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## Sin Papeles: The Experiences of Undocumented Central American Immigrants in the United States

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Sin Papeles: The Experiences of Undocumented Central American Immigrants  
in the United States

by

Elizabeth M. Jarquin

A Dissertation Presented to the  
College of Arts, Humanities, & Social Sciences  
In Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Philosophy

**Nova Southeastern University**

**2020**

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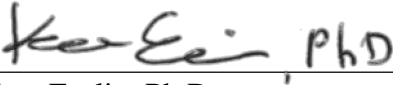
April 2020


**Nova Southeastern University  
College of Arts, Humanities, & Social Sciences**


This dissertation was submitted by Elizabeth M. Jarquin under the direction of the chair of the dissertation committee listed below. It was submitted to the College of Arts, Humanities, & Social Sciences and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Philosophy in the Department of Family Therapy at Nova Southeastern University.

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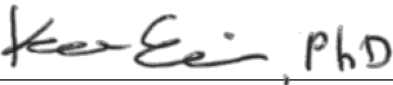
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## **Dedication**

This study is dedicated to the 12 million undocumented immigrants who migrated to the United States in the search of survival for themselves and their families. This study is also dedicated to the family members of those undocumented individuals who suffer the secondhand effects of an undocumented status. May this study raise awareness and empathy on the immigrant plight and lead to a positive shift in the perceptions of immigrants and the development of policies that support immigrants. ¡Si se puede!

## Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank my parents Deliana and Carmelo Jarquin. Without them, I would not have been able to complete 23 years of schooling. Thanks to their hard work and sacrifices, I was able to complete a PhD program. Education is a value my parents always instilled in my sister and me at an early age. They each migrated from Nicaragua to the United States in search of a better life for themselves and their families, and the answer to that was education. They believed that obtaining a higher education would lead us to become *profesionales* (professionals) and have good careers that would allow us to live comfortably without having to work as hard or make as many sacrifices as they did for us. My parent's dedication to our schooling required extra work for both of them. My father had to work 12 hour shifts 7 days a week so that my mother could have a flexible job, one that allowed her to drop us off and pick us up from school and dedicate time to our studies. This meant, however, that my sister and I did not spend much time with our father growing up. While my father worked long hours, my mother had to take on more work as well as she had her job in addition to the responsibilities of caring for us, attending to our studies, and taking care of everything related to our household.

My sister and I were forced to go to school every day whether we wanted to go or not, and regardless if we were sick. In fact, my sister and I always won awards for perfect attendance. My parents also pushed us to obtain the best grades possible. To accomplish that goal, my mom sat with my sister and I every single day after school to ensure we completed our homework. After we completed it, she checked it to make sure everything was correct. If we had projects to work on, she helped us with them. When we had

quizzes or tests, she studied with us and tested us to make sure we were fully prepared. Although my sister and I protested, my mother never let up. Even though I was annoyed and frustrated as a child, I now understand my parent's efforts—they wanted, and still want, the best for my sister and me. A large part of that is obtaining a higher education.

My parents wanted to provide my sister and I with better opportunities, ones that they never had. Both of my parents had difficult lives in Nicaragua, but my father had it particularly difficult because his mother passed away at an early age. Because of this, he was forced to start working to provide for his siblings at an early age. This meant that my father was not able to obtain an education. My father started working as a child and still works hard to this day. Even though my father made it to the United States, he still did not have an opportunity to obtain an education because he had to work such long hours. Therefore, it means a lot to me to obtain a PhD as a daughter of immigrants, and as the daughter of someone who can only read and write at the most basic level. Thanks to my parent's hard work, they were able to defy the odds and create opportunities for my sister and I in a country that currently has limited opportunities from immigrants, particularly undocumented ones.

Although I did not notice the sacrifices and hard work my parents made as a child, I became aware of them as a teen and young adult. As a result, I felt the responsibility to repay them for their dedication to my education. I did that by taking the opportunity they worked so hard to create for me and obtaining a higher education to become a *profesional* as they dreamed of. Now, as I sit here and write my acknowledgments section, I successfully defended my dissertation and completed 23 years of schooling thanks to my parents.

This accomplishment is particularly significant for me at this time because I obtained my PhD during a sociocultural context where many negative comments are being thrown around about immigrants. Undocumented immigrants are viewed as criminals who come to this country to live off of welfare. They are also viewed as uneducated individuals who are “good for nothing”—those stereotypes could not be further from the truth. Both my mother and father crossed the border and were undocumented for a number of years. I say this proudly because they faced various challenges in Nicaragua and their only solution for survival was to come to this country. Unfortunately, it was not possible for them to enter this country legally because of limited opportunities, which is still true today. For that reason, they crossed the border. Once here, they worked hard in order to provide for us and their families back home. In fact, they worked multiple jobs in order for us to survive. If my parents would not have crossed the border, I would not be here, and would not have obtained a PhD. Therefore, I thank my parents for their support and for helping me make this possible. *Gracias, Mom y Pa, los quiero mucho.*

I would also like to acknowledge and thank my committee members Drs. Erolin, Rambo, and Burnett. Dr. Erolin and I started our journey at Nova Southeastern University (NSU) together. When I first started at NSU as a master’s student, she started as full-time faculty in the department and I enrolled in the first class she taught. Although it was an online course, I felt a connection with her and we maintained in contact. After that, Dr. Erolin was my external practicum supervisor where she helped shaped my therapeutic identity and clinical work. During one of our supervision meetings, she asked me if I was considering going on to pursue a PhD. I remember being taken aback—it was something



I had not thought of. She told me that she thought I would do very well, which surprised me even more. I never imagined pursuing a PhD. Dr. Erolin is someone I really admire and respect, so it meant a lot to hear that coming from her. It was after that moment that I began to consider it and ended up applying and then being accepted into NSU's PhD program. During my time as a doctoral student, I worked as a graduate assistant for Dr. Erolin. Aside from being my faculty supervisor, she took on the role of being my mentor. Thanks to Dr. Erolin, I was pushed to do things I would have never considered. Although in the moment it was frustrating because it was something new to me, I always learned and continued to grow academically and professionally. I would like to thank Dr. Erolin for always seeing potential in me and helping me to tap into it and further develop it. With her guidance, I was able to turn my passion into a dissertation study. Now, we will continue to explore my passion by publishing and presenting. Thank you, Dr. Erolin for believing in me and for all of your hard work!

Dr. Rambo is another professor that I have had the pleasure of knowing since I began at NSU. I have always had an interest in working with children, so I interned at the Promise Program with Dr. Rambo during my master's program. There, I discovered that I loved school settings and working with at-risk and/or marginalized populations. As a graduate assistant, I also had the opportunity to work with Dr. Rambo at the Promise Program. My role was to assist Dr. Rambo in supervising master's and doctoral level interns. During this time, we had an influx of undocumented immigrant children referred to our program. Because I was the only person who spoke Spanish, I was the one who met with those students. It was at that moment when I found my passion of serving immigrants. Dr. Rambo supported me in exploring this passion by training Spanish

speaking interns to work with this population and finding and providing additional resources to these students. Further, I was able to publish and present with Dr. Rambo on our work. I would like to thank Dr. Rambo because she is always extremely supportive of all of her students and does everything she can to help us accomplish our goals. Thank you for your support, Dr. Rambo!

I did not meet Dr. Burnett until I was in my doctoral program, although, I always knew who he was. To students, he is known as the Bowen professor. I first met him when I took an internal practicum with him. I remember being so intimidated by him because of his intelligence. For that reason, I was fairly quiet in practicum. Although I was intimidated, I admired Dr. Burnett. I then took his Family Therapy III-Bowen Systems Theory course, where I got to know him more and came out of my shell a bit. After this class, I felt like I created a bond with him. I further developed that bond through the Advanced Bowen Systems Theory course that I took with him. I felt more comfortable with Dr. Burnett and spoke to him about my personal life and frustrations that come with being in a PhD program. Dr. Burnett always listened without judgment and provided support. I was grateful when he agreed to be one of my committee members because he offered me so much support throughout my program, and continued to do so during the difficult dissertation process. Dr. Burnett, I thank you for always listening to me and providing your support!

I would also like to thank all of my friends who have stood by me throughout the completion of my PhD. Some of these friends went through the master's program with me and recognized my potential. They were the ones who pushed me incessantly to apply to the PhD program. Although I said no, that I did not want to, or did not think I would be

able to do it, they continued to push. Thanks to their continuous efforts, I finally applied to the program and was accepted. I would also like to thank them for being there for me whenever I wanted to vent, which happened quite often. They listened to my frustrations, doubts I had about myself, and witnessed my tears. They believed in me even when I did not and always cheered me on and told me I could accomplish everything I set out to. They picked me up whenever I was down and motivated me to keep on going. They were with me every step of the way and celebrated each accomplishment, however minor it was. For that I am eternally grateful. Thank you for being such great friends and always believing in me and supporting me!

Lastly, and equally as important, I would like to thank the three the individuals who helped me find participants for my study. I will not say their names to protect their confidentiality and that of the participants, but they know who they are. Thank you for support, for placing your trust in me, and for vouching for me. I also would like to acknowledge and thank all of my participants. Thank you for sharing your stories with me and giving me the opportunity to share them with others. It was truly an honor to learn about your experiences, and those of your families. I am eternally grateful to my participants for trusting me, especially because it is so difficult to do during these times. Without the three individuals who helped me, and my participants, this study would not have been possible. Finally, thank you to everyone who was a part of my journey and helped me along the way. I am fortunate to have had so much help and support in this process.

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## Abstract

In the United States, the topic of immigration represents a source of intense debate, which has escalated in recent years. Research indicates that Latinx immigrants are negatively impacted by current immigration policies— they are feeling afraid, angry, exhausted, defeated, overwhelmed, and concerned about themselves and their family (Castrellón, Rivarola, & López, 2017; Wray-Lake et al., 2018). This research, however, has largely neglected the Central American subgroup and the experiences of undocumented immigrants. The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of undocumented Central American immigrants and their families within the current sociopolitical context. I utilized interpretative phenomenological analysis to examine data from five semi-structured interviews, which yielded four major themes: limited opportunities and restrictions; fear of deportation; increased racism and xenophobia; coping strategies; and several subthemes. Participant experiences were interpreted through the lens of Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model of development. The findings indicated that participants and their families experienced negative mental health indicators (e.g., stress, fear, anxiety, uncertainty, trauma) in relation to undocumented status; and were especially impacted by the current sociopolitical climate and immigration policies. Implications of the findings are discussed and clinical recommendations are given about the unique needs and challenges of this population, which will aid in the development and provision of culturally responsive care and services.

*Keywords:* immigration, Central America, undocumented immigrants, immigrant experience

## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Latinxs represent the largest group of foreign-born immigrants, both documented and undocumented, and the largest minority group in the United States (Xu & Brabeck, 2012). According to recent statistics, the Latinx population in the United States reaches nearly 58 million, constituting approximately 18% of the total population (Flores, 2017; U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). The Latinx population has emerged as an evident majority among minority populations and will only continue to grow—it is projected to exceed 119 million by the year 2060 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). Baker (2018) estimates that there are 12 million undocumented immigrants in the United States. Nearly three quarters of that population originates from Latin America, with approximately 10.7 million undocumented Latinxs (Flores, 2017; Lesser & Batalova, 2017). According to Lesser and Batalova (2017), it is likely that the actual number is greater than current census data reflects.

Latinxs migrate to the United States from Mexico, several countries in the Caribbean, and Central and South America (Alarcón et al., 2016). Individuals and families migrate for a myriad of reasons, such as improving their quality of life, finding freedom from the social, economic, and/or political constraints in their country of origin, war, natural disasters, crime, and/or to seek protection and security (American Psychological Association [APA], 2012). Historically, Mexicans have been one of the largest subgroups of Latinx immigrants in the United States (Alarcón et al., 2016). However, in the past decade, the number of immigrants from Mexico have declined while the number from Central America has increased by 375,000 over the same period (Lesser & Batalova, 2017). The number of Central American immigrants, both documented and

undocumented, has increased 28-fold since 1970, from 118,000 to nearly 3.3 million in 2018, growing six times faster than the overall immigrant population (Camarota & Zeigler, 2018). This study focuses on the experiences of undocumented Central American immigrants, a neglected subgroup within the larger Latinx population.

### **Personal Context for the Study**

I have always had an interest in this topic because of personal experiences, but recent professional experiences and the election in 2016 pushed me to develop this research. I am the daughter of Central American immigrants and witnessed firsthand the unique challenges of living with an undocumented status in the United States, and experienced the secondhand effects of having undocumented family members. Like other Latinx immigrants, my parents migrated to this country because of economic hardships/poverty. They believed they would have better employment opportunities in the United States, one that would allow them to improve their economic situation and assist their families back in Nicaragua. Because of financial challenges and how difficult it is to migrate to this country legally, they entered unauthorized and were undocumented for a few years. As a result, I was always aware of and sensitive to immigration status and its large impact on individual and family experiences.

This awareness and sensitivity of status is something that followed me throughout my work. When I was a graduate assistant supervisor at PROMISE (Preventing Recidivism through Opportunities, Mentoring, Interventions, Support, and Education) program, I began to work with undocumented immigrant children. The population we served did not specifically serve immigrants—we worked with children and teenagers in the school system. However, I saw more and more children that recently migrated from

Latinx American countries, particularly from the Central American countries of Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. Although my role was intended to be supervisory, I was the only Spanish speaking therapist, which meant I was the only one who could work with those students. The children told me stories about what life was like back home, the unfortunate circumstances that pushed them to migrate to the United States, their difficult journey to this country, and the challenges they currently faced. They shared many heartbreaking stories about survival, their fear of being deported, living in isolation, and being separated from their loved ones. Most traveled with only one parent, leaving behind their family, friends, country, and life. Once here, they were left to navigate a new country, culture, and life. During this time, Trump was recently elected as president. The children I worked with were filled with worry—worry about the possibility of staying in this country, whether they would ever become documented, and what would happen to them if they were sent back to their countries. They expressed not feeling welcome in this country and experienced fear and uncertainty about their future. Most of the children and teenagers brought up the president, his rhetoric towards immigrants, and new immigration policies which led them to feel unwanted and uncertain about their future in this country. They also told stories about discrimination they faced and even being assaulted by other students for not speaking English and being from another country.

As time went on, we had one or two interns who spoke Spanish and we were the ones who would meet with the Latinx children. As a supervisor, I met with the interns to debrief and review their notes. The interns expressed how challenging these cases were and not knowing what to ask about or how to navigate the sessions. It was then that I

began to give brief, informal trainings about the immigrant population and important areas to inquire about. Before meeting with the children and even after sessions, I would also meet with the interns to coach them on areas to touch on and what to discuss in future sessions. Through this experience, I realized that therapists generally are not trained to work with this population and the need for culturally informed practices. While speaking the same language as our clients was a big help, the interns needed more than that to provide effective services for the children. Furthermore, after seeing how deeply affected these children were and how their lives had changed, I knew research was needed to share their stories. It is my hope that sharing the stories of those who would otherwise go unheard will shed light on their experiences and aid clinicians in the provision of culturally competent practices with this population. Further, I hope policy makers create policies that improve, rather than negatively affect, the mental health and well-being for immigrant individuals and families.

### **Background of the Problem**

Beginning in the 1970s, a large number of Central Americans migrated to the United States due to civil wars, political instability, and economic hardship (Lesser & Batalova, 2017). Currently, an estimated 15 million are immigrants from Mexico and Central America, making up 37% of all United States immigrants (Brick, Challinor, & Rosenblum, 2011; Torres et al., 2018). Since Central Americans are typically grouped with Mexicans, there is no estimate of the number of Central Americans in the United States. Central America includes seven countries that form a link between North and South America: Belize, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama. Distinct historical events have created great variety in the sociopolitical contexts

among the seven countries. Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Nicaragua all have a similar history as well as social, economic, and political characteristics, and make up most of the Central American immigrant population in the United States. Therefore, I focused solely on those four countries in this study.

Political, social, and economic factors lead migration from Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Nicaragua to the United States. Some of these factors are a result of United States intervention in Central America which have created political instability in the region, forcing individuals and families to flee. In Guatemala and El Salvador, there were long-term civil wars (Rojas-Flores et al., 2013; Sawyer & Márquez, 2016). In Nicaragua, there was a revolution and a war (Sánchez Nateras, 2019), while in Honduras there was a military coup d'état (Sawyer & Márquez, 2016; Sládková, 2014). As a result, citizens of these countries suffered voluntary or government-sanctioned exile, death threats, police persecution, judicial sentences or jail terms, oppressive life under authoritarian regimes, increased violence, property loss, and financial or business pressures (Alarcón et al., 2016). According to Alarcón et al. (2016), poverty and scarce employment opportunities are probably the main reason for migration of Central Americans. The authors mention family as another key factor of migration as a large number of immigrants' close family members remain in their country of origin, often financially supported by the wages of those who migrate. Once more or less established in the United States, members of the immigrants' family migrate to reunite with them. Natural disasters also push migration as earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, hurricanes, and floods are frequent in Central America and can trigger the decision to migrate.

Although Mexicans make up one of the largest groups of undocumented immigrants living in the United States (Silva et al., 2017), there has been a decline of Mexican immigrants and an increase in immigrants from Central Americans (Wilson, 2019). In the past, migrants were predominantly single, adult males from Mexico. Today, most migrants are families and unaccompanied children from Central America. The migration experience is composed of various challenges and trauma, as immigrants experience trauma before, during, and after migrating. Researchers have shown that Central American immigrants experience trauma during each stage of migration: (a) premigration traumas occurring in the home country (e.g., Li, 2016; Rojas-Flores et al., 2013), (b) traumas en route to the new country (Sládková, 2014), and (c) the often hostile environment in the new country (e.g., Kaltman, Hurtado de Mendoza, Gonzales, Serrano, & Guarnaccia, 2011).

Once in the United States, there are many factors that impact an immigrant's experience, particularly immigration status. Studies have found that undocumented immigrants encounter culture shock, difficulty adjusting to life in the United States, and fear of deportation and/or family separation (e.g., Fernández-Esquer, Agoff, & Leal, 2017; Mendez-Shannon & Bailey, 2016). They experience many stressors associated with their unauthorized legal status which negatively impact their well-being, including moderate to severe symptoms of psychological distress, depression, and anxiety (Perreira et al., 2015). Undocumented status extends beyond the individual and affects social, community, and family life as well (Stacciarini et al., 2015). Latinx immigrants are also negatively impacted by exclusionary policies and an anti-immigrant climate (Gurrola & Ayón, 2018; Hatzenbuehler et al., 2017), and experience discrimination in various



aspects of their life (Gurrola & Ayón, 2018). Immigration laws “punish” both undocumented immigrants and their United States citizen family members (Enriquez, 2015); and mixed-status families experienced stress related to immigration and employment challenges, discrimination, financial concerns, and fear of deportability (Brabeck et al., 2016; Rodriguez, 2018).

### **Current Immigration Context**

While immigration has always been a popular issue, in recent years there has been an escalation of debates around the subject resulting in a shifting immigration climate and policies. In the early months of his presidency in 2017, Donald Trump signed several executive orders laying out policies to increase deportations of undocumented immigrants, separate families, limit access to asylum, increase border security, authorize construction of a wall at the United States-Mexico border, construct detention facilities, increase the detention of noncitizens, and expand expedited removal throughout the country (Department of Homeland Security, 2018). These executive orders also forbid sanctuary cities from receiving federal grants, require local-federal immigration enforcement cooperation, reinstates the Secure Communities program and Section 287 (g) agreements, and increases the number of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents (Department of Homeland Security, 2018).

In May 2019, Florida passed SB 168, an anti-immigrant bill forcing local law enforcement to cooperate with ICE officials in removing immigrants at massive levels, which puts documented immigrants and United States citizens at risk of wrongful arrest; and pressures schools, local government bodies, and state agencies into reporting to ICE (The Florida Senate, 2019). In terms of the wall at the United States-Mexico border, the

Trump administration plans to divert an additional \$7.2 billion from the Pentagon, according to reports from the *Washington Post* (Miroff, 2020). This would be more than five times the \$1.375 billion Congress approved for fiscal year 2020 and is in addition to the \$6.7 billion that was diverted in 2019, which would total to more than \$18 billion of taxpayer dollars allocated to the wall (Miroff, 2020). It was also reported that the Trump administration is waiving certain procurement regulations to speed up the construction of the wall (Johnson, 2020).

Most recently, the U.S. immigration system saw many changes ordered by the Trump administration during 2019, which will take effect in 2020 (Shoer Roth, 2020). The first is to increase the fees on DACA renewal applications, citizenship applications, work permits, and for the first time ever, create an asylum fee (Shoer Roth, 2020). The “public charge” rule states that immigrants will be denied entrance if they have used benefit programs such as Medicaid, SNAP, or public housing. Those who are thought to need those benefits in the future will also be denied. Thus, immigrants with low incomes are targeted through this rule. The Migration Protection Protocols (MPP) or “Remain in Mexico” policy, requires asylum seekers who arrived at ports of entry on the U.S.-Mexico border to be returned to Mexico to wait for the duration of their U.S. immigration proceedings (Limón Garza, 2020). Similarly, there is the “safe third country” agreement that requires asylum seekers to make their claim in the first participant country they enter (Myers, 2019). If they fail to do so, their asylum petition can be dismissed and they can be sent back to their country of origin (Myers, 2019). Both the Remain in Mexico policy and safe third country agreement aim to deter immigrants of color.

Further, the Trump administration will revise the citizenship test, although the changes have not yet been announced but are expected to be implemented this fall (Shoer Roth, 2020). Relatedly, the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services expanded a policy that prevents an applicant from meeting the good moral character requirement for naturalization. While the U.S. Supreme Court is still deciding the data of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), the acting ICE director said the agency is preparing to deport DACA recipients if the program is ruled unconstitutional in the upcoming Supreme Court case. To prepare, ICE is asking immigration courts to reopen administratively closed deportation cases against DACA recipients to ensure final orders of removal (Jawetz & Carratala, 2020). Finally, the Trump administration just announced that they are sending U.S. Customs and Border Protection officers, including those from SWAT-like Border Patrol Tactical Unit, to sanctuary cities across the country to support ICE in carrying out immigration raids (Narea, 2020). They are expected to be deployed from February through May (Narea, 2020).

### **Statement of the Problem**

The shifting immigration climate and policies in the United States makes the study of the Latinx immigrant experience crucial, particularly the experiences undocumented immigrants. Recent studies indicate that undocumented Latinx immigrants are feeling threatened, angry, and unsafe by the current sociopolitical context and anti-immigrant policies (Castrellón, Rivarola, & López, 2017; Wray-Lake et al., 2018). These policies target all undocumented immigrants, not just those with criminal convictions or prior removal orders (Torres, Santiago, Walts, & Richards, 2018). Many of these new

immigration policies contribute to the vulnerabilities of immigrants, negatively impacting their experience.

Statistics indicate that the Central American immigrant population in the United States is on the rise. In fact, it has grown six times faster than the overall immigrant population (Camarota & Zeigler, 2018). Given the growing rate of this group, it is imperative for mental health providers, including marriage and family therapists (MFTs), to be prepared to work effectively with Central American (undocumented) immigrants. Despite the fact that the Commission on Accreditation for Marriage and Family Therapy Education (COAMFTE) requires a multi-culturally informed educational approach that includes teaching professional practices related to diversity (COAMFTE, 2017), many MFT programs do not specifically provide training on how to work with undocumented immigrants. Sullivan and Rehm (2005) posit that undocumented Latinxs in the United States have a unique risk profile, which is why it is crucial to study this population and their experiences. The limited research and growing numbers of the Central American population add to the need for the study of this group.

### **Significance of the Study**

It is important for therapists to learn about the populations they serve and the challenges they face in order to deliver needed and appropriate services. During assessment and treatment, some clinicians may not know to inquire about the migration process, trauma, legal status, and how their legal status impacts their lives. As a result, there is a lack of appropriate and culturally sensitive services. It is imperative for clinicians to be aware of the various issues that impact these individuals, couples, and families in order to provide culturally sensitive treatment to serve this population's

unique needs. Similarly, community-based service providers will benefit from this study by having a better understanding of the immigrant population they serve to create culturally competent treatment, programs, and services. Presently, immigrants are underserved as their access to care is limited by barriers such as cost, lack of resources, language barriers, and lack of culturally competent treatment approaches (Torres et al., 2018). This study has the potential of providing community-based centers, agencies, program developers, and social agencies the knowledge to create services specifically intended for this population and address their needs.

Trump's election as President of the United States may be considered a historical moment as it has had lasting impacts on the immigrant population in the United States (Torres et al., 2018). The new presidential administration has promoted and implemented policies, offered rhetoric, and laid agendas for the future—all of which influence an individual's experience. Thus, this work is critical to understanding how undocumented Central American immigrants are experiencing this sociohistorical moment. This information has the opportunity of providing valuable policy and practice implications aimed at supporting, advocating for, and empowering immigrant populations (Wray-Lake et al., 2018).

Finally, this study may help to reduce the stigma associated with undocumented status and its association as a criminal act. Today's sociopolitical climate is filled with anti-immigrant rhetoric, stating that immigrants disproportionately commit criminal acts and hurt the United States economy (Torres et al., 2018). As a result, undocumented immigrants experience social rejection, discrimination, stress, shame, and live in isolation (del Real, 2019). In turn, this negatively affects their overall experience, well-being, and

mental health. It is hoped that this study will educate the public about the painful circumstances that push immigrants to migrate, barriers to becoming documented, and difficulties of living in the United States with an undocumented status. This research will inform policy changes needed to improve mental health and well-being for immigrant individuals and families.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The present study was grounded in Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model of human development, which was a useful framework for contextualizing the experiences of undocumented Central American immigrants. This theory views individuals as nested within multiple interactive systems, and considers various factors that impact a person's development over time. Bronfenbrenner (1979) believed that individuals do not develop separately from their environment, and interactions individuals have with others and within the various environments are key to human development. The ecological model of development proposes that human experience is a result of interactions between individuals and their social environments. Therefore, exploring and understanding human development requires analysis of the various ecological systems and their interaction. This theory provides a framework for understanding the immediate environment as well as the larger environment that influences individual's experiences.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) posited five ecological systems, described as a set of nested structures inside each other that influence an individual's development. The structure of the ecological environment consists of the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. The microsystem refers to the environment that is the closest to the individual and has the greatest impact on their development,

including home, school, and work. The mesosystem describes interconnections between various microsystems in which the developing person actively participates at a particular point in life. For example, a child's mesosystem may be comprised of interactions between the child and their family, the child and peers, and the family and the child's peers. The exosystem consists of social structures not directly connected to the individual that influence the immediate surroundings of the individual, and includes formal (e.g., government agencies, health care system) and informal structures (e.g., mass media).

The macrosystem is the overarching patterns of a culture or subculture that are embedded in micro-, meso-, and exosystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). These cultural patterns can be explicit, for example, in the form of laws, policies, rules. They can also be implicit and informal dominant belief systems and ideologies that inform customs, practices, rituals, or routines in everyday life. Bronfenbrenner highlighted the importance of exploring an individual's development over time through changes in the living environment of the individual. This is the chronosystem, which refers to environmental events and transitions that occurs throughout an individual's life, including sociohistorical events. An example is the migration process, settling into a new country, and political elections. According to Bronfenbrenner, these experiences have the capacity to indirectly create developmental change in an individual.

### **Definition of Terms**

In this section, I provide a list of definitions of relevant terms used in my dissertation to provide contextual information as to how they are utilized in this study.

- *Central American*. I define this term as a person who is born in a Central American country. For the purpose of this study, this term will only

encompass four of the seven Central American countries: Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Nicaragua.

- *Horizontal discrimination.* Discrimination by members of their own ethnic or racial group (Gurrola & Ayón, 2018).
- *Immigrant.* A person who migrates to another country, usually for permanent residence. These individuals have a foreign nationality and/or were born outside of the United States (Gimeno-Feliu et al., 2019).
- *Immigration.* A process by which non-nationals move into a country for the purpose of settlement (IOM, 2016).
- *Latinx.* A person of Latinx American origin or descent. This term refers to people of Cuban, Dominican, Puerto Rican, Mexican, or Central or South American origin or descent (Xu & Brabeck, 2012).
- *Latinxx.* A gender-neutral label for Latinxo/a (Salinas & Lozano, 2017),
- *Migration.* The movement of a person or a group of persons, either across an international border, or within a state (IOM, 2016). It is a population movement, encompassing any kind of movement of people, whatever its length, composition and causes; it includes migration of refugees, displaced persons, economic migrants, and persons moving for other purposes, including family reunification.
- *Mixed-status.* Families or households that contain varied constellations of United States citizens, permanent legal residents, and undocumented immigrants (Castañeda & Melo, 2014). Thus, in these families or households, the immigration status of at least one member—and, therefore, their



relationship to the state—is different from that of the other family members (O’Leary & Sanchez, 2011).

- *Multigenerational punishment.* A form of legal violence in which the sanctions intended for undocumented immigrants spill into the lives of individuals who should have been protected by their citizenship status (Enriquez, 2015). This tends to occur in families with mixed statuses.
- *Undocumented immigrant.* An individual who enters the United States without inspection (at a place other than a port of entry) and is present without authorization (Cornelius, 1982). Due to an authorized status, this individual does not have permission for residence or work (Passel & Cohn, 2011).

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I provided an overview of my research, which focuses on the experiences of undocumented Central American immigrants and their families in the current sociopolitical climate and the impact immigration policies have on them. This overview included contextual information about my personal and professional interest in the topic, background information about Latinx immigrants, and the current immigration context. I also highlighted the importance and significance of this research, explained my theoretical framework of this study, and included a list of relevant terms and definitions used in my dissertation. In the following chapter, I provide a review of the literature that focuses on the experiences of Latinx immigrants in their countries of origin and journey to and life in the United States.

## **CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a foundation for understanding aspects related to undocumented immigrants' experiences, specifically from the Central American countries of Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Nicaragua. This literature review focuses on Latinx migration patterns, the recent rise in Central American migration to the United States, reasons for migration, and the migration experience. In addition, I provide literature related to immigrants' experiences in the United States, particularly the unique challenges undocumented immigrants face, how their status affects their individual and family life, and the impact of the current sociopolitical climate and immigration policies on their experiences.

### **History of Immigration in the United States**

The United States has long been considered a nation of immigrants, as it was founded and built by successive waves of immigration from all over the world. Immigration in the United States traces back to the 1600s when the first European settlements arrived. Since then, the country has experienced various waves of immigration throughout the centuries. Today, the United States has a larger immigrant population than any other country in the world, with 89.4 million immigrants as of 2018 (Zong, Batalova, & Burrows, 2019). The population of immigrants is very diverse, with just about every country in the world represented among United States immigrants (López, Bialik, & Radford, 2018).

Presently, the Latinx population in the United States reaches nearly 58 million (Flores, 2017). According to Torres et al. (2018), an estimated 15 million are immigrants from Mexico and Central America—of those, about 9 million are undocumented (Torres

et al., 2018). It is important to note that the actual number is greater than the data reflects as many undocumented individuals and families are afraid of revealing their status, so they do not want to be counted (Hernandez, 2005). Latinx immigrants in the United States come from Mexico, several countries in the Caribbean, and Central and South America (Ennis, Ríos-Vargas, & Albert, 2011). Historically, Mexicans have always been one of the largest subgroups of Latinx immigrants in the United States (Alarcón et al., 2016). Other Latinx subgroups include Cubans, Puerto Ricans, Central and South Americans, and Caribbean. Individuals and families from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras (a region known as the Northern Triangle) make up 85% of Central Americans in the United States (Lesser & Batalova, 2017). They are followed by immigrants from Nicaragua, Panama, Costa Rica, and Belize.

According to Lesser and Batalova (2017), Central Americans generally follow the same arrival patterns of the overall immigrant population with some small variations. They were more likely than other immigrant groups to have entered the United States between 2000 and 2009, and less likely to have arrived since 2010. However, in the past decade, the number of unauthorized immigrants from South America, Canada, Europe, and Mexico have declined while the number from Central America has increased by 375,000 over the same period. As of the 2012-2016 period, Mexicans and Central Americans are estimated to make up roughly two-thirds (67% or 7.6 million) of the undocumented immigrants in the United States (Zong et al., 2018).

As per Torres et al. (2018), Latinxs live mostly in the southwest, along most of the west coast, and in South Florida. California, Texas, and Florida are the top three states that have the largest Latinx population (Flores, 2017) followed by Illinois, Arizona,

New Jersey, Colorado, New Mexico, and Georgia. Central Americans are more scattered geographically than other Latinx groups with the south holding the highest concentration of Central Americans (34.6%), followed by the Northeast (32.3%), and the West (28.2%) (Hernandez, 2005). In the 2011-2015 period, the top four counties with Central American immigrants were Los Angeles County in California, Harris County in Texas, Miami-Dade County in Florida, and Prince George's County in Maryland (Lesser & Batalova, 2017). In fact, these four counties together accounted for about 30% of the total Central American immigrant population in the United States.

### **History of Migration from Central America**

Immigrants leave their home countries in order to improve their quality of life and find freedom from the social, economic, or political constraints in their country of origin. Individuals and families migrate for a myriad of reasons; they may be driven out of their country seeking reunification; and/or due to poverty, war, natural disasters, crime, political concerns, religious and ethnic identity persecution; and/or to seek protection and security (APA, 2012). Large-scale Central American migration is not a new phenomenon. According to Lesser and Batalova (2017), civil wars, political instability, and economic hardship first drove significant numbers of Central Americans to the United States in the 1980s, when the population from that region living in the United States more than tripled. Although political conflicts ended in the early 1990s, severe poverty, an increase in drug activity, crime, family unification, natural disasters, and persistent political and economic volatility have been related to a constant pattern of undocumented migration from Central America (Hernandez, 2005; Lesser & Batalova, 2017). In the following section, I

describe the complex historical events in the Central American countries of Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador and Nicaragua that drive migration to the United States.

### **Guatemala**

Violence in Guatemala was initiated by a 36-year civil war and is perpetuated by increasing organized crimes and gangs (Sawyer & Márquez, 2016). In 1954, the United States Central Intelligence Agency supported a coup in which farmers lost their lands and voting rights. This resulted in a civil war from 1960-1996 between grass-roots guerilla warfare and the governmental military from which Guatemala still suffers massive repercussions. During those years, “the country alternated between civilian and military rule, multiple coups coupled with a dissolved constitution, Congress, and Supreme Court” (Sawyer & Márquez, 2016, p. 71). There were abductions, murders, mutilations, public dumping of bodies, rape, extortion, and intimidation, which continue to happen today. In addition to the longstanding effects of the war, organized crime and gangs also plague Guatemala. Although many gang members have been imprisoned, this has not reduced the violence since most crime is orchestrated and directed in prison. Sawyer and Márquez (2016) report that the group most affected by violence are women and girls, and “hundreds have been abducted and taken to prisons where they were raped by prisoners under the supervision of highly corrupt prison officials” (p. 71).

### **Honduras**

Honduras is one of the poorest countries in Latinx America (Sládková, 2014). According to Sládková (2014), the majority of Hondurans migrate to the United States because of the historical, political, military, and economic ties of the two countries and the growing social networks that partially facilitate the process. Migration began when

United States owned fruit companies and started using Honduran workers to transport bananas to United States ports. Years later, Honduras suffered several natural disasters including Hurricane Mitch, which killed 7,000 people and caused around \$3 billion in damage. As a result, migration to the United States immediately increased. The situation in Honduras worsened after a military coup d'état in June 2009 (Sawyer & Márquez, 2016; Sládková, 2014), in which a number of U.S. officials played an important role in preventing the former president's return to office. Consequently, the government became very restrictive and it suspended freedom of assembly, freedom of the press, and authorized excessive force on peaceful demonstrations (Sawyer & Márquez, 2016). The governmental police are highly corrupt—during 2011-2012, the police killed at least 149 civilians—yet few were subject to investigation. Since then, Honduras has become the most violent country in the world with the exclusion of war zones (Sládková, 2014).

### **El Salvador**

El Salvador is one of the countries most affected by violence (Rojas-Flores et al., 2013). The effects of community violence are widespread in El Salvador due to violence initiated by the civil war and now increasing gang activity and organized crime. In the 12-year civil war from 1980-1992, the United States pitted a right-wing government against Marxist guerrillas. Further, they sent military advisors to help the Salvadorian military, as well as economic and military aid. This war resulted in more than 70,000 deaths as people lost their lives in killing and bombing raids waged against civilians. Although political conflicts ended several years ago, there was an increase of criminal activity and social violence after the war. Other factors contributing to violence are “the proliferation of street gangs, heightened U.S. immigration enforcement, increased rates of

drug trafficking, persistent poverty, unemployment/ underemployment, and rapid urbanization” (Rojas-Flores et al., 2013, p. 269), which have weakened the government’s capacity to promote security for its citizens. These socioeconomic and political factors have contributed to the violence Salvadorians face daily.

### **Nicaragua**

Nicaragua is a country characterized by civil war, dictatorships, and foreign political intervention (Regan, n.d.). Due to its past, Nicaragua has struggled to achieve political stability or significant economic growth, all of which contribute to immigration to the United States. The United States first became involved in Nicaragua in 1909 when marines supported the new conservative government. This continued in the 1930s and in 1933, the United States established and trained the Nicaraguan National Guard, and installed a commander sympathetic to U.S. anti-communist policy, which resulted in a dictatorship of 43 years. In 1972, Nicaragua was hit by a devastating earthquake. At that time, the country received foreign aid which was believed to be kept by the Somoza regime. As a result, Nicaraguans began to side with Sandinistas and in 1979 they overthrew the Somoza regime. After that began the Contra War from 1979 to the early 1980s. The contras were U.S. backed and funded right-wing rebel groups that opposed the Sandinistas. Nicaragua’s political instability has negatively affected economic growth. Thus, Nicaragua is plagued by wide-spread poverty, low income and educational levels, has little formal employment and a large informal sector and high degrees of underemployment and child labor (Gustafsson, 2018). In earlier time years, Nicaraguans mostly migrated in the search of employment opportunities. During the revolutionary war, many fled to neighboring countries, particularly Costa Rica or the United States. The socioeconomic situation became particularly harsh after the 1980s, which led more

Nicaraguans to flee the country in search of employment to be able to provide for their families. Today, about 10-20% of the population resides outside of the country, mostly in Costa Rica and the United States.

### **Current Trends in Migration from Central America**

Historically, Mexicans make up one of the largest groups of undocumented immigrants living in the United States (Silva et al., 2017). In the last few years, there has been a decline of the overall number of undocumented immigrants due to a very large drop in the number of new unauthorized immigrants, especially Mexicans, coming into the country (Passel & Cohn, 2018). Over the last decade, however, migration to the United States from Central America has increased considerably. During 2006-2016, the number of individuals living in the United States who were born in Central America grew from 2.2 million to almost 3 million (Wilson, 2019). Wilson (2019) indicates this 37% increase was more than twice the increase for the total foreign-born population of 16%.

Although total apprehensions at the United States-Mexico border have decreased in the past fiscal years, the number of families from Central America apprehended has increased recently (Wilson, 2019). In fiscal year 2016 alone, U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) apprehended nearly 46,900 unaccompanied children and more than 70,400 family units from Central America arriving at the border (Lesser & Batalova, 2017). In the past, the migrants apprehended were predominantly single, adult males from Mexico (Wilson, 2019). Currently, the majority of apprehended migrants are families and unaccompanied children from Central America. The majority of those arriving at the border are requesting asylum, some at official ports of entry and others after entering the United States without inspection. Between 2012 and 2017 El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala were in the top five for countries whose immigrants were most



likely to be denied asylum—between 75% and 79% of applicants were denied (Lesser & Batalova, 2017). This adds to Central Americans' vulnerability, given the challenges faced when attempting to obtain documentation. In the following section, I explain the reasons that account for the rise of Central Americans migrating to the United States.

### **Present Reasons for Migration**

Despite the end of civil war, Central America continues to suffer from unstable political environments resulting in systemic violence and crime, declining economic stability, and failed political reforms which drive the large wave of undocumented migration of children, adults, and families (Lesser & Batalova, 2017). Violence committed by criminal gangs continue to plague the Northern Triangle (El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras), which represent three of the five countries with the highest murder rates in the world.

Honduras is considered the murder capital of the world. According to Sawyer and Márquez (2016), in 2014 the murder rate in Honduras ranked the highest in the world with a homicide rate of 90:100,000. Sládková (2014) note that there are “86 murders per 100,000 people, a rate five times higher than the currently tumultuous Mexico” (p. 2). These killings are mostly caused by drug trafficking as Honduras has become the new corridor from South America to the United States. Criminal gangs, such as the 18th Street Gang and MS-13 (Mara Salvatrucha), are also to blame for these killings as they are actively involved in murder, kidnapping, extortion, execution-for-hire, carjacking, narco-trafficking, armed robbery, and home invasions (Sawyer & Márquez, 2016). In Honduras, street crime is rampant and rarely prosecuted.

In El Salvador, the death rate is currently estimated to be approximately 105:100,000 citizens, the highest in the world (Sawyer & Marquez, 2016). Sawyer and Marquez (2016) remark, “El Salvador’s population is less than that of New York City, yet it still averages approximately 30 murders each day” (p. 71). In 2016, more than 100 battles were fought between police and street gangs. In turn, police were reported abandoning their posts due to insufficient support and equipment. Adding to the violence, the Salvadorian minister of security gave police the authority to shoot perceived gang members on sight. MS-13 and the 18th Street Gang are both responsible for a large part of the violence in Central America. Both gangs are currently active in all northern triangle countries, and the MS-13 has spread to the United States. In fact, MS-13 is known to be active in at least 42 states. These gangs tend to recruit middle and high school children with activities that include rape, prostitution, drug distribution, kidnapping, and sex trafficking. Sawyer and Márquez state, “the violence has infiltrated all aspects of society but primarily focuses within poor neighborhoods” (p. 71). Children as young as 7 or 8 years old are recruited by gangs—girls are kidnapped, used as objects, and discarded. There are reports of children being killed, attacked, kidnapped, threatened, and bribed.

In April 2018, Nicaragua once again faced political unrest at the hands of Daniel Ortega, the current dictator (Anderson, 2018). Ortega announced he would slash social security benefits as a cost-cutting measure, which led to protests to the streets to demand Ortega’s resignation and prompted a crackdown by government and paramilitary forces (Labrador, 2018). Government forces were responsible for most of the 324 people killed and 2,000 injured (Human Rights Watch, 2019). Police

arbitrarily arrested, and pro-government groups kidnapped, hundreds of people as part of “a policy” to eradicate opposition voices and critics. Authorities and armed pro-government groups targeted human rights defenders, journalists, bloggers, and university students. Further, doctors, nurses, health workers, and professors were fired for supporting or taking part in anti-government demonstrations. National police subjected protesters to abuse such as torture, beatings, waterboarding, electric shocks, and rape. Some were even forced to record self-incriminating videos. Abuses that authorities perpetrated remain unpunished, and the Attorney General's Office and Supreme Court obstructed international human rights bodies' efforts to document and investigate these cases. The surge of violence in Nicaragua has drawn widespread condemnation from human rights groups, regional organizations, and foreign governments, including the United States (Labrador, 2018). Peace talks between the government, peace organizations, and citizens have taken place, but have proven unsuccessful.

Poverty and lack of economic opportunity in Central America persist, which drives migration (Chishti & Hipsman, 2016). “Children roam hungry, and poverty is rampant in many neighborhoods” (Sawyer & Márquez, 2016, p. 71). Central America is experiencing the most severe drought in decades which has squeezed agricultural production and particularly hurt small farmers (Chishti & Hipsman, 2016). In Central America more than 3.5 million people are food insecure and in need of humanitarian assistance. Parents, unwilling to watch their children starve, abandon their children to come to the United States seeking employment in order to send money to their home country so that their children can eat. In some cases, families send their children to the United States so they can flee violence, starvation, impoverished living conditions, or

other life-threatening situations (Sawyer & Márquez, 2016). The conditions in their home countries are so dangerous, the perils involved in the actual journey and subsequent immigration issues are a better alternative than staying. Thus, political instability, high levels of violence, homicide rates, gang activity, poverty, and lack of economic opportunity drive migration to the United States.

### **The Migration Experience**

The migration experience is one that is composed of various challenges and trauma, and immigrants experience trauma before, during, and after migrating. Most live through difficult situations in their countries of origin, and experience high levels of violence, and even detention, along their journey. When they arrive at their destinations, they face the fear of never returning to their home country, the uncertain future of those left behind, and expectations of freedom increase their anxiety and make their experience of being uprooted and expatriated even more difficult (Hernandez, 2005). Foster (2001) outlined the potential experience of trauma at each stage, including premigration traumas that occur in immigrant's home country; traumas en route to the new country; and post-migration traumas resulting from a hostile environment in the new country.

### **Pre-Migration Traumas**

In Central America there are high rates of violence, with homicide rates and gang violence steadily increasing (Lesser & Batalova, 2017). Clinical and quantitative mental health research provide extensive evidence that the experiences prior to and during migration are directly associated with psychological challenges that are experienced in following years, as these immigrants make their adjustments to a new life and culture (Foster, 2001). The prevalence of premigration traumas in Latinx immigrants is high. For example, Li (2016) performed logistic regression models on data from the National

Latinx and Asian American Study (NLAAS) with subsamples of Asian ( $n = 1639$ ) and Latinx immigrants ( $n = 1629$ ) defined as being born outside of the United States. The researcher found that at least half of all Latinx immigrants and close to half of Asian immigrants experienced some type of trauma in their home country prior to arriving in the United States. Further, for both subgroups, pre-migration trauma victims were more likely to have traumatic experiences after migrating to United States than those without any pre-migration trauma exposure.

In another study, Rojas-Flores et al. (2013) measured direct and indirect exposure to community violence (CV) in El Salvador. The sample included 36 participants living in El Salvador who took part in four focus groups lasting 2.5 hours each, conducted in Spanish. Participants also completed a one-time self-report questionnaire, the Los Angeles Community Violence Checklist. Findings showed that all participants reported experiencing CV events, indicating direct and indirect lifetime exposure to violence. Rojas-Flores et al. noted,

...having seen or known someone armed, being or knowing a victim of robbery or attempted robbery, seeing someone dead in their communities, hearing or seeing shooting, seeing someone killed, and over half the participants experienced being at a place during the war where someone was killed or hurt. (p. 274).

### **Traumas En Route to New Country**

For some Central American immigrants, the migration journey is violent and terrifying (Kaltman et al., 2011). Because it is difficult for Central Americans to obtain documentation prior to entering the United States, they resort to the services of “coyotes,” guides who offer to take them through the border via risky alternative routes

(Hernandez, 2005). The trip to the United States can last weeks and sometimes even months depending on the country of origin. During the trip travelers are frequently mistreated, robbed, extorted, raped, and killed by their guides. When migrants cross into Mexico, they almost all encounter police or immigration officers who are either paid off by the coyote, steal from migrants and let them pass, or detain them (Sládková, 2014).

In Mexico migrants travel on buses, freight trains, hidden in enclosed vehicles, and on foot. Migrants with limited resources often travel through Mexico by the cargo train “La Bestia” (The Beast) in which there are assaults, robberies, accidents, including falls and mutilations (Torres et al., 2018). Recently, drug cartels have gotten involved in migrant trafficking because the routes often overlap and brings them additional income (Goddard, 2011). Many consider Mexico the most dangerous part of the journey (Sládková, 2014). According to Sládková (2014), very little help is available for the migrants other than shelters, Mexicans willing to provide them food and drink, and BETA, an immigration organization whose job is to provide help to migrants in need in Mexico.

Sládková (2014) conducted a qualitative study examining undocumented migrant experiences on their journeys to the United States. The study took place in the community of Copán Ruinas, Honduras, in order to include people who made it to the United States, as well as those who did not. The sample included 21 participants: 10 who attempted to reach the United States, but did not succeed; eight who made it to and returned from the United States; and three who had both experiences. In-depth, semi-structured interviews took place in Spanish and lasted approximately 40-120 minutes. Narrative analyses, specifically the analytical tools of high points and poises, were

utilized to gather the most salient experiences the migrants narrated. Findings showed that the high points of migrant experiences centered around the crossings of the United States-Mexico border, encounters with gangs and the police in Mexico, and travels on top of freight trains.

### **Post-Migration Traumas**

The environment in the new country can create further trauma for migrants (Foster, 2001). Katlman et al. (2011) sought to examine the types and context of trauma exposure experienced by immigrant women between the ages of 18-70 from Central America, South America, and Mexico living in the United States. Twenty-eight individuals participated in the study, and of those, 18 were from Central America. The researchers conducted semi-structured life history interviews where participants were asked to describe their life and experiences in their country of origin, immigration process, experience in the United States upon arrival, and more recent experience in the United States. The results showed that most of the women experienced some type of trauma in their countries of origin, during immigration, and/or in the United States. Several women reported interpersonal violence that was often facilitated by their vulnerability as recent immigrants due to limited financial resources, lack of English fluency, and no understanding of how to navigate their surroundings. Li (2016) also found that Latinx immigrants living in the United States have an increased likelihood of feeling guilty for leaving family/friends, social isolation, legal status stress, and language-based discrimination.

### **Undocumented Immigrant Experiences in the United States**

Once in the United States, undocumented immigrants face many issues such as difficulties obtaining documentation, poor living conditions, lack of job opportunities,

discrimination, lack of access to services and education, and deportation or detention for those who are arriving without permission (Foster, 2001). Thus, it is imperative to understand the experiences of individuals and families once they arrive and settle in the United States. Mendez-Shannon and Bailey (2016) conducted a study in which they explored the experiences of undocumented Latinx immigrant adults to learn how they interpret their status and manage living in the United States. The study utilized a qualitative descriptive approach where the researchers interviewed 16 participants residing in New York City. Participants had been in the United States for at least a year, and 15 were from Mexico and one was from Ecuador. Each participant had two interview sessions in Spanish. The first session included a discussion of consent and the main interview. The second session was conducted 6 months after the initial session to review the themes developed by the research team, discuss their accuracy, revise conclusions, and give greater detail on missing data. Interviews were semi-structured and included questions regarding the migration experience and experience of being undocumented.

The resulting analysis included two major themes and five subthemes (Mendez-Shannon & Bailey, 2016). The first theme was Culture Shock. The process of adapting to a new environment and culture is difficult and participants faced numerous financial, legal, and familial challenges. The first subtheme was *Como pez no en el agua* (like a fish out of water), which described the difficult transition from a small town to large city, being unable to communicate and understand others, feelings of stress and anxiety, effects of a language barrier, and living in constant fear because of their status. The second subtheme was *Cuando despertabas decías 'dónde estoy?* (Upon awakening, I said, where am I?), which described feelings of isolation, disconnect, as if being in two



places at one time (home country and United States), and little or no sense of belonging in United States.

The second theme was Adjusting, which is related to way participants have dealt with, and survived, the painful experiences of alienation (Mendez-Shannon & Bailey, 2016). The first subtheme was *Dios Tiene un Propósito En Mi Vida* (God has a purpose for my life), in which participants believed God had a plan for them and that somehow what they were going through made sense because it came from God. The second subtheme was *Sobresalir* (rise out of), related to participants' inner strength, such as endurance and willpower, to develop what they needed to confront barriers and achieve what they saw as success. For the participants, success in the United States is achieving a better economic situation than the one in their home country, and to make enough money to survive in the United States and to send money to their family of origin. The third subtheme was *La fuerza* (strength), which participants described as strength coming from within. This process of finding strength was articulated by key words such as *sobrevivir*, *sobrellevar*, and *sobresalir*, which roughly translates to surviving, enduring or coping, and to coming out ahead.

Stacciarini et al. (2015) generated a case report in which they described the experiences of an undocumented immigrant to examine the effects of an undocumented status on mental health. The case report was based on a single participant, a 30-year-old undocumented immigrant and mother of children who are naturalized U.S. citizens. Data was drawn from an in-depth ethnographic, semi-structured interview with the participant. The interview questions inquired about the elements that facilitated as well as prevented connection with the local community. Examples of interview questions are: How do you

feel living in here? Tell me what helps and make it difficult for you to feel you belong here (or fit in here). Utilizing the ecological framework, themes were arranged in four different levels: (a) social level: undocumented status; (b) rural community level: belonging, discrimination and geographic mobility; (c) family level: family dynamics and (d) individual level: social isolation, and depression. Fear was considered and overarching category.

Due to her undocumented status, for the past 25 years, the participant lived her life in a state of constant fear and expressed that her life was limited because of her status (Stacciarini et al., 2015). The participant expressed contradictory feelings of belonging: although she sometimes felt like a part of this country, the day-to-day reality of being an undocumented immigrant inspired feelings of rejection that inhibited a sense of truly belonging. Over time, the participant experienced discrimination and internalized the sentiment that she is “not equal” due to her undocumented status. Although the participant was qualified and spoke English well, she still struggled with the lack of job opportunities, and felt held back from jobs she thought she could do. The participant discussed a lack of mobility due to a poor, economic situation as well as her undocumented status, which prevented her from owning and driving a car. Because of this, she was not so involved in her children’s school and unable to spend much family time outside the home.

The participant’s undocumented status also affected family dynamics. Although she valued communication, she only spoke about “adult problems” with her eldest son who knew what they could or could not do as a family due to her undocumented status (Stacciarini et al., 2015). Further, the participant described her life as being in a constant

mode of hiding from others in order to avoid disclosing her undocumented status, which required isolating herself from even mundane activities. The participant described her depression as a “direct consequence” of her undocumented status, which led to persistent feelings of frustration, isolation, and inadequacy, as well as a lack of belonging and opportunity. Finally, she experienced fear constantly as she feared backlash from the local rural community, deportation of her parents and herself, and abandonment of her American children.

In a study by Arbona et al. (2010), the differences between documented and undocumented Latinx immigrants were examined in terms of the prevalence of immigration-related challenges and to determine the combined and unique association of legal status, immigration-related challenges, and fear of deportation to acculturative stress related to the external and the family contexts. Participants in the study consisted of 416 documented and undocumented Mexican and Central American immigrants living in two major cities in Texas. Data were collected through individual interviews that lasted 1.5 to 2 hours and were conducted primarily in Spanish. Results indicated that although undocumented immigrants reported higher levels of the immigration challenges of separation from family, traditionality, and language difficulties than documented immigrants, both groups reported similar levels of fear of deportation. Results also indicated that the immigration challenges and undocumented status were uniquely associated with extrafamilial acculturative stress, but not with intrafamilial acculturative stress. Finally, only fear of deportation emerged as a unique predictor of both extrafamilial and intrafamilial acculturative stress.

In a more recent study, Fernández-Esquer et al. (2017) explored the meanings that undocumented Latinx immigrant men attribute to the condition of living *sin papeles* (without legal papers) and the influence it has on their daily lives through qualitative research. The researchers held focus groups and in-depth interviews with Latinx immigrants living in a large metropolitan area in Texas. Participants included 27 recently immigrated Latinx men; of those, eight were selected for in-depth interviews in order to expand and validate the issues identified in the focus groups. Participants were asked about their reasons for migrating to the United States, current living arrangements, recreational activities, work experiences, and health problems over the past year. Thematic analysis combined with constant comparison generated the overarching theme of living *sin papeles*. The results demonstrated that living *sin papeles* extends far beyond legal status, as it is a condition of ever-present instability, insecurity, and hypervigilance that affects the social, work, health, and living conditions of undocumented Latinx immigrants.

Results showed that the participants' undocumented status precluded their right to seek gainful employment (Fernández-Esquer et al., 2017). Because of this, participants turned to the highly competitive, yet unstable job market of day labor and were denied of water and breaks, including time for lunch. This situation not only reflects the violation of worksite abuses, but also jeopardizes worker's health. Participants reported that due to their undocumented status they could not complain or seek compensation, so they had to assume responsibility for their own personal care and safety. Moreover, many participants experienced stress and problems adapting to poverty, saving money, and supporting their families, resulting in profound helplessness.

Participants faced loneliness and anxiety in adjusting to the United States since most did not come to join family and friends (Fernández-Esquer et al., 2017). Most participants did not have previous social network contacts and many did not easily find work, which led them to feel desperate and anxious. Participants stated that the awareness of being undocumented represented a psychological and social burden that impacted various aspects of their daily lives. They viewed their undocumented status as a constant uncertainty and instability that led them to experience symptoms of distress, such as hypervigilance, indicating heightened stress resulting from fear and lack of control over their situation. The fear of deportation constrained their movements, exacerbating hypervigilance and anxiety, and influenced personal and family travel decisions.

### **Impact of Undocumented Status on Family**

As noted by Chavez, Lopez, Englebrecht, and Viramontez Anguiano (2012), “unauthorized immigration status is not solely an individual concern, but rather it transcends entire families” (p. 647). Mixed-status families or households have at least one member that is an undocumented immigrant while the others are citizens or documented immigrants (Castañeda & Melo, 2014). Mixed-status households have doubled over the past decade and will likely continue to grow (Enriquez, 2015). Currently, there are more than 16.6 million mixed-status households in the United States (Rodriguez, 2018). Approximately 5.5 million children have at least one undocumented parent, and of those, at least 4 million were born in the United States (Suárez-Orozco, Yoshikawa, Teranishi, & Suárez-Orozco, 2011). In addition to differences between parents and children, about 450,000 undocumented children are foreign-born siblings of citizens (Passel, 2011). Despite their growing numbers, relatively little research has addressed mixed-status families and the unique challenges they face.

For many Latinxs across the United States, their experiences are framed not only by their own legal status but also by their family members' status. Their day-to-day lives are shaped by laws and policies that threaten deportation, limit their physical mobility, and prevent access to legal employment, education, and healthcare because of their undocumented immigration status (Enriquez, 2015; Martinez, 2014). Thus, experiences in mixed-status families are repeatedly mediated by the discursive formation of "illegality" (de Genova, 2002). The construction of illegality for some family members affects all members, including those who are recognized as citizens (Castañeda & Melo, 2014). Since individuals are members of social units, the production of illegality for some shapes experiences for all.

A qualitative study by Enriquez (2015) explored how immigration laws affect undocumented parents and their citizen children. The researcher conducted 32 interviews with undocumented adults who had children who were United States citizens. All participants were between the ages of 21 and 34 and immigrated from Mexico or Guatemala as children. The interviews averaged 2 hours and focused on the participants' plans for having children, their feelings about being a parent, and how their undocumented status affects their parenting experiences and their children. Enriquez found that immigration laws not only punish undocumented immigrants, but also punish United States citizens. The researcher reported that United States citizen children and their undocumented parents often share the risks and limitations associated with undocumented immigration status. According to Enriquez (2015) "conceptualizes this phenomenon as multigenerational punishment, a distinct form of legal violence wherein the sanctions intended for a specific population spill over to negatively affect individuals

who are not targeted by laws” (p. 939). Multigenerational punishment tends to occur within families because of the strong social ties, sustained day-to-day interactions, and dependent relationships found among family members.

Brabeck et al. (2016) conducted a similar study that researched the social-ecological contexts of unauthorized immigrant families and their United States-born children by examining how similarly low-income, urban, Latinx immigrant families differ on the basis of the parents’ legal status and interactions with the immigration system. Drawing on social-ecological theory, Brabeck et al. studied variations based on parents’ legal vulnerability among exosystem-level experiences (e.g., parents’ occupational stress, discrimination experiences) and microsystem-level experiences (e.g., parents’ mental health, parenting stress). Structured interviews were conducted with 178 families with an immigrant parent from Mexico, Central America, and Dominican Republic, and a child (aged 7-10 years) born in the United States. The researchers found that “unauthorized parents reported statistically higher occupational stress, ethnicity-based discrimination, challenges learning English, immigration challenges, and legal status challenges, and lower use of social services, when compared with authorized parents” (p. 3). The two groups, however, did not differ on microsystem factors, such as parent mental health, and parenting, marital, and family stress.

Rodriguez (2018) conducted a qualitative study to examine how citizen young adults with undocumented parents manage parental illegality. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 28 years and were all from mixed-status Latinx families. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were carried out and averaged 1.5 hours. Interview questions were related to experiences of citizenship, belonging, familial responsibilities, details of family

relationships, and experiences of discrimination. In analyzing how citizen young adults manage parental illegality, four themes emerged from the analysis: (a) parental deportability, (b) financial aid, (c) sponsoring parents for legal residency, and (d) breadwinning. Rodriguez found that the adult children in mixed-status families feared parental deportation; experienced challenges when they began the process to apply for federal college financial aid due to their parent's undocumented status; were concerned with and faced barriers when trying to sponsor their parents for legal residency; and provided financial help to their mixed-status families because of their access to the paid labor force. Thus, despite their age, adult children continue to manage the legal punishment of their parent's status.

### **Impact of Current Sociopolitical Climate and Immigration Policies on Experience**

After the 2016 presidential election of Donald Trump, Wray-Lake et al. (2018) explored Latinx adolescent's reactions to Trump's immigration politics. Their study used open-ended responses provided by 562 Latinx adolescents. The responses were collected shortly after Trump's inauguration to capture early reactions to his presidency. Participants were given a survey in which they were presented with a set of open-ended questions about their reactions to the election, reasons for these reactions, and any changes to their attitudes and behaviors. Examples of the questions asked are: "Describe your feelings about Donald Trump being President. Be as specific as you can. Positive and negative views are equally valued." "What is it about Trump being elected President that made you feel this way?" Results showed five themes that were particularly salient in immigration-related responses: feeling afraid and/or anxious; expressing anger, contempt,



and/or disgust; recognizing and experiencing racism; offering pro-immigrant narratives to challenge anti-immigrant stereotypes; and increasing civic engagement.

In terms of the feelings of fear and anxiety, some participants mentioned fear and worry in general, while many others reported personal fears of deportation for oneself or immediate family members (Wray-Lake et al., 2018). Other participants reported fear of being deported and sent to a country that is unfamiliar or where they feel like they do not belong. Relatedly, participants described how increased fear and anxiety have changed the way they behave, as they have become more cautious and hyper-aware of their behavior to avoid authorities or those who might perceive them as undocumented. These results demonstrate how fear and anxiety permeate Latinx's lives and how they think about the future.

Anger, contempt, and disgust were also salient emotions expressed by Latinxs when discussing Trump's immigration politics (Wray-Lake et al., 2018). Anger was mentioned most often due to Trump's deportation promises, as participants felt it is unfair for Trump to attempt to remove a group of people and that his reasons for doing so were unjustified. Participants also described feeling that their ethnic group was marginalized by Trump's policies and rhetoric, which further fueled feelings of anger and hurt. Although a less frequent theme, some participants expressed broader concerns about how Trump's anti-immigrant rhetoric divides the country and emboldens racism from the general public. Slightly more than half of the immigration responses (53%) included responses related to racism.

Participants discussed Trump's immigration policies, as well as a broader sociopolitical climate of anti-immigrant sentiment (Wray-Lake et al., 2018). Most

participants viewed and labeled several immigration policies as explicitly racist, including deportation efforts, Trump's executive order banning travel to the United States from select Middle Eastern countries, and the proposed United States-Mexico border wall as explicitly racist. They also mentioned feelings of exclusion as they felt that immigration policies communicated that immigrants were not wanted in the United States. The researchers noted, “With mentions of an increasing climate of racism and discrimination in society, Latinxs are feeling targeted, stereotyped, and marginalized in their everyday environments” (p. 198). Moreover, participants perceived Trump's immigration platform, particularly his deportation policies, as a personal threat to them and their families.

In the study, Latinxs expressed a range of negative reactions to Trump's immigration platform, which Wray-Lake et al. (2018) found to be noteworthy, stating “given that our survey did not explicitly pull for negative reactions to Trump or solicit comments about immigration—reactions were unprompted and naturally occurring” (p. 201). Most participants surveyed perceived violations of fairness, equality, and protection in Trump's immigration policies and rhetoric, and responded with expressions of negative emotions (fear, anxiety, anger, contempt, and disgust), feelings of exclusion due to racism, pro-immigrant narratives, and increased civic engagement. The researchers commented that their completely open-ended measure may not have fully captured the various ways Latinxs have been affected by the political climate and immigration policies and suggest qualitative interviews to add more in-depth insights into how they are affected by the Trump era.

Castrellón et al. (2017) wrote an article about their reflections and those of their students, of the various ways in which people are coping and making sense of President Trump and his rhetoric, while documenting the current political climate and everyday discourses they feel have taken a toxic turn since his presidential candidacy. The authors used poems, Facebook statuses, and artwork from a project they hosted with multiple groups of students and interested participants as data. The majority were of Latinx background and others were people of color. Some were undocumented, while others had family members, friends, and neighbors who were immigrants. Students were provided with one of two images: a butterfly with the words “immigration is” spelled at the top, or a brick wall with the words “tag the wall” written at the top of the page. They were also given the opportunity to make their own creative work. According to Castrellón et al., “The goal of our project was to understand the ways in which students are making sense of these two issues that seem to dominate the news headlines” (p. 937). They did not analyze or probe the reflections but presented them, so readers can begin to understand the impact of Trump’s presidency in people’s daily lives.

The data gathered showed multiple layers of emotions, feelings, and responses to the current administration (Castrellón et al., 2017). Some students described the president’s rhetoric as having hateful and discriminatory language. Others described feeling exhausted, defeated, and overwhelmed and that what they thought would not really happen in the United States actually happened. Similar to the Wray-Lake et al. (2018) study, the reflections described by Castrellón et al. expressed anger towards the president and his words, actions, and policy positions. Further, some students stated his words and actions took an emotional, psychological, and spiritual toll on their well-being.

They perceived his directives as targeting minority groups, making them feel excluded. The authors noted, “They are painful reminders that we are not wanted or accepted, and that those of us who remain will be publicly marked as second-class citizens in this country” (p. 942).

### **Impact of Undocumented Status on Mental Health**

At the most basic level, an undocumented immigration status indicates that an individual does not have legal permission to be in the country (Enriquez, 2015). This impacts immigrants’ day-to-day lives as their experiences are shaped by laws and policies pertaining to their undocumented status. Being undocumented extends far beyond legal status and it permeates every aspect of a person’s individual and familial life. For undocumented immigrants in the United States, there are many stressors associated with their unauthorized legal status that affect their mental health, such as worries about their legal status; preoccupation with disclosure and deportation; education and employment opportunities; low income; language barriers; ambiguous receptivity from the host country; and the inability to obtain legal documentation (Alarcón et al., 2016; Cavazos-Rehg, Zayas, & Spitznagel, 2007). These stressors can heighten the risk for emotional distress and impaired quality of health (Cavazos-Rehg et al., 2007). Thus, it is imperative to explore how immigrants’ undocumented status impacts their mental health.

Perreira et al. (2015) examined the association between exposure to the United States and symptoms of poor mental health among adult Latinxs. The researchers utilized survey logistic regression to model the risk for psychological distress, depression, and anxiety as a function of years in the United States perceived discrimination, language and social acculturation, ethnic and family identity, size of close social networks, and

perceived United States social standing. Data from the Hispanic Community Health Study of Latinos (HCHS/SOL) was utilized for the study. The data contained a large sample of foreign-born participants from various Latinx American countries with 52% of participants having had migrated to the United States in adulthood at age 20 or older. The sample included Mexicans (39%), other Central Americans (7%), Dominicans (10%), Puerto Ricans (16%), Cubans (19%), and other Latinxs with mixed (4%) or South American backgrounds (5%).

Descriptive analyses of mental health by exposure to the United States showed higher rates of moderate to severe symptoms of psychological distress, depression, and anxiety with both duration of residence in the United States and younger age at migration (Perreira et al., 2015). The associations between exposure to the United States and mental health were primarily explained by three of six explanatory variables: perceived discrimination, perceived United States social standing, and social networks. Perceived discrimination increased with duration of residence in the United States while the size of close social networks shrank, which was associated with higher odds of mental health problems. Latinx immigrants experienced the lowest social standing, while United States born Latinxs had a higher perception of social standing. The results of the study strongly suggest that immigrants become exposed to more stressful conditions, such as discrimination, with longer residence in the United States while losing some of the protective social and cultural resources, such as close social networks, that help create resiliency in individuals. These increases in exposure to stressors along with a loss of social and cultural resources place immigrants with more years of United States residence at higher risk of mental health problems.

In a similar study, Hatzenbuehler et al. (2017) evaluated associations between state-level policies and adverse mental health outcomes among Latinxs. The researchers commented, “Despite abundant state-level policy activity in the United States related to immigration, no research has examined the mental health impact of the overall policy climate for Latinxs, taking into account both inclusionary and exclusionary legislation” (p. 1). As such, Hatzenbuehler et al. created a multi-sectoral policy climate index that included 14 policies in four domains (immigration, race/ethnicity, language, and agricultural worker protections). The researchers then examined the relationship between the policy climate index to two mental health outcomes (days of poor mental health and psychological distress) among Latinxs from 31 states in the 2012 Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS), a population-based health survey of noninstitutionalized individuals aged 18 years or older. The states chosen had to meet the following criteria: (a) exhibit significant legislative activity (a minimum of three relevant laws to maximize variability); (b) have either a large or rapidly growing Latinx population in the state; and (c) a sufficient number of Latinx respondents in the state in the BRFSS dataset.

The results showed that individuals in states with more exclusionary immigration policies had higher rates of poor mental health days than participants in states with less exclusionary policies (Hatzenbuehler et al., 2017). Further, the association between state policies and the rate of poor mental health days was significantly higher among Latinxs versus non-Latinxs. In fact, Latinxs in states with more exclusionary policies had 1.14 times the rate of poor mental health days than Latinxs in states with less exclusionary policies. The sociopolitical climate seemed to have an impact on psychological distress as results showed that Latinxs living in states with more negative attitudes toward

immigration experienced significantly more psychological distress than Latinxs living in states with less negative attitudes toward immigration. Although there is a strong relationship between state-level public opinion toward immigration and psychological distress among Latinxs, immigration policies were not associated with increased psychological distress. Hatzenbuehler et al. pointed out that they only examined the relationship between state policies and psychological distress in 10 states, “which may have reduced our ability to detect small effects of state immigration policy on psychological distress outcomes among Latinxs” (p. 9).

Gurrola and Ayón (2018) also examined the impact of immigration legislation on Latinx immigrants and framed their findings within the social determinants of health framework to understand the impact of such policies on immigrants’ health. The researchers utilized focus groups to gather information on parents’ perceptions of the consequences of immigration policy and immigrant sentiment on their families. Six focus groups were conducted in Spanish with a total of 108 participants. The participants were all Latinx, with only nine of them born in the United States. The participants were recruited in a predominantly Latinx school district in Southern California.

The questions asked in the focus groups were related to immigration policies in California as well as in other states, how these policies affected their family and children, how these policies have changed overtime, and how participants have coped with the laws and enforcement practices (Gurrola & Ayón, 2018). Gurrola and Ayón (2018) found six overarching themes: experiences of discrimination in their work environment, discrimination experienced by children in school, discrimination while accessing health services, discrimination in public spaces/everyday activities, discrimination when

interacting with public officials, and limited social interactions as a result of anti-immigrant practices. The themes correspond with four domains of the Social Determinants of Health outlined by Healthy People 2020 including economic stability, education, health and health care access, and social and community context.

### **Economic Stability**

In the Gurrola and Ayón's (2018) study, participants experienced income insecurity as a result of exploitative practices, lack of upward mobility in employment, and reduced opportunities for informal employment. At their workplace, participants reported exploitation as they are not paid for their work and experience reduced job opportunities. Similarly, immigrants experience exploitation in jobsites in states that are passing stringent immigration policies and often do not report this treatment for fear of deportation (Ayón, Gurrola, Salas, Androff, & Krysik, 2011). The economic instability immigrants face places them and their families at risk of poverty (Gurrola & Ayón, 2018). Stress associated with unemployment or fear of losing their job can have negative impacts on the immigrants' health and economic stability (Hardy et al. 2012).

### **Education**

Participants in Gurrola and Ayón's (2018) study commented on the impact that such policies have on their children. For instance, participants shared examples of that involved physical attacks, bullying, and emotional abuse on school grounds or on the school bus by peers. In addition, participants shared negative experiences with teachers. These experiences ranged from parents describing that teachers were unresponsive to their needs to more harmful experiences where teachers made anti-immigrant comments in the classroom, asking children their immigration status, and frowning upon children



speaking in Spanish as well. Parents noted behavioral changes in their children such as biting nails, decreasing grades, and refusing to go to school. A participant reported that even United States born children are discriminated and treated as second class citizens.

### **Health Access**

Participants also noted discrimination they experience while attempting to access health care (Gurrola & Ayón, 2018). Several participants did not have access to health insurance as they were undocumented. Discrimination was experienced through delayed access to care, as they were expected to wait several hours for services. The researchers found that perceived and actual discrimination pose challenges to immigrant families seeking to access health care for their children. Maintaining access to health insurance was challenging for participants as the cost of health insurance was often a barrier. Participants mentioned having to discontinue their insurance plan to provide for their families in other ways.

### **Social and Community Context**

Participants shared various experiences of discrimination within their everyday lives including in public spaces and their interactions with public officials (Gurrola & Ayón, 2018). Several anti-immigrant practices limit their social interactions as they fear being detained and deported. As a result, individuals and families limit leaving their homes which limits their interactions with members of their social support system. Thus, immigrants are pushed into isolation. The researchers noted this as a significant finding and a strong social support system has been associated with improved health and mental health, which is consistent with the social and community context domain in the social determinants of health.

The findings from the Gurrola and Ayón (2018) study show that immigrants experience anti-immigrant sentiment in the form of microaggressions and institutional discrimination. Anti-immigrant policies and sentiment have created unhealthy environments in which Latinx immigrants experience feelings of worthlessness, fear, and discrimination. Participants reported increased isolation and distrust towards institutions such as schools and the law enforcement system after experiencing discrimination. This study described experiences of discrimination within participant's work, school environment, and in community and social interactions. These findings overlap with three domains of the social determinants of health framework including economic stability, education, and social and community context.

### **Summary**

Although much research exists on Latinxs in the United States, this research has largely neglected the Central American subgroup and the experiences of undocumented immigrants. Most of the literature about the experiences of Latinx immigrants in the United States focuses on the Mexican subgroup. While some aspects of their experiences can be generalized to the various Latinx subgroups, they neglect other aspects that are specific to the Central American population. Thus, there is a great need for research that focuses solely on Central American immigrants to capture this group's unique experience. Moreover, most of the existing research takes place in areas with large Mexican populations such as California and Texas, leaving out other areas with large Latinx communities. Florida is a state with a large Latinx population, yet not much research has been done there. Therefore, more research needs to be completed in this state to capture the experiences of Latinxs in Florida.

Further, research on undocumented Latinxs has generally been conducted in the disciplines of sociology, anthropology, or public policy (Sullivan & Rehm, 2005), resulting in a gap of knowledge in the mental health field regarding undocumented immigrants' experiences. Bean, Perry, and Bedell (2001) found that the MFT field and other counseling and helping professions, also lacks literature related to cultural competence with Latinx clients. The researchers noted, "One of the main points of consensus across the mental health disciplines is that greater attention to the training of competent multicultural therapists and counselors is needed" (p. 43).

Existing research on immigrants focuses mostly on individual experiences while other studies focus solely on the familial experience. Very few studies have focused on both the individual and familial experience. It is imperative to consider how immigration status affects both an individual and their family as it not only an individual concern, but transcends the entire family system. Similarly, few studies have considered the country's sociopolitical climate and immigration policies, which greatly impact immigrants' experiences. To date, there is sparse research that has looked at the current sociopolitical climate in the United States and the immigration policies, and how they impact undocumented immigrants' experiences. Thus, the purpose of this dissertation study was to address these gaps in literature by exploring the experiences of undocumented Central American immigrants in Florida, including individual and family experiences and the impact of the current sociopolitical climate and immigration policies on their experiences.

## **CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY**

### **Qualitative Research**

I utilized a qualitative research design in this study to gain an understanding of how participants' undocumented status impacted them and their families. According to Creswell (2013), qualitative research "is an inquiry process of understanding based on a distinct methodological approach to inquiry that explores a social or human problem" (p. 300). This type of research focuses on the experiences of the participants in the study, taking into account the contexts and meanings of their worlds. Pietkiewicz and Smith (2012) state that qualitative research "aims to provide rich descriptive accounts of the phenomenon under investigation" (p. 361). Essentially, qualitative research aims to explore the meaning individuals or groups attribute to their experiences. This research design was suitable for this study because I examined the meaning participants ascribed to their experiences as undocumented immigrants by exploring how it affected them individually, and how they perceived it affected their family. I considered each participant's individual experience, as well as the larger context within which they occur.

Qualitative research is conducted because a problem or issue needs to be explored (Creswell, 2013). Creswell (2013) states, "this exploration is needed, in turn, because of a need to study a group or population, identify variables that cannot be easily measured, or hear silenced voices" (pp. 47-48). While immigration is a hotly contested issue, the majority of the voices heard on this issue are those of politicians and policy makers; not of those who are directly affected, immigrants. A qualitative research method was necessary to give voice to the participants and form a complex, detailed understanding of the phenomenon by speaking directly with individuals and allowing them to tell their

stories. It is important to note common characteristics of qualitative research. According to Creswell (2013), one of the characters is a natural setting, which involves collecting data by speaking directly with individuals and seeing them behave and act within their context. The researcher is a key instrument as they collect the data themselves. Multiple methods are used to gather data, and researchers utilize inductive reasoning to establish a set of themes. Deductive reasoning is used to build themes that are constantly checked against the data. In the entire qualitative process, researchers focus on the meanings the participants derive rather than their own meanings. Thus, the researcher and research design must be flexible and able to shift as needed. It is imperative for the researcher to convey how their background informs their interpretation of the study. Finally, qualitative researchers try to develop a complex picture of the problem or issue under study, which includes sharing multiple perspectives and identifying the multiple factors involved. The qualitative research approach of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was utilized for this study.

### **Phenomenology**

Researchers utilizing a phenomenological approach describe the commonalities experienced of a concept or phenomenon. Phenomenology focuses on descriptions, experiences, meaning, and essence of the participant. Thus, qualitative researchers identify a phenomenon they want to study, collect data from persons who have experienced it, and develop a detailed description of the essence of the experience for all the individuals. The description consists of what they experienced and how they experienced it (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenology has a strong philosophical component that draws heavily on the writings of Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), a German

mathematician (Creswell, 2013). According to Husserl, phenomenology involves the careful examination of human experience (Creswell, 2013). Many others expanded on Husserl's views, which led to different philosophical arguments for the use of phenomenology. Despite the various perspectives, there are some commonalities among the philosophical assumptions of phenomenology: "the study of lived experiences of persons, the view that these experiences are conscious ones, and the development of descriptions of the essences of these experiences, not explanations or analyses" (p. 77).

There are several elements that are usually present in all phenomenological studies (Creswell, 2013). First, there is an emphasis on a phenomenon to be explored. This phenomenon must be explored with a group of individuals who have all experienced it. Moreover, researchers must understand that individuals have both subjective experiences of the phenomenon and objective experiences of something in common with others. In some forms of phenomenology, the researcher brackets themselves out of the study by discussing personal experiences with the phenomenon, so they can focus on the participant experiences. The data is usually collected by interviewing individuals who have experienced the phenomenon; however, some phenomenological studies involve varied sources of data. Data analysis follows systematic procedures that move from the narrow units of analysis to broader units, and on to detailed descriptions of what the individuals experienced and how they experienced it (Moustakas, 1994). Finally, "a phenomenology ends with a descriptive passage that discusses the essence of the experience for individuals incorporating 'what' they have experienced and 'how' they experienced it" (Creswell, 2013, p. 79). Within phenomenology, there are several different methodologies, some of which derive from descriptive phenomenology and

others from hermeneutic phenomenology; IPA stems from hermeneutic phenomenology (Sloan & Bowe, 2014).

### **Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis**

IPA was developed in the 1990s and has grown rapidly (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). This approach has a basis in psychology, but has been used in the human, social, and health science fields. According to Smith et al. (2009), IPA focuses “on personal meaning and sense-making in a particular context for people who share a particular experience” (p. 45). This qualitative approach is informed by concepts and debates from three key areas of the philosophy of knowledge: phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography. IPA is phenomenological in that it seeks to understand the meaning participants assign to their experiences. IPA’s hermeneutic or interpretive nature seeks to explain or describe an experience by going “back to things themselves,” rather than attempting to fix experience in predefined or overly abstract categories, as stated by Edmund Husserl (Smith et al., 2009, p. 1). IPA is idiographic as it seeks to understand the “particular,” such as the specific details of each individual’s experience and their individual perspective based on their unique contexts. Smith et al. express that “when people are engaged with ‘an experience’ of something major in their lives, they begin to reflect on the significance of what is happening, and IPA research aims to engage with these reflections” (p. 3). Thus, the purpose of IPA is to understand the significance the participants ascribe to their experiences. In order to do this, researchers use open-ended questions directed towards finding meaning.

### **Self as a Researcher**

I have a strong connection to this study because of my culture, family, and personal and professional experiences. To begin, I am the daughter of Central American immigrants. Both of my parents migrated from Nicaragua over 20 years ago and were undocumented for a few years. They immigrated to the United States individually, met in this country, got married, and had two daughters. Thus, I grew up in a mixed status household, one that was comprised of undocumented parents and documented children. My sister and I had the privilege of being United States citizens, but my parents did not. As a result, I witnessed firsthand the unique challenges of having an undocumented status in the United States. As research shows, my sister and I also felt the consequences of an undocumented status even though we were born in the United States.

Having undocumented parents significantly impacted my upbringing, the formation of my beliefs, values, and worldview, my identity, and experiences. From an early age, my parents spoke to my sister and I about where they were from, what life was like in Nicaragua, the reasons that pushed them to migrate to the United States, and the difficult journey they made to this country. Like other immigrants, they dreamed of having a better life and having the resources to help their families. My parents worked very hard to provide for my sister and I, and their families back home in Nicaragua. They always spoke to us about hard work and sacrifice and instilled in us the importance of education in order to have a professional career and better future.

Although I was born and raised in the United States, my upbringing was heavily influenced by Latinx culture, particularly Nicaraguan. I first learned to speak Spanish and did not learn English until I started school. Growing up, my sister and I were always



spoken to about Nicaragua and our family there. Unfortunately, we were not able to meet our family because our parents were not allowed to travel due to their undocumented status. Despite this our parents made sure we were connected to our roots. At home we only spoke Spanish and took Spanish classes throughout our elementary, middle, and high school years. As a result, my sister and I are fully fluent in Spanish. When my parents became documented, we began to travel to Nicaragua every year and spent our entire summers there—we were fully immersed in the culture. Even when we were not in Nicaragua, we maintained ties with the culture. We spoke the main language, ate Nicaraguan food, participated in cultural traditions, and so on. These experiences led me to have a deep respect and appreciation for diversity, and my Nicaraguan/Latinx culture.

Growing up, I had friends that were from different countries, some of which were from Central America. I related to them because their stories and experiences were very similar to those of my family. We shared many of the same hopes, fears, and challenges associated with being or having an undocumented family member. Being the daughter of immigrant parents, living in a mixed status household, and hearing about my friends' experiences allowed me to create and develop a deep interest in immigration, particularly advocating for immigrants and their rights. Passion for this topic is something I have always kept with me.

My background and personal and professional experiences, particularly recent ones, led me to further cultivate my interest in this area of research. Working with undocumented youth in the PROMISE program; hearing stories of how they left everything behind in search of safety and a better life, and witnessing their courage and strength ignited my passion in this topic. Experiencing the need for culturally informed

practices pushed me even further to research this specific topic. Those experiences and the current sociopolitical climate, specifically in terms of how immigration and immigrants are perceived, propelled me to learn more about immigrants' experiences and how undocumented individuals are treated in this country. I was fortunate enough that my dissertation topic found me.

## **Data Collection**

### **Sampling and Recruitment**

The selection of participants was based on pre-determined criteria needed for a rich description of the concept being explored. It was essential for all participants in the study to have originated from a Central American country (Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, or Nicaragua), currently live in Florida, and hold an undocumented status in the United States. As Creswell (2001) states "the intent is not to generalize to a population, but to develop an in-depth exploration of a central phenomenon" (p. 193). In order to do so, it is essential that all participants have experienced the phenomenon or issue being studied so they can provide a detailed description of it. Thus, purposeful sampling was appropriately used to select participants for this study. Due to the secretive and stigmatized nature of the subject, I also utilized snowball or chain sampling to recruit participants. This type of sampling identifies cases of interest from people who know people that have information-rich cases (Creswell, 2013). I asked recruited participants to help identify other individuals who were willing to take part in the study.

In qualitative research, the focus is on collecting extensive detail about each individual studied. Pietkiewicz and Smith (2012) note that for this reason, samples in IPA studies are usually small in order to obtain a detailed analysis of each participant's

experience. According to Creswell (2013), in phenomenology there can be as little as one participant or as many as 325; however, it is recommended to have three to 10 participants. IPA researchers should focus more on the depth, rather than the breadth of the study (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). Pietkiewicz and Smith (2012) assert that the number of participants included in a study depend on many factors such as: “1. The depth of analysis of a single case study, 2. the richness of the individual cases, 3. how the researcher wants to compare or contrast single cases, and 4. the pragmatic restrictions one is working under, such as time constrains or access to participants” (p. 364). I interviewed five participants, so the sample size was small enough for me to capture an in-depth understanding of their experiences. The selection criteria for inclusion in the study were: adult individuals who were born outside of the United States, specifically in the Central American countries of Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Nicaragua; must currently reside in the state of Florida; and must have an undocumented status in the United States. There were no exclusion criteria for this study. All study materials were available in both English and Spanish.

To recruit participants, I created a flyer (Appendix A) describing the purpose of the study, as well as the criteria necessary to be a participant. Once I received approval from my university’s Institutional Review Board (IRB No. 2019-380), I posted my flyer in the Latinx Scholars Facebook group. In addition, I shared my flyer through email with personal and professional acquaintances who have contact with the immigrant population. I asked them to share this information with individuals they thought qualified for the study and/or would be interested in participating. In the email, I provided my phone number and email address so interested individuals could contact me. Given the

nature of this research, I relied heavily on word-of-mouth to recruit participants by telling friends and colleagues about my study so they could help me identify participants.

### **Interview Procedures**

I conducted semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions for a full exploration of the proposed central phenomenon of this research. I used a list of questions (Appendix B) to guide my conversations and elicit each participant's description of their experience. Prior to collecting data, participants were given a consent form (Appendix C) to sign. Participants chose where the interview took place. They were offered two private practice locations in Miami so they could choose whichever one was most convenient to them. I obtained permission from two fellow therapists to use their offices for interviews when they were not in use. Participants also chose their preferred language for the interview, Spanish or English. It was important for me to allow participants to choose the setting of the interview and language spoken because I wanted them to feel as comfortable as possible, particularly since we discussed a very sensitive topic. I also wanted them to be able to express themselves freely and did not want content to be lost due to a language barrier.

To further increase the participant's level of comfort, I began the interviews by asking some demographic information. In addition, I asked them to choose a pseudonym to maintain confidentiality. Starting with their demographic information allowed me to segue into the beginning of their story. My hopes were that by starting there, the participants would feel more comfortable and at ease with the interview process. Moustakas (1994) suggests using broad questions in the beginning to facilitate rich and substantive descriptions of the phenomenon. In order to create an environment where the

participants felt safe and comfortable to share their experience, I made the interview process conversational and flexible. Although I prepared several questions in advance, I let the conversation unfold on its own and asked the questions when appropriate. According to Pietkiewicz and Smith (2012), the duration of an IPA interview is usually 60 minutes or longer. Thus, my interviews ranged from 60 to 90 minutes to provide an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences. At the end of the interview, I gave participants a list of clinical resources (Appendix D) and a recourses list with legal services (Appendix E).

The interviews were recorded on a digital voice recorder. Then, the interviews were transcribed through Happy Scribe, an online transcription software that offers services in both English and Spanish. This software encrypts data and has multiple layers of security including firewalls, intrusion protection systems, and network segregation, protecting the security and privacy of transcriptions. The digital voice recorder was not be accessible to anyone other than me. When I did not use it, I kept it in a locked cabinet in my home to which I only have the key. After each interview was complete, I downloaded the interviews onto my personal laptop computer using the pseudonym chosen by participants, which was password and facial recognition protected.

### **Data Analysis**

The primary goal of an IPA researcher is to generate a rich and detailed description of how individuals are experiencing the phenomenon studied, which is achieved “by examining an individual and producing a case study or will move to an equally attentive exploration of the second case, and so on” (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012, p. 363). Pietkiewicz and Smith (2012) note that if a researcher wants to study a group of

individuals, they will have to “move between important themes generated in the analysis and exemplify them with individual narratives (how particular individuals told their stories), comparing and contrasting them (i.e., showing similarities and differences)” (p. 363).

Once the interview transcriptions were complete, I downloaded each transcribed file onto my computer. The files were Microsoft Word documents which allowed me to read through the transcriptions along with the audio recordings and make changes if needed. According to Dahl and Boss (2005), when analyzing phenomenological data, researchers must immerse themselves in the data. This allows them to observe and define what is there and to notice what is not there; allows for incubation and reflection to take place, which then results in intuitive awareness and understandings to develop; and gives room for accurate and meaningful communication of the participants’ experience. I followed the six IPA steps of Smith et al. (2009) to analyze the data.

### **Step 1: Reading and Re-Reading**

Smith et al. (2009) note that the first step of an IPA analysis involves immersing oneself in the original data. I read through each transcript at least three times to immerse myself in the data and become more familiar with it. Smith et al. state that if the transcript is from an interview, researchers should listen to the audio-recording while reading the transcript because listening to the participant’s voice allows a more complete analysis. Therefore, I also reviewed the transcripts while listening to the audio-recording. Pietkiewicz and Smith (2012) wrote that “each reading and listening to the recording may provide some new insights” (p. 367). These steps allow the participant to become the focus of the study during the first stage (Smith et al., 2009).

## Step 2: Initial Noting

Step 2 “examines semantic content and language use on a very exploratory level” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 83). As I read the transcripts, I noted any observations or reflections I found to be of particular relevance (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). The purpose of notetaking is to develop a comprehensive and detailed set of notes and comments on the data (Smith et al., 2009). In order to do this, the researcher should fully immerse themselves with the transcript to produce detailed notes and comments. Further, it allows the researcher to become familiar with the transcript and the way each participant talked about, understood, and thought about the various issues they mentioned. Although there are no rules or requirements as to what is commented upon, the authors provide “analytic tools” for exploratory commenting. *Descriptive comments* focus on describing the content—key words, phrases, or explanations of the participant’s understanding of the things which matter to them, such as key objects, events, or experiences. *Linguistic comments* focus on exploring the specific use of language by the participant, and how the content and meaning is presented. *Conceptual comments* are more interpretative as it focuses on shifting your focus to the participant’s understanding of the matters they are discussing.

During this step, I reviewed data through the lens of Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological model of human development. This was an important step as it minimized researcher bias so I could tell participants’ story in their own words as much as possible. This process is known as bracketing, which Moustakas (1994) defines as the process of the researcher putting aside their previous knowledge about the phenomena so the researcher’s biases and assumptions do not impact the quality of this study. Thus, it was

crucial for me to “suspend presuppositions and judgments in order to focus on what is actually presented in the transcript data” (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008, p.181). It is important to note that I did not bracket in its “purist” form, but rather, looked at the data from a specific lens. This process allowed me to conduct the study from a curious and open stance by remaining aware of and moving away from previous knowledge, assumptions, and biases. It also aided me in developing a better understanding of the participants’ lived experiences and share the essence of their lived experience.

### **Step 3: Developing Emergent Themes**

After I carefully reviewed each transcript several times and completed my notes on each one, I began to develop emergent themes. In this step, the task of the researcher is to “reduce the volume of detail while maintaining complexity in terms of mapping the interrelationships, connections and patterns between exploratory notes” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 91). Thus, the researcher works primarily with their initial notes rather than the original transcripts. This process involves identifying themes from within each section of the transcript while looking for possible connections between themes (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008). I wrote possible emergent themes of the transcripts on a separate sheet of paper as I went through my notes. After reviewing them, I transferred the emergent themes onto an Excel spreadsheet which included the general category, subcategory, transcript page number, participant name, and coder comments. I repeated this step for each participant and they each had their own Excel spreadsheet. Smith et al. (2009) note, “The original whole of the interview becomes a set of parts as you conduct your analysis, but these then come together in another new whole at the end of the analysis in the write-up” (p. 91).



In developing emergent themes, the main task of the researcher is to capture what is important in a particular section of the text (Smith et al., 2009). Typically, themes are expressed through phrases as they speak to the “essence” of the text. According to Smith et al. (2009), phrases also “contain enough particularity to be grounded and enough abstraction to be conceptual” (p. 92). Themes not only reflect the participant’s original words and thoughts, but also the researcher’s interpretation. Thus, in this process, the researcher must be closely involved with the lived experiences of the participant.

#### **Step 4: Searching for Connections Across Emergent Themes**

During this step, I examined the emerging themes that were identified in Step 3. Pietkiewicz and Smith (2012) state, “The researcher will look for connections between emerging themes, group them together according to conceptual similarities, and provide each cluster with a descriptive label” (p. 368). I read through the emergent themes that were on the Excel spreadsheet to understand how they fit together and related to each other. Then, I re-organized the themes that conveyed a similar understanding on the spreadsheet, so they were listed one after the other. As noted in the previous step, each participant had their own Excel spreadsheet. I utilized this process for all five participant transcripts. It is important to note that not all emergent themes must be incorporated, and some may even be discarded depending on the overall research question and its scope (Smith et al., 2009). According to Smith et al. (2009), this step in the analysis allows the researcher to pull emergent themes together and produce a structure that highlights the most interesting and essential pieces of the participants’ account of their experience. The authors provide specific ways of looking for patterns and connections between emergent themes: abstraction, subsumption, polarization, contextualization, numeration, and

function. In *abstraction*, researchers identify patterns between themes by grouping similar themes; *subsumption* uses an emerging theme to connect a series of related themes; polarization analyzes opposite relationships to determine themes; *contextualization* utilizes narrative elements such as events to shape the understanding of a theme; *numeration* uses frequency counts (often quantitative) to account for the relevance of the theme; and *function* examines the relationship of the intertwined meaning and thoughts of a participant in order to gain a context of the experience. Thus, I looked for these patterns in the Excel spreadsheet and re-organized it so that similar themes were grouped together.

#### **Step 5: Repeating this Process for Each Case**

Smith et al. (2009) discuss the importance of viewing each case individually, and recommend the researcher bracket any the ideas that emerge from previous transcripts throughout the analysis of the current transcript being analyzed. I reviewed each transcript individually, completing Steps 1-4 before moving on to the next one. I bracketed by using the lens of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model of development to analyze the data in order to remain unbiased and ensure that I treated each one on its own terms and individuality. Then, when completing Step 2, I made initial notes on each individual transcript based on the theoretical framework. After, for Steps 3-4, when developing emergent themes and searching for connections among the themes, I worked on each individual participant Excel spreadsheet before moving onto the next. This process allowed me to closely examine each participant's unique experience.

**Step 6: Seeking Patterns Across Cases**

After I completed Steps 1-4 for each transcription, I looked for patterns of themes across all the transcriptions. Similar to Step 3, I grouped themes together according to conceptual similarities, providing each group with a descriptive label (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). I accomplished this by first analyzing the patterns that emerged to determine if any similarities existed among the participant's experiences. After identifying patterns across all of the cases, I copied and pasted participant data into one master Excel spreadsheet. There, I re-organized data so similar themes were grouped together. After, I read each theme and decided on a label that would accurately describe the data. According to Smith et al. (2009), IPA possesses the ability for this dual quality of identifying how participants represent a unique idiosyncratic position, and how that idiosyncratic position is shared with other participants. Initially, I tried to organize the themes according to Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems levels, but soon realized that this was not useful because there was significant overlap between the system levels. After consulting with my dissertation chair, I re-organized the data by major themes and subthemes and created labels for each that accurately described them. My dissertation chair then audited the themes and subthemes I gathered from all of the transcriptions.

**Step 7: Summarizing the Findings**

The final step in IPA analysis is to write up the findings. This process involves writing a detailed description of each theme, which includes excerpts from the interviews (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). It is crucial to include the participant's words in this step. Pietkiewicz and Smith (2012) note that using participants' words serves several functions such as illustrating themes, allowing the reader to assess the validity of interpretations,

and depicting each participant's unique perspective. The authors assert that the final paper should include the participant's account of their experience in their own words, and the interpretive commentary of the researcher. When writing up the findings of the study, I organized participants' experiences into themes and subthemes, and discussed implications related to the experiences of the individuals and their families. Further, I explained how this research benefits the field of marriage and family therapy.

### **Ethical Guidelines**

As a researcher, it is of utmost importance to follow ethical guidelines as we face various ethical issues in our work. In this role, I have a responsibility to the field and participants to abide by these guidelines as they are in place to protect us as researchers, participants, and the research. It is crucial to abide by ethical guidelines to promote trustworthy and credible research methods that safeguard participants' wellbeing. I followed the ethical guidelines set forth by the American Association of Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT). AAMFT (2015) states, "Marriage and family therapists respect the dignity and protect the welfare of research participants, and are aware of applicable laws, regulations, and professional standards governing the conduct of research" (p. 8).

One of the ethical principles set forth by AAMFT (2015) is to obtain institutional approval before conducting research and researchers must submit accurate information in their research proposals. Before conducting this study, I submitted a proposal with specific details of my study to Nova Southeastern University's (NSU) IRB and conducted the study after receiving approval. Per NSU's IRB consent form, data will be kept securely for 36 months from the end of the study and will be destroyed after that time,

which I will adhere to. Another ethical principle is informed consent to research. Prior to participating in the study, participants received an informed consent that provided information such as, “the purpose of the research, expected length, research procedures, and aspects of the research that might reasonably be expected to influence willingness to participate such as potential risks, discomforts, or adverse effects” (AAMFT, 2015, p. 8). I also included the participant’s right to voluntarily decline or withdraw from the study at any time; the protection of confidentiality of the respondents; and the signature of the participants as well as the researcher (Creswell, 2013). This falls in line with another ethical principle, the right to decline or withdraw participation.

The AAMFT (2015) principle, confidentiality of research data, states “information obtained about a research participant during the course of an investigation is confidential unless there is a waiver previously obtained in writing” (p. 8). To protect participants’ confidentiality, I utilized pseudonyms and informed participants that they had the to withdraw at any stage of the process, including the presentation of results (Dahl & Boss, 2005). In addition, I stored participant information in a password and facial recognition protected laptop and kept it in a locked space when not in use. Participants were informed of the steps I took to maintain their confidentiality, how the information was stored, and who it would be presented to.

Pietkiewicz and Smith (2012) state, “For ethical reasons, and because IPA studies are frequently concerned with significant existential issues, it is crucial that the interviewer monitors how the interview is affecting the participant” (p. 366). I carefully monitored participants throughout the interview process, and before starting the interview, participants were informed that they could take a break or stop the interview at

any time if they felt any type of discomfort. To ensure safety of the researcher during interviews, my dissertation chair was on call by phone if I needed to process anything that came up for me. I informed her of when each interview would take place so she would be available if I needed to speak with her. During the interviews, I was also self-aware of potential triggers. Due to the sensitivity of the research topic, all participants were provided with resources (Appendix D) so they could use them if needed. They were also given a “Know your Rights” sheet to learn about their rights as undocumented immigrants (Appendix E).

### **Trustworthiness and Credibility**

Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest trustworthiness and credibility as criteria for qualitative research. Yin (2011) wrote that there are three methods for building trustworthiness and credibility of a qualitative study. The first method is transparency, meaning researchers must describe and document their qualitative procedures so others can review and understand them. Further, all data needs to be available for inspection. Yin asserts that “the general idea is that others should be able to scrutinize your work and the evidence used to support your findings and conclusions” (p. 19). To achieve trustworthiness and credibility, I carefully and thoroughly outlined the procedures I took to conduct the study. In addition, I followed my university’s IRB protocol, where I explained the specifics of the study in great detail.

A second method for building trustworthiness and credibility is methodicalness, which includes following a set of research procedures and minimizing whimsical or careless work (Yin, 2011). A way to do this is by avoiding unexplained bias or deliberate distortion in carrying out research. To this end, I utilized my central research question

and areas of focus as a lens to analyze data. In addition, I implemented auditing in my study. Auditing is a systematic review of the processes which assists in establishing the trustworthiness and credibility of findings and interpretations in qualitative research (Given, 2008). It ensures findings are based on participants' responses rather than the researcher's own thoughts, feelings, and biases. After I completed my qualitative data analysis table, I sent it to my dissertation chair so she could audit my results. In addition, we discussed how I developed individual codes to themes, and my rationale for the codes I clustered together to form a theme. After completing this step, I also implemented member checking. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), interpretations and conclusions are tested with individuals from whom the data were originally collected. This process establishes trustworthiness and credibility as participants have an opportunity to assess the overall adequacy in addition to confirming the correctness of the data analysis. After creating a final draft of my qualitative data analysis table, I scheduled a meeting with participants so they could review the results for accuracy.

A final method is to base qualitative research on an explicit set of evidence. In studies where participants describe their own processes, the evidence should consist of their actual language and context in which it is expressed (Yin, 2011). Yin (2011) states, "in these situations, the language is valued as the representation of reality" (p. 20). I accomplished this by including direct quotes from the transcripts to allow the readers to assess the validity of interpretations and depict each participant's unique perspective (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012).

## Summary

In IPA, the main goal of the researcher is to understand the meaning participants ascribe to their experiences (Smith et al., 2009). Therefore, I utilized IPA to understand the experiences of undocumented Central American immigrants living in Florida. I explored the meaning participants ascribed to their experiences as undocumented immigrants, and their perception of how it affected their family. I originally intended to organize the data by utilizing Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems as the overarching categories, but quickly realized that this was not a meaningful way of presenting the data because participants' experiences were inextricably interrelated across all system levels. Therefore, I organized the data in terms of themes and subthemes, which was more representative of the participants' lived experiences. This allowed me to better describe each participants' unique experience and the meanings they ascribed to them, as well as the shared experiences across participants. In completing this study, I was mindful of my ethical responsibilities to the participants and adhered to ethical guidelines throughout its entirety.



## **CHAPTER IV: RESEARCH FINDINGS**

This chapter describes the findings I gathered from the interviews I conducted with five undocumented Central American immigrants in the United States about their experiences, and those of their families. I first provide background information for each participant. Then, I discuss the major themes and subthemes that developed during the data analysis process, using direct quotes from each of participant to illustrate said themes and subthemes. I did not include full interview transcripts in the appendices due to space limitations, but can provide them upon request. In order to maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms are used for each participant.

### **Participant Backgrounds**

In the following section, I provide a brief overview of each participant, including information about their experiences in their country of origin, the circumstances that forced them to migrate to the United States, their migration journey, and life in the United States. In doing this, participants have a voice for their stories and contextual information is provided for the readers. Due to the sensitive nature of the topic, specific demographic information for each participant is not given and direct quotes were amended to hide the gender of siblings and children in order to protect their identities. Further, the five participants in this study were between the ages of 18 and 43. One participant did not have any formal schooling, one completed high school, another completed some college, and two are currently in college. All participants have lived in the United States between 11 to 15 years. Two of the participants are single, three are married; and four participants have children. All participants have family in their

countries of origin and in the United States, and are part of mixed-status families. Participants are employed in construction, food service, and consulting.

### **Sofia**

Sofia was raised by family members because her mother migrated to the United States when she was very young. She said that because she was so young when her mother left, she did not feel her absence. A few years later, her mother went back to her home country to bring her and her sibling to the United States. At that early age, Sofia, her sibling, and mother, crossed the border to enter the United States. Sofia described it as a long and difficult journey because it took them two months. During their journey, they were often sent back and had to start over. Sofia and her sibling were separated at the end of the journey since they were brought in with a family by car while their mother had to cross the border. Once in the United States, Sofia faced many challenges and had to adapt to a new country and culture. Her first years in the United States were difficult since she did not speak English, left family and friends behind, and experienced relational conflict. Sofia did not know who her mother was and had to adapt to a new family system which included her mother whom she was separated from for years, and siblings she had not met until that point. Although she says they have all now adjusted, she recognizes that she has a different relationship with her mother than her U.S. born siblings do, and a different relationship with the sibling she grew up with and her U.S. born siblings.

### **Luis**

Luis was raised by various family members because his parents migrated to the United States when he was young. His father left first, and his mother left two years later. Luis and his siblings stayed in their home country. His parents left his home country

because of the lack of opportunities and violence. Throughout his life, Luis and his siblings lived with different family members. He recalls the rampant violence, so much so that it became normalized to him. He had friends who were killed because they were confused for someone else or wrongly thought of being a gang member. Luis also recalls hearing gunshots at night. He stated that being separated from his parents had a profound emotional and psychological effect on him. When he was in his home country, he felt anger, sadness, and even thought that his parents had forgotten about him and his siblings.

Luis and his siblings migrated to the United States by crossing the border. He crossed with two family members when he was an adolescent. His migration journey was difficult as he and his family were left behind by the coyote, experienced overcrowding, extreme temperatures, and felt stress and desperation. He was also detained by border patrol and spent a few days in a detention center. When Luis arrived in the United States, he felt safe; something he did not feel in his home country. Luis experienced relational conflict as he had to adjust to a new family system which included a sibling he had never met and parents he was separated from for years. They all had to come together and try to be a family after so many years apart. He felt as if he was living with strangers when he first reunited with them because he had not seen them for so long. Luis explained that at that time, there was a gap between them, and although things have improved, the gap is still present.

### **Verónica**

Verónica migrated when she was a young adult because she was being harassed by the father of her children. After they separated, he followed her wherever she went. He

also tried to force her to be with him. Therefore, she migrated to the United States and left her young children behind who were raised by their family. Verónica crossed the border in order to make it to the United States. She described her journey as difficult because she walked a lot and rode on top of a freight train known as La Bestia (the beast). Verónica's first years in the United States were difficult because she had to adapt to a new country and culture and was separated from her children. She said that in the beginning she cried every day because she missed them. A few years later, she went back to her home country for her children. They also crossed the border and had a difficult journey because they were sent back three times and were once apprehended and detained. After overcoming those challenges, they were finally able to make it to the United States.

### **Bernardo**

Bernardo's life there was filled with challenges. His family was separated when he was about one month old because soldiers raided his town. When the soldiers went in and opened fire, his father grabbed his sibling and ran for cover while Bernardo and his mother were taken to another town. His mother later remarried, but her husband was killed as well. Bernardo started working at a young age. He worked in the cornfields, construction, and picking coffee. When he was an adolescent, he and his uncle traveled to the capital to find work. During this time, he had to learn to speak Spanish because he only knew how to speak his native indigenous language. Bernardo worked at a factory for five years and then decided to migrate to the United States because of the violence and delinquency in his home country. In addition, he thought there were better employment opportunities here. Bernardo migrated to the United States by crossing the border. He had

a difficult journey as he walked a lot, experienced hunger, and extreme temperatures.

After arriving to the United States, he took a day to rest and went to work his second day here.

### **Carla**

Carla migrated to the United States because of lack of opportunities in her home country and wanting to provide for her mother and children. Before coming to the United States, Carla's mother became sick and could not pay for her medicine. Therefore, Carla decided that she would migrate so her mother would not have to work and so she could pay for her medicines and give her and her children a better life. Carla's decision to migrate is one that deeply affected her family. Carla was very close to her mother and children. It was difficult for all of them to be apart from each other for so many years. She left her children when they were very young. Carla made the journey to the United States alone with a coyote and a large group of people. Her journey was quite challenging—she walked and ran a lot, experienced overcrowding and extreme temperatures, slept on the ground, received threats from the coyotes, and was apprehended and sent to a detention center for over four months. When she was apprehended by immigration officers, they made negative comments towards her such as telling her to go back to her country and that she did not need to come here. In addition, they had her fill out paperwork which was in English and did not explain it to her. Carla experienced inhumane conditions in the detention center—she was only given bread to eat, had to drink water from the toilet, and slept on the floor. After four months, Carla was able to leave under bail. Carla's experience was difficult because she was away from her mother and children. She eventually married and was able to bring over one of her

children. Although she was happy to be reunited, it was difficult to adjust because they lived so many years apart and her child had resentment towards her. Now, things have improved between them.

### Major Themes and Subthemes

The analysis portion of this study yielded four major themes and 23 subthemes (see Table 1) that captured the ways in which the five participants made sense of their experiences as undocumented Central American immigrants in the United States. These themes were formed through careful interpretation of the data that emerged in each interview transcript. Direct quotes from each of the transcripts were utilized to illustrate participants' experiences.

Table 1

#### *Themes and Subthemes*

Theme	Subthemes
Limited opportunities and restrictions	Limited mobility Language difficulties Employment Access issues Legal status challenges Multigenerational punishment
Fear of deportation	Psychological distress Increased awareness of status Uncertainty Family separation Changes in family dynamics Lack of safety/need to be cautious
Increased racism and xenophobia	Horizontal discrimination Hate crimes Feelings of exclusion, marginalization, not belonging Criminalization Feeling voiceless
Coping strategies	Conversing/processing Use of humor Emergency plan

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Increased motivation to be successful  
Increased political engagement  
Challenging anti-immigrant rhetoric

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### **Limited Opportunities and Restrictions**

The first major theme that emerged during the analysis process was limited opportunities and restrictions. Across all interviews, participants' experiences as undocumented immigrants in the United States consistently impacted their daily life individually, and as a family. Participants brought up having less opportunities than American citizens or those with authorization to be in the United States because of the difference in status. These limited opportunities and restrictions did not only affect them individually, but affected their families as well. As individuals, participants experienced limited mobility, language difficulties, and employment challenges. Participants' families were also affected as they experienced multigenerational punishment (Enriquez, 2015), which resulted in limited family activities. Thus, the subthemes within this category were: (a) limited mobility, (b) language difficulties, (c) employment, (d) access issues, (e) legal status challenges, and (f) multigenerational punishment.

**Limited mobility.** Participants' day-to-day lives as undocumented immigrants in the United States impacted their individual experience in various ways. Specifically, their undocumented status created limitations in terms of their mobility. Every participant noted that their undocumented status resulted in a lack of mobility as they are not allowed to drive a car since they cannot obtain a driver's license. This has a significant effect on the participants' experience and day-to-day life as mobility is essential for them in order to get to and from work, go to appointments, pick up their children from school, and so on. While mobility is a necessity, it is a limitation undocumented immigrants face. Both

Carla and Verónica recalled a time when they were driving to work and were stopped by a police officer. Carla was fortunate enough to be let go with a warning while Verónica was arrested. I asked Verónica if she was afraid of being arrested again and she said, “What am I going to do? I need to drive” (p. 11). Verónica seemed to experience feelings of resignation as this is one of the many risks she must face in order to live in the United States. Participants are aware that their undocumented status impacts their mobility and are then forced to decide whether they remain immobile or find ways to get around because it a necessity for them to survive in this country.

**Language difficulties.** Language difficulties is another factor that impacts undocumented immigrants’ daily life. All participants stated that not knowing English made their experience difficult as it was hard for them adapt to a new culture and faced challenges when trying to communicate with others. In some cases, language difficulties even caused social isolation. For example, Sofia did not have friends when she first arrived in the United States because she did not know how to speak English. Sofia said, “It was hard because I didn’t know English. I didn’t have friends because they couldn’t understand me” (p. 13). Once she learned to speak English, she was able to make friends and become more involved in school; however, the majority of the participants still do not speak English, so they still face challenges related to language difficulties.

**Employment.** All five participants mentioned that their employment opportunities were limited because of their undocumented status, so they cannot seek employment in traditional settings. Verónica spoke about how her undocumented status prevented her from having a valid form of identification, which was required for jobs in traditional settings. Because of this, the participants sought low-paying or dangerous



occupations, such as domestic work, construction, and food service. Bernardo, for example, worked in the agriculture industry when he first arrived in this country. He said, “I arrived February 22<sup>nd</sup>, rested on the 23<sup>rd</sup>, and went to work in the fields picking beans on the 24<sup>th</sup>” (p. 13). Bernardo could not be selective about the type of job he wanted he knew his undocumented status limited him: “I found out I could pick beans and well, that's the work I had to do. Not a lot of people want to do this type of work so those of us that come to this country have to do it” (p. 13). Most of the jobs available to undocumented immigrants are ones that most U.S. citizens do not want to do and are underpaid. Bernardo explained, “I made \$15 a day and had to work very hard for those \$15” (p. 15). After spending more time in the United States, he learned that he could “find better a job or one that pays better” (p. 13), so he began working in construction. Similarly, Sofia indicated that she “can’t just apply for any job” (p. 7) because of her status, so she does not have many options. Verónica’s options are also limited, so she has done domestic work and worked in the food industry.

The lack of employment opportunities hinders participants’ ability to have both economic and employment stability because at any moment they could be fired by employers or forced to leave upon discovery of their undocumented status. Oftentimes, this results in exploitation, discrimination, and sexual harassment, amongst other things. Throughout her time in the United States, Carla did domestic work and later went into the food industry. In one of her first jobs in a restaurant, Carla experienced sexual harassment. She told me that one of her former bosses tried to touch her inappropriately. Since she did not let him, he fired her. Carla said, “you don’t know what it’s like for a boss to try to touch you and if you don’t let him, they fire you. They have fired me

because of that” (p. 23). She felt like she could not do anything about the situation because she was restricted by her undocumented status.

**Access issues.** Undocumented immigrants are not entitled to the resources and services that residents and citizens are. Therefore, all of the participants experienced access issues in terms of resources and services. The first one that was brought up was not being able to obtain a driver’s license or state ID, which created a significant burden for participants. Without a driver’s license or state ID, they cannot legally drive; therefore, they cannot purchase a car or have a license plate. Carla stated, “I cannot buy a car without a legal status. I don’t want a car for luxury I want one so it can take me to and from work, and to go to the supermarket if I need something” (p. 26). She explained that not having a car makes it difficult for her to move around, and that having all these restrictions greatly limit her. These restrictions not only affect individuals, but affects their families as well. This is the case for Bernardo, Luis, and Verónica who have children that depend on them. Luis said, “it even affects my relationship with my [child]. Not being able to pick [child] up from school because I’m not driving, not being able to take [child] where I want to take [child] because I’m not able to drive” (p. 14). Bernardo talked about how this will affect his child in the future and worries whether he will be able to drive his child to school or will have to take them on foot or a bike.

Carla brought up access issues in terms of healthcare. She explained that undocumented immigrants do not have access to health insurance and if they want to receive care, they are forced to pay out of pocket. She commented, “I have to pay for it. I don’t have insurance. My husband has insurance, a really good one, but he can’t add me because I’m undocumented” (p. 24). She went on to explain how costly healthcare can be

for those who do not have insurance, “When I go to the doctor, I spend 200, 300, 400 dollars. The consult is not that expensive it's \$25 but the medicine and exams?” (p. 27).

Luis and Sofia face restrictions in terms of access to resources and services. They are both currently college students despite being undocumented and pay for school on their own. This is quite challenging for them as they are already limited in terms of employment opportunities, do not receive financial aid, and do not qualify for most scholarships. Luis stated, “I do not get financial aid. I do not get state aid, so everything comes out of pocket. I do not pay the out of state tuition, I pay in state, but I still have to pay full out of pocket” (p. 14). This is can be quite a burden for undocumented immigrants particularly because they have limited finances. In fact, Luis said, “school was not an option for me. For me it was graduating high school and then going to work. Like I was not dreaming of going to school” (p. 15). He explained why school was not an option for him: “One, because my parents never went to college so, that's it, high school. It was high school. Second, because of the money, and third, because of my status” (p. 15). Fortunately, Luis was able to attend a college that accepts and assists immigrants so they can receive an education, which “changed my life completely” (p. 15). He never imagined it was something he would be able to do, and when he walked into school the first day he thought, “Hell yeah, I made it!” (p. 15). Sofia goes to a similar college as Luis and faces the same financial burden to receive an education: “in school, I can't get scholarships, certain scholarships, because I'm not a resident, so it's hard” (pp. 8-9).

Other restrictions participants brought up was not being able to establish a business or purchase a house. Verónica and her husband presently have their own company and a house; however, it is not legally theirs. Because they are undocumented,

they cannot own a business or a house, and they had to find alternative ways to do both. Verónica expressed her frustration, saying, “It's not easy. In fact, our company is under my [sibling's] name because you need to have someone legal... and our house is in our [parent's] name. I practically cannot have anything and for me that's difficult” (p. 9). She expressed: “I want to go back to my country because we're not given opportunities” (p. 17) and explained that all immigrants want to do is work. Carla also mentioned not being able to buy a house because of her undocumented status. Furthermore, she does not have credit in this country because of her status which causes further restrictions. Luis explained that because of his undocumented status, he cannot buy a house or have something as simple as a library card. He stated that these restrictions greatly impact his life: “it completely changes your life to something as small as going to a library and getting a book.... It completely changes your life” (p. 14).

**Legal status challenges.** As I spoke with participants about their limited opportunities, they all mentioned they do not have many opportunities to change their legal status; thus, they face legal status challenges. Participants stated that because of the changes in immigration policies, it is even more difficult for them to change their status. Carla critique's the president's immigration policies because they make it harder for individuals to change their status. She stated, “He has taken help away from everyone” (p. 30). In Sofia's case, the changes have caused a lengthy and delayed process. She submitted her paperwork a few years ago to begin the process but has not been able to fix her status—she is still waiting. Sofia said, “I just want to get my papers. When are they gonna come? It's been like a long time” (p. 10). Like Sofia, Carla is also experiencing a lengthy and delayed immigration process. She began this process three years ago and has

still not been able to change her status. Carla stated, “I want to fix my situation and, not only I, because I do not like to be selfish, but everyone that's in the same situation or worse can fix their situation” (p. 26). Similarly, the current immigration process has made it impossible for Verónica to change her status. She consulted with five different immigration attorneys to find a way to change her status, but they have all told her that there is no way to at this time. Verónica commented,

My [parent] cannot petition for me to live here because that takes like 10 years...

My [child] is only 13 and cannot petition for me to live here until [they are] 21.

I've tried to find a way but there isn't one. (p. 10)

She went on to say, “I have spoken to five lawyers and they all tell me the same thing” (p. 10). Like Verónica, Luis has not been able to find a way to change his status either. He and his sibling are desperately searching for ways to start their process.

Bernardo and his wife also faced legal status challenges—his wife applied for asylum, but was denied. He explained that when she went in for her interview it seemed as if they already had their minds made up before hearing her: “They listen because it's their job, they have to do it, but they already have their decision made” (p. 26). Thus, the changes in immigration policies have created various obstacles for undocumented immigrants to be able to obtain a legal status in this country.

**Multigenerational punishment.** In addition to their individual experiences, all participants discussed how their undocumented status impacted their families, as they experienced multigenerational punishment. In each case, participants' families faced limitations around family activities—they cannot go on vacation because they do not want to go without all of the family members. Thus, undocumented status of one or more

family members prevents the entire family from traveling even though some are able to. Sofia said, "I feel like we can't do everything we want to do. Sometimes, we want to travel outside of the country, but we can't" (p. 8). Similarly, Bernardo spoke about how he cannot travel or do something as simple as take his family out on the weekend, "I would like to go out on the weekends and take my family somewhere but...because of my undocumented status I do not have the freedom to" (p. 17).

Although Carla's mother and son live in her country of origin, they experience multigenerational punishment as well and are unable to spend time with her because she cannot travel to see them. Carla said, "my mother suffered a lot, you know? She would tell me, I hope you can come see me before I die. She always told me that. She died and I could not see her" (p. 28). Carla's mother wished she could visit her, but sadly, she was unable to do so before her mother passed because of her undocumented status. Carla talks about how her family in the United States wants to travel, but choose not to because she cannot go with them: "they feel bad. They tell me, let's go to [home country], we never go visit my [sibling]. I limit them" (p. 28).

### **Fear of Deportation**

The second major theme that emerged during the analysis process was fear of deportation. In discussing participants' experiences as undocumented immigrants in recent times, they brought up the anti-immigrant climate and changes in immigration policies which now target all immigrants and add to their vulnerability. This resulted in psychological distress for participants and their families. All participants brought up fear, specifically the fear of deportation and/or family separation, uncertainty, and feeling a lack of safety, resulting in the need to be cautious. The fear and uncertainty associated

with an undocumented status have created changes in family dynamics, which led to closeness or served as a source of conflict. Further, participants have an increased awareness of their status which results in constant worry. Six subthemes were identified within this major theme. These were: (a) psychological distress, (b) increased awareness of status, (c) uncertainty, (d) family separation, (e) changes in family dynamics, and (f) lack of safety/need to be cautious.

**Psychological distress.** Participants explained that the current anti-immigrant climate and policies have created fear in them and their families. Luis expressed that the president aims to spread fear in the immigrant community through threats and policies of deportation and family separation. Moreover, participants are constantly reminded of the risk of deportation through regular media coverage of threats of raids, deportations, and family separation, which exacerbates their fear. Luis commented, “I am afraid of being deported and I think that this president has been so good at expanding that fear and, uh, um, I mean it's, it's, it's, it's really sad” (p. 20). Participants have always been well aware of the risk of deportation as it is something that comes with an undocumented status, but it was not something they constantly thought about or feared until now. Luis explained that while his undocumented status has always been the same, the difference is the degree of deportability. Previous to Trump’s presidency, he was not as concerned about being deported, but it has now become a realistic threat due to the anti-immigrant climate and policies that currently exist. Luis stated, “During the Obama administration, there was some hope that if I was to be detained, I could, my lawyer could find something. Now, it's not like that under this administration” (p. 20).

Verónica's fear for herself and her family began when Trump was elected president: "Deep down I didn't want him to win, you know? When I saw that Donald Trump won it's like the world came crashing down" (p. 15). She said that in that moment, she and her husband panicked, and her fear was so significant she thought of fleeing: "I looked at him and asked, what are we going to do now? (laughs). The first thing we thought of was going to Canada" (p. 15). Carla feared being deported even though she started the process to change her status. She stated this fear started the night Trump won the presidential election:

I didn't sleep the night he won. I was crying and crying because when he started his campaign, he attacked Hispanics. I said, now that he won, he's going to kick everyone out. He's kicked out so many people and has separated families and doesn't want anything to do with undocumented immigrants. (p. 29)

Carla's fear grew as more anti-immigrant policies have been enacted: "There always risks, but now there are more deportations and more family separation. Now there are many more things" (p. 25). In talking about all the negative consequences that can come from deportation, she stated, "I think about my family, my job, losing my job, and that I'll be separated from my family... The fear is always present" (p. 26). Sofia commented, "I do get scared. Like before, I was okay, but now it's more serious since he's [Trump] making these new laws" (p. 12). She explained that the situation is "scariest than with other presidents we had before" (p. 9).

For some participants, the fear of deportation extends beyond the immediate consequence of leaving the United States. Sofia fears being deported and sent to a country that is unfamiliar or where she feels like she does not belong: "I feel like now, if



I go back now, I feel like I'm going to be left out because it's so different from here... and I got used to how it is here" (p. 14). Luis explained that if he were deported to his home country he would be sent to his death: "The fear of being killed in my home country has come back. And I think it's the fear of me being returned that keeps me really afraid of something bad happening to me" (p. 12). This pervasive fear had a significant psychological impact on participants. Sofia explained that fear she experiences has impacted her thoughts and behavior. Luis indicated that it also greatly affects the way he thinks, feels, and the ability to be himself: "I cannot be my true self because my mind is not where it needs to be in order for me to be able to say, uh, to be worry free" (p. 13). It also impacts his ability to be creative: "I'm not able to be creative. I'm not able to be who I am. And that completely changes who I am" (p. 13). This fear has created a sense of urgency in Luis, one that pushes him to do everything possible to change his status: "It has created a bigger urgency in my life, on the steps that I need to take" (p. 17).

**Increased awareness of status.** Each of the participants stated that it is more difficult to be an undocumented immigrant now than it was in previous years. One of the reasons why is because their undocumented status holds more significance now. Participants explained that they are "more deportable" now than ever before because the president has implemented anti-immigrant policies that increase deportations of undocumented immigrants, separate families, and limit access to asylum. These policies target all undocumented immigrants and contribute to their vulnerabilities. Carla noted that if you were detained in previous years, nothing would happen; however, if that were to happen now, ICE would get involved and deportation would likely occur. She stated,

Now it's harder than before because before, they would catch you and would not do anything. Now, if they catch you, they send you to ICE if you're undocumented. The police themselves send you to immigration where they send you back. Now it's tougher than before. (p. 25)

Luis shared a similar sentiment:

I mean now, exactly, I feel more undocumented now than before. Hell yeah. And not just undocumented, but deportable. I feel more deportable now. And that's the key, is like, because your status is the same, but then how deportable do you think you are? I feel way more, I actually feel deportable now and sometimes, I have even felt that if I was to be detained, that's it. I'm going to be deported. (p. 20)

Luis explained that although he has the same undocumented status as he did in previous years, it now signifies deportability. Thus, participants have an increased awareness of their status, which translates to heightened levels of worry—it is something they think about at all times. Luis commented, “I think that there's no day that I don't think about being deported. There is no day that I don't worry about being deported and uh, this is not a normal life. I don't think that we should be living like this” (p. 12). He further stated, “I'm always, I'm constantly, even unconsciously, thinking about the fact that I'm undocumented because this administration is reminding me every day” (p. 13). Carla's awareness of status is so prevalent she compares it to a mother who thinks about her children day and night: “It's on my mind, day and night. It's like a mother who only thinks about her children—you got to sleep and wake up thinking about it” (p. 26).

Participants stated that although they were undocumented in previous years, their status

was not a constant concern. Now, however, it is a continuous worry because of the anti-immigrant climate and policies which increases their deportability.

**Uncertainty.** Fear of deportation also created uncertainty for participants as they do not know what will happen to themselves or their families, or what the future holds. Luis noted, “I’m not able to think about tomorrow. I’m not able to plan in the long term” (p. 13). He explained, “having uncertainty does not help you build long-term because you don’t know where you’re going to be in two years from now so it’s, it’s just not being able to, to do that” (pp. 16-17). Carla also talked about being uncertain about her dreams for the future. Although Verónica thinks about the future, because of uncertainty, her thoughts revolve around preparing for possible deportation.

All of the participants interviewed were a part of mixed-status families. Although participants’ family members are legally authorized to be in the United States, the uncertainty spread to the entire family unit. Luis explained that despite some of his family members being legally authorized to be in the United States, they all fear what is going to happen to each other. Furthermore, those with legal authorization still fear being sent back to his home country due to threats of expanded deportation. In describing his family’s fears and the uncertainty they face, Luis commented,

All of us have the fear of being returned to [home country] except my [sibling] who was born in the U.S. but because all of us have different, most of us have different statuses, we don’t know what’s going to happen with each one of us, but, uh, it just, I mean, we don’t know. (p. 15)

He elaborated, “So, of course, what I’m going through is not just about the way I feel and the way I think, but also the way my family feels and the way they think as well” (pp. 15-

16). Bernardo shared a similar example about his family, specifically his wife who stays at home with the children while he goes to work: “She is at home and is very sentimental. She worries at home because she doesn’t know if I’m going to return or not” (p. 16). He explained that his wife is constantly fearful that he will be deported. Carla expressed that her family in her home country fear her possible deportation, along with her husband and children that live here in the United States. Sofia disclosed that her parents also fear for her deportation.

**Family separation.** Underlying the fear of deportation and uncertainty about the future is the fear of family separation. Verónica said that when Trump was elected, her young children became afraid of being separated from her since they are U.S. citizens. They did not want him to become president because of, “the laws he has enacted, because he speaks badly about people, and because he is racist” (p. 14). Her children feared that Verónica would be deported as a result of the anti-immigrant policies and negative climate towards foreigners. Bernardo explained that family separation has a significant negative impact on individuals and the family unit as a whole, so he would not want his family to experience this. He stated, “I worry a lot because I have ... children and if they deport me, what will happen to the love between a father and his children? It is something very special” (p. 16). He spoke about being under constant threat of being separated from his family because he risks being detained or deported by going to work every day: “I think this happens every day because every day that we go work we see the police and we don't know what type of police officers they are, so I'd say every day” (p. 16). Bernardo's wife has a work permit, “but with everything that's going on we don't know what can happen” (p. 16).

Luis explained that his entire family worries about being separated, particularly his mother. Whenever his parents see or hear things in the media, he downplays the information as a way to protect them and decrease the fear and worry they experience. He noted that their fear increases when there is a change in immigration policy because they do not know what is going to happen or how it will affect them. Like Bernardo, Luis has a young child and fears the negative consequences that come with being separated from his child. He shared that with the increase of deportation and family separation, he is re-experiencing trauma from similar past events in his life. Luis recalled watching a video clip of children crossing the border and being reunited with their parents where a mother is crying and telling her child, “Mijo, soy yo” (son, it’s me), and the child did not recognize her. He said,

...that triggered me. I did not understand why and then I had to do some- some work around that. And then that's when I realize this is affecting me a lot because it's not just a policy, something that I went through. (pp. 22-23)

He further stated, “I do understand that there are psychological things that happen that are going to stay with you for so many years when family separation happens. I don't want that to happen between me and my [child]” (p. 12). Luis is intent on not being separated from his child, and is willing to do whatever it takes, and face whichever risks arise to prevent his child from being separated from him.

How much do you love someone? I love [child] so much that I'm willing to come back crossing the border again in order to be able to reunite with [child] so, uh, I, and I understand the risk of doing that. (p. 12)

Sofia comments on the threat of family separation, “What he's doing with immigration is bad, separating families is inhumane, like, we shouldn't be doing that” (pp. 10-11). She elaborated, “We shouldn't separate families, little kids shouldn't be away from their parents they need them” (p. 11). Participants fear family separation as it is now a realistic threat due to anti-immigrant policies that increase deportations and family separation.

**Changes in family dynamics.** Participants explained that the fear associated with their undocumented status also impacted their family dynamics as they are uncertain of what will happen to them. For Sofia, Carla, Verónica, and Bernardo, their status brought them closer to their families; for Luis, it was a combination of closeness and a source of relational conflict. For those who stated their status brought them closer to their families, they attributed this to not taking each other for granted, spending more time together, and increased communication, particularly about their status. When I asked Sofia if her undocumented status affected her family relationships she said, “I don't think my family relationships are affected. I feel like if it's affected, it's actually stronger, like, it brings us closer together than like, it separates us” (p. 9). To gain a better understanding of how her status brought her family closer, I asked her in what way it makes them stronger. Sofia responded, “We do more stuff as a family rather than being separate because we never know like oh, it could be your last day here or something” (p. 9). Here, Sofia talks about how her family spends more time together because they do not know how much more time they have left. This also shows the value they place on each other and their family.

Luis explained that his status was a source of relational conflict because there is a difference in views, misunderstandings, and frustration/desperation in his relationship

with his parents. He explained that his parents do not understand the changes in immigration policies, so they misunderstand information presented by the media. This causes relational conflict between them because when they speak to Luis about it, he tries to explain it to them which then causes disagreements with his parents. Luis tries to provide his parents with accurate information about policies, but they believe it is incorrect. Luis noted that there is also a difference in his relationship with his siblings. He attributes this to their difference in status which affects their understanding of each other's experiences. One of his siblings was born in the United States, whose experiences vary significantly from those of Luis and his other siblings. He stated, "I don't think my [sibling] understands where we come from, our experiences" (p. 7). He went on to say, "my [sibling] does not understand what it means to be undocumented" (p. 16). Luis explained that he is able to speak with his other sibling more and understands his experiences since they are both undocumented.

**Lack of safety/need to be cautious.** Another fear that all participants talked about was fear of their status becoming known to others. They felt unsafe and worried that someone would discover their status and report them to immigration, possibly resulting in deportation. Because of this, participants were very cautious in their relationships with others. Sofia said that she is selective of who she shares her status with because she does not know if she can trust the person to not disclose it. She also worried that if others discover her status, she will be treated poorly and/or discriminated against: "I can't just tell anybody I'm undocumented because you don't know how they are. So, like, society could treat me wrong and stuff like that" (p. 8). Sofia's increased fear led her to become more cautious of her behavior in order to avoid authorities:

And now it's a little scary to even drive at night, like, I can't be driving at night, like anytime, because I don't know, like, I might get pulled over and they might send me to immigration. So, it's a little bit scary, like, I have to be more cautious.

(p. 10)

She is also careful of where she goes and tries to avoid people and places who might perceive her as undocumented, "I just can't go anywhere because there are some places where people are against immigrants. I have to be careful" (p. 12).

Bernardo takes the same precautions as Sofia and avoids authorities so his undocumented status will not be discovered. He commented, "I have to drive carefully. If I see a police officer I get nervous. I need to be more cautious" (p. 14). Bernardo mentioned that if something were to happen him, he "would not feel at liberty to call because you don't know the type of officer you'll speak with. You don't know if they will investigate the problem or your status" (p. 18). Thus, participants' fear of disclosure of status is so strong they do not seek police assistance even if it is needed because they are afraid it will result in their deportation. Luis shared an example of not meeting a school requirement rather than potentially exposing his status: "In high school I was supposed to apply to certain universities. It was a requirement. I did not apply to any university. I was afraid that the universities were going to report immigration, customs enforcement about my status" (p. 15). Sofia talked about how her parents must be more cautious about who they spend time with and what they disclose to others in order to protect herself and her sibling. Speaking of her stepfather, Sofia commented, "If he's with my [sibling], he has to be more careful because he never knows, he can be stopped anywhere" (p. 13).



### **Increased Racism and Xenophobia**

The third category that emerged in this study was increased racism and xenophobia. During the interviews, participants spoke about their experiences as undocumented immigrants in the United States in recent times. As participants shared their experiences, they all pointed out an increase in racism and xenophobia in the country, which they attributed to Trump. Participants described him as racist and said that he has created a climate of anti-immigrant sentiment in the United States. They believe his immigration policies, including expansion of deportation, family separation, detention of immigrants, and the proposed U.S.-Mexico border wall, and comments he makes about immigrants are racist. Verónica explained that the president's words and actions has made it acceptable for others to express similar thoughts and behave in the same way:

I see that there has been a rise. People are more racist because the president has made them express everything they kept inside. Maybe they felt it but didn't express it. It's as if he has awoken something in them. (p. 17)

As a result, racism and xenophobia is accepted and normalized which leads to an increase in both. Luis explained that individuals have a “pass” to express anti-immigrant sentiment, since the president does so.

People now just get a pass. People now get to really say who they are in reality just by having their pass of like, yes, you know, if our president misbehaving that way, then I can also behave that way. So that's also very problematic. (p. 21)

They are essentially mirroring his behavior, which creates various issues for immigrants such as experiencing racism, discrimination, and xenophobia.

Participants shared examples of instances in which they personally experienced racism, discrimination, and xenophobia. Luis said that when others find out he is from Central America, they think negatively of him because of what is said about them in the media. When people find out he is an immigrant who crossed the border, a common reaction is to be asked, "Wait, you're just like them, right?" (p. 22). Additionally, they make harmful comments about him and stereotype Central Americans, "calling us gang members and, and like being part of MS-13" (p. 22). His family has experienced racism, discrimination, and xenophobia as well. Bernardo shared an example of when he witnessed someone trying to take advantage of another person because of their perceived status and because they did not speak English. He explained that they were waiting in line when someone cut in front of him. Bernardo intervened in the person's defense by commenting that there was someone who was already waiting. The person who cut in line told Bernardo, "We are in the United States, you need to speak English" (p. 29) although he was speaking English. He said that he has had other personal instances of racism and discrimination because of his status. Sofia stated that they have experienced racism and discrimination because of their status and Verónica said that others have humiliated her because of it.

Participants also experienced racism, discrimination, and xenophobia from their own cultural groups; noted the existence and frequency of hate crimes; described feeling excluded, marginalized, and as if they do not belong; being criminalized because of their status; and feeling voiceless. As participants spoke about these experiences, it was evident that they were deeply affected by them. Luis stated, "there's a lot of hate towards immigrants" (p. 21). He went on to tell me that the current anti-immigrant sentiment that

exists, “it just, it- it’s affecting me” (p. 22). Five subthemes emerged within the major theme of increased racism and xenophobia: (a), horizontal discrimination, (b) hate crimes, (c) feelings of exclusion, marginalization, and not belonging, (d) criminalization, and (e) feeling voiceless.

**Horizontal discrimination.** As I inquired more about participants’ experiences with discrimination, I learned that all participants except for Sofia experienced horizontal discrimination. Bernardo gave an example of an incident that happened with his coworkers. Bernardo and some of his coworkers are from an indigenous part of his country of origin, so their first language is not Spanish. However, now that they are in the United States, his coworkers only want to speak Spanish. Bernardo, however, still speaks his native language. He said that when he speaks his native language, they ask him, “What are you talking about?” (p. 28) even though they speak the same language. Bernardo also speaks to his children in his native language so that they can learn it and communicate with him and his family. He has told others about this and said, “A lot of people criticize me. They say I’m dumbing down my [child] by teaching [child]” (p. 28). Teaching his children his indigenous language is important to Bernardo because he wants his children to maintain his culture and be able to communicate with his family: “Even though we don’t need it here my grandparents don’t speak Spanish. If [child] visits my grandparents, how will they communicate?” (p. 28).

Carla has also experienced horizontal discrimination. When speaking about this, she said that the frequency of it has increased since coming to the United States: “I have been affected since I arrived to this country and I am even more affected now” (p. 31). This form of discrimination mostly takes place at her place of employment from

coworkers and customers: “The people in my job have told me many things—illegal, get out of this country, go back to your country. Hispanic people have told me that” (p. 31). She said she is taunted by coworkers who say, “you’re an undocumented, you’re an illegal” (p. 31) and “you’re all illegal. I have my papers, I’m an American” (p. 32). Carla’s coworkers are from Central America just like her, yet they discriminate against her because of her undocumented status. She is deeply affected by this, but she becomes “dura” (strong), and says, “no me dejo” (she stands up for herself). Carla also stands up for other coworkers who are discriminated against.

Verónica commented, “I think that Hispanic people who are here legally, not everyone, but the majority, are racist” (p. 16). She explained that she has witnessed horizontal discrimination, saying, “those who are here legally do not want others to come, as if they didn’t come here the same way” (p. 16); and “If they are here it’s because they’re immigrants... Maybe they are documented, but they are still immigrants” (p. 16). Luis offered an explanation as to why horizontal discrimination occurs. He believes that after so much exposure to the anti-immigrant rhetoric that is constantly being presented in the media, people are starting to believe it. He remarked, “The rhetoric going around Central Americans, a lot of central Americans are starting to even believe it” (p. 23). He shared an example of his father who made comments about not wanting the individuals and families from the caravan to come to the United States even though he crossed the border to migrate here. His father said, “Why are they all coming here?” (p. 23). Luis responded, “The only difference between those who are coming right now and then those of, those like us that came before is we had more resources to make it before” (p. 23). He went on to explain that all immigrants—whether documented or undocumented—come to

this country to escape the same hardships and to survive. Luis also pointed out that most immigrants do not have the resources or appropriate way to come to this country legally, which is why they resort to coming here in illegal ways, such as crossing the border. He stated, “I think that there's a lot of work that needs to happen... I don't think that they, they're really understanding what is really happening” (p. 23). He believes lack of understanding contributes to horizontal discrimination, which adds to undocumented immigrants' vulnerabilities as it creates within group conflict.

**Hate crimes.** In addition to the increase in racism and discrimination, Carla pointed out that there is an increase in hate crimes against various minority groups, including Latinxs. She believes that hate crimes are something new; something that has not happened under other presidencies. As with racism, discrimination, and xenophobia, she attributes the existence and frequency of hate crimes to Trump. She cited his racist, anti-immigrant comments and policies, which caused the creation of anti-immigrant sentiment:

It's hard and now with this president it's even harder because there are things happening that did not happen before... This man has promoted racism. Look at how the people are killing, these kids killing their classmates because of racism, because they're Hispanic. It's hard. (p. 14)

She further explained the cause of hate crimes: “Look at the man who killed-why was it that he killed? Because there are too many Hispanics in the United States. Who generated that? Thanks to who did that happen? I blame him for all of those deaths” (p. 29), and that she will “die blaming him” (p. 29) because his hateful and racist rhetoric is what gives way and rise to hate crimes. She commented,

They don't want us here. In fact, they have never wanted us here, but this man has promoted hate against the illegals and Hispanics. They had that hate inside and everyone who goes out to kill is releasing it. Look at how many killings there have been after that man won. In the schools, in the churches. (p. 31)

Carla said that while the Latinx community was never wanted or accepted in the United States, the president has fueled their hate which has resulted in deaths. She believes no one is safe as people were killed in Walmart, schools, nights, and even people who were praying were killed in churches and mosques. She said that she is experiencing trauma as she fears for her safety as a minority: "I'm now afraid when I go to supermarket. I like to go to Walmart. Look at the shooting that happened in Walmart. It makes me afraid" (p. 29). This fear has expanded to her family as well. She mentioned that when she and her husband go to Walmart, they discuss what they are going to purchase beforehand and have a plan of going in and out in case something happens. She also experiences fear and worry because the Walmart she goes to is in a predominantly Latinx area, so she feels it is a target for hate crimes. Carla not only worries about her safety, but the safety of others as well. She mentioned that two of the tragedies that impacted her the most are the school shootings and the shooting in Walmart in Texas. Carla explained that although she does not have young children, she worries about the racially fueled shootings, "...I am always thinking about the kids and pray nothing happens" (p. 14). She remarked, "What if a crazy guy comes and kills just because he felt like it? Because they are Hispanic?" (p. 14).

Further, these tragedies result in painful losses that can never be mended: "Who repairs that? It's a pain that stays with mothers permanently" (p. 14). Carla stated that she

is not able to live peacefully because of the hate crimes and that for her, “it’s trauma, for me, that’s trauma” (p. 31). She explained that even if you are doing something good like praying or buying something for your children at the store, the risk of being killed through a hate crime exists. The fear created by hate crimes transcends borders—Carla’s family in her home country fear for her safety. They watch the news and speak about what is going on and tell her to be careful. Although they are miles away, Carla’s family also experience psychological distress because of the hate crimes.

**Feelings of exclusion, marginalization, and not belonging.** With mentions of anti-immigrant sentiment in the United States, participants felt excluded, marginalized, and as if they do not belong here. In asking participants to reflect on these feelings, Sofia commented that the president has signed exclusionary policies that target her group: “I feel like he cares more about himself and the society he's in and he doesn't care about what others go through” (p. 11). She explained that there are harsh policies that target her group while other groups remain unaffected, which creates feelings of marginalization. Participants agreed with this sentiment as they all disagreed with Trump’s immigration policies and labeled them as anti-immigrant and inhumane. Bernardo said that he thinks the majority of the Latinx community does not agree with the president or his policies because they are racist and are further marginalized by them. He brought up an example of ending Temporary Protected Status (TPS) and the “safe third country” agreement. He remarked,

First, he wanted to end TPS and most recently the issue with asylum. He wanted people to solicit asylum from Mexico and now from Guatemala (laughs). How are

we going to ask immigrants to go to Guatemala to apply for asylum when we know there is a lot of delinquency there? (p. 23)

Participants stated they are excluded, marginalized, and made to feel as if they do not belong because they come from another country, speak another language, and look differently from the stereotypical American. Luis explained,

I think that the average person that voted for Trump thinks that the average American looks White and that's its own problem. There is- the United States should not have an identity, um, all of us are the identity of the United States. And I think that that's a big problem. (p. 21)

Luis described how U.S. society has a stereotypical idea of what the “average” American looks like, which causes issues for those who do not fit that image. He shared an example in which a family member, a U.S. citizen, went to Key West and was treated poorly:

They treated [family member] with so much racism. And then I said, exactly. So, at the end of the day it is like even if I was a US citizen that does not make me in the eyes of White America, it does not make me, uh, similar to them or to them or equal to them. (p. 17)

Through this example, Luis explained that if you look differently than what a stereotypical American is, you are not considered equal even if you are legally authorized to be in the United States. This then results in exclusion, marginalization, and feelings of not belonging.

Verónica has experienced similar situations as that of Luis’ family member: “it is not my language, it is not my country, so they humiliate me” (p. 11). She explained that



there have been instances in which she has experienced racism or discrimination because she does not speak English and is undocumented, which results in feelings of exclusion, marginalization, and not belonging. Verónica also pointed out that immigrants are not given an opportunity in the United States, so they are excluded. Carla shared Verónica's view and said the same thing. Luis believes that minorities will soon be the majority in the United States, so the administration implements practices of exclusion and marginalization to prevent that from happening: "I mean, it's working the way they want it to work and uh, of course it's racist. Uh, it's trying to make the U.S. white, really making sure that they, they, they just have one agenda" (p. 21). The feelings of exclusion, marginalization, and not belonging have a significant negative impact on participants. For Verónica, the impact is so great she wants to go back to her home country: "I want to go back to my country I don't want to be here for the rest of my life. Living in this country is not easy" (p. 18). Luis said that he feels very small and cannot make a difference because of his undocumented status and has been marginalized because of his status, which is exacerbated by the constant reminder he receives from the media.

**Criminalization.** As part of their experiences with racism, discrimination, xenophobia, and marginalization, participants were also made to feel like criminals because of their undocumented status. They attribute this to Trump's anti-immigrant, and racist comments. Bernardo pointed out that the president has described Latinx immigrants as, "thieves, that we come here to steal jobs" (p. 24). Verónica stated, "They feel like we come to steal their jobs or take their opportunities" (p. 17). Luis commented on the stereotype of Latinx immigrants stealing jobs, "It's easier to blame it on someone else and right now we're the ones being blamed for that" (p. 20). Carla said that the president

describes the Latinx population as being made up of “bad” people. These comments are then overplayed in the media, which causes others to believe these incorrect comments. Carla provided an example of the biased way crimes are portrayed in the media depending on the individual’s racial/ethnic background, which she believes adds to the negative image and criminalization of immigrants: “Have you paid attention to the news? Did you notice that when an American grabs and rapes women and kills them, they do not say it was an American? Never. Only when it is someone Latinx they say, he is Cuban, he is Nicaraguan” (p. 29). Luis stated that he feels like a criminal for simply being an undocumented immigrant: “I’m always- I’m constantly, even unconsciously, thinking about the fact that I’m undocumented, because this administration is reminding me every day, and even being undocumented now makes you feel like you’re a criminal” (p. 13).

The view of undocumented immigrants has severe consequences for them. Luis brought up immigration policies and how they are shaped by negative ideals or stereotypes of immigrants. Thus, immigrants are viewed as threats, and are punished through harsh immigration laws. For instance, they are deported for even minor offenses; police are now required to identify immigrants eligible for deportation, and so on. Luis commented on the current administration: “They make sure that you make sure that they don’t vote, uh, you criminalize them, you deport them, you, you implement all of these policies that you’re implementing right now” (p. 21).

Criminalization of status has a significant impact on individuals’ well-being. Carla shared an example of when she was treated as criminal for being an undocumented immigrant. She said, “They handcuffed us like if we were delinquents. I started crying

and told them not to cuff me since I had not killed or robbed anyone, but those are the rules” (p. 7). Verónica had a similar experience to Carla’s. She was once driving and was stopped by a police officer. Since Verónica did not have a license because she is undocumented, she was arrested. She said, “he handcuffed me as if I was a delinquent” (p. 10). She expressed that, “it was the most humiliating moment in my life” (p. 10) and she wondered, “What am I doing in this country? This would not have happened in my country. This makes me want to go back because it is humiliating” (p. 10). Thus, criminalization of status punishes individuals for simply existing and trying to survive through various punitive laws, which affects their well-being.

**Feeling voiceless.** In speaking with participants about their experiences as undocumented immigrants in the current political climate, the theme of being voiceless came up. All of the participants mentioned that immigrants and immigration are hot topics right now. Sofia commented, “now, it’s not even about other countries, we’re focusing on immigrants and separating families” (p. 11). According to Sofia, other issues are not as important or largely discussed as immigration. She feels that immigration has become the main focus of the country. Although immigration is a hotly contested issue, the voices heard on this are those of primarily White male politicians and policy makers. Trump has one of the strongest voices when it comes to this issue.

Participants pointed out that although they are the ones being spoken about and who are directly affected, their voices are not heard. Luis commented,

It's something that is so personal and yet the voices of Central Americans are not being heard. And it's always someone else that shares the experiences of like how that feels, uh, an expert, um, it's, it's not our voices being heard. (p. 23)

He went on to say that they cannot accurately describe the experience of immigrants because they did not live it, which leads to incorrect depictions of immigrants and their experiences:

And I think that, that's very hard and it's completely different than someone that went through that and really sharing what it's like to come cross the border, why did you have to leave, and, and sharing all of that. (p. 23)

Sofia noted that the current political climate makes it difficult for her and other immigrants to share their voice: “Now with the new immigration thing it’s getting harder for us to speak, like, the way we want to speak because we never know” (p. 13). I asked what she meant by speaking the way they wanted to speak, and she said, “We can’t freely express ourselves because we can be sent back” (p. 12). The issue that Sofia points out is that not only are undocumented immigrants voiceless, but they are being silenced. Oftentimes, they are unable to share their voices because that is tied to the risk of disclosure and deportation. When I spoke with Luis about this, he said, “How do you make sure that they don't have a voice?” (p. 21). He stated that the current administration enforces policies that silence undocumented immigrants. In turn, they feel voiceless, invisible, disconnected, and isolated. Thus, they are afraid of speaking up.

### **Coping Strategies**

The fourth major theme that emerged from the participant interviews was coping strategies. Participants faced various challenges related to being undocumented, including limited opportunities and access issues, racism, discrimination, and xenophobia. As a result, participants and their families experienced psychological distress—fear, worry, stress, anxiety, sadness, uncertainty, and trauma. Participants utilized six different coping

strategies to manage these challenges: (a) conversing/processing, (b), use of humor, (c) emergency plan, (d) increased motivation to be successful, (e) increased political engagement, and (f) challenging anti-immigrant rhetoric.

**Conversing/processing.** As I spoke with participants about their experiences, I asked them if their family was aware of their status. All of the participants told me that their families were fully aware of their status and that they often spoke about it and the risks that come with it. Deportation is one of the most severe risks for undocumented immigrants because it threatens to remove them from their lives in the United States and potentially separate them from their families. The participants and their families experienced worry, stress, anxiety, sadness, uncertainty, and trauma. Moreover, they were regularly reminded of this punitive risk through the constant media coverage of threats of raids, deportations, and family separation, which exacerbates their psychological distress. As a way to cope with their psychological distress, participants openly spoke about the threat of deportation with their spouses, children, and/or family members. Verónica shared an example in which she spoke with her children about her status: “My [sibling] is going to go to [home country] now and ... taking them. They tell me, “I want you to come with us” but I can't. That's when they learn about the status” (p. 13). She went on to speak about the restrictions she faced because of her status, and what would happen if she went with them. Luis explained that he and his sibling also have conversations about deportation; however, the focus of their conversations is on finding a solution to fixing their status, rather than the risks they face. He said focusing on being deported is not helpful for them because it makes them feel bad, and “the only way we

talk about it is to bring solutions” (p. 18). His sibling stays up to date on immigration policies and has conversations with Luis about them so they can try to find a solution.

**Use of humor.** Verónica utilized humor as a way to make light of such a heavy topic. She told me that her entire family know about her undocumented status and the risks she faces because of it. Aside from speaking openly about this with her family, Verónica uses humor as a way to cope with her reality of being undocumented and being at-risk for deportation, which lightens the weight of the conversation and normalizes the reality she and her family are facing. In this example, Verónica uses humor to subtly deliver a harsh reality to her children, saying, “When I drive, I tell them, “put on your seatbelt because the police is going to stop us” and “hey they're going to send me to El Salvador” (laughs)” (p. 13). The risk of being deported is increased by driving without a license. If stopped by a police officer, there is a possibility of ICE becoming involved and deporting Verónica. Using humor, however, allows the information to be conveyed in a less threatening way and even prepares her children for the possibility of deportation.

**Emergency plan.** Most participants, particularly those with children, developed an emergency plan in the event they were deported. The possibility of detention or deportation is a very real threat to undocumented immigrants. Individuals do not know whether they, or their family members, will return home, which creates psychological distress. To cope with this, participants created an emergency plan to support those experiencing detention or deportation. Luis explained the importance of an emergency plan: “I want to make sure that you know, if something happens, at least I'm prepared for it and that, um, it does not affect my family or those around me as much as it should” (p. 16). The plan includes financial, legal, childcare, and safety aspects. In terms of finances,

participants save as much money as they can to cover costs related to their detention or deportation, requiring them to spend as little money as possible on unnecessary things and cut costs in other areas. Verónica stated, “I try to prepare as much as I can because I don't forget that I'm illegal. I try to save as much as possible and not spend the little bit that I earn so that I'm prepared if I'm ever deported” (p. 17). Luis not only saves in order to cover possible costs, but also to “make sure that my [child] does not go through any financial hardship” (p. 19). Thus, saving is not only related to the immediate consequences of detention or deportation, but also the long-terms ones of family separation.

Saving money would allow participants to hire an attorney to represent them in the event of detention or deportation. Although Luis has not been detained or deported, he already has an attorney to prepare for that possibility and he saves to “make sure that I have the money for a lawyer. So just preparing myself around that and making sure that I have a plan B if something was to happen” (p. 19). Luis spoke about the importance of preparation and the steps he is taking in case something happens to him. His fear extends beyond deportation—he fears being killed if he is forced to return to [home country]. Because of this, he has several plans in mind, one of which extends to the aftermath of deportation: “So if I am able to have enough capital to, to even at least leave [home country] right away and then go somewhere else where I can feel safe” (p. 19).

Another important aspect of the emergency plan is planning for childcare needs. Three of the participants, Verónica, Luis, and Bernardo have U.S. born children whom they would be separated from if they were to be deported. Because of this, they have to make the difficult decision of what is going to happen to their children if they are

detained or deported. Verónica's plan includes taking her younger children with her to her home country even though they are U.S. citizens. She would not take her oldest children because she wants them to go to college here, so they would stay in the United States with her mother and sister. Her entire family is aware of her emergency plan, which aids in preparing her children for the threat of deportation. Verónica explained, "I will take the little ones with me, and maybe my middle child. The oldest children will stay here but the youngest will go with me... They need to be with their mother" (p. 18). As a part of her plan, she will enroll the children she takes with her to her home country in bilingual schools so they will continue speaking English and can later return to the United States for college. Luis does not have an exact plan in terms of childcare needs, but said he is, "Willing to come back crossing the border again in order to be able to reunite with [child]" (p. 12) despite the risks he might face. Bernardo said that he and his wife do not have an emergency plan yet, but they understand the importance of it and will create one. Part of the plan includes, "fighting for our case" (p. 17) or fighting to become documented.

**Increased motivation to be successful.** Verónica and Carla's challenges increased their motivation to be successful. For these participants, success is the ability to make enough money to survive in the United States and send money to their family in their countries of origin and to change their status. Verónica explained that while most undocumented immigrants complain about not having a legal status, she views it as something positive because it increases her motivation to work more and create her own opportunities. She stated, "Sometimes we complain because we don't have papers but in



reality, I view it as something good because maybe if I had papers everything would have been easier. Since it hasn't been easy for me, I value it more” (p. 21).

According to Verónica, if everything was handed to them, they would not appreciate it because they did not have to work hard for it: “Maybe other people don't look at this way but if you think about it, you don't value what you get easily; you value what you have to work hard for” (p. 22). She believes that being undocumented gives people something to work towards. Similarly, Carla reflected on all the challenges she overcame—being held in a detention center for over four months, experiencing sexual harassment from a former boss, and discrimination amongst other things. Carla said that these challenges have made her “dura” (stronger), which motivates her to be successful. Viewing their status as a motivator to be successful is a helpful coping strategy for participants because it pushes them to overcome the many challenges they face, rather than staying stagnant.

**Increased political engagement.** All participants expressed feelings of frustration, stress, and anger about the current anti-immigrant climate and policies. Sofia commented on the growing anti-immigrant sentiment, “I feel like now, a lot of people are coming together against immigrants. There is another group that’s with the immigrants and are trying to fight for them” (p. 11). Participants are caught in the middle as they are undocumented immigrants who cannot speak up because of the risks of disclosure and deportation. Bernardo and Luis, however, channel their feelings to become more politically engaged and fight for immigrant rights, which serves as a coping mechanism for them. They both described an increase in civic engagement, such as political rallies

and protests, community gatherings, paying greater attention to changes in immigration policies, and providing education on immigration.

Bernardo shared that because of the current anti-immigrant climate and policies, he has joined pro-immigrant organizations to learn more about what is going on politically and changes in immigration policies. Further, he fights for immigrant rights and pro-immigrant policies: “We have meetings at the organizations. I go to protests to demand rights for immigrants. We want there to laws that help our community. We don’t want anti-immigrant laws” (p. 18). Luis also provides education on immigration and support to pro-immigrant organizations. He has done this for years, but felt the need to increase his political activity since Trump became president. He described a sense of disbelief about what was happening in this country, and woke up one thinking, “I want to do more than what I'm doing right now. And then I challenged myself to do that” (p. 19). This coping strategy seemed to help Bernardo and Luis manage their feelings of frustration, stress, and anger.

**Challenging anti-immigrant rhetoric.** In speaking about the anti-immigrant climate and policies that currently exist, participants credited the president for creating this environment because of his anti-immigrant rhetoric. Carla noted that Trump spent his entire presidential campaign delivering anti-immigrant and anti-Latinx remarks and has continued to do so throughout his presidency, “When he began his campaign he started to attack and attack the Hispanics and Mexicans” (p. 29). She elaborates on this point, “Ever since he started, he began talking about the wall, the Mexicans, the illegals. He's attacked undocumented immigrants ever since he started. What has he done for the country? Nothing. All he's done is attack everyone” (pp. 25-26). All of the participants stated that

they heard negative comments about Latinx immigrants and measures against the population from the administration or president.

Through my interviews I discovered that anti-immigrant remarks take a toll on undocumented immigrants and their families. Bernardo explained that his wife becomes sad whenever she hears anti-immigrant remarks. In addition, he and his family experienced high levels of stress because of the anti-immigrant comments the president makes, “It's stressful. It's stressful because every day we hear racist comments... I don't want to hear it anymore because we never hear anything nice” (p. 22). Similarly, Carla’s family members in her home country have also been affected by anti-immigrant remarks, “When [child] watches the news on Univision, because they watch Univision over there, [child] tells me, “mom, be careful, take care of yourself. That man is doing away with Hispanics” (p. 28). Although her family members live in her home country, they remain up to date with what is going on in the United States and worry about Carla.

As a way to cope, participants challenge the anti-immigrant rhetoric by providing positive narratives about immigrants. Participants attempt to improve undocumented immigrants’ collective identity by pointing out the rights of immigrants to be in the United States given that they come to this country to work hard and help their families. Carla commented, “We don't harm anyone. I think that we come here to work, that we are known for wanting to help our family” (p. 26). Similarly, Sofia stated that undocumented immigrants should have a right to stay in the United States because they have been here for years, work hard, and are not committing crimes, “Many people that have been working here for years should have the right to stay here. It's not like they're doing anything bad” (p. 10). She went on to say, “Everybody works for what they have and

yeah, like, they didn't come here legally, but if they got here and are doing their stuff right then they should stay here” (p. 11). Carla also pointed out that despite entering this country illegally, undocumented immigrants are good people and should be given a chance because they want to support and love their families, “They didn't make me come here, I'm clear on that. Since I came here, I violated the law because I entered illegally but give us a chance to be good people” (p. 35). She also stated, “I ask them to leave us in peace, let us work, and fight for our family and love our family above everything else” (p. 35). Carla explained that a paper (legal status) is necessary to be in this country and that she hopes all of her hard work was not in vain.

Other participants mentioned contribution of labor, and immigrants taking on needed jobs, particularly those U.S. citizens do not want to do. Bernardo commented, “They make negative comments but in reality, the jobs we do many people do not want to do and we are producing in this country” (p. 24). Luis made a similar statement: “We're producing at higher levels. Like we, we have not stopped producing and are producing at record numbers” (p. 20). Both Bernardo and Luis highlighted that undocumented immigrants are part of the U.S. workforce and produce at high rates. Participants also countered negative stereotypes of undocumented immigrants; a common stereotype is that they do not pay taxes. Bernardo stated,

We all, we all pay taxes. When we pay taxes, they do not ask if you have social security. They don't tell you that if you don't have a social you can't do your taxes. Whether you have a social security or not they want to charge taxes” (p. 24).

Luis argued for immigrants' rights of staying in the United States given that it is a matter of desperation and survival because of the dire situations in their countries of origin. He described the desperation of Central Americans:

Many of the people that say why would you send a kid or your son, your daughter through that, uh, everyone that has said it is because none of them have lived in Honduras or El Salvador or Guatemala. It's easier to say that when you have never lived in one of these countries. (p. 25)

He explained that immigrants have no choice if they want to survive; because of this, they are forced to migrate even if it means entering the U.S. illegally.

“for us, that’s what it was. We know we’re running the risk of something happening on our way to the U.S. We know that staying here we’re at risk of dying. So, it was a decision of death or just being alive. At the end of the day, you have to make a decision if you want to survive. (p. 25)

Luis said Americans are, “very disconnected from, from, from what is really happening” (p. 22). He attributes this to a lack of understanding of, “the history behind it and many different factors” (p. 22). Luis commented to those against immigration: “I invite you to go to these countries and then experience why people leave” (p. 25). He believes that in this way, they will understand that, “By staying there, you're not going to have an opportunity, so you might as well take a chance of having an opportunity and then leave [home country] or any of these countries” (p. 25). Luis hopes that by visiting Central American countries and witnessing people’s experiences there, they will obtain an understanding of individual’s and family’s desperation to leave and search for survival. Luis also hopes that by people to seeing the humanity of undocumented

immigrants their perspective might shift. He shares that his sibling posts on social media so people can learn about their experiences in the hopes of humanizing the immigrant population, “Really being able to see the humanity of people that are undocumented is more important than just any other policy” (p. 12) to “change the perspective of those of us who are here as undocumented” (p. 13).

### **Summary**

Results of the data analysis showed that participants’ undocumented status not only impacted them individually, but also affected their families because of their strong social ties. As a result, the limitations and restrictions associated with an undocumented status spread throughout the entire family system and created psychological distress in both participants and their families. The anti-immigrant sociopolitical climate and immigration policies created fear for undocumented individuals and their family members living in the United States and their home countries because of the uncertainty of what could happen to them. In the next chapter, I discuss the findings in light of current literature and the significance of the findings for various stakeholders.

## **CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of undocumented Central American immigrants living in the United States. Specifically, it focused on the meaning of being undocumented and participants' perceptions of how their status affects them and their families. Further, it examined if the current sociopolitical climate and immigration policies impact immigrants' experiences. This study was conducted through an interpretative phenomenological analysis that was designed to extract deeper meaning from, and make sense of, those personal experiences. The four major themes and 23 subthemes illustrated the unique experiences of each participant and shared experiences across participants. In this chapter, I discuss the findings and establish connections with existing literature and my personal experiences, and how the participants' experiences relate to Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model of human development. Additionally, I describe strengths and limitations, implications of the study, and provide suggestions for future research.

### **Connections of the Findings to Past Literature and My Experiences**

Throughout the interviews, participants spoke about the various challenges that come with being undocumented and the impact it has on their daily lives individually and as a family. To begin, undocumented immigrants experience numerous restrictions and have limited opportunities as a result of their status. The participants in this study did not have as many employment opportunities as residents and citizens, so they had low-paying or dangerous occupations. This was not surprising as it is something I personally witnessed with my parents who have been employed in domestic work and food service

and employment limitations are well documented in the literature (Alarcón et al., 2016; Brabeck, Sibley, & Lykes, 2016; Enriquez, 2015; Fernández-Esquer, Agoff, & Leal, 2017; Gurrola & Ayón, 2018; Martinez, 2014; Rodriguez, 2018; Stacciarini et al., 2015). Studies have shown that these limitations have a significant impact on participants' lives as they are forced to work long hours for minimal pay, experience financial issues, and do not have a life outside of work. This not only impacts them financially, but impacts their family system as well, which was the case with participants in this study.

Bernardo was not able to spend much time with his wife and young children, and Carla was unable to spend much time with her husband and a child she recently reunited with after so many years. I experienced something similar growing up. My sister and I only spent time with our mother because our father worked 12 hour shifts seven days a week. Our mother worked as well, but was able to schedule her work around our schooling. Because undocumented immigrants are not entitled to governmental services and supports, they are forced to pay out of pocket for most things. Access to services is reduced even more due to the financial difficulties they already experience. The findings from this study also support previous work recognizing undocumented immigrants' numerous restrictions, such as not being able to buy a house or car, obtain a driver's license or state ID, or have access to services (Arbona et al., 2010; Brabeck et al., 2016; Enriquez, 2015; Fernández-Esquer et al., 2017; Stacciarini et al., 2015). Thus, an undocumented status creates a systematic pattern of marginalization and disadvantage, and undocumented immigrants are punished every day for living in a country they do not have authorization to reside in.



Findings from this study showed that an undocumented status is not solely an individual concern as it expands to the entire family system. I have personally experienced this with my family, and my sister and I have felt the effects of an undocumented status because of our parents. Growing up, our family did not travel because our parent's undocumented status prevented them from leaving the country. My sister and I were not involved in extracurricular activities because of financial challenges, and our family was socially isolated, keeping to ourselves because of their undocumented status. Many researchers (Arbona et al., 2010; Brabeck et al., 2016; Enriquez, 2015; Fernández-Esquer et al., 2017; Rodriguez, 2018; Stacciarini et al., 2015; Wray-Lake et al., 2018) note the effects of an undocumented status on families. Essentially, the punishment intended for undocumented immigrants spills over to the lives of children who should be protected by their status as U.S. citizens. This is because families are comprised of strong social ties that interact constantly and depend on each other. Thus, U.S. citizen children are punished for having undocumented parents.

This spillover of punishment across generations is something that I have experienced; however, I was taken aback by how pervasive the consequences were for participants in this study. U.S. children's opportunities are also limited, and they face restrictions across various aspects of their life as a result of their parents' status. Moreover, these consequences have long-lasting effects. Participants mentioned not being able to travel with their families, which I experienced, but the punishment now extends beyond that. Participants' children grow up without having their parents take them to school and cannot participate in basic family activities because of the risks.

Further, they live with constant worry and fear, which have long-term negative effects on their mental health.

While my sister and I faced some restrictions, we did not live in hiding or have negative mental health effects as a consequence of our parent's status. Additionally, our everyday lives were not affected as those of the participants and their families. Another effect of an undocumented status on families is the change in family dynamics. Most of the participants stated that their undocumented status brought their families closer, while Luis said that it caused conflict in his relationship with his parents. Given the significance of an undocumented status and the risks it comes with, it is only natural for it to be a source of tension. As shown in this study, most families turned to each other to ease the tension as a coping strategy. However, for Luis and his parents, it became a source of conflict as it was combined with confusion and misunderstanding. My parents always spoke to my sister and I about their status, even when we were little. These conversations brought us closer as it was something we dealt with together as a family. The effects of an undocumented status on familial relationships (e.g., closeness or contention) is important to consider, yet is an area that has not been researched.

Findings from this study highlight the resilience of participants and their families through their use of numerous coping strategies. Resilience is a notable characteristic in the Latinx culture, which has been widely documented in the literature. The Latinx community's resilience is also shown in the present study through their adaptation to current times in the development of new strategies to cope with present challenges; however, there are relatively few studies examining these strategies as they were recently created. Brabeck et al. (2016), Fernández-Esquer et al. (2017), and Mendez-Shannon and

Bailey (2016) wrote about immigrants transforming their challenges into success; Castrellón, Rivarola, & López (2017) about conversing/processing about fears as a coping strategy; Wray-Lake et al. (2018) focused on increased political engagement to cope with fears; and Enriquez (2015) on developing an emergency plan—all of which participants in the current study discussed.

Increased political engagement and the development of an emergency plan are coping strategies that were recently developed. The current sociopolitical climate and immigration policies are underscored by anti-immigrant sentiment, which caused an increased and substantial level of fear in participants and their families. Because there are now more risks, such as deportation and family separation, families need to be prepared and are creating emergency plans to protect themselves and their loved ones, which many of the participants did in this study. The emergency plan also assists families in navigating those difficult situations. Further, as participants now feel oppressed, marginalized, and voiceless as a result of the anti-immigrant climate and immigration policies that currently exist, they have become more politically engaged in order to cope, gain a sense of justice, and make their voices heard. This resonated with me because when my parents were undocumented, our family often spoke about the implications of their status. However, while the risk of deportation was always present, we did not feel that it was necessary to have an emergency plan. The fact that many immigrant families have to create an emergency plan is quite scary and saddening because it shows the level of fear they have and the reality of the risks they have to take in their daily lives. These new coping strategies illustrate a difference between being an undocumented immigrant before and during Trump's presidency.

This study was situated within the historical moment described by Torres, Santiago, Walts, and Richards (2018), where increased deportations, family separation, militarized borders, limited access to asylum, construction of detention facilities, and expansion of expedited removal were all central to participants' stories. Participants described living in an anti-immigrant climate, which significantly impacted them individually and as a family unit. One of the consequences of this climate on participants was feeling an increased awareness of their undocumented status. Fear of exposure and deportation is something that has always been a part of undocumented immigrants' lives, which research supports (Arbona et al., 2010; Brabeck et al., 2016; Enriquez, 2015; Fernández-Esquer et al., 2017; Gurrola & Ayón, 2018; Hatzenbuehler et al., 2017; Mendez-Shannon & Bailey, 2016; Rodriguez, 2018; Stacciarini et al., 2015; Wray-Lake et al., 2018). Participants, however, noted that the risk of deportation was always a thought, not a constant worry or fear that permeated their lives as it does now. Additionally, they did not fear exposure in the past as they do now, resulting in constant thinking about their status, even subconsciously, as Luis mentioned. In turn, they have heightened fears of exposure, deportation, and family separation. Clients I have worked with clinically have brought this up, even those who are still minors. The negative impact it has on their mental health is striking.

Other consequences of the current sociopolitical climate and immigration policies that participants talked about are increased racism, discrimination, xenophobia, horizontal discrimination, feelings of exclusion, marginalization, criminalization, and feeling voiceless. While many immigrant groups have experienced racism and discrimination (Arbona et al., 2010; Brabeck et al., 2016; Castrellón et al. 2017; Fernández-Esquer et al.,

2017; Gurrola & Ayón, 2018; Hatzenbuehler et al., 2017; Mendez-Shannon & Bailey, 2016; Perreira et al., 2015; Stacciarini et al., 2015; Wray-Lake et al., 2018), the present anti-immigrant sentiment has taken on a decidedly racial and cultural tone resulting in increased discrimination and marginalization. Further, the media links immigrants, particularly undocumented ones, with social problems ranging from violent crime to tax evasion (Waldman, Ventura, Savillo, Lin, & Lewis, 2008).

A number of states including Florida, have passed strict anti-undocumented immigrant laws. Both the media and anti-immigrant policies result in the criminalization of undocumented immigrants. In my work with immigrants clients have brought up all of these issues. Consequently, they experience mental health concerns related to stress, anxiety, uncertainty, and trauma, as participants in this study have. Additionally, participants pointed out that there is a division in the United States between those who are for immigration, and others who are against it. While immigration has always been a central issue, it has not created the division that exists today. Participants attributed this to Trump making harsher immigration policies a part of his election campaign and presidential term, and his anti-immigrant rhetoric fuels this new division.

The effects of the anti-immigrant sociopolitical climate and policies on participants' families was striking to me. As a daughter of immigrants, I can certainly understand the fear that exists; however, I found that this fear transcends international borders. Participants' family members who live in other countries are worried about their well-being and the risks of deportation. While the fear in families has extensively been documented (Arbona et al., 2010; Brabeck et al., 2016; Enriquez, 2015; Fernández-Esquer et al., 2017; Gurrola & Ayón, 2018; Hatzenbuehler et al., 2017; Mendez-Shannon

& Bailey, 2016; Rodriguez, 2018; Stacciarini et al., 2015; Wray-Lake et al., 2018), studies focus exclusively on immediate families and exclude family members in participants' countries of origins. I have experienced this in my clinical work as well, and clients have conversations about the sociopolitical climate, changes in immigration policies, their fears, and the risks with family members still living in their country of origin. Thus, the fear has a large systemic impact.

Another interesting finding was the mention of hate crimes. This was brought up by only one participant, but it had a significant impact on her. Studies support the findings that immigrants experience racism and discrimination (Arbona et al., 2010; Brabeck et al., 2016; Castrellón et al. 2017; Fernández-Esquer et al., 2017; Gurrola & Ayón, 2018; Hatzenbuehler et al., 2017; Mendez-Shannon & Bailey, 2016; Perreira et al., 2015; Stacciarini et al., 2015; Wray-Lake et al., 2018). However, none have cited hate crimes even though two of the studies (Castrellón et al., 2017; Wray-Lake et al., 2018) were conducted in the present sociopolitical climate. Carla brought up the existence and frequency of these crimes and said that she now fears for her life and experiences trauma. She stated these hate crimes are a result of Trump's hateful speech toward minority groups, as he normalizes and even encourages hateful speech and behaviors. This not only impacts her, but also affects her immediate family and family in her home country and they worry about her safety and caution her to be careful. It will be interesting to see if hate crimes are mentioned in future studies.

A major takeaway from this study is the negative impact the current sociopolitical climate and immigration policies have on the well-being and mental health of undocumented immigrants and their families. The lives of participants and their families

in this study are shaped by harsh immigration laws and policies that threaten deportation, family separation, limit their mobility, prevent access to legal employment, and restrict their access to services. Further, they live with uncertainty about what will happen to them and each other, which causes much psychological distress (e.g., worry, stress, anxiety, trauma) and a heightened need to be cautious. To my knowledge, only two studies (Gurrola & Ayón, 2018; Hatzenbuehler et al., 2017) have examined associations between immigration policies and mental health; however, those studies do not include new immigration policies.

### **Connection of Findings to the Ecological Model of Human Development**

This study was grounded in Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model of human development as it examines multiple ecological systems of interaction in order to gain a better understanding of a particular phenomenon or experience. This theoretical framework was useful in exploring the experience of undocumented immigrants in the United States as it showed that their status along with the current sociopolitical climate and immigration policies affected participants and their families across the five ecological systems—micro, meso, exo, macro, chrono. The participants' experiences were interdependent, so it did not make sense to organize the data by system level because there was much overlap across ecological systems.

The findings of this study showed that participants' undocumented status resulted in limited opportunities and restrictions. This impacted participants' microsystems as their undocumented status limited them in terms of employment opportunities. Because of their status, participants could only seek low-paying and/or dangerous jobs. Further, they were confined to domestic work, construction, agriculture, and the food industry. At

the level of the mesosystem, participants' relationships with peers were negatively impacted as they experienced language difficulties and could not communicate others, which resulted in isolation. Families experienced the consequences of their undocumented family members' status, which showed an interaction between the micro- and exosystem. While individuals were supposed to be protected by their authorized status, they felt the effects of an undocumented status because of their close family ties. Moreover, these limitations and restrictions cut to the exosystem as participants did not have access to social services, financial aid, or health care because of their undocumented status. In the same way, they faced challenges in changing their legal status, which is related to government agencies (exosystem).

The findings also showed that participants and their families experienced a significant fear of deportation, which resulted in psychological distress. Psychological distress is the microsystem of the individual, but cuts across to the mesosystem of family interaction with the individual. The psychological distress not only resulted from a fear of deportation, but also a fear of separation, heightened awareness of status, and uncertainty. This fear led participants and their families to feel a lack of safety and a need to be cautious to protect their, or their family's members, status from being discovered. Relatedly, participants and their families experienced a change in family dynamics as they feared what could happen to the system because of the presence of an undocumented status. This tension led to closeness or served as a source of conflict, which shows an impact on the family microsystem.

Further, participants described the current sociopolitical climate as anti-immigrant, demonstrating the impact of the macrosystem on individuals, families, and



communities. They attributed this to the president's anti-immigrant rhetoric which resulted in anti-immigrant sentiment in the U.S. Because of this, there is increased racism and xenophobia. Social structures (exosystem), such as government agencies, the media, and community are underscored with anti-immigrant sentiment which negatively impacted the participants' lives and those of their families. Relatedly, the current perceptions of immigrants, particularly those of undocumented Latinx, are negative—they are fueled by the president's anti-immigrant comments which are then reinforced through continuous media coverage, highlighting the interactional influence of the exosystem and macrosystem on each other and creating negative effects on undocumented immigrants and their families.

Finally, Trump's election in 2016 is considered a significant sociohistorical event as it has marked the lives of many, particularly the Latinx population. This constitutes the chronosystem as it is an event that creates change over time. The president's election campaign and presidency have been grounded in anti-immigrant rhetoric and harsh immigration policies. This has a trickle-down effect on all system levels as it has impacted the perceptions of immigrants and policies that are passed.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

A strength of this study is the focus on the experiences of undocumented Central American immigrants, a population that has been largely excluded from research. While there is extensive literature on the Latinx population, the majority focuses on Mexicans. This is because Mexicans have historically been the largest Latinx subgroup in the United States; however, the presence of Central Americans is rapidly increasing. It is useful to study the Central American subgroup because they have different experiences from those

of Mexicans as they come from countries with unique sociopolitical and economic contexts, and face dissimilar challenges. A related strength is the IPA methodology, which allowed me to provide an in-depth description of participants' experiences, as it focuses on "personal meaning and sense-making in a particular context for people who share a particular experience" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 45). A potential limitation of the study is the small sample size. However, in qualitative research this is common practice in order to collect extensive detail about each participant (Creswell, 2013). Therefore, the sample size was also a strength because it allowed a complex, detailed description of participants' experiences. As a result, I was able to obtain a better understanding of participants' experiences and those of their families, which I intended to do.

Another strength is my personal experience as a daughter of undocumented Central American immigrants and clinician who works with undocumented immigrants. This insider perspective gave me access to a population that is very hard to reach, particularly in today's sociopolitical climate. Despite having an insider status, it was quite difficult to recruit participants. In fact, it was significantly more challenging than I expected. When I began to recruit participants, I expected to have an influx of interested individuals—I was sure my insider status was enough to gain their trust. Although I had this status, individuals were hesitant to speak with me because of their fear and risks associated with revealing their status to someone unknown. I then had to work closely with friends who worked with this population in order to recruit participants. My friends identified potential participants, spoke about my study, and vouched for me. This was enough to get them to speak with me about what the study entailed, but not enough for them to agree to participate—I still had to prove myself.

Being a daughter of Central American immigrants, having a Latinx identity, and speaking Spanish were factors that helped me to begin to build trust with participants. Disclosing information about my family and our experiences is what allowed me to fully obtain the trust of participants who were otherwise hesitant to share their experiences. Because of the vulnerability of this population, participants are especially at risk of exploitation and oppression. Therefore, a strength of the study is the measures taken to provide protection to participants throughout the study, such as the use of pseudonyms, checking in on participants during interviews, careful storing of data, providing resources to participants, and withholding specific identifiable demographic information in the write up of the study.

My personal background could also be viewed as a limitation as it could potentially create bias in the questions I asked during the interviews and the way I interpreted the resulting data. To this end, I took various precautions to minimize this as much as possible. When creating the interview guide for my study, I based the questions on past literature related to the Latinx population and made sure the questions addressed all of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems. Other precautions I took were to implement auditing and member checking. My dissertation chair audited my themes and subthemes, and when I had a final draft, participants reviewed the results to ensure I accurately described their experiences. Additionally, I consulted with my dissertation chair throughout the entire dissertation process. While it is not possible to completely separate our experiences and perceptions when conducting research, the precautions I took were helpful in reducing their presence and increasing trustworthiness and credibility.

## **Implications of the Study**

### **Individuals, Family, and Community**

The findings of this study have significant implications for Latinx individuals, families, and community. Because an undocumented immigration status indicates that an individual does not have legal permission to be in the country, findings show it has a twofold impact on individuals and families: first, on their mental health, and second, on their opportunities and access to services and supports. An undocumented status is associated with mental health concerns for both individuals and their families, including worries about their legal status; the inability to change their status; preoccupation with disclosure and deportation; limited education and employment opportunities; financial issues; language barriers; discrimination; criminalization; and marginalization. These challenges increase the risk for mental health concerns such as worry, stress, anxiety, uncertainty, and trauma.

Those at risk are not only undocumented individuals, but also their family members, as they are bonded through strong social ties, day-to-day interactions, and dependency on each other (Enriquez, 2015). As a whole, the Latinx community is at risk for workplace issues; economic instability; access issues in terms of education, health care, and other services and supports; and discrimination in public spaces. This is concerning as research shows immigrants experience trauma in their countries of origin and their journey to the United States, which is then exacerbated by the challenges faced in the United States. In light of these challenges, undocumented Central American immigrants are resilient, and they utilize numerous strategies to cope (e.g., creating emergency plans, being politically active), as participants in this study demonstrated.

Therefore, it is recommended that Latinx individuals, families, and community continue implementing strategies that assist them in coping with the various stressors they face. In doing so, they will reduce the negative mental health effects that come with them.

This study also has implications for community-based service providers as they can obtain a better understanding of the immigrant population and their unique needs. In Florida, there are several community-based organizations that provide services to immigrants; however, services are limited to legal representation, advocacy, and educational programs. While this is a great starting point, the Latinx community needs comprehensive services, such as family therapy, healthcare, financial support, and employment assistance. Community-based organizations can build on the services they already provide and develop innovative practices to help immigrants build social networks and a sense of community, provide training to help health and human service providers to effectively work with immigrant clients, have translation and interpretation services, and offer other resources that help them navigate their lives in the United States. Through these efforts, organizations can assist in building communities where all immigrants can thrive.

### **Schools**

Findings from this study show that an undocumented status and the changing immigration policies impact entire family systems, and family members who are legally authorized to be in the United States also suffer negative effects. A large number of those affected family members are children, and approximately 5.5 million children have at least one undocumented parent (Suárez-Orozco, Yoshikawa, Teranishi, & Suárez-Orozco, 2011). Thus, the shifting immigration climate and policies affect millions of

students, and the new policies target all immigrants and contribute to their vulnerabilities ultimately impacting their experience and those of their families. This has significant implications for schools as they serve countless students of immigrant families.

Therefore, schools should prepare themselves to work with immigrant communities and know how to best support students and their families.

One way schools can help immigrant families is by becoming allies and building support systems for immigrant families. In order to become allies, schools should create a welcoming environment; one that celebrates all students and families. Educators and schools can achieve this by regularly expressing that families are welcome (preferably in their language), posting welcome signs and messages of support around the school in multiple languages, and making statements of support available on the school's website in multiple languages. Additionally, educators can learn a few phrases in the families' language to make them feel welcome and show their support. Importantly, if the student's teacher does not speak the same language as the student and/or their family, there should be a bilingual or multilingual point person they can speak to if they have any questions or need information. It is imperative for students, families, teachers, and school staff to be able to communicate with each other. Further, educators can incorporate diverse material so that all students are represented.

Schools should also raise teacher and staff awareness of immigrants' experiences to increase sensitivity and understanding. This in turn will help them become more attuned to their students' needs and will assist them in providing the appropriate resources. Further, schools can let immigrant students and families know that they stand with them by being vocal of their support. An example of how to do this is by displaying

signs that show support for all students and families. There are also campaigns educators can participate in such as #UnafraidEducator, which demonstrates supports towards immigrant students and families. This will help students and families feel safe and make it clear that you are a safe person to talk to. Moreover, educators and schools should not ignore current events or the rhetoric about immigration. Instead, they should be prepared to address anti-immigrant language or behaviors that occur.

Another way schools can help immigrant families is by building or improving support systems for them. First, schools should research the resources their district and state already have available. Then, they should create a sheet or pamphlet with information about available immigrant services and resources. This should be accessible in multiple languages as students and families may not read or speak English. Examples of helpful resources are legal, medical, social, and education services. Schools can also include information about immigrants' rights. School staff should be informed about these resources so they can give them to their students or students' families if needed. Further, these resources should be placed in areas that are visible to parents so they can easily access them.

Because of the shifting immigrant climate and policies, schools are questioning how far they can legally go to protect their students. Like places of worship, schools are sensitive locations, meaning that U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and Customs and Border Protection (CBP) cannot engage in immigration enforcement unless they received prior approval by a supervisor or there are exigent circumstances (American Civil Liberties Union [ACLU], 2017).). Thus, ICE and CBP generally will not arrest, interview, search, or surveil a person for immigration enforcement purposes while

at a school, a known school bus stop, or an educational activity. Despite this policy, there have been reports of ICE enforcement actions in the immediate vicinity of sensitive locations. Therefore, schools need to be prepared in the event that ICE or CBP show up. Schools can do this by developing a procedure or plan. The ACLU (2017) recommends directing the ICE or CBP agents to the superintendent, who should request to see written legal authorization and verify the identity of the agent(s). If the agents do not have a judicial warrant that is signed by a judge, they should request legal review before allowing agents further into the school. Only a judicial warrant, not an administrative warrant, will allow ICE agents to enter locations in which there is a reasonable expectation of privacy. Further, the National Educational Association (NEA) has an online sample of a safe zone resolution that is accessible to everyone for free. After developing a plan that is approved by administration, all staff members—particularly those in the front office—should know how to respond if ICE or CBP officers want to see a student’s records or detain a student. It is recommended that once the plan is developed, school staff should hold a training so everyone knows how to respond.

Schools can further protect students and their families by employing practices that protect their information and privacy. For instance, school administrators can limit the information collected from students, provide a variety of methods for establishing necessary information for enrollment (including alternatives for students who lack traditional proof of residence), and review district policies and practices regarding the management and use of student data (ACLU, 2017). Further, schools should not ask students for information that may indicate a student’s immigration status. According to the ACLU (2017), the Federal Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) prevents



schools from releasing students' education records, including information about immigration status, except in extenuating circumstances. Therefore, schools may not disclose information to ICE officials unless they have consent of a parent or a student (if 18 or older) or if necessary to comply with a judicial order or a subpoena signed by a judge. Protecting students' and families' information is especially important as all students have the right to a free, public K-12 education, regardless of their immigration status or that of their parents. This includes access to services and programs such as free- and reduced-priced meals, school activities, therapy, and so on. For many immigrant students and families, schools are often the primary place to receive support services. Therefore, it is imperative for schools to support immigrant students and families by protecting their information and privacy and making their education and support services accessible to them.

### **Family Therapy and Mental Health**

As shown in this study, undocumented Central American immigrants experience mental health issues related to anxiety, trauma, stress, and discrimination as a result of the current sociopolitical climate and immigration policies. These mental health problems do not only affect undocumented individuals, but also their families. In responding to these mental health needs, there are several important considerations. First, there is a need for culturally sensitive and appropriate services. Because the immigrant population is unique with their own set of challenges, mental health professionals should inform themselves and become knowledgeable on this. Clinicians should be informed on the sociopolitical and economic contexts that currently exist in the clients' countries of origin

as it will guide them on areas to inquire about related to clients' experiences prior to living in the United States.

Further, clinicians should ask for the path of migration and the circumstances surrounding it as this could have a significant impact on a clients' experience. Immigrants migrate for various reasons, such as fleeing economic crisis, sexual violence, civil war, and government corruption. Each situation can lead individuals to present with unique symptoms in treatment. Therapists should also be aware of and attend to the trauma immigrants face, as immigrants experience trauma before, during, and after migrating. Once in the United States, immigrants face other sets of challenges. Clinicians should explore how immigrants' legal status affects their experience, as this study and existing literature has shown that it has negative mental health effects on the individual and their family. This will aid therapists in areas of inquiry during the assessment and treatment process. Through my own experience, I have found that having knowledge of these subjects facilitates establishing a therapeutic relationship with clients because they feel understood, which increases their level of comfort and trust.

Clinicians should be sensitive when asking questions regarding clients' migratory experience and legal status as individuals can be mistrusting of professionals due their legal status. Clinicians are perceived as authority figures and are often lumped into a group of people undocumented immigrants assume they cannot trust and they may not be so forthcoming in therapy. Thus, establishing rapport is especially important in the assessment process. It is recommended therapists adapt a non-expert stance and lead from a step behind in order to reduce the power hierarchy and make clients feel more

comfortable. Falicov (2007) recommends clinicians to remain collaborative and uncritical in order to build a relationship that will foster openness and trust.

Confidentiality is another important consideration when working with undocumented immigrants. While confidentiality is a requirement for all mental health professionals, it is particularly significant when working with this population. This study, along with existing literature, has shown that undocumented Latinx immigrants are fearful of their status becoming discovered by others because of the various possible risks they face. Therefore, confidentiality is key when working with this population. It is recommended that clinicians have an extensive conversation about confidentiality, and practices in place to protect it. Therapists should assure clients that they are not interested in disclosing their status, but rather helping them. Conversations about confidentiality might extend beyond the first session, as clients may express concerns about it throughout treatment. Therefore, clinicians should underscore confidentiality in order to form therapeutic relationships with clients and increase trust and comfort, which will allow individuals and families to feel safe to share their experiences.

Confidentiality is of utmost importance given the severe risks undocumented immigrants face, especially today. A report that was recently shared by The Washington Post focused on the case of a 19-year-old Honduran young man who was seeking asylum because of the violence he experienced in Honduras (Dreier, 2020). His initial request for asylum was granted by an asylum judge, but was then overturned when ICE appealed this decision based on therapy notes they received. According to the report, other unaccompanied immigrant children have been similarly held in detention based on information ICE obtained by accessing confidential psychotherapy notes. The American

Psychological Association (APA) (2020) explained that the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) entered into a formal memorandum of agreement with ICE in April 2018 to share details about children in its care. Trump's administration requires that minors who are detained in U.S. shelters undergo therapy upon entering the United States (Dreier, 2020). Therapists are then required to gather specific information about the minors, such as criminal history (NPR, 2020). Notes taken during sessions are then passed onto ICE, which they can use against minors in court (Dreier, 2020).

These practices are highly concerning as therapy is supposed to help children in these situations adjust and process the trauma they have faced—instead, therapy is used against them. While this is a very unethical practice, it is one that is legal. The National Association of Social Workers (NASW), APA, and American Counseling Association (ACA) denounce this practice—the APA expressed “shock and outrage” (p. 1) that the ORR has been sharing confidential psychotherapy notes with ICE to deny asylum to immigrant youth. The NASW (2020), APA (2020), and ACA (2020) note that this practice destroys the bond between clinicians and their clients, which is crucial when working with all clients, particularly those who experienced trauma. To this end, the ACA (2020) demanded that “government agencies respect the sanctity of the established confidentiality upon which our core professional standards are built” (p. 1).

While counseling organizations have not given guidelines as to how to navigate this situation, clinicians should take appropriate steps to protect client confidentiality. The ACA (2020) urges mental health professionals to “be aware of policies that govern their individual work settings so they can better understand how it may impact client confidentiality” (p. 1). Further, clinicians should review their code of ethics. They should

keep in mind the principles of beneficence, nonmaleficence, fidelity, responsibility, integrity, justice, and respect for people's rights and dignity. Above all, we must remember to do no harm and safeguard the welfare of our clients. The American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT) has remained silent on this issue.

Thus, therapists should consider ways to maintain client confidentiality while adhering to the ethical and legal guidelines for our field. To protect clients, some clinicians are now keeping two sets of clinical notes or leave things out entirely (Dreier, 2020). Another suggestion is for clinicians to revise their paperwork. For instance, some practices or agencies ask for clients' social security. If possible, this should be removed from intake paperwork as this is an indicator of an individual's legal status. Further, if an individual's undocumented status disqualifies them from receiving services, it should be documented as "not eligible" instead of "not eligible because of undocumented status." Additionally, an individual's status should not be included in intake or discharge paperwork or progress notes. It is important for clinicians to become familiar with the guidelines of their place of work so they can find ways to protect their clients while adhering to the establishment's protocols. Overall, clinicians should be cautious of what they write in their paperwork and progress notes and consider the language they use so that they include necessary information while protecting their clients. Clinicians should ensure that what they write cannot potentially harm their clients.

Findings from my study showed that family should be considered when working with immigrants. Some participants were currently separated from family while others were reunited with them. For some, the separation and/or reunification of family was a

source of distress. In all cases, it was shown that participants' undocumented status not only affected their mental health but affected that of their families as well. Therefore, when working with undocumented immigrants, families should be invited to participate in treatment. In therapy, families can address relational issues related to an undocumented status, challenges of separation and/or reunification, and improve their communication and learn tools to deal with conflict. In terms of the impact of an undocumented status, families can process the mental health concerns they face—*anxiety, trauma, and stress*—and provide support to each other. Thus, family therapy can assist immigrant families in strengthening relationships, developing coping skills, and increasing resilience.

In addition to providing therapy, it is recommended that clinicians take on other roles in order to provide culturally sensitive and appropriate services. Oftentimes, immigrants who recently arrive to this country do not have information about available resources and/or may be fearful of seeking them because of their legal status. Thus, clinicians can aid clients in locating available services to them, such as legal services, adult education, family services, youth programs, food pantries, scholarships, and so on. These services provide additional supports and may assist in reducing psychological symptoms associated with challenges they face. Additionally, therapists can educate undocumented immigrants on their rights, which can reduce their anxiety and/or fear, and empower them.

Another role that mental health professionals can consider taking on is that of advocacy. The AAMFT (2015) code of ethics recognize commitment to service and advocacy as a responsibility to the profession, and even view it as equally important to all other aspects of the field. It notes states that marriage and family therapists (MFTs)

should participate “in activities that contribute to a better community and society” as it is “essential to the character of the field, and to the well-being of clients and their communities” (p. 1). Given that current immigration policies are detrimental to the well-being and mental health of undocumented immigrants and their families, MFTs and other professionals can engage in advocacy efforts to aid in the development of a better community and society and contribute to the well-being of immigrants and their communities. Examples are to donate time and/or money to organizations that serve immigrants; educating themselves on current pending legislative issues affecting immigrant families and calling and/or writing to elected officials frequently; and support practical, humane immigration policies that consider the needs of immigrants and asylum seekers (Jarquin, Alfaro, & Rambo, 2018). As previously mentioned, it is imperative for clinicians who work with undocumented immigrants to educate themselves on immigrant rights and resources available to them, and to speak about this with clients when needed.

While the AAMFT (2015) code of ethics recognizes commitment to service and advocacy as a responsibility to the profession, it does not explicitly describe advocacy as a component of our roles as marriage and family therapists. The code of ethics has vague language related to MFTs’ responsibility to advocacy. As previously stated, it notes that MFTs should participate “in activities that contribute to a better community and society” as it is “essential to the character of the field, and to the well-being of clients and their communities” (p. 1). These vague statements imply that MFTs should engage in advocacy as this promotes the well-being of our clients and communities which contribute to a better community and society, but it is not enough. This is especially true now given the current sociopolitical climate and changes to immigration policies which

negatively affect various aspects of individual and families, including their mental health. Findings from existing and the present study show the detrimental effects on our clients, community, and society. As an MFT who works with this population and other marginalized populations who are affected, I see the need for us to do more. As therapists, we have to hold multiple hats in order to effectively meet our clients' needs. While therapy helps, it is not enough. Therefore, the field should strive to do more. This should be supported by the AAMFT code of ethics (2015) by elaborating on the activities we should engage in to "contribute to a better community and society" and promote "the well-being of clients and their communities (p. 1). One of those activities is advocacy, which should be explicitly stated as one of the responsibilities of MFTs.

Findings from this study also showed that both participants and their families are significantly affected by the current sociopolitical climate. Therefore, in order to effectively work with the immigrant population, it is imperative for clinicians to be informed about the ways they are reacting to the climate and how they are affected by policies and rhetoric. Clinicians should be aware of the increased levels of fear, anxiety, stress, and trauma that Latinx immigrants currently experience. Further, many Latinx immigrants feel threatened by the current sociopolitical climate and immigration policies and are afraid of what will happen to them and their families. Wray-Lake et al. (2018) note that feeling heard has psychological benefits for the Latinx population. Therefore, it is recommended for clinicians to inquire about clients' experiences related to the current sociopolitical climate and policies. Hearing about and understanding these experiences will help Latinx immigrants feel supported and empowered.



Aside from informing themselves on how to provide culturally sensitive and appropriate services to the Latinx immigrant population, it is recommended that clinicians offer training and consultation to other practitioners. This would lead to an increase in mental health professions that are able to understand, communicate with, and effectively work with these individuals and families. Providing consultation to other practitioners that work with immigrants would ensure they are providing culturally sensitive and appropriate care, which is a barrier immigrant clients currently experience. It is also recommended to increase the number of bilingual providers, making services more accessible to non-English speaking clients. It is important to note that while speaking the same language as clients is an important step, it is not enough, particularly with this population. Therefore, clinicians that speak Spanish who are intending to work with Latinx immigrants should also be knowledgeable about the population and the unique challenges they face in order to better assist them. Further, they should consult with clinicians who regularly work with this population to ensure they are providing appropriate care.

### **Society and Government**

Research shows that immigrants experience significant trauma before, during, and after migrating (Foster, 2001; Kaltman et al., 2011; Li, 2016; Rojas-Flores et al., 2013). The circumstances that force them to leave their countries, their journey to the United States, and adapting to a new country and culture create unique challenges for immigrants. Once in the United States, immigrants face additional stressors related to their legal status, fear of deportation and family separation, racism, discrimination, marginalization, and criminalization. Trump has exacerbated these stressors by enacting

immigration policies that increase deportations, separate families, limit access to asylum, increase border security, expand expedited removal throughout the country, construct detention facilities, and increase the detention of noncitizens (Department of Homeland Security, 2018). In this study, participants indicated that they are now experiencing increased levels of racism, discrimination, xenophobia, and marginalization as a result of Trump's anti-immigrant rhetoric and anti-immigrant sentiment. This deepens the mental health concerns of undocumented immigrants and their families. With this in mind, it is suggested for policymakers to support practical, humane immigration policies that promote health and well-being among immigrants.

Based on existing literature and present findings, it is recommended to dismantle policies that separate families or prolong families' detainment. Instead, policies should aim to keep families together, considering the long-term negative mental health effects on individuals and families. For this same reason, families should be able to stay together while they await immigration hearings or other legal processes. Policies should be created that support immigrant children and families' critical health and care needs by ensuring immigrants have access to supports that promote children and families' healthy development. Additionally, individuals and families should not be penalized for using government supports. The "public charge" rule intentionally increases the barriers immigrants already face in regard to obtaining a legal status in the United States by allowing officials to deny immigrants' applications if they use, or are predicted to use, public programs. Examples of these programs are medical care, food, shelter, and other basic necessities. Aside from creating barriers to obtaining a legal status in the United

States., it also negatively impacts the overall health, financial security, and well-being of individuals and families.

Policies should highlight the needs of immigrants and their families, such as allowing for authorized employment, protection from workplace abuses, and granting driver's licenses. Authorized employment would allow undocumented immigrants to legally enter the workforce, contribute to the economy, and decrease unemployment and poverty rates in the immigrant community. Granting driver's licenses to undocumented immigrants would not only benefit them, but would also benefit society by boosting state revenue because individuals would pay license fees and taxes associated with the purchase of vehicles. Obtaining a driver's license requires taking a driver's test, learning common traffic rules and signs, and submitting to a vision and hearing screen, which would increase safety on the roads. Moreover, this would increase accessibility to transportation which would then impact various aspects of immigrants' lives. For instance, it would facilitate going to and from work, going to appointments, picking up their children from school, and so on.

Another recommendation is to develop policies that increase pathway to citizenship. Latinx immigrants face dire situations in their countries of origin. Individuals and families are forced out of their countries for various reasons, such as poverty, war, natural disasters, crime, political concerns, religious and ethnic identity persecution, and/or to seek protection and security (APA, 2012). Thus, migration is a matter of survival. As the United States recognizes the right legal right of asylum, this should be honored without criminalizing, turning back, or separating families, particularly because they are seeking an opportunity to survive. A common misconception is that it is simple

for immigrants to come to the United States legally; however, that is not the case, especially now with immigration policies that restrict asylum and legal permanent immigration.

Another common misconception is that immigrants come to the United States to live off of welfare; however, research and current findings show this is incorrect. Immigrants want to obtain a legal status to be able to gainful employment, contribute to the economy, and support their families. To increase pathways to citizenship, policymakers can provide a permanent solution to immigrants with a Temporary Protected Status (TPS). Further, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) should not be terminated as it not only benefits DACA recipients, but the United States as well. The DACA program has economic benefits not only for recipients, their families, and community members, but also the country as a whole as it allows for productivity, advancement, and continued growth of the economy and its inhabitants. Ending DACA would mean deporting individuals who have established a life, family, and career in the United States, and taking away the opportunity for others to do so. While there is a need to balance immigration policies with national security and public safety, immigrants are likely to experience mental health concerns which can be exacerbated by harmful immigration policies. The development of policies that positively impact the overall health, stability, and well-being of individuals and families would help reduce these mental health issues.

Finally, the formal memorandum of agreement between the ORR and ICE should be dissolved as it has severe negative consequences for immigrant youth. I stand with NASW, APA, and ACA who demand to cease the sharing of immigrant youths'

confidential psychotherapy notes with ICE. The NASW (2020) state that sharing confidential notes without clients' knowledge or consent is "an affront to this country's basic principles of protecting the civil rights of all people" (p. 1). Further, they demand this stop immediately, and called on the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), Department of Homeland Security (DHS), and Congress to conduct an investigation. They also demand ICE to release immigrants who have had their asylum requests denied because of this practice (APA 2020; NASW, 2020). Therapy should assist immigrant youth in processing the trauma they experienced and adjusting to life in the United States, rather than retraumatizing them and placing them at risk.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Future research might examine differences among undocumented Latinxs living in different parts of the United States, such as urban vs. rural, and liberal vs. conservative areas. The participants in this study live in a state with a large immigrant population, so it would be interesting to explore how geographical and demographic differences impact undocumented immigrants' experiences. Another area for future research is examine the difference in experiences among various Latinx subgroups. Currently, most of the research focuses on the Mexican immigrant subgroup. It would be important to include immigrants from other Latinx countries because they have unique sociopolitical and economic contexts, migrate in different ways, and have dissimilar paths to citizenship which ultimately impact their experience.

This research was conducted in a time when immigration was at the center of controversy, and consequently resulted in various changes in immigration policy. Therefore, future research might investigate the impact of specific immigration policies

on immigrant experiences. Additionally, as laws vary state by state, future research might examine the impact of state-level policies on undocumented immigrants' experiences. Some states have punitive immigration laws while other states that have more supportive ones. Therefore, it would be beneficial to examine the differences in experience based on the state-level policies that exist, which allow researchers to determine the effects of these policies on individual and family mental health and would aid in future policy development.

Related to the changes in immigration policy, all five participants noted that under Trump's presidency, an anti-immigrant climate has developed. All participants pointed out a difference in anti-immigrant sentiment in the country, and a difference in their experiences in previous years compared to now. Thus, researchers can study the differences in experiences of immigrants in previous years under other presidencies, and the experiences of immigrants now in Trump's presidency. Further, researchers should study both undocumented and documented individuals as this study showed that all immigrants are affected by the current presidency and sociopolitical climate, regardless of status.

Exploring the impact of immigration status on family relationships is another area for future research. Existing studies examine the various ways in which an undocumented status impacts the family system (e.g., Brabeck et al., 2016; Fernández-Esquer et al., 2017; Gurrola & Ayón, 2018; Rodriguez, 2018), but does not explore the effect on family relationships, specifically. This would be beneficial as there are so many families with at least one undocumented member, and the present findings show that this impacts familial relationships. An interesting finding from this study was the effects on family

relationships of growing up separated from your parents and reunification after so many years apart. Both children and parents who lived this spoke about how difficult the experience was. Future research can examine the experiences of children whose parents migrated to another country, and parents who migrated to another country without their children. Researchers can also study the relationships of families who reunite after so many years apart. This would be beneficial to mental health and other helping professionals as this is the reality of many immigrant families in the United States and would aid in providing appropriate treatment.

Sullivan and Rehm (2005) found that there is a gap in the literature in the mental health field regarding undocumented immigrants' experiences, as most research on the topic has been conducted in the disciplines of sociology, anthropology, or public policy. Therefore, it is recommended for MFTs to examine the multigenerational connections to how families make the decision to migrate to the United States. Existing studies and the present one, along with my personal experience, indicate that families have difficult lives in their countries of origin as they experience high levels of violence, homicide rates, gang activity, poverty, lack of economic opportunity, and other challenges. Because of this, they consider migrating to the United States where they face a new myriad of challenges, such as difficulties obtaining documentation, poor living conditions, lack of job opportunities, discrimination, lack of access to services and education, and deportation or detention for those who are arriving without permission (Foster, 2001). Essentially, families are left to decide between two difficult situations. It would be interesting to explore why so many families decide the context in the United States is better than the context in their countries of origin. This would provide MFTs and other

mental health professionals with valuable information about their clients to better meet their needs by providing culturally competent services.

### **Conclusion**

This study expanded on the ways in which we understand the experiences of undocumented Central American immigrants in the United States. Findings from this study showed the various factors that force immigrants to flee their countries, such as poverty, political instability, crime, and/or to seek protection and security. The myriad of reasons for migration are all underscored by survival—individuals and families flee to have an opportunity to live. Once in the United States, they work hard in order to support themselves and their families; however, they are faced with numerous challenges, which they must overcome to survive. Their undocumented status significantly impacts the well-being of individuals and their families across multiple system levels—micro, meso, exo, macro, chrono. Consequently, undocumented individuals and family members in both the United States and in their home countries, experience psychological distress, such as worry, stress, anxiety, uncertainty, and trauma. As demonstrated in this study, these stressors are exacerbated by the current sociopolitical context and immigration policies.

On a societal level, this study aimed to humanize undocumented immigrants by giving them a platform where they could make their voices heard and share their stories. Today's sociopolitical climate is filled with anti-immigrant rhetoric, stating that immigrants disproportionately commit criminal acts and hurt the United States economy (Torres et al., 2018). As a result, this creates a negative image of undocumented immigrants which leads to their criminalization and gives way to anti-immigrant policies.



Undocumented immigrants, therefore, experience social rejection, discrimination, stress, shame, and live in isolation (del Real, 2019), which affects their overall experience, well-being, and mental health. Individuals and their families also experience heightened levels of fear of deportation and family separation, awareness of status, lack of safety, and an increase in racism and xenophobia, as participants in this study contested to.

As shown in this study, undocumented immigrants have much resiliency and have developed coping strategies to manage the constant threat of deportation and family separation, but this alone is not enough. It is crucial for clinicians and other helping professionals who work with Latinx immigrant populations to not only provide culturally appropriate services, but also be informed about the ways they are affected by the current sociopolitical climate, policies, and anti-immigrant rhetoric. On a larger scale, it is my hope that findings from this study will bring awareness to the immigrant plight and will humanize undocumented immigrants. Further, I hope that in future conversations and debates about immigration we can hear from immigrants themselves, rather from those who are not informed on their experience. In listening to their stories, it will be possible to make effective policy decisions that help rather than hurt immigrant individuals and families.

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## **Appendices**



## Appendix A

### Recruitment Flyer – English Version

#### RESEARCH STUDY

Exploring the Experiences of Undocumented Central American Immigrants Living in Florida: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

#### PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

To understand the experiences of undocumented Central American immigrants and their families.

#### WOULD YOU LIKE TO PARTICIPATE?

- Were you born in Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, or Nicaragua?
- Are you undocumented?
- Are you currently living in Florida?
- Are you 18 or older?

I would like to hear about your experiences!

#### INTERVIEWS

- Eligible participants will be interviewed for a minimum of 1 hour and a maximum of 2 hours by the researcher.
- Interviews will be conducted in Spanish or English.
- Interviews will take place in a private office.
- Interviews will be recorded utilizing an audio recording device.

\* Participants' identity and responses will be anonymous to protect confidentiality. \*

#### ARE YOU INTERESTED OR KNOW SOMEONE WHO WOULD LIKE TO PARTICIPATE?

Contact Elizabeth Jarquin, MS, LMFT  
(305) 814 - 2684 | ej454@mynsu.nova.edu

## Recruitment Flyer – Spanish Version

### ESTUDIO DE INVESTIGACIÓN

Explorando las Experiencias de Inmigrantes Indocumentados de Centro América que viven en la Florida: Un Análisis Fenomenológico Interpretativo

#### PROPÓSITO DEL ESTUDIO

Entender las experiencias de los inmigrantes indocumentados de Centro América y sus familias.

#### LE GUSTARÍA PARTICIPAR?

- ¿Nació en Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, or Nicaragua?
- ¿Tiene estatus d indocumentado?
- ¿Vive actualmente en Florida?
- ¿Tiene 18 años o más?

Comparta sus experiencias conmigo!

#### ENTREVISTAS

- Los participantes elegibles serán entrevistados durante un mínimo de 1 hora y un máximo de 2 horas por la investigadora.
  - Las entrevistas se ofrecerán en español o inglés.
  - Las entrevistas se llevarán a cabo en una oficina privada.
  - Las entrevistas serán grabadas utilizando un dispositivo de grabación de audio.
- \* La identidad y las respuestas de los participantes serán anónimas para mantener su confidencialidad. \*

#### ¿ESTÁ INTERESADO O CONOCE A ALGUIEN QUE LE GUSTARÍA PARTICIPAR?

Contacte a Elizabeth Jarquin, MS, LMFT  
(305) 814 - 2684 | ej454@mynsu.nova.edu

**Appendix B**  
**Interview Guide – English**

Demographic Questions

1. What name would you like me to use for you?
2. How old are you?
3. What country are you from?
4. How long have you been in the United States?
5. What is your marital status?
6. Do you have children? If so, how many?
7. Do you have family here?
8. Do you have family in your home country?
9. What is your employment status?
10. What level of education did you obtain?

Interview Questions

1. What was your life like in your country of origin?
2. What led you to migrate?
3. Did you migrate alone or with others?
4. Tell me about your journey to the United States.
5. What was your experience like during your first few years in the United States?
6. What is like to be an undocumented immigrant living in Florida now?
7. Does your status impact your day to day life? If so, in what way?
8. Does your status impact your family? If so, in what way?

9. Do you think your undocumented status makes more of a difference now than before?
10. What has your life been like since the election of Donald Trump?
11. What is your opinion on the president and the immigration policies he has implemented?
12. How would you describe the current sociopolitical climate in the United States in relation to immigrants?
13. Does the current political climate affect you? Does it affect your family?
14. Have the new immigration policies affected your experience? Have they affected your family?
15. Is there anything else about your experience that you would like to share with me?
16. Do you know anyone who might be interested in sharing their experiences?

## Interview Guide – Spanish

### Preguntas Demográficas:

1. ¿Qué nombre quiere que use para usted?
2. ¿Cuántos años tiene?
3. ¿De qué país es?
4. ¿Cuántos años lleva en los Estados Unidos?
5. ¿Cuál es su estado civil?
6. ¿Tiene hijos? ¿Cuántos hijos tiene?
7. ¿Tiene familia aquí?
8. ¿Tiene familia en su país?
9. ¿Cuál es su situación laboral?
10. ¿Qué nivel de escolaridad tiene?

### Preguntas de Entrevista

1. ¿Cómo fue su vida en su país?
2. ¿Cuáles fueron las razones que lo forzaron a dejar su país?
3. ¿Vino solo/a o con otras personas?
4. Cuénteme sobre sus experiencias del viaje a los Estados Unidos.
5. ¿Cuál fue su experiencia durante sus primeros años en los Estados Unidos?
6. Cuénteme sobre sus experiencias como indocumentado en los tiempos más recientes.
7. ¿Cree que su estatus afecta su vida cotidiana? ¿De qué manera?
8. ¿Cree que su estatus afecta a su familia? ¿De qué manera?
9. ¿Cree que su estatus lo afecta más ahora que en años anteriores?

10. ¿Cuénteme sobre su vida desde la toma de posesión del actual presidente?
11. ¿Cuál es su opinión sobre el actual presidente y sus pólizas migratorias?
12. ¿Cómo describiría el actual clima sociopolítico relacionado a los inmigrantes?
13. ¿Ha sido afectado por el actual clima sociopolítico? ¿Ha sido afectada su familia?
14. ¿Ha sido afectado por las nuevas pólizas migratorias? ¿Ha sido afectada su familia?
15. ¿Hay algo más que quisiera compartir conmigo sobre sus experiencias?
16. ¿Conoce a otra persona que quisiera compartir sus experiencias conmigo?

## Appendix C

### Consent Form – English

#### General Informed Consent Form NSU Consent to be in a Research Study Entitled

*Exploring the Experiences of Undocumented Central American Immigrants Living in Florida: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis*

Who is doing this research study?

College: Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences

Principal Investigator: Elizabeth Jarquin, MS

Faculty Advisor/Dissertation Chair: Kara Erolin, Ph.D.

Site Information:

Private Practice Office  
9380 SW 72nd St, Suite B211  
Miami, FL 33173

Private Practice Office  
13054 SW 133rd Court, 2nd  
Floor  
Miami, FL 33186

Funding: Unfunded

#### **What is this study about?**

This is a research study, designed to test and create new ideas that other people can use. The purpose of this research study is to explore the experiences of undocumented Central American immigrants living in Florida. Specifically, the goal is to explore the impact of an undocumented status on the individual and familial experience, and to understand what, if any, impacts the current sociopolitical climate and immigration policies have on undocumented Central American immigrants. These results will be used to provide specific suggestions for clinicians and social service and mental health agencies working with this population.

#### **Why are you asking me to be in this research study?**

You are being asked to be in this research study because you are an undocumented Central American immigrant and can share your experience of what it means to be undocumented in Florida. This study will include about 6 people.

#### **What will I be doing if I agree to be in this research study?**

While you are taking part in this research study, you will be interviewed once by the researcher, Elizabeth Jarquin. The interview will include questions about your experience as an undocumented Central American immigrant living in Florida, and will last a minimum of 1 hour, and a maximum of 2 hours.

Research Study Procedures - as a participant, this is what you will be doing:

First, you will go over the consent form. If you agree to participate in this research study, you will sign the form. In order to make sure you are eligible to participate in the study, I will ask you your immigration status and where you were born. If you do not meet the criteria to be eligible for the study, you will not participate in the interview. If you are eligible, you will participate in the interview. First, I will go over any questions you may have about the study. After that, you will spend 1-2 hours with me answering questions about your experience. When the interview is over, I will answer any additional questions you may have.

**Are there possible risks and discomforts to me?**

This research study involves minimal risk to you. To the best of our knowledge, the things you will be doing have no more risk of harm than you would have in everyday life. As this research focuses on the undocumented immigrant experience, you may find some questions I ask you to be upsetting or stressful. If so, I will give you a list of resources that may be able to help you with these feelings.

**What happens if I do not want to be in this research study?**

You have the right to leave this research study at any time or refuse to be in it. If you decide to leave or you do not want to be in the study anymore, you will not get any penalty or lose any services you have a right to get. If you choose to stop being in the study before it is over, any information about you that was collected before the date you leave the study will be kept in the research records for 36 months from the end of the study and may be used as a part of the research.

**What if there is new information learned during the study that may affect my decision to remain in the study?**

If significant new information relating to the study becomes available, which may relate to whether you want to remain in this study, this information will be given to you by the investigators. You may be asked to sign a new Informed Consent Form, if the information is given to you after you have joined the study.

**Are there any benefits for taking part in this research study?**

There are no direct benefits from being in this research study. We hope the information learned from this study will help clinicians gain knowledge on the undocumented Central American immigrant population and their experiences. This knowledge will help community-based centers, agencies, and program developers create appropriate services for this population.

**Will I be paid or be given compensation for being in the study?**

You will not be given any payments or compensation for being in this research study.

**Will it cost me anything?**

There are no costs to you for being in this research study.

**How will you keep my information private?**

Information we learn about you in this research study will be handled in a confidential manner, within the limits of the law and will be limited to people who have a need to review this information. To protect your confidentiality, your name



will not be stated in the audio recording. In addition, the transcripts of the recordings will not have any information that could be linked to you. This data will be available to the researcher, the Institutional Review Board, and the dissertation chair, Dr. Erolin. If we publish the results of the study in a scientific journal or book, we will not identify you. All confidential data will be kept securely on a password and facial recognition protected laptop that will be kept in a locked cabinet in my home. All data will be kept for 36 months from the end of the study and destroyed after that time by deleting the recording and all files from the laptop.

**Will there be any Audio or Video Recording?**

This research study involves audio recording. This recording will be available to the researcher, the Institutional Review Board, and the dissertation chair, Dr. Erolin. The recording will be kept, stored, and destroyed as stated in the section above. Because what is in the recording could be used to find out that it is you, it is not possible to be sure that the recording will always be kept confidential. The researcher will try to keep anyone not working on the research from listening to or viewing the recording.

**Whom can I contact if I have questions, concerns, comments, or complaints?**

If you have questions now, feel free to ask us. If you have more questions about the research, your research rights, or have a research-related injury, please contact:

Primary contact: Elizabeth Jarquin, MS, can be reached at (305) 814-2684 before and after normal work hours.

If primary is not available, contact: Kara Erolin, Ph.D. can be reached at (954) 262-3055 on Monday through Friday between 9 am and 5 pm.

**Research Participants Rights**

For questions/concerns regarding your research rights, please contact:

Institutional Review Board Nova Southeastern University  
(954) 262-5369 / Toll Free: 1-866-499-0790  
[IRB@nova.edu](mailto:IRB@nova.edu)

You may also visit the NSU IRB website at [www.nova.edu/irb/information-for-researchparticipants](http://www.nova.edu/irb/information-for-researchparticipants) for further information regarding your rights as a research participant.

**All space below was intentionally left blank.**

### **Research Consent & Authorization Signature Section**

Voluntary Participation - You are not required to participate in this study. In the event you do participate, you may leave this research study at any time. If you leave this research study before it is completed, there will be no penalty to you, and you will not lose any benefits to which you are entitled.

If you agree to participate in this research study, sign this section. You will be given a signed copy of this form to keep. You do not waive any of your legal rights by signing this form.

#### **SIGN THIS FORM ONLY IF THE STATEMENTS LISTED BELOW ARE TRUE:**

- You have read the above information.
- Your questions have been answered to your satisfaction about the research.

#### **Adult Signature Section**

I have voluntarily decided to take part in this research study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name of Person Obtaining  
Consent and Authorization

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Person Obtaining Consent &  
Authorization

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## Consent Form - Spanish

### Consentimiento General

#### NSU Consentimiento para Participar en un Estudio Llamado

*Explorando las Experiencias de Inmigrantes Indocumentados de Centro América que Viven en la Florida: Un Análisis Fenomenológico Interpretativo*

#### **¿Quién está llevando a cabo este estudio de investigación?**

Departamento: Artes, Humanidades, y Ciencias Sociales

Investigadora Principal: Elizabeth Jarquin, MS

Consejera de la Facultad/Directora de Tesis de Doctorado: Kara Erolin, Ph.D.

Información de los sitios:

Oficina Privada  
9380 SW 72nd St, Suite B211  
Miami, FL 33173

Oficina Privada  
13054 SW 133rd Court, 2nd  
Floor  
Miami, FL 33186

Financiamiento o fondos: No está siendo financiado

#### **¿De qué se trata el estudio?**

Este es un estudio de investigación, diseñado para probar y crear nuevas ideas que otras personas pueden usar. El propósito de este estudio de investigación es entender las experiencias de los inmigrantes centroamericanos indocumentados que viven en la Florida. Específicamente, el objetivo es averiguar el impacto del estatus de indocumentado sobre la experiencia individual y familiar, y averiguar qué impacto (si alguno) tiene el clima sociopolítico actual y las leyes migratorias sobre los inmigrantes centroamericanos indocumentados y sus familias. Los resultados se utilizarán para hacer sugerencias específicas para terapeutas, agencias de servicios sociales y de salud mental que trabajan con esta población.

#### **¿Por qué pide que participe en este estudio de investigación?**

Se le pide que participe en este estudio de investigación porque usted es un inmigrante indocumentado y puede compartir sus experiencias como un indocumentado centroamericano que vive en la Florida. Este estudio incluirá alrededor de 6 personas.

#### **¿Qué tengo que hacer si acepto participar en este estudio de investigación?**

Cuando participe en este estudio de investigación, será entrevistado por la investigadora principal, Elizabeth Jarquin. La entrevista incluirá preguntas sobre su experiencia como un inmigrante centroamericano indocumentado que vive en la Florida, y demorará un mínimo de 1 hora y un máximo de 2 horas.

Procedimientos del estudio de investigación: como participante, esto es lo que hará: Primero, repasará el formulario de consentimiento. Si acepta participar en este estudio de investigación, firmará el documento. Para ser elegible para participar en el estudio, le preguntaré su estatus legal y donde nació. Si no es

elegible para participar en el estudio, no será entrevistado. Si es elegible para participar, será entrevistado. Primero, contestaré cualquier pregunta que pueda tener sobre el estudio. Después, usted pasará 1 o 2 horas conmigo contestando preguntas sobre su experiencia. Cuando termine la entrevista, contestaré preguntas adicionales que pueda tener sobre el estudio.

**¿Hay posibles riesgos o molestias para mí?**

Este estudio de investigación implica un riesgo mínimo para usted. Según mi conocimiento, lo que hará en este estudio no tiene más riesgo de perjudicarlo que lo que tendría en la vida cotidiana. Como este estudio se enfoca en la experiencia de los inmigrantes indocumentados, es posible que algunas preguntas sean perturbadoras o estresantes. Si es así, le daré una lista de recursos que pueda ayudarlo con estos sentimientos.

**¿Qué pasa si no quiero participar en este estudio de investigación?**

Usted tiene el derecho de retirarse del estudio en cualquier momento o de negarse a participar en él. Si usted decide retirarse o ya no desea participar en el estudio, no recibirá ninguna sanción ni perderá los servicios que tiene derecho a recibir. Si decide retirarse del estudio antes que acabe, cualquier información que fue recolectada sobre usted antes de la fecha en que decidió retirarse se mantendrá en los registros de la investigación durante 36 meses a partir del final del estudio y podrá usarse como parte de la investigación.

**¿Qué sucede si obtengo nueva información durante el estudio que pudiera afectar mi decisión de permanecer en el estudio?**

Si se dispone nueva información relacionada a este estudio, que puede estar relacionada a su decisión de permanecer en él, su investigadora le comunicará esta información. Si se le da la información después de haberse inscrito en el estudio, es posible que tenga que firmar un nuevo formulario de consentimiento.

**¿Hay algún beneficio por participar en este estudio de investigación?**

No hay beneficios directos de la participación de este estudio. Se espera que la información obtenida en este estudio ayude a los terapeutas a adquirir conocimiento sobre los inmigrantes centroamericanos indocumentados y sus experiencias. Esta información también ayudará a los centros, agencias, y desarrolladores de programas a crear servicios apropiados para esta población.

**¿Me pagarán o recibiré compensación por participar en este estudio?**

No recibirá ningún pago ni compensación por participar en este estudio de investigación.

**¿Me va a costar algo?**

No hay costo para usted por participar en este estudio de investigación.

**¿Cómo mantendrá mi información privada?**

La información que obtengamos sobre usted en este estudio de investigación será manejada de manera confidencial, dentro de los límites de la ley, y se limitará las personas que tengan necesidad de revisar esta información. Para proteger su confidencialidad, su nombre no será mencionado en la grabación de audio. Además, las transcripciones de las grabaciones no tendrán ninguna información que pueda ser vinculada con usted. Estos datos serán disponibles

para la investigadora, el Institutional Review Board (Junta de Revisión Institucional), y la directora de tesis de doctorado, Dr. Erolin. Si publicamos los resultados de este estudio en un diario o libro científico, no lo identificaremos. Los datos confidenciales se mantendrán en una computadora portátil protegida con contraseña y reconocimiento facial que se guardará en un gabinete con llave en mi hogar. Los datos serán conservados durante 36 meses a partir del final del estudio y se destruirán después de ese tiempo. Eliminaré las grabaciones y todos los archivos relevantes a este estudio de mi computadora portátil.

**¿Habrá grabación de audio o video?**

En este estudio de investigación se usará grabación de audio. Las grabaciones serán disponibles para la investigadora, el Institutional Review Board (Junta de Revisión Institucional), y la directora de tesis de doctorado, Dr. Erolin. Las grabaciones serán guardadas, archivadas, y destruidas como se indica en la sección anterior. Debido a lo que está en la grabación lo pudiera identificar, no es posible estar seguro de que la grabación siempre se mantendrá confidencial. La investigadora intentará evitar que cualquier persona que no esté trabajando en la investigación escuche o vea las grabaciones.

**¿Con quién puedo comunicarme si tengo preguntas, inquietudes, comentarios o quejas?**

Si tiene preguntas ahora, no dude en preguntar. Si tiene más preguntas sobre el estudio, sus derechos de participante, o si sufre algún daño relacionado con la investigación, comuníquese con:

Contacto primario:

Elizabeth Jarquin, MS, puede ser contactada al (305) 814-2684 antes y después de las horas normales de trabajo.

Si el contacto primario no está disponible, contacte a:

Kara Erolin, Ph.D., puede ser contactada al (954) 262-3055 de lunes a viernes de 9 am y 5 pm.

**Derechos de los Participantes**

Si tiene preguntas/inquietudes sobre sus derechos de participante, por favor comuníquese con:

Institutional Review Board (Junta de Revisión Institucional)  
Nova Southeastern University (954) 262-5369 / Línea gratuita: 1-866-499-0790  
[IRB@nova.edu](mailto:IRB@nova.edu)

También puede visitar la página del IRB de NSU aquí [www.nova.edu/irb/information-forresearch-participants](http://www.nova.edu/irb/information-forresearch-participants) para obtener más información sobre sus derechos como participante en una investigación.

**El espacio a continuación de dejo en blanco intencionalmente.**

**Consentimiento de Investigación y Sección de Firma de Autorización**

Participación voluntaria – Usted no está obligado a participar en este estudio. Si usted decide participar, se puede retirar del estudio en cualquier momento. Si decide retirarse del estudio antes que se acabe, no tendrá ninguna sanción y no perderá ningún beneficio al que tenga derecho.

Si decide participar en este estudio, firme esta sección. Usted recibirá una copia firmada de este documento para que lo conserve. Al firmar este documento, no renunciará a ninguno de sus derechos.

**FIRME ESTE DOCUMENTO SOLAMENTE SI LAS DECLARACIONES QUE SE INDICAN A CONTINUACIÓN SON VERDADERAS:**

- Ha leído la información anterior.
- Sus preguntas relacionadas al estudio han sido respondidas a su satisfacción.

**Sección de Firma de Adulto**

He decidido voluntariamente participar en este estudio de investigación.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Nombre del Participante

\_\_\_\_\_  
Firma del Participante

\_\_\_\_\_  
Fecha

\_\_\_\_\_  
Nombre de la Persona que Obtuvo  
Consentimiento y Autorización

\_\_\_\_\_  
Firma de la Persona que Obtuvo  
Consentimiento y Autorización

\_\_\_\_\_  
Fecha

**Appendix D – Resource List (English)****RESOURCE LIST**

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- 1 enFamilia Inc**  
16090 SW 293rd Dr,  
Homestead, FL 33033  
(305) 245-7288
  
- 2 Survivor's Pathway**  
1801 Coral Way,  
Miami, FL 33145  
(786) 275-4364
  
- 3 Banyan Health Systems**  
13850 W Flagler St,  
Miami, FL 33134  
(305) 774-3300
  
- 4 PsychSolutions, Inc.**  
700 S Royal Poinciana Blvd #300,  
Miami Springs, FL 33166  
(305) 668-9000
  
- 5 NSU Brief Therapy Institute**  
3301 College Ave,  
Davie, FL 33314  
(954) 262-3030

**Important Telephone Numbers**

- In case of emergency: 911
- In case of a crisis: 1-800-784-2433

**Resource List – Spanish****LISTA DE RECURSOS**

---

- 1 enFamilia Inc**  
16090 SW 293rd Dr,  
Homestead, FL 33033  
(305) 245-7288
  
- 2 Survivor's Pathway**  
1801 Coral Way,  
Miami, FL 33145  
(786) 275-4364
  
- 3 Banyan Health Systems**  
13850 W Flagler St,  
Miami, FL 33134  
(305) 774-3300
  
- 4 PsychSolutions, Inc.**  
700 S Royal Poinciana Blvd #300,  
Miami Springs, FL 33166  
(305) 668-9000
  
- 5 NSU Brief Therapy Institute**  
3301 College Ave,  
Davie, FL 33314  
(954) 262-3030

**Números de Teléfono Importantes**

- En caso de emergencia: 911
- En caso de crisis: 1-800-784-2433





## Appendix E – Know your Rights Sheet (English)

### KNOW YOUR RIGHTS

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American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU)

<https://www.aclu.org/know-your-rights/immigrants-rights/>

Immigrant Legal Resource Center

<https://www.ilrc.org/red-cards>

American Immigration Lawyers Association

<https://www.aila.org/advo-media/tools/psas/know-your-rights-handouts-if-ice-visits>

Florida Immigrant Coalition

<https://floridaimmigrant.org/resources/what-to-know-after-sb-168/>

You have constitutional rights:

- DO NOT OPEN THE DOOR if an immigration agent is knocking on the door.
- DO NOT ANSWER ANY QUESTIONS from an immigration agent if they try to talk to you. You have the right to remain silent.
- DO NOT SIGN ANYTHING without first speaking to a lawyer. You have the right to speak with a lawyer.
- If you are outside of your home, ask the agent if you are free to leave and if they say yes, leave calmly.
- GIVE THIS CARD TO THE AGENT. If you are inside of your home, show the card through the window or slide it under the door.

**NSU**  
Florida  
NOVA SOUTHEASTERN  
UNIVERSITY

## Know your Rights Sheet (Spanish)

### SEPA SUS DERECHOS

#### American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU)

<https://www.aclu.org/know-your-rights/derechos-de-los-inmigrantes>

#### Immigrant Legal Resource Center (Centro de Recursos Legales para Inmigrantes)

<https://www.ilrc.org/red-cards>

#### American Immigration Lawyers Association (Asociación Americana de Abogados de Inmigración)

<https://www.aila.org/advo-media/tools/psas/know-your-rights-handouts-if-ice-visits>

#### Florida Immigrant Coalition (Coalición de Inmigrantes de la Florida)

<https://floridaimmigrant.org/resources/what-to-know-after-sb-168/#spanish>

**Usted tiene derechos constitucionales:**

- **NO ABRA LA PUERTA** si un agente de inmigración está tocando la puerta.
- **NO CONTESTE NINGUNA PREGUNTA** de un agente de inmigración si el trata de hablar con usted. Usted tiene el derecho de mantenerse callado.
- **NO FIRME NADA** sin antes hablar con un abogado. Usted tiene el derecho de hablar con un abogado.
- Si usted está afuera de su casa, pregunte al agente si es libre para irse y si dice que sí, váyase con tranquilidad.
- **ENTREGUE ESTA TARJETA AL AGENTE.** Si usted está dentro de su casa, muestre la tarjeta por la ventana o pásela debajo de la puerta.

