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(Un)studied vulnerability: introducing UndocuCrit to critical disaster studies

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper argues that when citizenship status is excluded from disaster management and planning, assumptions are made about undocumented communities, leading to their continued marginalization. In response, we introduce undocumented critical theory (UndocuCrit) as a necessary intervention in critical disaster research. By applying its four tenets – fear, liminality, parental sacrifice and acompañamiento – we demonstrate how undocumented status fundamentally shapes disaster experiences. UndocuCrit reorients disaster frameworks to honor the lived realities of undocumented immigrants, and we argue that it challenges exclusionary norms in traditional disaster paradigms.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper presents a theoretical intervention grounded in UndocuCrit, applied within the context of critical disaster studies. Drawing from interdisciplinary literature and the documented narratives of undocumented immigrants, this paper uses the four tenets of UndocuCrit as an analytical framework. Through conceptual synthesis and critique, it examines how legal status produces unique forms of disaster vulnerability. Rather than relying on empirical data collection, this study offers a reorientation of disaster scholarship that centers on an underrepresented perspective and challenges the dominant assumptions embedded in disaster research.

Findings – Applying the UndocuCrit lens reveals how undocumented immigrants face systemic exclusion in disaster preparedness, relief and recovery due to assumptions embedded in citizenship-based planning. UndocuCrit clarifies how fear of deportation, legal liminality and reliance on informal networks shape disaster responses with undocumented communities. This paper demonstrates that, although some disaster and immigration literature intersect, most fail to center the epistemologies and experiences of undocumented individuals. By grounding our paper in an undocumented scholar-led lens, disaster scholars can reframe research ethics, develop inclusive methodologies and critically challenge the structures that render undocumented disaster experiences invisible.

Originality/value – This paper aims to bridge the gap between disaster and undocumented immigration scholarship, addressing the disaster field's long-standing neglect of undocumented experiences. This paper challenges dominant disaster paradigms that universalize vulnerability without accounting for legal exclusion. Its value lies in a theoretical approach that redefines who is considered at risk and what equitable disaster preparedness and recovery could look like for undocumented immigrants.

Keywords Social vulnerability, Critical disaster studies, Hazards and disaster planning, UndocuCrit theory, Undocumented immigrants

Paper type Research article

1. Introduction

Understanding the experiences of undocumented individuals during disasters remains an urgent underexplored concern for disaster managers, planners, and scholars. Disaster studies have long recognized that disasters are not solely natural events. Critical Disaster Studies (CDS) scholars argue that disasters are shaped by physical hazards and political, social, and economic structures that amplify harm and determine who suffers most (Remes and Horowitz, 2021). Despite growing commitments to equity in disaster research and planning, undocumented status remains largely absent from prevailing disaster frameworks (Méndez et al., 2020). This exclusion fosters flawed assumptions about who deserves aid, who is considered prepared, and who belongs within the civic body. These assumptions reinforce bureaucratic and legal barriers that systematically restrict undocumented communities' access to emergency services, shelter, and recovery resources.

This paper argues that undocumented critical theory (UndocuCrit) offers a necessary intervention in disaster research and planning. UndocuCrit centers on the lived experiences of



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undocumented immigrants, challenges dominant logics of exclusion and introduces a new paradigm for understanding vulnerability, resilience, and policy response (Aguilar, 2019). By integrating UndocuCrit into the CDS tradition, we honor the complex, often-overlooked realities of undocumented disaster survivors and challenge prevailing disaster paradigms that rely on narrow citizenship-based definitions of belonging. Our contribution is twofold: first, to demonstrate how excluding undocumented status from disaster management results in harmful assumptions and misguided policies; second, to present UndocuCrit not only as a theoretical framework but as a corrective intervention that reorients disaster studies toward justice. When citizenship status is excluded, disaster planning risks reinforcing exclusionary norms. We present UndocuCrit as a tool to expose and confront those norms, honoring the disaster experiences of undocumented communities.

2. UndocuCrit theory: a framework centering undocumented experience

UndocuCrit is a theoretical intervention developed by undocumented scholars to articulate the lived realities of undocumented communities in the United States (Aguilar, 2019). Rooted in the broader traditions of Critical Race Theory, Latino Critical Theory, and Tribal Critical Race Theory, UndocuCrit exposes how legal status structures social exclusion, institutional violence, and systemic neglect. Gonzales (2016) emphasizes the urgent need for more nuanced theories of undocumented life that challenge state logic and epistemologies of illegality. UndocuCrit responds to this need by shifting undocumented people from being subjects of policy to being agents of theory. It recasts undocumented status from a passive condition to a position that generates critical insights about belonging, vulnerability, and power. This shift is particularly significant in disaster studies, where undocumented people have been rendered (un)studied—excluded from data, planning, and theoretical engagement in the very systems meant to protect them.

UndocuCrit functions as a framework and an intervention. As a framework, it provides a structured lens for understanding how undocumented communities experience marginalization across legal, educational, and institutional contexts (Aguilar, 2019). It organizes these insights around four tenets that articulate the social, political, and emotional dimensions of undocumented life. It does not merely describe undocumented experiences; it challenges dominant knowledge systems that have historically erased undocumented voices. Particularly in disaster studies, it confronts foundational assumptions such as the neutrality of citizenship or the invisibility of legal status in defining vulnerability. In doing so, it aligns with and extends the aims of CDS, which seek to politicize and historicize the study of disasters. This paper explores how undocumented experiences are rendered legible or illegible in disaster contexts through a framework that centers, rather than erases, those experiences.

The four tenets of UndocuCrit were developed primarily through research in higher education, immigration, and racialized legal scholarship (Aguilar, 2021). While the original foundation does not explicitly address disaster planning or environmental hazards, this paper builds on UndocuCrit theorize how undocumented immigrants lived experiences intersect with disaster management systems. The following analysis applies UndocuCrit's core insights to the disaster context, expanding the theory's reach while remaining grounded in its foundational commitments.

The first tenet, "fear is endemic," recognizes that fear is not incidental to undocumented life—it is a structural and enduring condition. This fear is most evident in educational, legal, and interpersonal spaces, where undocumented individuals must constantly assess risk and visibility (Dreby, 2012). We extend this insight to disaster systems, suggesting that the same state-sanctioned fear influences how undocumented individuals may engage with, or avoid, institutions responsible for providing preparedness and aid (Chunga Pizarro, 2024). Fear is more than an emotion; it operates as a logic that disciplines undocumented life across multiple domains.

The second tenet, “liminality produces distinct realities,” refers to the condition of “in-betweenness” that defines experiences within mixed-status families, undocumented immigrant life, and transition to illegality (Gonzales, 2011; Menjívar, 2006; Schuck, 1998). Menjívar (2006) defines legal liminality as the state in which individuals exist in the U.S. without full access to rights, resources, or protections. Although Aguilar (2019) develops this concept in the context of legal and educational institutions, we contend that disaster systems also demand legibility—proof of identity, stable residence, and citizenship—requirements often inaccessible to undocumented individuals (Aguilar, 2021). Liminality thus serves as an analytical bridge between undocumented status and disaster vulnerability, revealing how marginalization manifests through the denial of aid and procedural invisibility.

The third tenet, “parental *sacrificios* (sacrifices) as capital,” reframes the sacrifices made by undocumented parents as a form of epistemic and emotional inheritance. Aguilar (2019) introduces *sacrificios* as a mode of undocumented knowledge production—rooted in survival, intergenerational resilience, and care. Initially conceptualized to understand of undocumented students’ experiences with family struggles and perseverance, this tenet highlights how undocumented children acquire insights into navigating exclusionary systems (Aranda *et al.*, 2014). Applied to disaster studies, we argue that these sacrifices also inform the decision-making of undocumented families during crises, such as choosing to remain silent to avoid detection, relying on informal networks, and protecting one another within systems not designed for them (Asad and Rosen, 2019; de Lourdes Villar, 1992).

The fourth tenet, “*acompañamiento* (accompaniment),” centers on relational ethics and collective engagement. It rejects extractive research paradigms and calls for solidarity-based, reflexive methodologies. We draw from this tenet to propose a vision of accompaniment in disaster research and planning: working with undocumented communities to co-develop safety strategies, support systems, and narratives that prioritize lived experience over bureaucratic abstraction. As we apply this concept beyond the university, we emphasize the necessity of ethical presence and accountability at every stage of disaster engagement. When citizenship is not explicitly considered in disaster planning, undocumented people are rendered illegible, resulting in policies and systems that fail to serve (Méndez *et al.*, 2020). This misrecognition is not benign. It is operationalized through bureaucratic decisions that deny undocumented individuals access to shelters, federal relief, and relocation programs (Méndez, 2022).

In the following section, we focus on one of the most influential frameworks in disaster research: the Social Vulnerability Framework. While it has played a vital role in highlighting the unequal impacts of disaster, we argue that it remains incomplete without accounting for legal status. Through an UndocuCrit lens, we examine how this widely used framework can obscure the exclusions it seeks to address and how it can be reshaped to more accurately reflect the realities of undocumented disaster vulnerability.

3. Social vulnerability critique through an UndocuCrit lens

Quarantelli (1985) challenged scholars to ask: What is a disaster, and who gets to define it? This question opened the door to critical interventions that explored physical hazards, but also the political, racial, and institutional structures that determine who is protected and who is left behind (Perry, 2018). Frameworks such as the Social Vulnerability Index (SVI) have attempted to map risk through demographic indicators like race, age, income, and housing tenure (Cutter, 2003; Van Zandt *et al.*, 2012). Additionally, the work and mentorship of the late Dr William Averette Anderson, and the ongoing legacy of the Bill Anderson Fund, were instrumental in bringing race and equity into disaster scholarship, emphasizing how disasters amplify long-standing social inequalities. At the National Science Foundation, Dr Anderson paved the way for generations of scholars of color to interrogate vulnerability as a product of structural violence rather than individual misfortune.

Despite these advances, the social vulnerability framework has historically overlooked undocumented populations—not out of disregard, but because legal status is difficult to quantify using conventional mapping tools (Méndez *et al.*, 2020). It is important to note that this paper does not call for adding undocumented status as a technical variable within disaster risk assessments. Instead, we argue that undocumented status must be conceptually centered as an axis of disaster vulnerability that resists easy measurement and calls for a more profound theoretical reckoning.

While the SVI and similar frameworks were breakthroughs in connecting social factors to disaster risk, they carry fundamental limitations. These models often rely on census-derived variables, privileging technical rationality over lived experience (Morrow, 1999). As Jacobs (2019) observes, they frequently avoid naming systemic forces like white supremacy, racial capitalism, and settler colonialism—systems that actively shape vulnerability. Moreover, mapping “hotspots” or “at-risk” zones depoliticizes vulnerability, reducing it to a demographic condition rather than recognizing it as a politically constructed issue (Bankoff, 2003; Cáceres *et al.*, 2024). Where the SVI typically treats vulnerability as a function of being low-income, disabled, or a racial minority, UndocuCrit reframes vulnerability as a legal and political condition. It directs attention to how “illegality” is constructed and enforced through surveillance, exclusion, and deportability (De Genova, 2002). To our knowledge, no study explicitly positions the U.S. immigration system itself as an oppressive system that intensifies disaster vulnerability. Overlooking this connection weakens efforts to fully understand disaster vulnerability. As Molina (2014) reminds us, even race scholars have often failed to account for immigration systems as drivers of racialized inequality.

Undocumented immigrants are disproportionately exposed to harm because they live under a system of criminalization that distorts their ability to prepare for, survive, and recover from disasters. As (Méndez *et al.*, 2020) explains, exclusion from disaster systems is a direct product of policy decisions. Undocumented people are routinely denied access to Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) aid, public shelters, and housing recovery programs (Dadson *et al.*, 2025; Horton, 2012; Morey, 2012; Villarreal, 2023). This exclusion manifests not only as material deprivation, but also as “slow violence”—harm that unfolds gradually, invisibly, and cumulatively (Nixon, 2011). UndocuCrit insists that undocumented status is not a neutral legal category but a racialized, socially constructed identity that enables exclusion (Gonzales and Burciaga, 2018; Valdivia, 2020). When disaster frameworks ignore this, they misrepresent both who is vulnerable and why. For example, fear of detection and deportation pressures many undocumented immigrants to avoid use of public services, even in life-threatening situations (Abrego, 2011; Phillips, 1993; Rhodes *et al.*, 2015). Yet social vulnerability models rarely account for fear, liminality, or exclusion by legal design.

UndocuCrit makes these elements central. Its tenets reveal that undocumented disaster vulnerability is not an exception produced by external forces, but a consequence of the very political, legal, and institutional system that structure disaster response. UndocuCrit shifts the question from who is vulnerable to how vulnerability is produced. This theoretical reframing does not dismiss the value of social vulnerability theory but challenges it to confront its limitations. UndocuCrit thus functions as both a complement to and a critique of existing frameworks.

CDS scholars strongly assert that disasters are not “natural” but political events. This recognition pushes the field to interrogate how crises are constructed, who benefits, and who is excluded. However, legal status and citizenship remain under-theorized even within CDS. UndocuCrit bridges this gap by placing undocumented perspectives at the center of understanding vulnerability and resilience, rather than relegating them to the margins. It compels the field to ask: What forms of state violence are embedded in preparedness and recovery? Who is excluded by so-called “universal” plans? How do we design research and policy that responds to multiple overlapping exclusions? And perhaps most urgently: What knowledge have undocumented communities already developed that disaster studies must now learn from?

4. Four tenets under disaster management

UndocuCrit's four tenets reframe undocumented disaster experiences as moments of precarity but also as sites of theorization, resistance, and resilience. Although [Aguilar \(2019\)](#) originally developed these tenets in the context of higher education, this section extends them into critical disaster research. It demonstrates how the exclusion of citizenship from disaster planning shapes undocumented communities' access to aid and reinforces broader patterns of exclusion.

4.1 *The risks of rescue (fear is endemic)*

Fear shapes how individuals navigate evacuation routes, whether they access shelters, and their willingness to seek public assistance. This fear is produced and sustained by the legal and political condition of *deportability*, which renders undocumented presence perpetually provisional and subject to removal ([De Genova, 2002](#)). The constant threat of deportation actively structures behaviors and survival strategies in disasters ([Chunga Pizarro, 2024](#)). Historical and contemporary disaster responses have revealed the close entanglement of disaster systems with immigration enforcement ([Elkin, 2022](#)). The presence of border patrol, Customs and Border Protection (CBP), checkpoints during Hurricane Harvey, and similar avoidance behaviors observed during the Loma Prieta earthquake, exemplify how undocumented individuals often view aid sites as spaces of risk ([Lind, 2017](#)). This fear of aid spaces is not theoretical; it has played out in real disasters, where immigrants have faced the impossible choice between seeking help and risking exposure to immigration enforcement.

During Hurricane Katrina, the deployment of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents resulted in some undocumented evacuees being detained and referred for deportation ([Miller, 2017](#)). Their presence generated widespread fear among undocumented immigrants. While governmental officials encouraged affected individuals to seek help, they offered no assurances against deportation, leaving undocumented storm victims in an impossible predicament: seek aid and risk exposure, or stay hidden and endure the Hurricane's brutal aftermath alone ([Murray and Gelatt, 2005](#)). Some evacuees were asked for documentation, and at least three were ordered to appear for deportation hearings. Already stripped bare by the category 5 winds, undocumented families navigated a treacherous line between survival and the threat of removal—an added layer of risk rooted not in the disaster itself, but in the systems designed to respond to it. Their fear was not unfounded; it was a manufactured reality.

This reality is shaped not only by isolated disasters, but by the broader criminalization of immigrants embedded in U.S. law and policy. One of the clearest examples of this is the rise of "crimmigration", where immigration policy and criminal law increasingly overlap, criminalizing Latin American immigrants and reinforcing their marginalization ([Menjívar et al., 2018](#); [Stumpf, 2006](#)). This blending of enforcement systems has produced a decentralized system of immigration control, where local police are empowered to act as de facto immigration agents ([Coleman, 2012](#); [Provine et al., 2018](#)). Crimmigration does not exclusively affect the undocumented; even documented immigrants report feeling more exposed to surveillance and enforcement because their legal status makes them easily identifiable to the state and vulnerable to detention, surveillance, or other forms of legal punishment ([Asad, 2020](#)).

Given the established role of law enforcement in disaster response and recovery, this convergence of immigrant policing and emergency response undermines public safety efforts ([Gutierrez and Valla, 2023](#)). Spaces of aid transform into sites of surveillance and risk, prompting many undocumented immigrants to avoid government-run disaster services altogether. This dynamic corrupts trust in disaster systems, leaving undocumented immigrants with few safe options when crisis strikes. Even in cases where aid programs were confirmed to be safe, studies after Hurricane Harvey show that undocumented immigrants often avoided them; demonstrating how that fear endures long after the disaster has passed ([Villarreal, 2023](#)).

Fear is intergenerational. Children from undocumented families do not merely witness it; they absorb it. U.S. citizen children contend with their parents' deportability, and navigate a world where their family's safety is conditional (Abrego, 2011; Dreby, 2012; Menjívar and Abrego, 2012; Zayas, 2015). Legal status shapes how children come to understand institutions, authority, and risk (Dailey and Rosenbury, 2018; Gonzales, 2011). In disaster scenarios, these layered vulnerabilities compound. Disasters intensify the precarity experienced by children of immigrants. School closures, housing displacement, and healthcare disruption disproportionately affect mixed-status families (Dreby, 2012; Gándara and Ee, 2022; Iraheta and Morey, 2023; Kiester and Vasquez-Merino, 2021; Page *et al.*, 2020; Yoshikawa and Kalil, 2011). For undocumented parents, decisions about evacuation or sheltering are filtered through the question of whether their children will be safer turning to institutions that could also tear their family apart (Wilson and Tiefenbacher, 2012). As a result, families often adopt survival strategies that focus on staying hidden rather than seeking help, placing the burden on children to act as translators, advocates, or emotional buffers in high-stress environments (Dreby, 2010; Orellana, 2009). The emotional toll of managing legal vulnerability during disaster recovery affects children's mental health and sense of stability, leaving them with lingering anxiety and uncertainty (Fazel *et al.*, 2012). These hidden consequences illustrate how disaster vulnerability extends beyond physical harm, shaping undocumented families' wellbeing long after the immediate crisis ends.

The compounded effects of deportability, crimmigration, and institutional mistrust demonstrate that fear is not incidental to undocumented disaster experiences, but it is produced by overlapping legal and enforcement structures. Disaster planning that ignores this reality does more than perpetuate harm; it actively reproduces the very exclusion it claims to address. Moving beyond fear requires reimagining disaster systems in ways that account for legal status and restore trust, ensuring that undocumented communities are no longer forced to choose between safety and survival.

4.2 In-between status and systems (liminality translates into reality)

Legal liminality produces distinct and often contradictory realities for undocumented immigrants (Chacon, 2014). In the U.S., undocumented people work, pay taxes, and raise families, yet their legal existence remains precarious (Chomsky, 2014). This "in-betweenness" is a legal condition that reaches far-reaching consequences, shaping where undocumented people can live, how long they remain in legal limbo, and the constant emotional toll of uncertainty (Gonzales and Burciaga, 2018; Menjívar, 2006). Disaster management processes often rely on legibility for someone to access aid, yet few studies have examined how this requirement affects those living in a state of legal liminality (Cheng, 2017).

Bureaucratic liminality leaves undocumented individuals in an uncertain, unstable position, where they are visible to the state through their labor but excluded from essential protections (Rabin, 2020; Stumpf and Manning, 2022). As Coutin (2003) argues, undocumented people exist in a condition of "legal nonexistence," visible through their labor and tax contributions, yet systematically erased within disaster recovery systems that require formal identification, leases, or digital documentation. FEMA aid, for example, presumes legibility through paperwork, which undocumented individuals often lack or are afraid to present due to fear of being turned away (Morey, 2012; Sterett, 2016). Immigration status is a state of perpetual limbo; undocumented individuals may spend decades or a lifetime with unresolved legal cases, without a pathway to a documented status. As a result, their futures remain indefinitely deferred (Gonzales, 2016). By contrast, disaster response processes operate on the assumption that time is linear and definitive outcomes are expected (Aijazi, 2015). Yet for undocumented people, disaster recovery happens under constant uncertainty. They are expected to rebuild their lives while facing legal barriers that prevent them from achieving lasting stability.

Public narratives about undocumented people shape how policymakers and the public perceive who deserves protection. One of the most dominant of these narratives is the “Dreamer” myth, which frames undocumented immigrants, particularly those who are recipients of Obama’s deferred action program (DACA), as young, high-achieving students, college-educated, fluent in English, and morally upright (Abrego and Negrón-Gonzales, 2020). This narrative reinforces a good/bad immigrant binary that valorizes a small, exceptional subset of the undocumented population while sidelining the vast diversity of undocumented experience (Benhabib, 2012). Many are informal day laborers, caretakers, formerly incarcerated, or aging adults without access to legal relief. Yet U.S. policy favors those who meet narrow, exceptionalist standards of worthiness (Balgamwalla, 2024; Oliviero, 2021). This valorization of “model” undocumented immigrants obscures the reality that all people deserve dignity and protection in the face of disaster, regardless of educational attainment, criminal record, or work history. When disaster planning frameworks and processes reflect the Dreamer narrative, they risk selectively recognizing only those who conform to a sanitized version of undocumented life. As a result, shelters, aid programs, and outreach strategies are often designed with these imagined Dreamers in mind while sidelining individuals who cannot fit that mold of exceptionalism. This narrow approach leaves many undocumented unprotected even before disasters strike, reinforcing the exclusion that liminality produces in their daily lives.

Liminality manifests across many aspects of life, and future research must continue exploring its wide-reaching impacts beyond. For example, undocumented individuals frequently work in disaster-adjacent industries where they are exposed to toxic conditions without protection and are not guaranteed any type of aid (Chunga Pizarro *et al.*, 2024). But liminality extends far beyond the workplace. As stated before, children of mixed-status families often act as emotional and logistical mediators, managing crises on behalf of their undocumented parents (Delgado, 2022; Zayas, 2015). To even further explore liminality, we must also look beyond the traditional family and consider how gender, identity, and other intersecting factors shape undocumented experiences. Women and transgender people experience gendered forms of liminality, particularly in shelters and healthcare systems where their safety and identity are often disregarded (Collier and Daniel, 2019; Goldsmith *et al.*, 2022; Vogler and Rosales, 2023). These examples illustrate that liminality is not simply a legal condition; it is a structurally determined, compound reality that shapes multiple dimension of undocumented life.

Finally, spatial liminality emerges in the areas where low-income undocumented people are most likely to live, such as mobile homes, garages, unpermitted housing, or informal settlements (Asad and Rosen, 2019). Such housing is frequently overlooked during evacuation orders, damage assessments, or rebuilding plans (Rumbach *et al.*, 2020). These areas often become zones of abandonment, lying outside the scope of formal response but within the epicenter of disaster risk (Biehl, 2013). Taken together, these layered experiences of liminality reveal that undocumented immigrants do not experience disaster as a rupture from normalcy but as an intensification of chronic insecurity. When disaster frameworks presume bureaucratic legibility, they reproduce systems of exclusion. Recognizing the full humanity and diversity of undocumented communities is both a moral imperative and a practical necessity (Méndez, 2022). Disaster planning must reject conditional inclusion and instead commit to universal protections, not based on worthiness, but rooted in collective vulnerability.

4.3 Parental sacrifices as survival knowledge (*parental sacrificios as capital*)

Aguilar (2019) reframes the everyday sacrifices of undocumented parents, or *sacrificios*, from a silent suffering to an intergenerational wealth of knowledge and strategies of survival, care, and epistemic inheritance. These *sacrificios* expand to enduring exploitative work conditions, deferring personal health and safety, and navigating institutions that criminalize the presence

of undocumented parents (Yoshikawa, 2011). Such actions generate cognitive capital, or forms of survival knowledge, passed on to children. Aguilar's concept parallels Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth framework, which recognizes the skills that marginalized communities develop to navigate exclusionary institutions. In this sense, *sacrificios* are not individual acts of endurance but collective strategies embedded in community knowledge systems.

Sacrificial acts are invisible in policy narratives yet are central to undocumented families' disaster survival. Undocumented parents frequently serve as de facto planners, managing risk with few resources to keep their families as safe as possible (Collier and Daniel, 2019; Farfán-Santos, 2022). The decisions undocumented parents make during disasters—such as whether to seek aid or avoid public aid programs—could be misunderstood as noncompliance. In reality, these decisions reflect hard-earned survival knowledge about which systems can be trusted and which may expose their families to additional risk (Abrego, 2006; Villenas, 2001). These behaviors reflect the embodied labor of protecting one's family under layered conditions of legal, economic, and, as we argued, disaster precarity. Feminist theorists of care labor have established that acts of emotional and physical caregiving are foundational yet often devalued in social systems (Glenn, 2010; Tronto, 1996). Parental *sacrificios* operate within this tradition as a form of affective labor, or care work that sustains undocumented life in the absence of institutional support (Cuevas, 2019). In disasters, caregiving is the infrastructure of safety, resilience, and dignity for families excluded from formal aid systems.

Theorization of care labor, community cohesion, and resilience connect directly with disaster research through the concept of social capital. Social capital shows how community ties, trust, and collective support are essential to disaster resilience and recovery (Meyer, 2018). Roy and Meyer (2024) extend this further by identifying organization-based social capital as a driver of equitable recovery planning. For undocumented families, *sacrificios* function as both a form of affective labor and a mechanism for building informal social infrastructures. These include mutual aid, trust-based resilience, and grassroots preparedness efforts that help communities survive in the face of exclusion from formal disaster systems. Méndez et al. (2020) demonstrate how undocumented families relied on informal networks and mutual aid when formal disaster systems failed them. These practices are not ad hoc; they are historically rooted responses to state abandonment. Beyond being short-term coping mechanisms, *sacrificios* are transgenerational responses to system harm, producing survival knowledge passed down across generations.

Parental *sacrificios* also shape how undocumented youth come to understand power, inequality, and resilience. Negrón-Gonzales (2014) argues children of undocumented parents often draw from their families experience to develop a critical awareness of the system that governs their lives. This knowledge-sharing fuels a politically conscious formation that aligns with theories of collective memory that aid marginalized communities in interpreting state violence, organizing for justice, and celebrating their own empowerment (Kim, 2021). In the aftermath of disasters, this consciousness can materialize into action for undocumented youth to step into roles as cultural brokers and organizers, drawing from familiar narratives to advocate for inclusive recovery efforts.

Rather than dismiss parental sacrificial acts as anecdotal, scholars must recognize them as a counter-archive source of disaster knowledge, rooted in lived experience, which has been ignored in dominant disaster frameworks. *Sacrificios*, as theorized here, challenge dominant paradigms of resilience by recentering undocumented parents as agents of preparedness. Their labor extends beyond sustaining their families into supporting the social fabric of communities. By acknowledging *sacrificios*, we gain a deeper understanding of how undocumented communities can help one another before and after a disaster.

4.4 Solidarity as a method and practice (*acompañamiento*)

Undocumented communities have long called for research that reflects their lived realities rather than speaking about them from a distance (Abrego and Negrón-Gonzales, 2020). *Acompañamiento* emerges from the imperative to research and theorize undocumented life in a way that aligns with community truths, emotions, and resistance. Rather than simplifying or overlooking the complexities of being undocumented, *acompañamiento* recognizes the precarity of living without legal status while honoring the resilience of the community. This raises an urgent question: How can *acompañamiento* be meaningfully applied within critical disaster scholarship?

Acompañamiento emphasizes relational ethics and collective engagement. It challenges extractive research paradigms by calling for solidarity-based, reflexive methodologies that recognize undocumented communities as co-producers of knowledge (Sepúlveda, 2011). In disaster studies, this tenet calls researchers to engage not only on undocumented people's experiences but with them by co-constructing frameworks, safety strategies, and policy critiques.

Disaster Participatory Action Research (PAR) can provide a clear methodological pathway for this. As Meyer *et al.* (2020) argue, PAR enhances disaster resilience through community-based, iterative knowledge production that fosters mutual learning and reciprocal engagement. *Acompañamiento* and PAR together could promote the co-creation of preparedness plans, alert systems, and resilience strategies grounded in cultural knowledge and political realities. This extends to highlighting community organizing decisions in research. Highlighting these choices at the organizational level, not just individual ones, is essential to understanding how undocumented community or organizations collectively resist exclusion and build safety strategies. For example, during the Tubbs Fire, Mendez *et al.* (2020) documented how a mutual aid network rejected collaboration with the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), choosing instead to prioritize the protection of undocumented families over securing federal resources. The decision exemplifies *acompañamiento* in action, especially given that many researchers might otherwise dismiss such a choice as insignificant. In reality, the decision to reject collaboration with DHS is a deliberate act of protection, reflecting how undocumented communities and migrant-serving organizations operationalize trust. These examples illustrate how disaster justice requires centering the priorities, knowledge, and safety of undocumented communities, not the preference of institutions, as the foundation for equitable response efforts.

Reflexivity is another fundamental basis of *acompañamiento*. Farfán-Santos (2022) explains how the emotional labor of listening to migration stories exposes profound power asymmetries and challenge academic detachment. Recognizing our positions as researchers and potential gatekeepers means embracing humility and discomfort. This requires asking ourselves: Who benefits from our research? Whose experiences are we centering? Who are we allowing to speak? It also requires recognizing the growing role of undocumented scholars themselves. Undocumented immigrants are not simply passive subjects confined to narrow assumption about their labor sector; they are also researchers, theorists, and emerging scholars (Salazar *et al.*, 2023). Their scholarship is often developed at significant personal and institutional risk (Salazar *et al.*, 2023). As more undocumented students pursue doctoral education, their lived experiences expand and challenge conventional boundaries of academic knowledge, introducing perspective shaped by lived legal liminality. Disaster scholars can draw lessons from the higher education field, where undocumented scholars have long theorized exclusion, access, and institutional violence (Aguilar, 2021), making a case for epistemic inclusion.

Acompañamiento, entails shifting who is seen as a legitimate producer of academic knowledge and challenging the notion of undocumented communities as "hard to reach". Undocumented communities have consistently generated knowledge; what is lacking is a research community willing to listen and follow their lead. Ultimately, *acompañamiento* is a refusal to reproduce exclusionary practices that persist within academic spaces when scholars

treats undocumented communities as mere subject of a study rather than as partners in knowledge creation. It is also an invitation to build a scholarship agenda that reflects the complexity and brilliance of undocumented life.

5. Conclusion

When disaster planning excludes citizenship status, it operates on assumptions that reinforce exclusionary norms. As a result, undocumented immigrants are left outside the bounds of aid, deemed unworthy of protection, or rendered entirely invisible. We have argued that UndocuCrit is a theoretical lens and a necessary intervention that exposes these harmful assumptions while honoring experiences of undocumented immigrants. CDS laid the foundation for this approach by urging the field to move beyond technocratic responses and interrogate how power, race, and inequality structure disaster vulnerability. This paper builds on that foundation by insisting that legal status cannot be treated as peripheral; it is a necessary dimension.

We acknowledge this intervention may face critique. Some may argue that foregrounding legal status politicizes a field that aims to be universally applicable, or that UndocuCrit cannot be broadly applied across disaster contexts. However, as Fortun and Morgan (2016) and many scholars argue, disaster planning is inherently political. Ignoring legal status is not merely a neutral act; it is a choice that perpetuates the exclusion of one of the most vulnerable communities in the U.S. today.

This intervention is especially urgent in the context of the current U.S. political climate. In the recent election, we have witnessed an escalation of anti-immigration policies, rhetoric, and enforcement, where undocumented individuals are targeted indiscriminately (ACLU, 2024). The criminalization of immigrants has been amplified through strategic scapegoating, linking immigrant to national security despite extensive evidence on the contrary. This hostility is not accidental, but a deliberate tactic to fuel nativist ideologies. As such, disaster scholarship that ignores legal status risks becoming complicit in broader structures of exclusion and state violence.

Rather than offering a comprehensive analysis of undocumented disaster vulnerability, this paper serves as a starting point for what must be a collective, evolving, and inclusive project. It is a call to center undocumented people not as marginal but as theorists, planners, and co-creators of just futures.

Disaster planning is already complicit in fostering exclusion through fear; without intentional change, it will only deepen this harm. To fulfill its ethical responsibility, disaster research must turn toward undocumented communities not with extractive curiosity but with committed accompaniment. We conclude by restating our core argument: when disaster research excludes citizenship status, it does not merely overlook undocumented communities but also reinforces harmful assumptions about who belongs and actively sustains their exclusion.

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