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Research Article

The impact of COVID-19 and anti-immigration policy on an undocumented student in the United States: a qualitative case study

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Background

The change of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program has significantly impacted DACA students' mental health in the United States. The study aimed to conduct a qualitative case study for understanding the effects of DACA program on one undocumented college student's life during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methods

We conducted a two-component qualitative case study, the online survey and the subsequent in-depth interview, with a DACA college student, Leah (pseudonym), in California who was in an ongoing fear of deportation before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. We used Questionnaire-9 (PHQ-9) and General Anxiety Disorder-7 (GAD-7) in the online survey to measure her level of depression and anxiety. QSR NVivo was used to analyze the verbatim transcription.

Results

Leah's anxiety and depression level just before the Supreme Court's decision to the DACA termination in June 2020 was higher than during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021. Leah's concern still remained due to the uncertain legal status in the United States even after the presidential election.

Conclusions

During 2020-2022, the anti-immigration policy, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the presidential election has impacted a DACA student's mental health status. However, because of the unstable legal status and fear of deportation in the United States, our participant's anxiety and depression level maintained high. From our participant's standpoint, more policy support is needed to sustain her legal status, financial stability, and mental health during the pandemic.

Undocumented immigrants in the United States are an essential asset to American education and future workforce.^{1,2} The Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program was issued by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) in 2012 to allow young unauthorized immigrants to stay in the U.S. with a renewable two-year temporary legal status.³ However, DACA students' mental health has been significantly impacted by new stressors. The COVID-19 pandemic, one of the main stressors among DACA students, led to depression and anxiety (e.g., negative emotions, disappointment, suicidal ideation, and uncertainty), substance use, negative academic performance, and economic insecurity due to remote learning, curtailed campus life, and pandemic-related financial strain.⁴⁻⁷ DACA students had uncertainty about their educational fu-

ture, faced more prejudice and discrimination during the pandemic, and had little social support. DACA students and their families faced financial difficulties, which contributed to poorer psychological well-being.⁸ The pandemic caused many people to have reduced working hours and many others lost their employment; undocumented individuals were unable to receive financial aid and medical care due to having no legal standing in the United States.^{9,10}

In addition to COVID-19, Supreme Court DACA ruling impacted the mental health of DACA students. Exposure to political stress was a source of significant anxiety and depression, especially for undocumented U.S. immigrants. On June 15, 2012, DHS announced that certain individuals who arrived in the United States as minors and satisfied specific criteria may apply for the DACA program for two

years.¹¹ DACA grants temporary relief from deportation for a period of time and gives work authorization. This program, however, does not entitle legal status.^{1,4,11-19} Besides experiencing emotions of seclusion throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, DACA students were at risk of poor mental health due to constant stressors such as fear of deportation, lack of legal support, and financial instability.

As the Supreme Court battled with a complete revamp of the country's immigration system, the existence of DACA has been a long-overdue debate.^{2,12,14,15,20,21} On November 20, 2014, during Obama's Administration, DHS directed the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) to expand DACA by removing the age cap, extending renewal and work authorization to three years, and adjusting the date-of-entry requirement.^{22,23} Then upon, there was an ongoing issue with the expansion during the administration. However, on June 16, 2017, the Trump Administration rescinded the program and therefore, DACA expansion was no longer a debate.^{16,18,24} The rescission eventually led to a fight to keep the administration accepting DACA applications. DACA has been continually amended since it was issued in 2012, with court judgements and administration actions reviving or rolling back the program.

Although there have been studies on the experiences of DACA students during the COVID-19 pandemic,^{1,2,4-7} little is known about how the Supreme Court DACA ruling, the 2020 U.S. presidential election, and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic have comprehensively impacted undocumented college students' psychological well-being, coping strategies, and dreams. In addition, there have not been research studies that conducted an in-depth interview with undocumented students to understand their mental health during those unexpected situations. Thus, we aimed to extensively evaluate the effects of recent changes of political climate on one undocumented college student's life amidst the COVID-19 pandemic as a qualitative case study. We sought to study the challenges that undocumented students faced during the COVID-19 pandemic in regard to their eligibility to remain in the United States. This study analyzed an undocumented student's general challenges, the impact of recent several events (i.e., COVID-19, the Supreme Court DACA ruling, and the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election), coping strategies, and future and dreams. We expect that our study will become a cornerstone of raising awareness of developing the U.S. immigration system to reduce health inequity among undocumented students during the political changes in the context of an unexpected disease outbreak. [Figure 1](#) demonstrates a timeline of the amendment and development of the DACA policy.^{23,25-43}

METHODS

STUDY DESIGN AND DATA COLLECTION

We designed a qualitative case study with a DACA student in California, consisting of two components: 1) an online survey and 2) subsequent in-depth interview. The target participant was a DACA student whose age is 18 years and older in California.

The online survey was distributed to one of the state universities in California and collected from April to May 2021. We used convenient sampling by contacting various organizations at the university, such as college/university-level centers/organizations, academic and honorary organizations, cultural and religious organizations, and student clubs to request the distribution of the online survey to their electronic mailing lists. In addition, an invitation to survey on the university's mobile application was periodically posted to directly identify DACA students. A total of two DACA students filled out the online survey, and both of them showed willingness to participate in an in-depth interview. One of them responded to our invitation to an in-depth interview (response rate: 50%), and we conducted an online interview with this participant via Zoom, a video conferencing software program (Zoom Video Communications, Inc., San Jose, California, U.S.). Our results were based on one participant who completed both an online survey and an in-depth interview. We used a pseudonym for this participant, Leah, in the Results section. The duration of the interview was approximately 1 hour and 35 minutes. Semi-structured in-depth interview was conducted through an interview questionnaire with a script, which presented in the **Online Supplementary Document (Appendix S1)**.

ANALYSIS

In an online survey, three sets of questions—demographic questions, Patient Health Questionnaire-9 (PHQ-9), and General Anxiety Disorder-7 (GAD-7)—were used to check the eligibility and measure the participant's level of depression and anxiety.⁴⁴⁻⁴⁶ PHQ-9 scores ranged from 0 to 27 from a total of 9 Likert scale questions—Not at all (0), Several days (1), More than half the days (2), Nearly every day (3)—with the following six categories: no depression (0), minimal depression (1-4), mild depression (5-9), moderate depression (10-14), moderately severe depression (15-19), and severe depression (20-27).⁴⁶⁻⁴⁸ GAD-7 scores ranged from 0 to 21 from a total of 7 Likert scale questions—Not at all (0), Several days (1), More than half the days (2), Nearly every day (3)—with the following five categories: no anxiety (0), minimal anxiety (1-4), mild anxiety (5-9), moderate anxiety (10-14), and severe anxiety (15-21).^{44,45,49}

For qualitative analysis, we used QSR NVivo software (QSR International, Pty, Ltd, Doncaster, Australia). The interview questionnaire consisted of six categories with a total of 24 questions: 1) experience as an undocumented student before COVID-19 (4 questions), 2) during COVID-19 (4 questions), 3) reaction to DACA termination (4 questions), 4) coping strategies (5 questions), 5) thoughts about the new administration (2 questions), and 6) future goals and any comments (5 questions) (Supplementary Fig. 1). An in-depth interview was video recorded for verbatim transcription work. Then, transcription excluding any potential disclosure of direct identifiers was stored in a word document and imported to QSR NVivo. Data were coded using both deductive and inductive approaches. [Figure 2](#) demonstrates the final coding tree, including themes, categories, and codes.

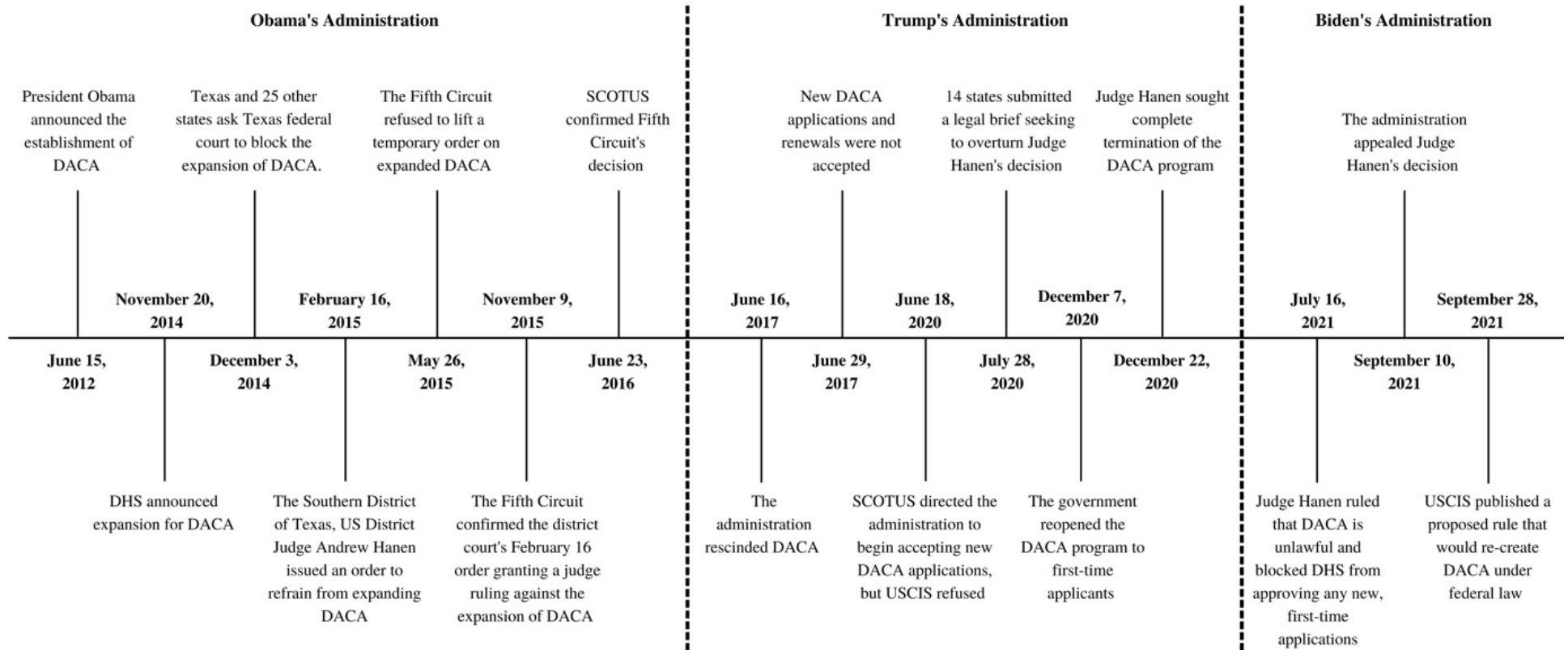


Figure 1. The timeline of DACA policy amendment and development^{23,25-43}

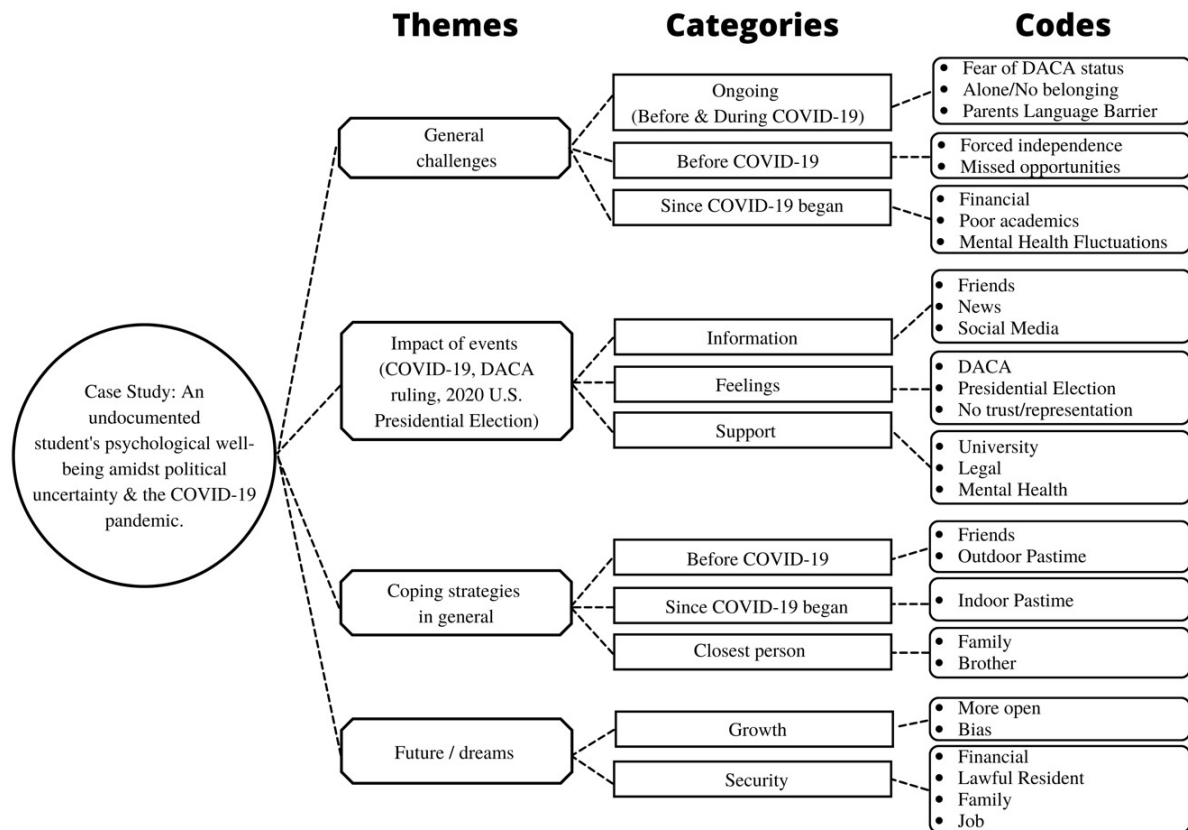


Figure 2. The final coding tree: themes, categories, and codes

ETHICS CONSIDERATIONS

This study was determined to be exempt research, “category of approval §46.104(d)(2iii),” from the Institutional Review Board at a higher education institution in California. In addition, waiver of signed consent from a participant was granted. At the beginning of the online survey, we included a consent notice for an in-depth interview and asked participants’ intention to be contacted for an in-depth interview. Subsequently, participants were given another consent notice for the online survey before answering demographic and DACA-specific questions; participants’ completion of the online survey indicated their willingness to participate in the study. Before starting the interview, we provided the most comfortable online environment by giving Leah options to choose her nickname or pseudonym and turn off the video in the Zoom, and she used both options. Then, we received permission from her to record and initiated the interview.

RESULTS

GENERAL CHALLENGES

Leah expressed hesitancy in participating in the in-depth interview as she was fearful of her and her family’s status being revealed even though she was informed that the in-

terview would be confidential. An ongoing fear of deportation by the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) existed prior to the change in political climate and COVID-19 but has increased since March of 2020. She thought one of the difficulties of being an undocumented student is not being able to share her struggles with people. “It scared me into just staying silent, I cannot talk about it, like I almost felt unreal. Thinking back, it was almost like if you talk about it with anybody, there are spies and they will report us [to ICE] and we will [have to] leave. That’s how scary it was for me. It was just a really scary thing and I had nobody to talk about it with because it was just my parents and sibling. I couldn’t consult anybody about it, and so it was [a] deep dark secret that I wasn’t allowed to share, and it scared me.” She spoke of not having a sense of belonging, “They [(people who don’t want to see DACA students)] still see us as just such foreign beings, even though I’ve been here for more than a decade, in fact my whole life. . . . Well, if you don’t think I belong here and I can’t really speak my own language in my home country, where [did I] come from, where do I belong?”

She also expressed fear that her parents would not be able to communicate with ICE officials if something were to happen to them, since the parents of undocumented students do not normally speak proficiently in English. “I think something that really comes with being an undoc-

umented student because your family is from a different place that doesn't speak the language [(English)], I think a lot of has to come down to language barriers and obviously, that was outside of COVID-19 too." Over the course of the pandemic, the fears of something happening to her family worsened. Although ICE provides the Language Access Plan,⁵⁰ there was a time-consuming or absence of service for diverse language needs that delayed provision of real-time language interpretation service.^{51,52} "It scared me, knowing that something [could] happen with my parents, and my living nightmare is they [(parents)] wouldn't be able to translate [from Chinese to English]. [So] they wouldn't be able to talk with ICE officials. To imagine somebody [mis]handling my parents is not a pleasant feeling."

Starting in elementary school, she was forced to be independent. "I started doing my own application [for school], since I was really young, translating for them [(parents)] for really important things that kid[s] wouldn't [even] understand." Leah felt that due to her status, she was limited to opportunities related to school, work, and social activities, "I just feel like being undocumented restricts my opportunities, internships, scholarships, financial aid." She also spoke of how her status of being an undocumented student would affect her degree, "I want to say that one thing that I'm really missing out is my major requires us to travel to learn about cultural aspects of (major name). However, I won't be able to do that, so I need to find alternative route."

Leah felt that none of her friends, professors, and co-workers were cognizant of the challenges of her DACA status and financial issues due to COVID-19, which negatively impacted her grades and mental health including feelings of isolation, increased stress and inability to concentrate. Due to less work hours, she stated that "I couldn't really afford to pay any more rent in (city name), so I had to move back with my family." Her grades suffered over the course of the pandemic. "I felt every time I was present in class, I wasn't really present in class. When I did my homework, it wasn't to the best of my abilities, . . . so I'm really stressed about this." She felt, "Everybody is in La-La Land [(the place oblivious to reality)] and having fun, and you're like on the right side, the world's falling apart and on the left side, everybody [is] just minding their own business, not really caring. It feels like the world goes on [with La-La Land on one side and myself on the opposite side], while I'm personally dealing with so many struggles."

IMPACT OF EVENTS (COVID-19, SUPREME COURT DACA RULING, 2020 U.S. PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION)

Leah gathered information from friends, the news, and social media. The Supreme Court had overturned the termination of DACA June of 2020, Leah stated that she "learned about this through one of my friends." Since the beginning of the pandemic, she stated that "I guess, one can't really keep out of listening to the news. It's just like it's the scares you, in the sense that you need to know what's happening next, but at the same time, listening to the news really brings heaviness to you, you know you get a really deep sense of 'Oh my goodness, what's going on with the world,' you know everything's burning literally." More recently, she

said "I started using my social media platforms as a way of staying updated, even though it's really depressing [to] see so much hate going [on], Asian hate crimes, the forest fires, all the politic[s], and then so many countries are in economic turmoil right now."

With the changes in the political climate and DACA policy in the last year, Leah stated that more legislation for DACA students and their families need to be in place to feel supported and safe. Upon hearing the news that the Supreme Court overturned the DACA termination, she had mixed feelings about the decision. She felt, "Relieved, like major, major, major, relief to know that the government still supports this in some way. However, I feel I can't really trust anything [because] you'll try to find loopholes through it." Her viewpoint on the 2020 U.S. Presidential election result was less than enthusiastic. "The presidential election. I'm happy that the lesser of the two evils won, but I feel the whole issue of undocumented is still a scary subject for people to touch [upon]." Though she has seen DACA on the news, she stated that she "really struggled with getting proper representation in the community." She also did not trust any decision, "It's not like you can trust if the decision is overturned. I still can't trust any person of authority."

Leah felt supported by her university program for DACA students since the pandemic started, though she feels trepidation on reaching out for support and still believed there would be unsupported areas. "I think it's still sort of scary for me to reach out and find these resources. I feel if I go anywhere near that area, people are going to auto[matically] [think] 'Oh, she's undocumented.' So it scares me to go." She believed there is a lack of legal and mental health support. "I think they [(university)] might need a counselor for [undocumented students] or have several because I think [somebody should] more pertain to the legalities, to [be] able to renew your work permit, your DACA status."

In the time prior to the Supreme Court overturning the DACA termination, she was constantly hypervigilant. Leah had a higher GAD-7 score (8 vs. 6) and PHQ-9 score (6 vs. 5) for two weeks prior to the Supreme Court overturning the DACA termination in 2020 than the two weeks prior to survey completion (2021). At both times, the GAD-7 scores were categorized as mild anxiety and the PHQ-9 scores were in the mild depression range.^{45,46} "You're on the edge of your seat, not knowing what Trump and his administration is (pause). You just don't know what's going to happen and obviously every moment you're like, this could not get worse, and then it [actually] gets worse. That's what it felt like. It feels like you're digging a hole and you're just digging deeper, and you just keep going down." She sought help for her mental health, "I spoke with the mental health specialist at the health center and even though it was a very short amount of time, and I feel they don't really grasp the whole heaviness of what it is to be an undocumented immigrant while going through the pandemic and whatever's happening with the Trump's administration." She pretended to be okay and just wanted to dismiss the session right away, "I immediately saw the response from them [(mental health specialist)] and I was like 'Thank you so much for your time.' I backed out of there really fast."

I couldn't get the emotional help I needed from that person and I guess I just went to the wrong place."

COPING STRATEGIES

Leah had different coping strategies before the pandemic, as compared to after the pandemic. Prior to the pandemic, Leah stated that her friends were supportive and aided in the ability of the participant to de-stress and would do activities together outside the home, but there were limits due to their understanding of the situation. "From what a lot of my friends understand, I'm a broke college student but they don't understand this deep need to constantly be ready for the unexpected." Since COVID-19, her coping strategies changed to indoor activities, "It's just talking with friends, it's just reading a book, it is just you know watching TV or something to help you cope."

The DACA recipient is fearful of their status being exposed, so the people closest to them are their family members who know their status and are able to wholly support them. "My family is a really big part of me. Ever since I was little, I was just not the same as all the other kids. I just felt there were other things more important than the things that they were talking about, [so] I just didn't fit in." Leah stated that her family does not hold permanent ties since others do not understand or know of their situation. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, the bond within the family has become stronger. "I know this sounds so just to me sounds a little surreal, but we have go bags. We... I guess in our family, our mentality is never to buy anything that's long-term, everything is secondhand, [and] is used already." "My biggest emotional support is my sibling, my brother, you know we're from the same family, we know our struggles. So he's one of the pillars of support really for me."

FUTURE AND DREAMS

The wish of Leah was the security of their family. "I'm worried for the safety of my family [that] is the main part of [me]." Security meant financial stability, good health, and legal status for her. "I just want this whole thing done. Just give me my status, give me citizenship already, give me my green card, [so] I can travel... just it's so frustrating." The dream that Leah wishes for is simple, "I want to be successful, and I want my parents to be able to stop working." In the future for undocumented students and families, she stated that, "I wish that people talked about this [(DACA)] more and show their support for at least a reasonable and justifying [reason] why they do support and don't support or if they're in the middle ground and why. I feel if people talk about this more, it wouldn't be such a big scary issue."

DISCUSSION

The main findings from this study were three main events—the COVID-19 pandemic, the Supreme Court DACA ruling, and the 2020 U.S. presidential elections—that negatively impacted the mental health of the respondent. Immigration status has impacted undocumented young adults'

psychological welling due to distress, negative emotions, and deportation worry.¹⁵ This study showed a consistent result with another case study that a DACA recipient had high intra- and inter-personal stressors and severe symptoms of anxiety.⁵³

First, during the pandemic, undocumented immigrants have had limited resources (e.g., job opportunities, wages), which made them to be seen as underserving.⁷ In addition to verifying the mental health issues that DACA recipients normally had, this study showed that there were several challenges that might have affected Leah's legal status: anti-immigration policy, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the presidential election. During the pandemic, many low-income undocumented U.S. immigrants did not wish to continue receiving public benefits, fearing that it would affect their legal status or lead to deportation.² Leah also showed her fear of deportation by ICE; thus, she could not keep open herself to anyone else to protect her status before our study. She felt responsible to help her family who has a language barrier and had severe anxiety that her parents could be mishandled by anyone. She even needed to be courageous to participate in our study, by overcoming fear that she and her family would face any immigrant disadvantages if her status as an undocumented student were revealed. She did not receive her parents' advice or help for her study and felt that no one was aware of the difficulty of her DACA status and financial challenges.

Second, many studies reported that undocumented immigrants were negatively impacted by immigration- and enforcement-related policies in the post-2016 U.S. presidential election in various ways, such as limited access to healthcare and social services,^{37,54} being afraid to go to school,⁵⁵ and experiencing discrimination and bullying.⁵⁶ Xenophobia—fears about ethnoracial outsiders—became stronger during the Trump administration, which acted as a significant predictor of ongoing support for Trump in the 2020 U.S. presidential election.⁵⁷ Aligning with those findings, our study showed that the political changes (Supreme Court DACA ruling and the 2020 U.S. presidential election) and the COVID-19 pandemic negatively impacted her mental health. She still showed a certain level of anxiety and depression even after the Supreme Court overturned the DACA termination, and those tensions continued throughout her life.

Third, there were similar findings from other studies regarding mental health of undocumented students during the 2020 U.S. presidential election. Studies on the mental health of undocumented individuals during the Trump administration highlighted that DACA students had worries about things such as families being harmed, losing a career and financial opportunities.^{56,58,59} Students claimed to feel attacked during the Trump administration and were worried about what other races think of them and losing their American dream.^{56,58,59} DACA recipients had increased anxiety and depressive-like symptoms in response to the changes in immigration policy during the Trump administration.^{56,58,59} Losing DACA status and being deported would highly impact students' academic goals. The political climate during the 2020 presidential election also raised

concerns about losing DACA students' existing way of life in the United States or about having to move back to a place they do not consider home, especially during unprecedented times.

The COVID-19 pandemic served as a momentum for Leah to realize the importance of her family. Before the pandemic, she used to spend time with friends outside to relieve her stress, but she was able to build a strong bond with family during stay-at-home restrictions and became aware that she was receiving unsparing emotional support from her family. Understanding family values during the COVID-19 pandemic might affect her future and dreams. She did not have a grandiose dream, rather, it was very practical and realistic; she wanted her family's life security and more support for DACA recipients. Establishing financial stability, maintaining good health, and most importantly, securing safe immigration status would realize a dream of a continuous life with her family in the United States.

Leah was looking for legal and mental health support from her university during the pandemic. To address undocumented students' needs, holistic support from academic institutions are recommended. This aligns with findings from previous research that universities should help to buffer the effects of societal shocks and provide psychological services for undocumented students whose academics, health, and finance were negatively impacted by COVID-19.^{5,6}

LIMITATIONS

Our original intention was to conduct a qualitative study based on a sufficient number of in-depth interviews with DACA students for reaching saturation; however, it was challenging to identify and recruit them due to their protected status by the university. Although we ended up conducting one in-depth interview, we found that a 1.5-hour interview with one respondent was still valuable enough to report the impact of COVID-19 and recent political changes on undocumented students as a qualitative case study. Still, responses from one respondent could be subjective and may not be generalizable among larger DACA student populations. As our respondent expressed, there was fear that participation in an interview could lead to negative consequences on his/her relationship with any participating institutions or organizations. Before, during, and after one presidential administration to the next, there has been growing apprehension among DACA students regarding their unstable legal status of being in the United States. Thus, it is speculated that DACA students might feel substantial concern about being disadvantaged from their education or financial aid in some way, and moreover, being deprived of the eligibility status of staying in the United States, if they speak up for themselves under any circumstances.

CONCLUSIONS

During the recent two years (2020-2022), there had been several situations that had fluctuated Leah's mental health status, such as the anti-immigration policy, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the presidential election. However, even before the pandemic, Leah's anxiety and depression levels remained high, due to her unstable legal status and fear of deportation from the United States. As DACA students were disproportionately affected by the global pandemic and tense political climate, the individuals' psychological well-being needs to be addressed. Mental health support and accessible resources may help improve undocumented student immigrants' quality of life. It is expected that future studies expand the strategy of recruitment of DACA students for in-depth interviews, which would be generalizable to DACA recipients in the United States. Lastly, systematic support from academic institutions is needed for improving the psychological well-being of undocumented students.

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ETHICS STATEMENT

The informed consent notice was provided to the participant involved in the study.

DATA AVAILABILITY

Provide details regarding the access to data supporting the reported results. If publicly available data were used, provide the link. *(Delete if not relevant)*

FUNDING

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AUTHORSHIP CONTRIBUTIONS

CP designed the study. SS conducted an in-depth interview and transcribed a recording. CP and SS analyzed the results. CP, SS, and PA drafted and finalized the manuscript.

DISCLOSURE OF INTEREST

The authors completed the ICMJE Disclosure of Interest Form (available upon request from the corresponding author) and disclose no relevant interests.

ADDITIONAL MATERIAL

The article contains additional information as an Online Supplementary Document.

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SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

Online Supplementary Document

Download: <https://www.joghr.org/article/75168-the-impact-of-covid-19-and-anti-immigration-policy-on-an-undocumented-student-in-the-united-states-a-qualitative-case-study/attachment/158745.docx>
