

# **UCLA**

## **Aleph, UCLA Undergraduate Research Journal for the Humanities and Social Sciences**

### **Title**

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### **Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3vt7g2wz>

### **Journal**

Aleph, UCLA Undergraduate Research Journal for the Humanities and Social Sciences, 21(0)

### **ISSN**

2639-6440

### **Author**

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### **Publication Date**

2024

### **DOI**

10.5070/L621064053

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# Living Under the Undocumented Umbrella

## The Mixed-Status Family Complex: U.S. Citizens with Undocumented Parent(s)/Guardian(s) Framework

Ruth Rodriguez

**Abstract:** An immigrant-made city, Los Angeles has served as the heart of the Immigrant Rights Movement for decades. From the 2006 immigration reform protests to Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), Los Angeles has rarely neglected the topic of immigration. Yet, one lived experience seldom recognized is that of mixed-status families (i.e., families that are not uniform in legal status). Approximately 1 in 5 individuals identify as either undocumented or having an undocumented family member. Acknowledging that mixed-status families vary, I focus on the mixed-status of U.S. Citizens with Undocumented Parent(s)/Guardian(s) and, consequently, how a U.S. citizen's life is altered by living under the undocumented umbrella. In this paper, I propose the existence of the Restriction of Mobility, (Active) Family Separation, Second-Hand Undocumented Trauma, and (Un)Documented Double-Consciousness under a developing framework called the *Mixed-Status Family Complex*. By reviewing existing literature and reflecting on my lived experiences, the mission of the framework is to help understand the nuances of how U.S. children of undocumented immigrants experience belonging.

**Keywords:** *Mixed-Status Family; U.S. Citizens; Immigration; Citizenship, Undocumented Parents/ Guardians*

## Introduction

Calling a mixed-status family home means sharing one roof under which, every day, the people living within work to find stability amongst unstable legal structures. These different homes may be composed of individuals who have Temporary Protective Status (TPS), Green Cards, Visas, Permanent Residency, DACA, [Statelessness], are U.S. Citizens, or are Undocumented (Fix & Zimmerman, 2001). Of these different combinations of families that exist, U.S. Citizen children with Undocumented Parent(s)/Guardian(s) will be the focus of this paper.

Current literature suggests that approximately 16.6 million people in the United States are members of mixed-status families (Enriquez, 2015). About 85% of undocumented immigrants have U.S. citizen family members, and 62% of undocumented immigrants have at least one U.S. citizen child (Barreto & Segura, 2014). In total, the United States is home to 5.8 million domestically-born children who live with an undocumented family member in their home (Mathema, 2017).

In California, where U.S. citizen children are estimated to have the highest number of undocumented parents, two million U.S. citizen children live with undocumented families (Mathema, 2017). Narrowing the scope, Los Angeles County is home to 10 million individuals, of which one-third are foreign-born (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). 1 in 5 individuals in Los Angeles are either undocumented or have an undocumented family member (Center for the Study of Immigrant Integration, 2020).

Neither safety nor comfort exists for these individuals in a country that constantly terrorizes and inflicts violence. Through sparse literature surrounding this topic, it is evident that psychological trauma is a side effect of being part of a mixed-status family. Due to this reality, we must acknowledge the existence, strength, and struggle that mixed-status families experience in order to open avenues of advocacy. Within families that consist of Undocumented Parent(s)/Guardian(s) and U.S. citizen children, an unleashing of political power can bloom from the privileges of citizenship while simultaneously recognizing the structural, emotional, and societal barriers they face. Thus,

through research and the conceptualization of a mixed-status family framework, we can better understand a U.S. citizen's experience, family dynamics, governmental systems, and broader conceptualizations of citizenship while questioning the existence of systems that seek to persecute and dehumanize humans.

With this in mind, the two research questions that guide the study are: What does current literature state about U.S. citizen children with Undocumented Parent(s)/Guardian(s) in mixed-status families? How can we construct a research framework that will help the United States understand what it means to be part of a mixed-status family?

By reviewing existing literature on mixed-status families and conceptualizing an ongoing *Mixed-Status Family Complex* research framework centered on the lived experiences of U.S. Citizens with Undocumented Parent(s)/Guardian(s), the aim is to bring awareness and representation of these families in realms of research. The intention is for researchers to use the developing framework to look at societal dilemmas through a mixed-status family lens. In addition to our traditional categories of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and income, an individual's proximity to immigration must also be considered as an indispensable demographic factor (Romero, 2008). LatCrit, a theory that examines Latiné individuals' multidimensional identities through the intersectionality of racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of oppression, has established immigration as an essential demographic to consider (Trucios-Haynes, 2000). However, this theory is still heavily centered on the undocumented experience, preventing insight into mixed-status family life.

In a world bound by societal constraints of citizenship, this research aims to remind individuals that establishing a family and staying united should not be a privilege dictated by a piece of paper but, instead, a *human right*. To argue that undocumented parents of U.S. citizens should receive citizenship solely on the basis of their proximity to a U.S. citizen would be impotent. Instead, citizenship itself should be regarded as an unsound concept when mobility, feeling safe in one's residence, and the establishment of a family are all fundamental human rights. Therefore, the *Mixed-Status Family Complex*, while describing what it is like to be

a U.S. citizen child of undocumented parents, complicates the notion that citizenship equates to belonging.

### **Positionality**

As the daughter of undocumented Mexican immigrants, the topic of mixed-status families is personal. Although I am a U.S. citizen, I grew up believing I was undocumented. Seeing myself as a mirror of the people that I love most, I attributed their undocumented status to be my own until, one day, I discovered this was not the case. However, fear did not cease after discovering my documented status; it only deepened with the vivid idea of losing my parents at any second and being left behind. Acknowledging my privilege as a U.S. citizen while shedding light on the pitfalls of having an unstable legal status at home, I hope to convey the message that just because one is documented, it does not mean one is free of fear, guilt, or worry.

### **The Mixed-Status Family Complex**

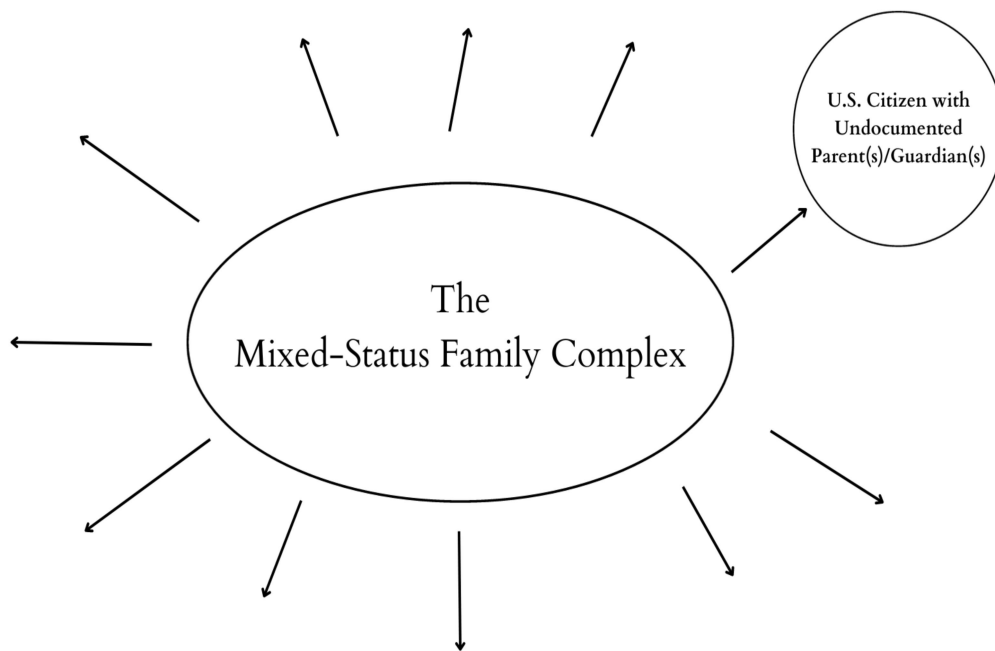
In reviewing a portion of existing literature about mixed-status families, I specifically focus on the experiences of U.S. citizens with Undocumented Parent(s)/Guardian(s). This work will present and establish the four central tenets of the developing U.S. Citizens with Undocumented Parent(s)/Guardian(s) Framework: Restriction of Mobility, (Active) Family Separation, Second-Hand Undocumented Trauma, and (Un)Documented Double-Consciousness. Existing literature will be synthesized, analyzed, and critiqued, allowing existing gaps to come to light.

Mixed-status families are not new—we have existed for decades. With the Immigrant Rights Movement's intense focus on the undocumented struggle, we need more awareness of the reality of the mixed-status family experience. From here, we can understand how an individual's undocumented status ripples into the lives of loved ones around them.

In *Contested Americans: Mixed-Status Families in Anti-Immigrant Times*, Dr. Cassandra Rodriguez complicates the assumption that citizenship equates to belonging based on studies

conducted with U.S. citizen children of undocumented immigrants (2023). This notion echoes sociologist T.H. Marshall's claims that citizenship is the fruit of legal status, rights, participation, and belonging (1950). Placing the Mixed-Status Family Framework within this context and the present moment, the mission of the framework is to aid in understanding how U.S. citizen children of undocumented immigrants *experience belonging*.

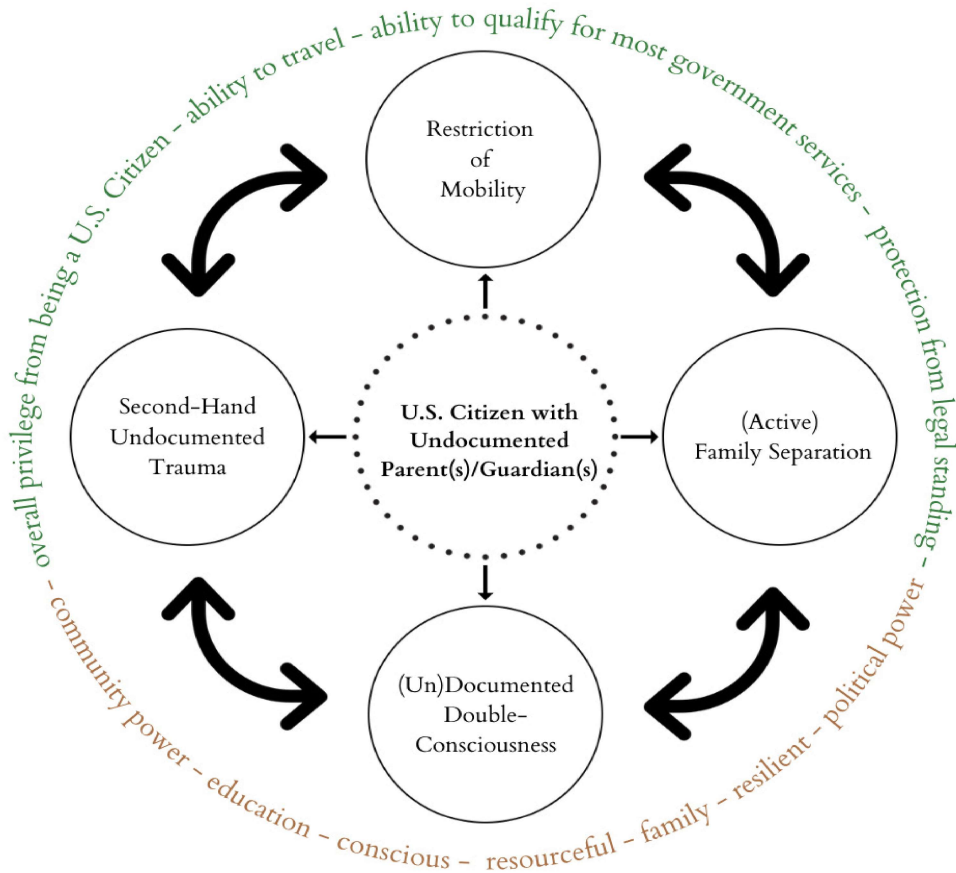
### The Mixed-Status Family Complex Framework



Pictured above is the Mixed-Status Family Complex. This developing framework, in its entirety, is home to the varying shapes and forms that a mixed-status family can take. It serves as a reminder that no one type of family is the center of it all. One branch is complete: U.S. Citizen with Undocumented Parent(s)/Guardian(s). As the years go by and the field grows, the Mixed-Status Family Complex will begin to fill with frameworks that will increase our awareness of mixed-status families altogether.



## U.S. Citizen with Undocumented Parent(s)/Guardian(s)



Above is the U.S. Citizen with Undocumented Parent(s)/Guardian(s) Framework. The four tenets—Restriction of Mobility, (Active) Family Separation, Second-Hand Undocumented Trauma, and (Un)Documented Double-Consciousness—are bound by phrases and words that describe the qualities of the individuals who identify within this status. In tandem, these components bring the experience and struggle of a U.S. citizen with undocumented parents to life, helping us understand how these individuals experience belonging in the United States.

## The Circle of Power & Privilege



Although parallels may be drawn between the experiences of those who are documented and undocumented, their distinctness from each other must always be front of mind. To acknowledge this reality, the framework is composed of phrases and words describing the power and privilege held by those with legal status. This circle of words embraces the lived experiences inside, allowing the contents within the framework to exist without the guilt and shame often felt when a privileged individual speaks of issues they encounter in their everyday lives. Gratitude, above all, holds the framework together.

The identified powers draw inspiration from Dr. Benavides López's theoretical framework, *Pedagogies of Migration*, which focuses on the strengths of mixed-status family members

(2016). By developing varying pedagogies within the theoretical framework, the heart of immigration-impacted individuals is revealed to be home to copious amounts of strengths, including bravery, self-sufficiency, cultural awareness, social awareness, and educational trailblazing (Benavides López, 2016).

Brown-colored words compose the bottom half of the *Circle of Power and Privilege*, representing U.S. Citizens' powers: community, education, great levels of consciousness concerning societal dilemmas, resourcefulness, strength from family, resiliency, and boldness in political action. Of course, these powers are neither exclusive to U.S. Citizens, nor always rightfully exercised by them, but they are powers they hold nonetheless.

The words that complete the circle above highlight the privileges of the individual. Colored in green, the words paint privileges as the fruits of the brown roots below. The following phrases are used: overall privilege from being a U.S. Citizen, ability to travel, ability to qualify for most governmental services, and protection from legal standing. These privileges are known within our society as a birthright; however, they are complicated by mixed-status households, which gets at the crux of the existence of the *Mixed-Status Family Complex*.

Ultimately, the goal of the *Circle of Power and Privilege* is to ground readers in the advantages held by U.S. Citizens while opening the gates to a more balanced, respectful, and mindful discussion of their life struggles within the framework.

### **Restriction of Mobility**

U.S. citizens have the privilege of mobility via their documented status, which allows them to travel with few restrictions. However, this privilege is curtailed by the restrictions placed on the shoulders of their undocumented parents. Consequently, the right to mobility becomes impotent for the U.S. citizen child who lives under the care of undocumented parents whose mobility is restricted.

The inability to reap the full usage of privileges by a U.S. citizen child due to their undocumented parents' lack of status

is classified as *multigenerational punishment*—laws created by the State in an effort to shape and constrain undocumented immigrants' lives also generate limitations across immigration status (Enriquez, 2015). By placing restrictions on travel, public services, and general freedom for undocumented immigrants, this punishment is felt generationally by those who experience the barring of freedom despite having access to it themselves. Frankly, it is difficult to use what one has access to when there are no role models to serve as examples; everything lies in the abstract. Another term that encapsulates this restricted existence of mixed-status families is *liminal legality*, as it serves to describe the grey area undocumented-led households live in; they limit their interactions with U.S. institutions due to their combined documented and undocumented status (Coutin, 2017).

Therefore, by combining multigenerational punishment and liminal legality, the curtailing of human rights is made explicitly clear. By constraining the movement of the undocumented population, the State snowballs these barriers onto future generations of U.S. citizens; by simply denying rights to at least one individual in the family, the rights of the entire family unit erode over time (Enriquez, 2015).

Apart from restriction of mobility tangibly limiting the freedom of a U.S. citizen in an undocumented household, there are also restrictions being imposed on intangibles, such as social mobility. Enriquez elaborates on this topic by naming the lack of social, cultural, and experiential capital for U.S. Citizens in mixed-status households (2015). Social capital is restricted because the less an individual travels, the more limited their global perspective becomes. Cultural capital is limited because, due to a lack of experience outside the bounds of a bubble of protection, there is little to no accrued knowledge from life experiences. Experiential capital is lacking because, without the confidence to take risks and move, individuals limit their ability to explore their natural wonder.

However, deficit frameworks are at play when discussing a supposed lack of capital. Mixed-status families have a wealth of internal social, cultural, and experiential capital. There is abundant beauty in sharing community and experiences within

a family. As Benavides López discusses in her *Pedagogies of Migration* framework, a mixed-status family's values ultimately provide substantive assets that ensure prosperity within these families (2016). Thus, framing this reality to emphasize how governmental structures prevent access to external social, cultural, and experiential capital would be more accurate. By placing the charge of this experience on the State, we avoid placing blame on the people being impacted by State-sanctioned oppression.

Based on conversations held with U.S. citizens of undocumented parents, college choices are limited to local universities as opposed to universities in other locations due to separation anxiety and a generalized fear of mobility. More research is needed in this area, and rather than emphasizing a lack of social, cultural, and experiential capital, we can emphasize the restriction aspect of mobility. To this extent, we will renounce placing blame or deficits onto the individual but will hold structural systems, like the State, accountable for the restriction of mobility caused by multigenerational punishment and liminal legality.

With literature about the restriction of mobility, one can better understand the social and psychological halts placed on U.S. citizens in mixed-status families. Incorporating the Restriction of Mobility tenet in the U.S. Citizen with Undocumented Parent(s)/Guardian(s) Framework allows us to deconstruct the narrative that citizenship equates to belonging. There is an identifiable gap in qualitative data in this field—data that would help bring this tenet to life with real stories of how, despite having the means, agency is still restricted for U.S. citizens with an undocumented umbrella hanging above them.

### **(Active) Family Separation**

In the literature, family separation is one of the most severe fears that comes with being part of a mixed-status family (Rojas-Flores, 2017). Both qualitative and quantitative research conducted on mixed-status families has shown the detrimental psychological trauma caused by finalized acts of deportation and the threats of deportation on families (Rojas-Flores, 2017). It is

what De Genova coins as the difference between deportability and deportation—deportability being the threat of deportation that looms ominously versus the actual act of deportation (2002).

Furthermore, when discussing family separation, it is imperative to highlight the role of borders and how they have both split families and created *transnational families*—families who live in different countries. The active separation of families strains the daily lives of U.S.-based migrants in various ways. The division of income between countries and the emotional toll felt by both parties (due to prolonged separation) make family separation a past and present reality for transnational families (Castañeda, 2012). Upon further theorization, family separation can also be interpreted as an experience that carries residual trauma to the present and future.

(Active) Family Separation works in the past, present, and future: *past* because parents leave their families to migrate, *present* due to the existence of transnational families, and *future* because of the looming threat of deportation—family separation is everywhere, altogether, all at once. Consequently, by combining the past, present, and future of family separation, the concept of (Active) Family Separation is born.

It is crucial to emphasize that family separation is not solely a potential occurrence but is very much a past and present experience. A gap exists in the literature regarding how this intersection of past, present, and future family separation impacts individuals in mixed-status families. By conducting interviews and group discussions with families domestically and abroad, we can strengthen the (Active) Family Separation tenet.

By adding (Active) Family Separation to the U.S. Citizen with Undocumented Parent(s)/Guardian(s) Framework, emphasis on its active nature transforms the mainstream outlook on family separation, allowing us to understand how genuinely generational the fear of family separation is for mixed-status families.

### **Second-Hand Undocumented Trauma**

Relatively recently, the American Immigration Council reported on Immigration and Customs Enforcement's (ICE)

deportation of more than 200,000 undocumented immigrants—all parents of U.S. citizen children (Lopez Hernandez, 2018). From a young age, the life experiences and survival instincts of U.S. citizen children of undocumented parents prevent them from feeling a sense of security in the country where they took their first breath. The country that pronounces their right to pursue happiness has the source of their happiness tightly gripped in its hands; what is happiness if not a loving family and support system?

The literature demonstrates that the constant threat of an undocumented parents' deportation leaves U.S. citizen children with bouts of depression and attentional issues (Lopez Hernandez, 2018). In the case that a U.S. citizen's parents are deported, severe psychological issues often transform their educational trajectories and lives, including a higher risk of anxiety, depression, and PTSD at the hands of this trauma (Lopez Hernandez, 2018).

Feelings of guilt also cloud the minds of citizen children. For many, even if they are experiencing the aforementioned mental health issues, they believe they have it “too good” to be feeling down (Lopez Hernandez, 2018). U.S. citizen children look to their parents and their undocumented struggles, taking it as a sign to be grateful for the status they have; they leave themselves to belittle their own issues. This downplaying of their well-being is gravely concerning and is ingrained in their minds.

U.S. citizens have citizenship, yet why do they have similarly compromised mental health as their undocumented counterparts? There is a societal assumption that citizenship grants a shield of immunity from battles faced by undocumented loved ones, yet studies indicate the opposite. A recent study conducted by the University of California Collaborative to Promote Immigrant and Student Equity (UC PromISE) found that 28% of undocumented students and 30% of U.S. citizens with undocumented parents reported depressive symptoms at a level that warranted clinical treatment, compared to 21% of U.S. citizens whose parents have lawful immigration status (Enriquez et al., 2021). There is a looming undocumented umbrella that hovers over mixed-status families, creating challenges for a U.S. citizen child.

In the same study, when asked if they had used on-campus

support for immigration-impacted students, 76% of undocumented students stated they had, compared to 18% of U.S. citizens with undocumented parents (Enriquez et al., 2021). Among the U.S. citizens with undocumented parents who had not made use of these services, 69% did not know they existed, 48% thought it was not for students like themselves, and 31% did not feel comfortable in these spaces (Enriquez et al., 2021). *They did not feel comfortable in these spaces.* Here, we have arrived at the heart of the dilemma. Since the Immigration Rights Movement has pushed mixed-status families onto the sidelines, they do not view themselves as part of it. Due to this isolation, individuals feel out of place in the place they belong the most—a place where they could use the power and privileges they hold.

Thus, we can see that trauma is directly created by the instability that comes with being part of a mixed-status family. There is trauma passed from the parent(s) to the child in the form of fear of deportation and multigenerational punishment. Just like second-hand smoke, the fear that undocumented parents bear due to our governmental structures are fears that ebb and flow into every crevice of a home. Ever-present terrors linger and stay in the minds of U.S. children who, despite their privilege, are still unable to free themselves from the intoxicating thoughts, worries, and traumas brought about by their mixed-status family experiences. Although they may not be undocumented, the undocumented umbrella they live under maintains a feeling of Second-Hand Undocumented Trauma—opening a window into both the documented and undocumented world.

The addition of Second-Hand Undocumented Trauma to the U.S. Citizen with Undocumented Parent(s)/Guardian(s) Framework provides insight into why living in mixed-status families as a U.S. citizen is incredibly nuanced. Yes there is privilege, and yes there is gratitude, but there is also immense pain. Naming these complex realities as consequences of Second-Hand Undocumented Trauma helps individuals with this status feel less alone and helps researchers gain more insight into their lives.



### **(Un)Documented Double Consciousness**

In 1903, W.E.B. Du Bois coined the term “double consciousness” to explain the inner conflict experienced by Black Americans in how they view themselves and how they understand an oppressive society views them (Black, 2007). Similarly, approximately fifty years later, Frantz Fanon wrote about how colonized people generally experience a kind of double consciousness in how they view themselves and the world (Black, 2007). In the lives of U.S citizen children of undocumented parents, similar to these insights, having to live in an undocumented-led household informs their perspectives in life, which in turn informs the creation of a (Un)Documented Double-Consciousness.

An example from the literature that supports the existence of this lived experience is a qualitative study conducted by Green (2019). This study demonstrates the severe impact the threat of deportation has on the documented children of undocumented immigrants. One striking story involves Señora Alcántara and her six-year-old daughter after Donald Trump’s presidential election. Señora Alcántara spoke:

My daughter is just six years old and sometimes she has trouble going to sleep...she is very smart and she can’t be deceived. When [Donald Trump] was elected, she came home crying from school and said, ‘Mom, we’re all going to be sent to Mexico, all of us’ and she was so sad and stayed sad for several days...We can’t underestimate their awareness. They worry more than we know. (p.136)

The example of a six-year-old worrying for her family’s safety demonstrates the profound level of pain and suffering occurring within mixed-status families. Although this little girl is deemed “worthy” as an American child and has therefore been bestowed abundant rights, due to her family’s undocumented status, she has taken her parent’s status as her own.

In this instance, one can argue that as a child, the only consciousness present is an undocumented consciousness influenced by her mixed-status family household. More research is needed in this area. Specifically, there is room for the growth of research in the following areas: the formation of the documented consciousness for U.S. Citizen children living in an undocumented-led home, the differentiations between their undocumented consciousness and their documented consciousness, and the coping with these distinct realities that call for the utmost of responsibility. One of my central questions for future studies is the following: In what ways does Second-Hand Undocumented Trauma catalyze the creation of the (Un) Documented Double Consciousness and how do both states co-exist in the minds of growing U.S. citizen children?

The objective of asking the aforementioned questions is to make note of the growing niche that (Un)Documented Double-Consciousness is. There are no answers to provide as of today because the research is pending, and the term is new. With time and research, the answers to these questions will be found, and profound knowledge of the lived experience will be uncovered. (Un)Documented Double-Consciousness is a developing term created in an effort to grapple with the confusion often felt by the children of undocumented immigrants. This confusion is often riddled with guilt about why these feelings are being felt in the first place. The goal of placing this term within the framework is to allow nuance and confusion to exist, surrounded by an acknowledgment of power and privilege.

By adding (Un)Documented Double-Consciousness to the U.S. Citizen with Undocumented Parent(s)/Guardian(s) Framework, Second-Hand Undocumented Trauma finds an extension to its existence. Whereas the latter speaks to the direct trauma experienced from being a U.S. citizen with undocumented parents, the former acknowledges a physiological transformation that U.S. citizens in mixed-status families endure. Merging the two new terms under this framework, the wheels for cognitive liberation begin to churn, opening avenues for advocacy.

## Conclusion

The Mixed-Status Family Complex makes a case for understanding mixed-status families. Although current literature on mixed-status families exists, we need more research that specifically pertains to U.S. citizens with undocumented parents. There are gaps in the literature regarding tangible and intangible mobility, the merging of past, present, and future family separation, and the analysis of how (Un)documented Double-Consciousness develops in children. Thus, with the attempt to focus on the dynamics of U.S. Citizens with Undocumented Parent(s)/Guardian(s), this research adds to the greater understanding of mixed-status families.

In addition to conceptualizing the *Mixed-Status Family Complex*, citizenship itself should be questioned. Besides the argument that citizenship is a man-made creation to ensure national security, why else does it exist? From its current standing, citizenship has existed for the subordination of people, stripping of human rights, and for the benefit of some over others more times than not. Although it is tempting to argue that solely giving status to undocumented people would make all these complications go away, this could not be further from the truth.

Legally, we need citizenship for all; socially, we need belonging for all. This framework leads us toward the cognitive liberation necessary to realize these truths by catalyzing us to advocate for a more just, humane, and compassionate world.

Though dilemmas persist, there have been glimmers of hope. The Deferred Action for Parents of Americans and Legal Residents (DAPA) program would have provided undocumented parents temporary protection from deportation, but talk of the program vanished into thin air, never to be heard of again. Although this was disappointing, there is hope that the existence of a program like DAPA will come to fruition one day. With the mobilizing of mixed-status families, we could bring the program to life.

Politically, we must find the strength to unify ourselves in our immigration experience. For too long, we have segregated ourselves, and in this act, we have only served a violent state. It is now time to create an understanding of our lived experiences

to serve each other and our collective liberation. With the Mixed-Status Family Complex in hand, avenues for advocacy are opened via the acknowledgment that these families exist—that *we* exist. There are U.S. citizens with Undocumented Parent(s)/Guardian(s) who have been waiting to rightfully be incorporated into the immigrants' rights movement. Now is the time.

By acknowledging the existence of the multi-dimensional experience for U.S. citizens with undocumented parents through the *Mixed-Status Family Complex*, which includes Restriction of Mobility, (Active) Family Separation, Second-Hand Undocumented Trauma, and (Un)Documented Double-Consciousness, we arm ourselves with the knowledge and political prowess to launch a second wave of modern-era immigration reform—an era that equates belonging to existence, not citizenship.

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## Author Bio

**Ruth Rodriguez** Born and raised in Los Angeles, California, Ruth Rodriguez graduated Summa Cum Laude from UCLA (2023) with a B.A. in Public Affairs, a minor in Labor Studies, and a B.A. in Education & Social Transformation. The daughter of immigrants from Guanajuato, Mèxico, Ruth will pursue her Master of Public Policy at UC Berkeley's Goldman School of Public Policy, aiming to bring her scholarship to life via the union of theory and practice. She began theorizing and researching in the Spring of 2021 as a second-year student and finalized the visuals that bring the framework to life in the Spring of 2022 through UCLA's Educators for Tomorrow Research Program. The creation of new knowledge for the field and lives of mixed-status families could not have been made possible without her pillars: Family, Community, Advisers, and Belief in the importance of this work. Ruth would like to specifically thank her EFT Family (Gloria, Karol, Cassie, Brian, and Gabby), Dr. Yadira Valencia, Dr. Magali Campos, Dr. Benavides López, Dr. Solorzano, Dr. Dorio, Dr. Gaffney, Erin Rubin, Hilary Malson, and Sara Wang. To community!