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## EFFECTS OF VOLUNTARY REMOVAL ON AN IMMIGRANT FAMILY

Miriam Jimenez

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# EFFECTS OF VOLUNTARY REMOVAL ON AN IMMIGRANT FAMILY

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A Project  
Presented to the  
Faculty of  
California State University,  
San Bernardino

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Social Work

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by  
Miriam Jimenez

May 2024

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Miriam Jimenez  
May 2024

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## ABSTRACT

This study explores the effects on the family system when undocumented parents voluntarily leave the U.S. to gain legal status while their children remain behind. This study looks into the financial, emotional, and relational burden caused by the separation in order to gain legal status. This information is important to find possible alternatives and resources that can help families who go through a similar situation. There is an estimate of 1.1 million undocumented immigrants that can be led to leave the U.S. to gain legal status and spend years in their home country, which could potentially mean separation of families (Three- and Ten-Year Re-Entry Bars Policy Brief, 2023). This case study used qualitative interviews to gather information from each family member. Interviews were conducted via Zoom to and transcribed for analysis. Major themes and sub-themes were identified. Analysis revealed a number of effects on family dynamics and interpersonal relationships due to voluntary leave from the U.S. to gain legal status.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge and express my gratitude to my supervisor Dr. Laurie Smith who was able to help make this all possible. Her guidance throughout this project was what helped me feel supported and accomplish this research. Her patience and insightful feedback were encouraging to me.

## DEDICATION

This study is dedicated to my parents and husband who have been an inspiration for me to always work hard for my career. Their endless love and support have motivated me to continue my education and feel encouraged along the way.

I would also like to dedicate this thesis for the families who have gone through an experience similar to this one. Their journey might be full of challenges and unwanted experiences, but they are not alone. I hope this research brings an insight of the difficult journeys and contributes to an increase in understanding and a chance for improvement in future policies.

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# CHAPTER ONE:

## PROBLEM FORMULATION

### Introduction

It is estimated that about 11 million people in the U.S are unauthorized immigrants, also known as, undocumented immigrants (MPI, 2019). Those who are considered undocumented could be people who came into the U.S with a visa and overstayed their visit or came into the U.S unauthorized. There are very limited ways one with an undocumented status can take to gain legal status. It can either be by marriage to a U.S citizen or permanent resident, U Visa for victims of crime, DREAMers Green Card, and Asylum Status (Leimer, 2020). Another possible method could be if the undocumented individual has a U.S Citizen adult child over the age 21 who could petition for undocumented parent. However, if none of these methods are possible due to not meeting qualification, an individual can result to voluntary leave for the adjustment of legal status (MarketCrest, 2020). These methods are only for qualifying applicants and usually don't guarantee legal status. Many of these methods could be challenging since they might require the leave of the individual from the U.S to complete the process in obtaining a permanent residency.

Undocumented immigrants who want to gain legal status have so much to gain but so much to potentially lose. Undocumented immigrants build a home and a family in the U.S and after so many years, it is difficult to leave everything behind (Zayas & Bradlee, 2014). With the possibility of having to be deported or leave the country in order to complete the process in obtaining permanent residency, many families might rather remain undocumented than to risk leaving everything behind. For the families that

do take the risk and must leave everything behind, what happens to their children? How do they rebuild a life in the country they had once left? How do the children live in a whole new country?

There are two classes that the government created of vulnerable citizen children, exiles and orphans. Exiles are considered children who leave the country along with their parents and orphans are children who are left by their parents in care of others or even the child welfare system (Zayas & Bradlee, 2014). These consequences also lead to more children in the child welfare system when already there are high number of foster children. For the parents that do get the chance to leave their children with other family in the U.S., they might have more opportunities to see their children more often, but what affects have had limited research.

### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the research study was to explore the effects on the family system when undocumented parents voluntarily leave the U.S. to gain legal status while their children remain behind. This study investigated the financial, emotional, and relational burden caused by the separation in order to gain legal status. This information is important to find possible alternatives and resources that can help families who go through a similar situation.

The overall research method that was used for this research was qualitative design. The study focused on a specific case and utilized individual interviews. This design was chosen since the study focused on collecting data on the insight on what a family goes through when having to voluntarily leave the U.S. in order to adjust their

legal status. In addition, the limited frame for the study was a rationale for this type of research design.

### Significance of the Project for Social Work

The reason to conduct this study came to light due to the lack of information about how adjusting legal status can have an effect on a family who experiences voluntary leave in hopes to eliminate their status of being illegal or undocumented. The lack of information limits the resources and support to families who experience such challenges. Becoming familiar and aware of this type of study can help formulate additional support amongst courts, social workers, and mentors that can be specific to families who experience the challenges found in the study.

With researching undocumented immigrants' experiences, I was able to investigate the financial, emotional, and mental health costs of families who have been affected with facing the voluntary leave of one or both parents in order to attempt to gain legal status. In a study by Zayas (2015), results showed psychological trauma and disconnections due to deportation. In this study, deportation was not exactly the factor of the mental health effects, however, voluntarily leave of the parents had similar impacts. On a macro level, this research will increase awareness of the barriers faced by undocumented immigrants undergoing this process and contribute to the development for improved public policy. This could potentially impact on a macro level by working along side policy makers and the community to collaborate and find methods to help decrease the effects caused by undocumented parents leaving the U.S.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

### Immigration

The United States of America has long been home to many immigrants dating back to the first year the U.S started collecting data in 1850 (Batalova & Esterline, 2022). In recent data from Migration Policy Institute, it is estimated that about 11 million people in the U.S are unauthorized immigrants, in other words, undocumented (Migration Policy Institute, 2019). Many families, with undocumented family members, in the U.S. have had to be separated due to deportation or voluntary leave in attempt to gain legal status. If an individual is undocumented and came to the U.S. illegally, in order to gain legal status, they have to leave the country for some time and return to the U.S. legally (American Immigration Council, 2018). The focus of this literature review is the impact of deportation within families gaining legal status and had to leave the country to reenter.

#### Voluntary Leave

The process for an undocumented immigrant to get their permanent residency can be different for many immigrants depending on their situation. In order to gain legal status or Lawful permanent resident (LPR), an individual needs to obtain a visa before coming in the U.S. (American Immigration Council, 2021). However, there are immigrants who come to the U.S without a visa which can have a more complicated process to gain their legal status which is called “adjustment to status”(American Immigration Council, 2021). Typically, there are several methods an immigrant can attempt to receive legal status but there are three general ones such as, through family,

employment, or refugee or asylum status (American Immigration Council, 2021). Each option has different eligibilities and different procedures to go through.

In order to be eligible to gain legal residency through family, an individual must either be a spouse of a U.S. Citizen, be an unmarried child under the age 21 years old of a U.S. Citizen, or a parent of a U.S citizen who is at least 21 years old (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2022). However, if an undocumented immigrant entered the U.S without legal permission, and they qualify for a visa, they have to leave the country in order to gain the visa (American Immigration Council, 2021). This is called barred from “adjustment status” (American Immigration Council, 2021).

### Barriers to Adjustment of Status

If an undocumented immigrant wants to gain legal status through family there are barriers or “Bars to adjustment” that can prevent legal status which will require the individual to leave the U.S.(American Immigration Council, 2021). Adjustment of status is based on how an undocumented immigrant entered the U.S or if an act or violation to the immigration law was committed (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2022). There is however, the Immigration and Nationality Act Section 245(i) that allows undocumented immigrants to still be eligible to adjustment of status. Unfortunately, Section 245(i) was enacted in 1994 and amended in 2000 (Fact Sheet:Section245(i)Adjustment, 2021). This means that if undocumented immigrants have barriers to adjustment of status and did not apply for Section 245(i), they are faced with having to leave the U.S. and wait about 10 years to reenter the country (American Immigration Council, 2021).

## Impact of Gaining Legal Status

Being deported can have multiple impacts on the deportee and on the family. Literature explains that the deportation procedure can be traumatic and can have changes between the family (Drotbohm, 2015). 4.5 Million U.S. citizen children live in families that have an undocumented parent or have both parents with undocumented status. (Gulbas & Zayas, 2017). Citizen children have to face the reality that comes with having a parent with an undocumented status which is the risk of parent's deportation. Undocumented immigrants also build a home and a family in the U.S and after so many years, it is difficult to leave everything behind (Zayas & Bradlee, 2014). The experience of parental deportation has shown a risk of depression and behavioral problems on children (Lovato et al., 2018). With the removal of a parent, families have to also make a decision of moving closer to the deportee or live with other relatives which can have an emotional impact on both parents and children (Ceciliano-Navarro & Golash-Boza, 2021).

Many families have to change their routines in order to fulfill the financial requirements needed to help out relatives who have had to leave the U.S. and also help out any children left behind (Ceciliano-Navarro & Golash-Boza, 2021). Literature also explains the difficulty for deported parents to find a new job to support family members left in the U.S (A Policy Statement by the Society for Community Research and Action: Division 27 of the American Psychological Association, 2018).

With deportation being a great risk in the U.S. and being part of the process to gain legal status, it creates an impact to families and deportees. Literature reports that children and relatives of individuals that get deported had experienced fear of that

outcome before they did get deported (Coutin, 2015). It is noticed that undocumented immigrants and their families live in fear as a result to the distrust of the police and possible deportation (Drotbohm, 2015).

The migration journey to the U.S. can have traumatic effects within an undocumented immigrant let alone the effects of returning to the birth country can be more harming to a deportee (American Psychological Association, 2018). Literature explains how deportation has an effect on children whose parents are deported. Children are challenged with housing instability, access to food, and poverty (American Psychological Association, 2018). With reviewing all literature, it can be concluded that deportation has a great effect on families.

Having to leave the U.S. in order for an undocumented immigrant to adjust their legal status can have an impact on not just the individual having to leave but, their family. Literature explains that the deportation procedure can be traumatic and can have changes between the family (Drotbohm,2015). Although most research focuses on deportation and deportees, this research focuses on individual's who in order to have the chance to adjust their legal status, leaving the U.S. is the only way to gain legal status. The Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRAIRA) of 1996, created what is called The Three- and Ten- Year Bars which grants legal re-entry to the U.S. if they are being petitioned by a U.S. Citizen adult child or a spouse. This, however, means that depending on the length of the unlawful stay in the U.S., the individual would have to leave the U.S. and apply through a U.S. consulate but, it can take three or up to 10 years to gain legal status (American Immigration Council, 2016). This is considered voluntary leave from the U.S. to gain legal status. It might not be



deportation however, there is still an impact. The literature explains a financial impact for deportee and relatives of deportees. Whether it's helping a relative return to the U.S or visiting relative in country of origin, it can have a financial strain in families (Ceciliano-Navarro & Golash-Boza, 2021).

## Theory

The theory used in this research is phenomenology theory. Phenomenological theory is used to examine human experiences and develop descriptions based on lived experiences described by the people (Reeves et al., 2008). This theory was developed by Edmund Husserl, a philosopher in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The role of this theory is to explore first person point of view (Reeves et al., 2008). This type of theory answered questions with interviews that were conducted by obtaining the information needed to gain understanding of the impacts of gaining legal status and having a parent voluntarily leave. This qualitative research and phenomenological theory have been useful when doing this type of research.

Research on impact of voluntary leave for the adjustment of legal status is limited. There is more research on deportation and the impacts on deportation that has explored data and policy but is missing the stories that elaborate the type of impact voluntary leave to gain legal status causes in families. To adjust legal status, voluntary leave is the best option, yet it affects families who have to be separated for years until authorization to return. This study was an opportunity to tell a personal story. This study has addressed this gap to give policy makers an idea and perspective on the affects these laws have on the undocumented immigrants who in the process of making a better decision, got impacted along the way.

## CHAPTER THREE:

### METHODS

#### Study Design

The purpose of this study was to identify and explore the impact that a family had when having to leave voluntarily out of the U.S in order to gain legal status. This case study used qualitative interviews to gather information from each family member. Interviews were conducted via Zoom and transcribed for analysis. Major themes and sub-themes were identified. This is an exploratory research due to limited amounts of real stories and voices of families who have had to gone through this type of process. This method allowed the opportunity for each family member to include their personal experiences. The case study consisted of four participants all related to each other but interviewed individually on separate days. The four participants were a husband, wife, and two adult children (male and female). The questions asked were related to their experience financially, emotionally, and relationally during the time frame of the family members gaining their legal status.

A strength with using case studies in order to complete this qualitative research method is, it allowed the opportunity for each family member to include their personal experiences. This provided in-depth understanding of experiences and perspectives on how voluntary leave to adjust legal status impacts a family as a whole. In addition, utilizing a case study for this research was able to provide a rich source of data.

With choosing to use a case study to complete qualitative research method, there were some limitations. A limitation of using a case study was that it was time-

consuming and resource intensive. Finding participants who were willing to take time to interview and get full details about their perspective was in fact a challenge. With researching the experiences that voluntary leave had on a family, I was able to investigate the economic and mental health impact of this family who faced having to leave to gain their legal status. These findings contributed to awareness and gaining an insight of the experiences with this issue along with potentially opening the opportunity for new policies to be created that can attribute to help future families in these circumstances.

### Sampling

Qualitative interviews were obtained using convenience sampling (Grinnell, R. M. 2018). Initially purposive sampling was considered due to experience however, convenience sampling was ultimately used. Interviews were held via zoom and were recorded and transcribed into written format. All data gathered from the interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis. All statements were sorted out based on individual and environmental domains. Major themes and sub-themes were identified under the categories and assigned codes that were logged into a codes list. Statements were assigned a corresponding category and entered in an excel sheet.

### Data Collection and Instruments

Qualitative data was collected by conducting interviews via zoom with each individual family member. Each interview began with an introduction and description of the study and the purpose of the study. Demographic information was collected during

the interviews. The demographic information consisted of age, gender identification, ethnicity, race and current income.

I know of families who have experiences this type of situation and asked them to consider participation. After family denied participation, word of mouth was used to find an eligible family to participate in this study. Adult children, spouse, parents, and other extended family members who were impacted by such experience were encouraged to participate in study however, extended family denied participation. The eligibility criteria to participate in this study required that individual who decided to voluntary leave to gain legal status, has now returned. Other elements were covered in consent form.

A script for recruitment was created which went like "Hello My name is Miriam Jimenez, I am currently working on a study to obtain insight on how a family is affected by the voluntary leave of a parent or both parents, in order to gain legal status. This study will help us learn what challenges might have been faced. I am looking for a family willing to participate and answer some questions about their experiences. Participation in this study involves interviews that will be done via zoom. These interviews may take about 45min-1 hr. Your participation is voluntary and there is no consequence if you would not like to participate. Thank you for your consideration."

Interviews were conducted using questions created based on the focus and lack of information found on such topic. Questions were both in Spanish and English in order to accommodate the participants primary language. Interviews were designed to take up to an hour however interviews took less than 45 minutes.

## Procedures

A flyer was not created for this study due to finding participants utilizing word of mouth. Participants were given consent forms which were then signed and sent back. Zoom links were sent to participants with a scheduled time to conduct interviews. Participants were allowed to select a date and time that can accommodate with their schedule to meet for the one-on-one interview. Interviews were completed in a private room utilizing headsets to ensure confidentiality. Each interview began with a review of confidentiality and how participation is voluntary and can end at any time during interview. At the close of the interview, participants were thanked for their participation and a debriefing statement hand out was sent.

## Protection of Human Subjects

The identity of the participants was kept confidential for the purpose of the study. The interviews were conducted virtually in a private room with headsets to abide with the confidentiality of the participant. Researcher will instruct participants to use pseudonyms if needed and not mention their names. Participants will be sign consent form (Appendix A) prior to participating along with video recording agreement attached on informed consent. Participants were each given a debriefing statement (Appendix B) upon conclusion of the interview. The video recording was transcribed and stored on computer. No Identifiable information was recorded or used with transcribing. The video recordings and any significant non-verbal's recorded were destroyed after they were transcribed. This study was approved as exempt by the California State University of San Bernardino Institutional Review Board (IRB-FY2024-39).

## Data Analysis

All data gathered from the interviews was analyzed using thematic analysis. Video recording was transcribed into written format via zoom. Each family member was assigned a unique code such as participant 1,2,3,4, to be used while transcribing for the purpose of differentiating. Non-verbal actions were also documented.

All statements will be sorted out into individual domains with each question. Under each domain, statements were categorized as being impacts on each participant. Major themes and sub-themes were identified under the categories and assigned a corresponding category and entered in an excel sheet.

## CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

The participants of the case study were a family of four (2 Male, 2 Female) and were recruited during the months of December 2023-February 2024 (recruitment period). The participants that completed individual interviews lasted between 15–20-minutes. Two participants identified as Mexican while the other two as Mexican-American but all four identified as Hispanic. The participants were all immediate family members that consisted of mother and father, who were the participants that voluntarily left the U.S. in order to gain legal status. The other two participants were their adult children (daughter and son).

In this study, the mother was participant 1 (P1) and the father was participant 2(P2). The adult children were participants 3 and 4 (P3, P4). P1 and P2 left the U.S. to adjust their legal status and were out of the country for about 13 years. Their children were between the ages of 8-10 years old when they were separated from their parents. P1 explained that they first all lived together in Mexico, however the children moved back to the U.S. and lived with extended family.

The qualitative data was analyzed using an excel spread sheet to create a large table that would include the question and each participants' response to the question. The data was analyzed by categorizing and finding themes among the questions asked during the interview. Four major themes arose based on the data collected. The four major themes were emotional and psychological impact, family dynamic change, financial challenge, and sense of loneliness and alienation. Each theme will be

discussed in turn. Response from the parents (P1 and P2) will be presented first followed by the adult children (P3, P4).

### Emotional and Psychological Impact of Separation

Participants expressed a lasting significant psychological effect on their health and the overall mental well-being of the family from the separation. P1 presented teared eyed which showed her own emotional impact that is still present till this day. P1 stated “My son cried every morning. He didn't want to go to school. And they always liked to study. I took them to the doctor because my daughter also started to have many hives on her body and my son was not eating.” Both parents expressed the difficult emotions that came with being separated from their children, family and friends. P2 expressed his own observations of how his children was affected emotionally from the separation but also elaborated how it was emotionally difficult for him. P2 stated being conflicted by his own thoughts due to the strong emotional distress. P2 stated “We don't want to return illegally; we want to do everything right.” These thoughts represent the conflicting thoughts that would cause a sense of motivation and possible reminder of why the family was not together.

Adult children (P3 and P4) expressed mental health problems started once they were separated as a family. P3, who is the adult son, expressed his personal emotion and feeling confused and angry with the situation. P4, adult daughter, stated “it led to a feeling of neglect and abandon from my parents. Which led to me having to see therapists and psychiatrists to deal with that abandonment that I felt.” The children of these parents felt an emotional impact which caused the need to seek mental health therapist to help heal with the challenges.



A sub-theme founded under emotional and psychological impact was the education challenge due to the adult children's mental state being raised without their parents. P1 discusses the negative effects on their children's academic performance and emotional well-being, highlighting the challenges of adapting to a new school environment, language, and potential bullying. P1 got teary eyed when talking about her emotional impact being away from her family when she voluntarily left the U.S. to gain legal status.

Another sub theme was confusion or continued lack of resolution about the family separation. P3 would use the term "I guess" very often which shows that there was a lack of understanding during that time in his life probably being due to his young age. P4, seemed short and straight to the point when answering questions as if she wanted to end the interview as fast as possible. Limited elaboration was provided from P4 which could be a representation of how impactful it was that she limited her responses.

Furthermore, the last sub-theme was health illness as a result to the emotional distress. P1 reported high blood pressure and risk for a stroke which was a result to the high levels of stress. P1 stated "this also gave me high blood pressure and I was on the verge of having a stroke, because, well, it is inexplicable to be separated from your children." Although the adult children did not report health conditions due to the stress, P1 included health conditions that she observed from her children such as decreased eating and hives. P2 interestingly did not report health changes or observing health changes in his children.

## Family Dynamics Changes

All participants expressed changes throughout the years within the family. The parents expressed how the relationships between their children changed with time. P2, explained that after all the years apart, now that they are reunited, they still don't have a close relationship with one another. Both parents expressed how they no longer feel as they can guide their children or discipline them due to them feeling like they might be seen as strangers. The parents seem like they don't feel like parents to their adult children and their children don't seem to view their parents as parental figures. P1 stated "13 years ago, my children were younger, I know they needed more from me." The parents in this study understand that the years without their children changed the relationship between all of them.

P3 explained how the distance between his parents and himself "affected my relationship with my parents in that I didn't really talk to them that often. I guess the only times I ever really did see them was when like the 2 weeks out of the year that I would go back and visit them." P4 stated "now that we're back together, we're trying to rebuild that bond." The family dynamics amongst the family changed and have still not been able to be rebuilt in the way where they each trust each other. A sub-theme was the physical separation between these members that also brought closeness to others rather than the parents. The adult children of this family explain that they got closer to each other since they stayed behind together when their parents left. They became distant with their parents but were raised by other family members when staying behind. P3 indicated feeling closed off towards their parents.

## Financial Challenge

The participants all expressed there was financial strain from the moment they separated. P1 explained the challenges that they had to face in order to even move back to their country of origin which was Mexico. The changes consisted of losing their valued items and their jobs. They still had to pay for their debts even though they no longer lived in the U.S. P2 stated “After 20 years, more or less, of living in the United States it was very difficult because at first, we lost our house, we lost our cars, we lost almost most of the things and were left with very few things, so you start over.” Both parents reported the challenge of finding jobs when they lived in Mexico. They both explained that in Mexico, they were considered “old” to be employed.

The adult children explained the challenge to do activities such as “school dances, birthday parties, and spending time with friends”, due to relying on other family members who they lived with. The financial strain is still present but in a different format. Both parents report that they work jobs that are not as stable, and they had to slowly recover. P1 states “not having a good stable job is complicated for me because I already feel more tired, and our rent is very high, and we need to make many payments.” The adult children explain how it has now been easier, but it is not what it could have been since they struggled financially for many of their adult years on their own.

## Sense of Loneliness and Alienation

The participants all expressed some kind of sense of abandonment and loneliness not just from each other but also from both countries (Mexico and U.S.). P1

explained that “we had been away for so many years that we were also strangers in our own country.” Those feelings of being alienated from their own country not just because it has been many years but also because they were faced challenges with finding jobs just based on their age. P2 stated “Every year when it was Christmas time, birthday time, it was when one would remember the family and the moments, we were together.”

All participants missed out on many years of celebrating events and gatherings which help a family feel united and less lonely. P1 expressed a statement which adds to feeling alienated in the long run. P1 states “now they invite us and everything, but it doesn't feel the same. It no longer feels the same way gathering with people.” P1 also stated “I had my family here, although I returned to my country, but there, I didn't have my family, my parents, my brothers, so emotionally it affected me a lot.” This represents loneliness and missing out on moments and bonding with those who seem to be important to these participants.

The adult children expressed feeling lonely during events at school that most parents would attend except for their own. P3 stated “you just don't have your parents or anybody when you would come home after school if you had a tough day. I mean, somebody you could confide too. I think it sort of just made me a lot more closed off.” P4 expressed a lack of trust of people and the lack of building relationships with others. P4 stated “I don't know where I belong in the sense that I don't know if I am American because my parents had to voluntarily leave and so there's no sense of belonging anywhere.” The adult children grew up without having their parents as part of their developmental journey and educational achievements.

The results show multiple similarities between the impact of family separation on the adult children and their parents. Both adult children and their parents felt like the separation resulted to a disconnection between them. They also noticed a sense of loss due to inability to be present during developmental stages that were crucial for both the adult children and the parents.

A difference between the parents and adult children was seen in the financial impact. Even though they were all impacted financially, the financial strain was felt more on the parents as they were trying to make ends meet with the Mexican wage. The children relied on the support of family members who were raising them while the parents found it challenging to find a job.

To summarize, the four key themes regarding the impact of adjustment to legal status were emotional and psychological impact, family dynamic change, financial challenge, and sense of loneliness and alienation. The results show an impact that caused a distress among all participants not just the parents who left the U.S to adjust their legal status. This distress was felt throughout the years the family was separated and the distress is on-going.

## CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

The results of the interviews in this case study using qualitative design, show similarities to existing literature regarding deportation. Although there are limited stories and research done on experiences with voluntary leave for the adjustment of status being the method used, these results have brought some insightful results.

Emotional and psychological results seem to have been due to the feelings of abandonment that the adult children felt at that time. Research on deportation show that children get left feeling abandoned which is relevant to what the children in this case felt (Capps et al., 2007). Both parents (P1 and P2) and their children (P3 and P4) revealed emotional distress and mental health challenges resulting from the separation. This finding is consistent with existing literature which highlights the effects of family separation on mental health (Smith & Jordan, 2018). As reported in the results, P1 showed nonverbal cues such as watery eyes that indicate emotional impact on the separation of her family. As parents, the decision to let their children live in a different country which can cause to an emotional distress that is a result of wanting to be legal for the purpose of no longer having the undocumented status.

Within the family dynamic, as a result of the parents living apart from their children, it seems to be a challenge to connect with one another at the time of the interviews. Previous studies on deportation show that there are disconnections between family relationships which can combine with attachment issues due to sudden separation (Dreby, 2012). Although in this case study, the separation was not sudden due to the cause of deportation, the separation still shows a sign of the adult children

having attachment issue. This change in relational dynamics is consistent with previous research explaining that a long family separation can disrupt parent-child bonds and change family roles (Choi et al., 2017).

With regards to the theme of financial challenge, the results confirm that financially there is an impact that seems to last years. The participants that went back to their home country, struggled to find a job due to the many years that they lasted in the U.S. The participants found it challenging to send money for their children earning a Mexican wage. Studies on deportation have previously shown that deportation has a significance consequence financially (Ceciliano-Navarro & Golash-Boza, 2021). This study indicates that it might not just be a financial strain for deportees but also families who want to adjust their legal status and have to voluntarily leave the U.S. as a result to their illegal entrance and lack of additional methods that won't separate a family.

In addition, participants discussed how the sense of loneliness and the stress of being apart caused not just mental health complications but health illness such as high blood pressure, hives, and the risk of a stroke. This insight shows that because of the changes in environment and the challenges that come with it, brings stress that might have resulted to health illnesses. Although voluntary leave is a decision on the individual wanting to gain legal status, one participant discussed how they just wanted to do things the right way and no longer be undocumented however, these lifechanging experiences might not have been anticipated.

The limitations of this study were the number of participants, the limited time, and study being illustrated as a single family qualitative case study research. Future research

can benefit by using more participants among the family such as those who help the family during the adjustment of status. Furthermore, interviewing more families would be considerably helpful to find out if these themes are present for all. Additionally, illustration of the different codes and categories by more than one person can show further discussion on the impact of voluntary leave as a method to the adjustment legal status.

### Implications/Recommendations

These results provide an understanding and a view that can remind readers and policy makers that these negative experiences occur with the current methods to adjust legal status. These results are an opportunity to put into perspective the views of these participants. This can create a realization that just like these participants, many other families are affected in a similar way due to the lack of a less punishing method to adjust legal status.

Within the social work field, advocacy in a macro level can be made to benefit families going through something similar. Social workers can help find a method or intervention that can allow the continued union of a family. A method can be building a coalition with other organizations and groups that can increase the influence of social workers in policy advocacy. In a study by Minkler (2010), they used community-based participatory research which helped create change. Such research can be useful to help engage other organizations in a coalition.

A potential policy to gain legal status that could avoid these family impacts could be having a possible conditional permanent residency that could lead to citizenship if all



criteria are met. This could work with undocumented parents that have a U.S. citizen child and the undocumented parents have been living in the U.S. for a specific number of years. The conditional permanent residency could be valid for a particular length of time and during that time, they could be required to keep a clean criminal background and demonstrate the ability to support their family. This type of policy can later bring the ability to withdraw the conditions and allow a legal permanent residency. Social workers could help build upon a type of policy as such by bringing in research and a more compassionate outlook to the impacts current policies create. A policy as such, can be a more humane method to help gain legal status which leads to the continued unity of the family.

In a micro level, social workers can offer counseling services to help undocumented parents and their children cope with the emotional and psychological stress of the immigration process. The counseling services would focus on stress and anxiety that comes with immigration policies and procedures. Furthermore, if such policy changes don't occur, social workers can focus on counseling that can address anxiety and depression and teach skills to manage with the separation of the family. This type of service could be provided as an on-going service for both the children and parents or until they determine the end of these services. Narrative therapy could be a type of therapy that can help both the children and undocumented parents externalize the issue and separate themselves from the issue while working on creating a narrative that can acknowledge their resiliency.

In a mezzo level, social workers can offer workshops and training sessions on family communication and conflict resolution to help the family stay connected. These

type of workshops and training sessions can begin as soon as the undocumented parents make the decision to start the procedure to adjust their legal status. The workshops and trainings can include psychoeducation and skills that promote family closeness. The workshops and trainings could consist of how parent and child relationships can be improved even when they are not in the same country. It can also include strategies to maintain connections for the duration of the separation of the family. These workshops could be provided virtually on a weekly basis which can also provide the opportunity for engagement of the family.

On a macro level, social workers can provide community outreach such as conducting workshops that can help educate policy makers that can help collaborate and empower the change for different methods. Social workers ethics and skills to empower and create advocacy within the different type of levels can be useful to build a more sensitive method to help undocumented immigrants gain legal status.

Future research can be beneficial to finding out in what ways could have the family felt more supported or struggled less with their challenges. With finding out the ways the family could have been more supported, programs can be created in a macro level to create the kind of support beneficial to them. With the start of those types of programs, policymaking can potentially become easier.

## Conclusions

To conclude, the result of this study shows the significant negative impact that adjustment of status by voluntarily leaving the U.S. can have in a family. The findings show how it can affect not just to the person leaving the U.S. but also, the children who

get separated from their parents. The impacts have led to feelings of abandonment, and a precedent reason for mental health issues which resulted to therapy amongst some family members. Families for whom one or both parents have an undocumented status and want to adjust their status could benefit with different options such as, having support or education on family conflict resolution to reduce the difficulties that come with voluntarily leaving the U.S. to gain legal status.

APPENDIX A:  
INFORMED CONSENT

## Informed Consent

The study in which you are asked to participate is designed to help gain insight on the impact that voluntary leave from the U.S. for the adjustment of legal status, has among a family. The study is being conducted by Miriam Jimenez, a graduate student, under the supervision of Dr. Laurie Smith, Professor in the School of Social Work at California State University, San Bernardino (CSUSB). The study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at CSUSB (IRB-FY2024-39).

**PURPOSE:** The purpose of the study is to obtain insight on how a family becomes affected with the voluntary leave to gain legal status among a parent or both parents occur.

**DESCRIPTION:** Participants will be asked questions on their experience and changes caused by leaving the U.S and returning to country of origin in order to return to the U.S with a legal status.

**PARTICIPATION:** Your participation in the study is totally voluntary. You can refuse to participate in the study or discontinue your participation at any time without any consequences. In addition, you can refuse to skip through any question that you may not want to answer at any time during the interview.

**CONFIDENTIALITY:** Your responses will remain confidential, and data will be reported in group form only.

**DURATION:** It will take about 45 minutes to 1 hour to complete interview.

**RISKS:** Although not anticipated, there may be some discomfort in answering some of the questions. You are not required to answer and can skip the question or end your participation. There are no consequences for not answering a question, skipping a question, or ending the interview.

**BENEFITS:** There will not be any direct benefits to the participants.

**CONTACT:** If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Dr. Smith at (909) 537-3837.

**RESULTS:** Results of the study can be obtained from the Pfau Library ScholarWorks database (<http://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/>) at California State University, San Bernardino after July 2024.

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I agree to have this interview be video recorded: \_\_\_\_\_ YES \_\_\_\_\_ NO

I understand that I must be 18 years of age or older to participate in your study, have read and understand the consent document and agree to participate in your study.

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Place an X mark here

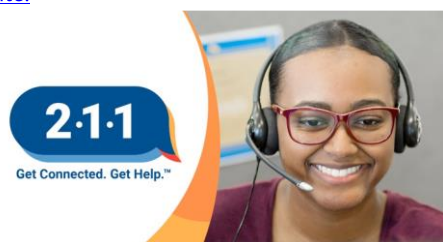
Date

APPENDIX B:  
DEBRIEFING FORM

### **Debriefing Form**

This study you have just completed was designed to investigate the challenges amongst a family who one or both parents had to leave the U.S. in order to gain legal status. Thank you for your participation and for not discussing the contents of this study decision question with others. If you have any questions about the study, please feel free to contact Professor **Laurie Smith** at **(909) 537- 3837**.

- [Call 211 for Essential Community Services | United Way 211](#) [Links to an external site.](#)



- [Call 211 for Essential Community Services | United Way 211](#) [Links to an external site.](#)  
Whether you provide local services, operate a national non-profit, or represent a company that wants to help more people, 211 can help. Across the country, 211s are vital partners to hundreds of organizations, businesses, and government agencies.  
[www.211.org](http://www.211.org)

- National Immigration Legal Services:  
[https://www.immigrationadvocates.org/nonprofit/legaldirectory/organization.392661-Access\\_California\\_Services](https://www.immigrationadvocates.org/nonprofit/legaldirectory/organization.392661-Access_California_Services)

APPENDIX C:  
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL LETTER



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**IRB #:** IRB-FY2024-39

**Title:** An Insight of the Impact of Gaining Legal Status

**Creation Date:** 9-21-2023

**End Date:**

**Status:** **Approved**

**Principal Investigator:** Laurie Smith

**Review Board:** Main IRB Designated Reviewers for School of Social Work

**Sponsor:**

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## Study History

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<b>Submission Type</b> Initial	<b>Review Type</b> Exempt	<b>Decision</b> <b>Exempt</b>
<b>Submission Type</b> Modification	<b>Review Type</b> Exempt	<b>Decision</b> <b>Approved</b>

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## Key Study Contacts

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<b>Member</b> Miriam Jimenez	<b>Role</b> Co-Principal Investigator	<b>Contact</b> 004874684@coyote.csusb.edu
<b>Member</b> Laurie Smith	<b>Role</b> Principal Investigator	<b>Contact</b> lasmith@csusb.edu
<b>Member</b> Laurie Smith	<b>Role</b> Primary Contact	<b>Contact</b> lasmith@csusb.edu

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