up only a small step ahead, however. Lacking legal status and a college degree, early-exiters confront some of the same limited and limiting employment options as their parents. Economic circumstances and family need force them to make choices about working and driving illegally. Nearly all respondents contributed money to their families, averaging nearly \$300 per month. After high school, early-exiter Oscar, who at 27 still gives his parents \$500 a month, moved through a string of short stints in the workforce, not staying in any one job more than six months at a time.

He quit jobs because he was dissatisfied with the meager wages and generally uneasy about the ways in which employers treated him. Each new job proved no better than the previous one. Over time, Oscar realized he had few job choices outside of physical labor: "I wasn't prepared to do that kind of work. . . . It's tough. I come home from work tired every day. I don't have a life. . . . It's not like I can get an office job. I've tried to get something better, but I'm limited by my situation."

The effects of stress and difficult work took their toll on other respondents. Simon, who used to play piano, showed me calluses and cuts on his hands. "Can you believe this? I'm so far away from those days," he said. Janet, who has been employed by various maid services, told me she cried every day after work for the first two months: "I can't believe this is my life. When I was in school I never thought I'd be doing this. I mean, I was never an honors student, but I thought I would have a lot better job. It's really hard, you know. I make beds, I clean toilets. The sad thing is when I get paid. I work this hard, for nothing." Janet and others expressed difficulty coming to terms with the narrow range of bad options their illegal status forced on them.

While financial need forced respondents into the workforce, lack of experience put them at a disadvantage in the low-wage job sector, where they became part of the same job pool as their parents and other family members who have much less education but more work experience. During Josue's final year of high school, his grandparents, who had raised him since childhood, decided to move. Instead of enrolling in a new school, Josue decided to try his luck in the labor market. But he soon realized what a great disadvantage his lack of experience was:

[At first] I thought, "I'm not gonna bust my ass for someone who can be yelling at me for like \$5.75, five bucks an hour." Hell no. If I get a job, I wanna get paid 20 bucks an hour. I speak English. But actually I didn't have any experience. So, it's really hard to get a job. Especially now, because those

kinds of jobs . . . they're looking for a more experienced person who knows how to work in the field and ain't gonna complain.

Respondents also recounted difficulty negotiating precarious situations because their undocumented status forced them to confront experiences for which K to 12 schooling did not prepare them. Pedro found himself in legal trouble when, after completing a day job, he tried to cash his check at the local currency exchange. A teller called Pedro's employer to verify its legitimacy, and he denied writing the check and called the police. When the police arrived, they found multiple sets of identification in Pedro's possession and took him to jail for identity fraud. This incident awoke Pedro to the reality that his inexperience with undocumented life could have grave consequences, including arrest and even deportation.

Given the limited employment options available to undocumented youth, moving on to college becomes critical. Making a successful transition to postsecondary schooling requires a number of favorable circumstances, however, including sufficient money to pay for school, family permission to delay or minimize work, reliable transportation, and external guidance and assistance. Respondents who enjoyed such conditions were able to devote their time to school and, equally important, avoid activities and situations that would place them in legal trouble. As a result, they suspended many of the negative consequences of unauthorized status.

When I met Rosalba, she had associate's, bachelor's, and master's degrees. Her parents had prohibited her from working, thus allowing her to concentrate fully on school. Throughout her time in school, she benefited from assistance from a number of caring individuals. "I've made it because I've had a support system," she said:

At every step of my education, I have had a mentor holding my hand. It's a thousand times harder without someone helping you. Being undocumented, it's not about what you know, it's who you know. You might

have all of the will in the world, but if you don't know the right people, then as much as you want to, you're gonna have trouble doing it.

When I interviewed Nimo, he was in his final year of college and considering graduate school. His college years had been enjoyable, lacking many of the stressors of legal limitations. A financial sponsor paid his tuition and fees and provided money for books. Nimo worked only minimally, because his mother did not ask for his financial assistance. He was usually able to secure rides to and from school; on other days, he took the bus. Although the two-hour commute each way was time consuming, the time allowed him to "read and think." Nimo's case is exceptional, but it is also instructive. Without the various barriers of financing college, supporting family, and having to work and drive, he was able to concentrate on school. As a result, he maintained a positive attitude and has high aspirations for his future.

Many other respondents, however, found postsecondary education to be a discontinuous experience, with frequent stalls and detours. Several took leaves of absence, and others enrolled in only one school term per year. Faced with the need to work, few scholarships, debt, and long commutes, these respondents managed to attend college, but completing their schooling was an arduous task that required them to be creative, keep their costs low, and in many cases join early-exiters in the low-wage labor market. Several respondents' dreams of higher education did not materialize because financial burdens became too overwhelming. Margarita, for example, aspired to be a pharmacist, but after two years of community college, her mother started asking her to pay her share of the rent. She left school to clean houses, which she had been doing for almost four years when I met her.

### *Coping: Ages 25 to 29*

The impact of not having legal residency status becomes particularly pronounced for respondents in their mid-20s, when prolonged

experiences of illegality force them to begin viewing their legal circumstances as more permanent. By this time, most young adults in the United States have finished school, left the parental home, and are working full-time. They have also started to see the returns on their education in better jobs and have gained increased independence from their parents. Although sharp differences in educational returns persist among legal young adults, I found a high degree of convergence among college-goers and early-exiters as they finished the transition to illegality. By their mid-20s, both sets of respondents held similar occupations. While both groups were also starting to leave the parental home, early-exiters were already settled into work routines. Years on the job had provided them with experience and improved their human capital. Many had let go of hopes for career mobility long ago, opting instead for security and stability. While college-going respondents spent much of their late teens and early 20s in institutions of higher learning, by their mid-20s most were out of school and learning that they had few legal employment options, despite having attained advanced degrees.

In his study of working-class youth in Clarendon Heights, MacLeod (1987) chronicled the experiences of two groups of differently achieving working-class students as they came to realize their limitations in the job market. As their aspirations flattened over time, they put a “lid on hope” (p. 62). For my respondents, day-to-day struggles, stress, and the ever-present ceiling on opportunities similarly forced them to acknowledge the distance between their prior aspirations and present realities. The realization was especially poignant for those who managed to complete degrees but ultimately recognized that the years of schooling did not offer much advantage in low-wage labor markets—the only labor markets to which they had access.

These are young people who grew up believing that because their English mastery and education surpassed those of their parents, they would achieve more. Instead, they came face-to-face with the limits on their

opportunities—often a very unsettling experience. Early-exiter Margarita underscored this point:

I graduated from high school and have taken some college credits. Neither of my parents made it past fourth grade, and they don't speak any English. But I'm right where they are. I mean, I work with my mom. I have the same job. I can't find anything else. It's kinda ridiculous, you know. Why did I even go to school? It should mean something. I mean, that should count, right? You would think. I thought. Well, here I am, cleaning houses.

Others conveyed a tacit acceptance of their circumstances. When I interviewed Pedro, he had been out of school for nine years. He had held a string of jobs and was living with childhood friends in a mobile home. He was slowly making progress toward his high school diploma but was not hopeful that education would improve his opportunities or quality of life. I asked him what he wanted for himself. He replied:

Right now, I want to take care of my legal status, clean up my record for the stupidity I committed and get a decent job. I'm thinking about five years from now. I don't want to extend it any longer. I wish it could be less, you know, but I don't want to rush it either, because when you rush things they don't go as they should. Maybe 10 years from now. I like where I live, and I wouldn't mind living in a mobile home.

Other respondents had similarly low expectations for the future, the cumulative result of years of severely restricted choices. When I first met Gabriel, he was 23 years old. He was making minimal progress at the community college. He had moved out of his mother's home because he felt like a financial burden, and he left his job after his employer received a letter from the Social Security Administration explaining that the number he was using did not match his name. He was frustrated



and scared. When I ran into him four years later, near the end of my study, he seemed to be at ease with his life. He was working in a factory with immigrant co-workers and participating in a community dance group. He told me he was “not as uptight” about his situation as he had once been:

I just stopped letting it [unauthorized status] define me. Work is only part of my life. I’ve got a girlfriend now. We have our own place. I’m part of a dance circle, and it’s really cool. Obviously, my situation holds me back from doing a lot of things, but I’ve got to live my life. I just get sick of being controlled by the lack of nine digits.

Undoubtedly, Gabriel would rather be living under more stable circumstances. But he has reconciled himself to his limitations, focusing instead on relationships and activities that are tangible and accessible.

Such acceptance was most elusive for respondents who achieved the highest levels of school success. At the time of their interviews, 22 respondents had graduated from four-year universities, and an additional nine held advanced degrees. None were able to legally pursue their dream careers. Instead, many, like Esperanza, found themselves toiling in low-wage jobs. Esperanza had to let go of her long-held aspiration to become a journalist, in favor of the more immediate need to make ends meet each month. In high school, she was in band and AP classes. Her hopes for success were encouraged by high-achieving peers and teachers. Nothing leading up to graduation prepared her for the reality of her life afterward. Now three years out of college, she can find only restaurant jobs and factory work. While she feels out of place in the sphere of undocumented work, she has little choice:

The people working at those places, like the cooks and the cashiers, they are really young, and I feel really old. Like what am I doing there if they are all like 16, 17 years old? The others are like *senoras* who are 35.

They dropped out of school, but because they have little kids they are still working at the restaurant. Thinking about that makes me feel so stupid. And like the factories, too, because they ask me, “*Que estas haciendo aqui?* [What are you doing here?] You can speak English. You graduated from high school. You can work anywhere.”

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The experiences of unauthorized 1.5-generation young adults shed some important light on the powerful role played by immigration policy in shaping incorporation patterns and trajectories into adulthood. Contemporary immigration theory has made great strides in its ability to predict inter-generational progress. In doing so, however, it has paid less attention to the here-and-now experiences and outcomes of today’s immigrants and their children. As Portes and Fernandez-Kelly (2008) point out, focusing exclusively on inter-generational mobility contributes to a failure to uncover key mechanisms that produce delayed, detoured, and derailed trajectories. Indeed, by focusing on individuals they call the “final survivors”—two to three generations out—we neglect the struggles of individuals today who end up disappearing from view. Many respondents in this study possess levels of human capital that surpass those of their parents, who tend to speak little English and have fewer than six years of schooling. We may be tempted to see this outcome as a sign of inter-generational progress. But these young men and women describe moving from an early adolescence in which they had important inclusionary access, to an adulthood in which they are denied daily participation in most institutions of mainstream life. They describe this process as waking up to a nightmare.

While life-course scholars note that most U.S. youngsters today face some difficulty managing adolescent and adult transitions, undocumented youth face added challenges. Their exclusion from important rites of

passage in late adolescence, and their movement from protected to unprotected status, leave them in a state of developmental limbo, preventing subsequent and important adult transitions. Their entry into a stigmatized identity has negative and usually unanticipated consequences for their educational and occupational trajectories, as well as for their friendships and social patterns. Unlike documented peers who linger in adolescence due to safety nets at home, many of these youngsters must start contributing to their families and taking care of themselves. These experiences affect adolescent and adult transitions that diverge significantly from those of their documented peers, placing undocumented youth in jeopardy of becoming a disenfranchised underclass.

Positive mediators at the early (discovery) and middle (learning to be illegal) transitions help cushion the blow, and a comparison of early-exiters and college-goers reveals a lot about the power, and the limitations, of these intermediaries. The keys to success for my respondents—extrafamilial mentors, access to information about postsecondary options, financial support for college, and lower levels of family responsibility—are not very different from those required for the success of members of other student populations. For undocumented youth, however, they take on added significance. In adult mentors, they find trusting allies to confide in and from whom to receive guidance and resources. The presence of caring adults who intervene during the discovery period can aid in reducing anxiety and minimizing barriers, allowing undocumented youth to delay entry into legally restricted adult environments and to make successful transitions to postsecondary institutions. Eventually, however, all undocumented youth unable to regularize their immigration status complete the transition to illegality.

My findings move beyond simply affirming that immigrant incorporation is a segmented process. Analyses of this group of undocumented young adults also suggest that successful integration may now depend, more so than ever before in U.S. history, on

immigration policy and the role of the state. Historically, assimilation theory has been concerned with the factors that determine incorporation into the mainstream. Scholars argue that human capital is a key determinant for upward mobility (Zhou 1997). However, as I demonstrate here, blocked mobility caused by a lack of legal status renders traditional measures of inter-generational mobility by educational progress irrelevant: the assumed link between educational attainment and material and psychological outcomes after school is broken. College-bound youths' trajectories ultimately converge with those who have minimal levels of schooling. These youngsters, who committed to the belief that hard work and educational achievement would garner rewards, experience a tremendous fall. They find themselves ill-prepared for the mismatch between their levels of education and the limited options that await them in the low-wage, clandestine labor market.

The young men and women interviewed for this study are part of a growing population of undocumented youth who have moved into adulthood. Today, the United States is home to more than 1.1 million undocumented children who, in the years to come, will be making the same sort of difficult transitions, under arguably more hostile contexts (Massey and Sanchez 2010). These demographic and legal realities ensure that a sizeable population of U.S.-raised adults will continue to be cut off from the futures they have been raised to expect. Efforts aimed at legalizing this particular group of young people have been in the works for more than 10 years without success. Political experts believe there will not be legislative movement at the federal level for at least two more years. In the meantime, proposals aimed at ending birthright citizenship for U.S.-born children of undocumented immigrants and barring their entry to postsecondary education threaten to deny rights to even greater numbers. These young people will very likely remain in the United States. Whether they become a disenfranchised underclass or contributing members to our society, their fate

rests largely in the hands of the state. We must ask ourselves if it is good for the health and wealth of this country to keep such a large number of U.S.-raised young adults in the shadows. We must ask what is lost when they learn to be illegal.

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## Notes

1. The Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986 provided the last large-scale legalization program. The 1987 estimate represents the undocumented population after many of the 2.7 million estimated illegal immigrants had moved into legal categories under IRCA.
2. Under *Plyler*, the Supreme Court ruled that undocumented children are entitled to the equal protection under the law afforded by the 14th Amendment of the Constitution and therefore cannot be denied access to public elementary and secondary education on the basis of their legal status (see Olivas 2005).
3. See, in particular, the Mexican Migration Project (MMP), a bi-national research effort co-directed by Jorge Durand (University of Guadalajara) and Douglas S. Massey (Princeton University). Since 1982, the MMP has collected economic and social data from more than 140,000 Mexicans including many migrants; most of the households in the MMP random samples were interviewed in Mexico.
4. Given the respondents' immigration status, I went to great lengths to ensure confidentiality. 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. Because of these precautions, personal information

does not appear anywhere in this research. Respondents provided verbal consent rather than leaving a paper trail with a written consent form. I destroyed all audio tapes immediately after transcription. I conducted all interviews in English, and I gave respondents gift cards for their participation.

5. Only New Mexico (SB 582) and Texas (HB 1403) allow undocumented students to apply for state aid.
6. Assembly Bill 540 (2001) gives undocumented youth in California who have gone to a state high school for three years and graduated the ability to pay tuition at in-state rates. Many undocumented immigrant students have benefited from this provision.

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