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Getting Out of the System What You're Putting In: An Examination of the Tax

Contributions of Documented and Undocumented Immigrants

There are two prevailing narratives regarding the presence of immigrants in the United

States. The first is the more optimistic one: immigrants are the backbone of the United States.

They help bolster the country's economy by working jobs that U.S.-born citizens refuse to do,

they are hard-working people in search of a better life, and they contribute greatly to taxes and

the economy. However, there is also a much more pessimistic narrative regarding immigrants,

particularly concerning those who reside in the U.S. with no citizenship status: they steal jobs

from Americans, they bring in crime and drugs, and they contribute nothing in taxes while

exploiting social services (Rose). Particularly when it comes to that last notion regarding the tax

contributions of undocumented immigrants, there is much confusion on whether undocumented

immigrants still pay taxes. So what is the truth? Do immigrants, especially undocumented

immigrants, help fund our state? This point of contention thus drives my research question: *Is*

there a relationship between immigration status and tax contributions?

In this paper, I will be looking at the estimated tax contributions of documented

immigrants, undocumented immigrants, and U.S.-born citizens in 23[1] of California's counties

from the year of 2019. I am specifically looking at state and local income tax contributions, and I

will be calculating an average "per capita tax contribution" for each of the three immigration

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[1] Alameda, Contra Costa, Fresno, Kern, Los Angeles, Merced, Napa, Orange, Riverside, Sacramento, San
Bernardino, San Diego, San Francisco, San Joaquin, San Mateo, Santa Barbara, Santa Clara, Santa Cruz, Solano,
Sonoma, Stanislaus, Tulare, and Ventura

status groups for each county. In doing so, I will be able to create an objective comparison of how much an average citizen in each group is paying in these state and local income taxes. In looking at 23 counties in California, I will be able to better understand the average patterns of the influence of immigration status on tax contributions, despite differences in wages, dominant industries, population density, county GDP, etc. This analysis will provide insight into whether immigrants are making positive contributions to our economy and society, despite what many may believe.

Significance of Issue

The issue of immigration status influencing tax contributions is significant because of the sheer number of immigrants present in the United States. Immigrants make up a sizable share of the United States population and are present in even larger amounts in California. In 2021, 27% of California's population was born outside of the United States. California is currently home to 10.5 million immigrants, with around 2.3 million being undocumented as of 2019 (Perez et al.). With such a high concentration of immigrants in California, many of them being undocumented, it is no surprise that there is discourse regarding immigrants and their contributions to our state.

In that same vein, examining the tax contributions of immigration status groups is important because taxes are essential to the functioning of California's economy. Tax contributions go towards essential sectors of California, such as education, health care, public safety, and transportation (Lin). Individual income taxes specifically are the largest sources of per capita revenue for the state, which in total had $630.7 billion in state and local general revenues in 2019 ("California State Fiscal Brief"). The taxes levied on California's citizenry are therefore of great importance to the functioning of California, its GDP, and its economic prowess in terms of the rest of the world.

For immigrants themselves, the perception of them and their contributions is of the utmost importance. Immigrants, both documented and undocumented, build up California in many ways because of the goods, services, and benefits they provide. In California in 2014, immigrants were 43% more likely to be in the workforce than U.S.-born-citizens ("The Contributions of New Americans in California"). Almost one in ten workers in California are undocumented immigrants, with there being 1.75 million undocumented immigrants in our workforce (Hayes and Hill). These undocumented immigrants provide $63 billion annually in government revenue for California, contribute over $263 billion to California's GDP, and are disproportionately employed in what are deemed as "essential sectors" (Ojeda et al.).

Therefore, when immigrants contribute so much, is it justified that their hard work becomes dismissed in favor of the narrative that they are dangerous, lazy, and cost our state more money than they are worth? Making the facts clear regarding the economic contributions of immigrants, particularly when it comes to tax contributions, could greatly aid this group in terms of improving the social perceptions and attitudes towards them. Beyond social perceptions, there are a variety of important policy implications that could arise from examining the tax contributions of immigrants, specifically undocumented immigrants.

Prior Research and Background

Past research on tax and broader economic contributions of documented and undocumented immigrants has greatly informed us and provided much to the pool of knowledge on this topic. A paper titled "Illegal Immigration: A Positive Economic Contribution to the United States," from the Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies delves into the economic impacts of undocumented immigrants. In this paper from 2009, the author discusses both the

positive tax contributions of undocumented immigrants, while also looking at the costs which undocumented immigrants impose in the United States (Nadadur, 2009).

There are also a multitude of comprehensive reports, such as one by the New American Economy immigration advocacy and research group. In 2016, they published a report titled "The Contributions of New Americans in California." This report primarily discussed the economic and tax contributions of documented immigrants, but also touched on the role of immigrants in the workforce (in specific industries/sectors such as agriculture and STEM), healthcare issues, and housing issues.

Both of these organizations have provided powerful research and information, but there are still gaps left. Specifically with the work in the Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, the state of California is not examined in depth. Instead, the issue of illegal immigration is broadly looked at in terms of the United States. Additionally, these pieces of past research reports use older information than I am utilizing in this research project, so I will be able to provide valuable insight regarding the most current, relevant implications of this issue.

This relationship between immigration status and tax contributions has also led to a multitude of policies and legislation that impact undocumented immigrants. In examining the contributions that undocumented immigrants have made to our state, California has subsequently expanded the social safety net for undocumented immigrants. One such example of this was seen in the expansion of Medi-Cal. In 2018, undocumented children began being covered by Medi-Cal, and undocumented adults up to age 26 became covered in 2020 (Kuang and Foy). On May 1, 2022, Governor Gavin Newsom expanded Medi-Cal to all undocumented immigrants, regardless of their age. In general, California has been hailed as having one of the strongest social safety net programs in all of the United States (Miranda). Starting in 2001, undocumented

immigrants became eligible for in-state tuition at public schools and financial aid as of 2011.

Undocumented immigrants can also get driver's licenses as of 2013 and are eligible for earned

income tax credits as of 2020 (Kuang and Foy). There are many more social safety net

expansions for undocumented immigrants in the works, however, with research such as the type

that is being done in this project informing the rationale behind these types of policies.

Theory and Argument

Considering that my research question is, "Is there a relationship between immigration

status and tax contributions?", my independent variable is immigration status. This variable is

split into three levels: documented immigrants (defined as lawful residents and naturalized U.S.

citizens), undocumented immigrants, and U.S.-born citizens. I will specifically be looking at the

numbers of Californians who are in each of these immigration status groups for each of the 23

counties in which the database I am looking at has available data. The database I am utilizing is

the California Immigrant Data Portal, which is compiled by the Equity Research Institute at the

University of Southern California ("California Immigrant Data Portal").

The dependent variable is the estimated state and local income tax contributions of each

of these three immigration status groups, specifically the *per capita* state and local income tax

contributions for each group, which I will personally be calculating using available population

and overall tax contribution data. Once again, this data is derived from the California Immigrant

Data Portal and I will be looking at the same 23 counties in California. For both the independent

and dependent variables, I am using the most recent data available in the California Immigrant

Data Portal, which is from 2019. This data from 2019 represents five-year averages (from 2015

to 2019), but to stay consistent with the methodology utilized in the CIDP, I will simply be

referring to this data as being from 2019.

My hypothesis is that immigration status *does* affect tax contributions, specifically that U.S.-born citizens and documented immigrants contribute more in state and local income taxes than undocumented immigrants. However, I argue that the main causal mechanism behind this relationship is due to variation in median hourly wages between these immigration status groups. Specifically, I argue that U.S.-born citizens and documented immigrants will contribute more in taxes because they have higher median hourly wages than undocumented immigrants. This is because U.S.-born citizens and documented immigrants have the virtue of accessibility to higher-paying jobs because of their status as citizens and legal residents. Undocumented immigrants are often employed in low-paying sectors that do not require certifications or a United States education, such as agriculture, manufacturing, and private household employment (Blanco). With undocumented immigrants working in sectors that produce lower incomes on average, it is obvious that they would subsequently be paying fewer taxes.

Therefore, the second part of my hypothesis is that undocumented immigrants still make significant net-positive state and local income tax contributions, especially given their lower wages on average. I, therefore, hypothesize that this difference is not due to undocumented immigrants somehow "bypassing the system" and getting away with not paying taxes. I instead believe that immigrants, particularly undocumented immigrants, are still contributing to the economy via tax contributions to a much higher degree than many people may think.

There may be confounding variables that provide other possible explanation for undocumented immigrants contributing less in taxes than documented immigrants and U.S.-born citizens, beyond variation in median hourly wages. Though many undocumented immigrants utilize Individual Taxpayer Identification Numbers (ITIN) to pay taxes without having a social security number, it is possible that not all undocumented immigrants are doing so (Schoichet).

This would reduce the state and local income tax contributions of this immigration status group, and subsequently decrease the average per capita tax contributions of an undocumented immigrant.

Research Design and Data

In order to test my hypothesis, I conducted a point-in-time, small-n study which utilized data from 23 California counties in the year of 2019. My research question, "Is there a relationship between immigration status and tax contributions?" drove me to collect data regarding the state and local income tax contributions of 3 immigration status groups: documented immigrants, undocumented immigrants, and U.S.-born citizens. I utilized the 23[2] California counties in which full data was available regarding the state and local income taxes, median hourly wages, dominant industries, and population numbers for each immigration status group. I looked at the year of 2019 because it was the most recent year in which data was available in the California Immigrant Data Portal; I did try searching for more recent data from other sources, but I was unable to find anything more current than 2019.

The first part of my hypothesis, which is that documented immigrants and U.S.-born citizens *will* contribute more in state and local income taxes than undocumented immigrants, led me to create a way in which I could compare the tax contributions of each of these groups. The state and local income tax contributions of these three groups would therefore be my dependent variable, while the independent variable is immigration status. Subsequently, I calculated the "per capita tax contributions" for an average citizen in each of the immigration status groups by taking the total state and local income tax contributions for documented immigrants,

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[2] Alameda, Contra Costa, Fresno, Kern, Los Angeles, Merced, Napa, Orange, Riverside, Sacramento, San Bernardino, San Diego, San Francisco, San Joaquin, San Mateo, Santa Barbara, Santa Clara, Santa Cruz, Solano, Sonoma, Stanislaus, Tulare, and Ventura

undocumented immigrants, and U.S.-born citizens in each of the 23 California counties for the year of 2019 and dividing it by the total number of members in each group. This created a more objective measure of tax contributions that could be easily comparable across the three different immigration status groups, considering that these groups vary widely in population, especially across counties. Again, the data for both the total state and local income tax contributions for these groups in each county and the number of members in each group was derived from the California Immigrant Data Portal.

In order to factor in the median hourly wages of each immigration status group to further explore the relationship between immigration status and tax contributions (specifically to see whether variation in median hourly wages is the cause of documented immigrants and U.S.-born citizens contributing more in taxes), I once again utilized the CIDP. The CIDP contains full data regarding the median hourly wages in 2019 in the 23 counties for documented immigrants (lawful residents and naturalized U.S. citizens), undocumented immigrants, and U.S.-born citizens. These median hourly wages represent full-time wage and salary workers who are aged 25-64 and are shown in 2019 dollars. The median hourly wages were provided separately for lawful residents and naturalized U.S. citizens, so I calculated the average median hourly wage for the documented immigrant category as a whole by multiplying the respective median hourly wages by the number of members in each of the two groups and then dividing that number by the total number of documented immigrants.

To further compare the state and local income tax contributions of these three immigration status groups, I also looked at the *same* median hourly wage for these groups across different counties. In other words, I compared the per capita state and local income tax contributions for when each immigration status group made the same median hourly wage, but in

different counties. I utilized the median hourly wages of $19, $20, and $22 because these were

the only wages in which there were counties where all three immigration status groups had the

same median hourly wage.

For the median hourly wage of $19, documented immigrants in San Bernardino County,

undocumented immigrants in Alameda County, and U.S.-born citizens in Merced County all

made this same wage, so they are the counties that I utilized in this analysis.

For $20 an hour, documented immigrants in 4 different counties made this same hourly

wage (Los Angeles, Riverside, San Joaquin, Sonoma). Therefore, for my bar graph below, I

chose Los Angeles County, as the documented immigrants per capita state and local tax

contributions of $1,153.35 were closest to the mean contributions across all 4 counties (which

was $1,108.21). For undocumented immigrants and U.S.-born citizens, I respectively used Santa

Clara and Tulare counties, as those were the only counties in which those immigration status

groups made $20 an hour.

There was no county in which undocumented immigrants had a median hourly wage of

$21, but each immigration status group did make $22 an hour in at least one county. I used Santa

Cruz County for documented immigrants and San Francisco County for undocumented

immigrants, as these were the only counties for these groups where the median hourly wage was

$22. However, for U.S.-born citizens, they had a median hourly wage of $22 in both Kern and

San Bernardino counties. Both counties had very similar per capita state and local income tax

contributions, with only about a $20 difference between them. Therefore, I chose Kern County

because San Bernardino had been already utilized in the graph, and I wanted to provide more

variation across counties.

I further broke down per capita state and local tax contributions by dominant industry in each county involved in my analysis, in order to provide more insight into any possible relationships that could be seen when comparing the tax contributions of immigration status groups making the same median hourly wages in different counties. I did so because employment in different industries yields different hourly wages, and subsequently will greatly influence the tax contributions of immigration status groups. I once again used the California Immigrant Data Portal, which contains data regarding the proportions and raw numbers of those employed in each county's industry, based on immigration status. For my graph in Figure 4, I specifically broke counties down by the predominant industry in which undocumented immigrants were employed in each county. I classified it this way rather than doing the dominant industry for all of those employed in the county because I found that otherwise, the dominant industry in almost all the counties would have been "retail trade," which would not provide many variations and points of comparison.

Therefore, the retail trade category includes the 12 counties of Alameda, Contra Costa, Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, Sacramento, San Bernardino, San Diego, San Francisco, San Mateo, Santa Clara, and Sonoma. The dominant industry of agriculture includes the 10 counties of Fresno, Merced, Napa, Kern, San Joaquin, Santa Barbara, Santa Cruz, Ventura, Stanislaus, and Tulare. The only category where undocumented immigrants were predominantly employed in the construction sector was Solano County.

Findings and Analysis

I found that there is in fact a relationship between immigration status and tax contributions, with documented immigrants and U.S.-born citizens contributing more in state and local income taxes than undocumented immigrants across all 23 counties. However, this

relationship does appear to be driven by documented immigrants and U.S.-born citizens having higher median wages, which are strongly statistically linked to higher per capita tax contributions.

My first finding, that documented immigrants and U.S.-born citizens have higher per capita tax contributions than undocumented immigrants, can be seen in the boxplot in Figure 1 below. This boxplot contains all the average per capita state and local income tax contributions for the three immigration status groups in each of the 23 counties. A big link is seen between residing in the U.S. with legal status and contributing more in state and local income taxes, as undocumented immigrants are contributing around $1,000 less per year in taxes than their documented and U.S.-born counterparts.
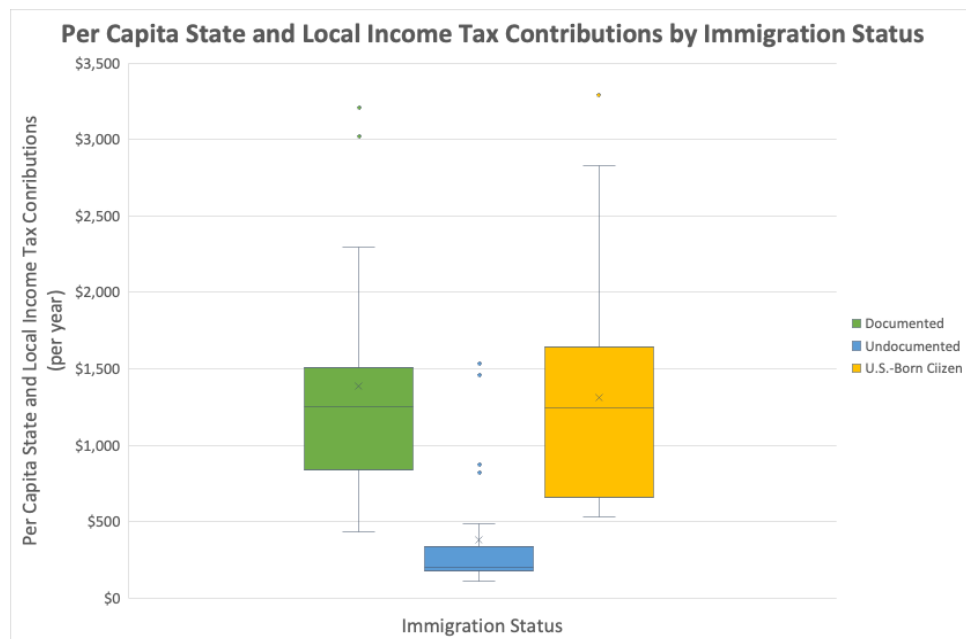

Figure 1. Data Source: California Immigrant Data Portal

However, as I hypothesized, I found a clear link between median hourly wages and per capita state and local income tax contributions. As seen below in Figure 2, I plotted the median hourly wages of each immigration status group and their respective per capita state and local income tax contributions in each of the 23 counties on a scatter plot. Figure 2 clearly shows that

higher median hourly wages in a county for an immigration status group are strongly associated with higher state and local income tax contributions. Specifically, the correlation coefficient for the scatter plot in Figure 2 is 0.93, indicating a very strong relationship between median hourly wages and per capita state and local income tax contributions.
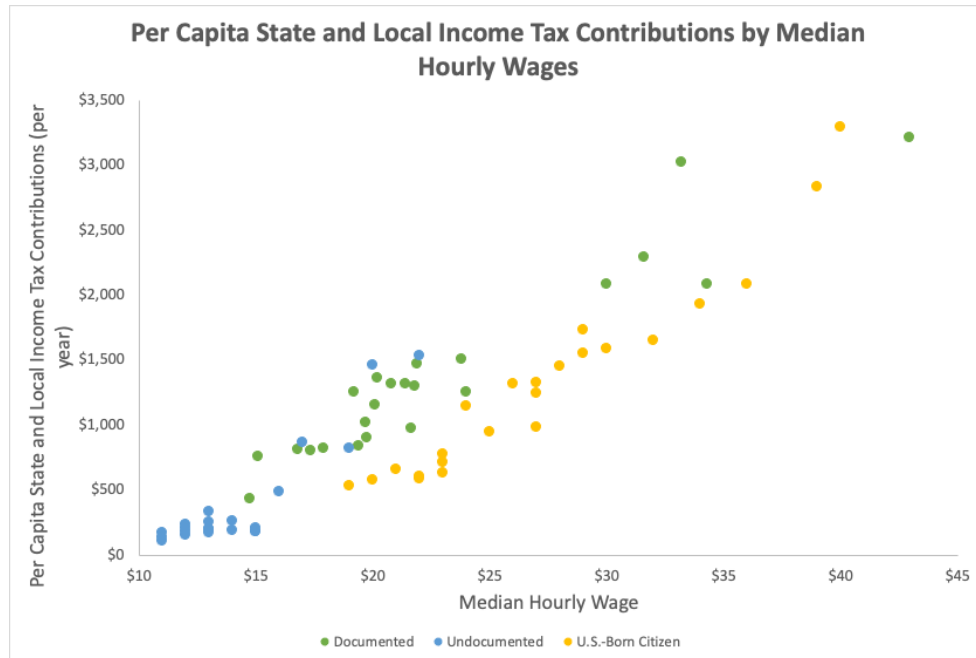

Figure 2. Data Source: California Immigrant Data Portal

This represents a fairly intuitive relationship: the more money you make, the more you will be contributing in income taxes, especially given California's progressive tax rate (Lin). However, in plotting this relationship in the scatterplot below in Figure 2, one possible explanation is made clear regarding *why* undocumented immigrants are contributing less in income taxes than U.S.-born citizens; they are simply making less money on average.

As previously mentioned, I did provide a comparison of when immigration status groups are making the *same* median hourly wage, across different counties. As seen below in Figure 3, in the three cases where per capita tax contributions for immigration status groups making the same median hourly wages are compared, documented and undocumented immigrants contribute significantly more in taxes than U.S.-born citizens. For the median hourly wages of $20 and $22,

undocumented immigrants contribute more per capita than both documented immigrants and U.S.-born citizens. The sheer differences in these tax contributions are also important to note. Undocumented immigrants in Santa Clara County making $20 an hour are contributing $1,457.17 on average, whereas U.S.-born citizens in Tulare County who make $20 an hour are only contributing $577.99 on average. Undocumented immigrants in Santa Clara County, therefore, contribute a little over 2.5 times more in taxes than U.S.-born citizens in Tulare County. This significant difference in tax contributions across immigration groups who are making the exact same median hourly wage illuminates a fascinating relationship between immigration status and tax contributions.
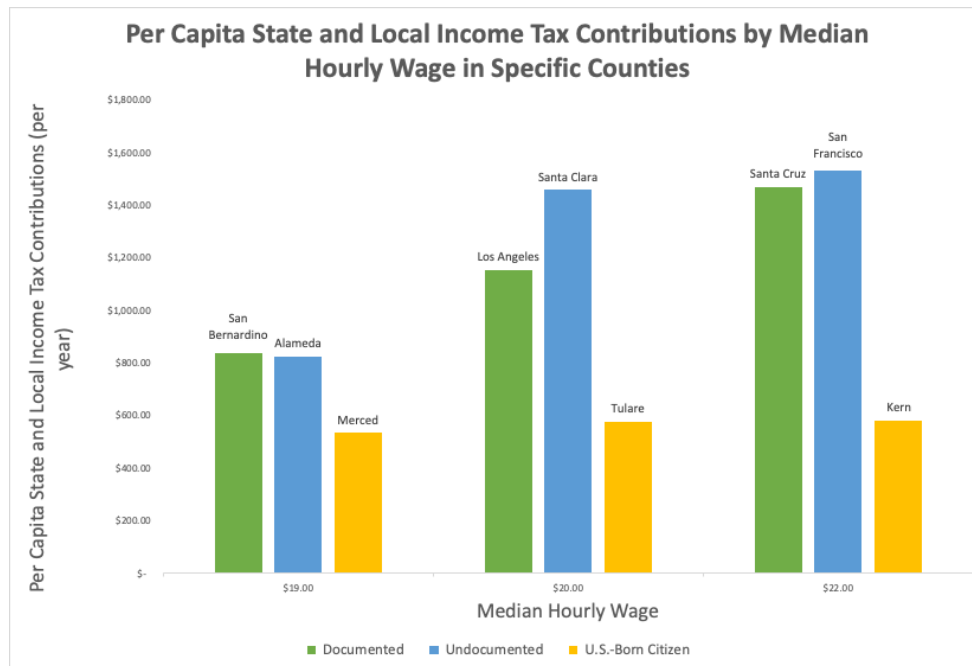

Figure 3. Data Source: California Immigrant Data Portal

In order to further examine and understand the interesting finding in Figure 3, that U.S.-born citizens contribute less in taxes per capita than documented and undocumented immigrants when these groups make the same hourly wage, I classified counties by the dominant industries in which undocumented immigrants were employed. This analysis, seen in Figure 4, shows that on average, all immigration status groups who are employed in counties where retail

trade is the predominant industry contribute greater taxes than those in agriculture-dominant counties. Specifically, the counties of Merced, Tulare, and Kern, where U.S.-born citizens are contributing less in taxes compared to both documented and undocumented immigrants, are all agriculture-dominant counties. Subsequently, the counties of Alameda, Santa Clara, and San Francisco, where undocumented immigrants are contributing more in taxes than U.S.-born citizens, are retail-trade dominant counties.
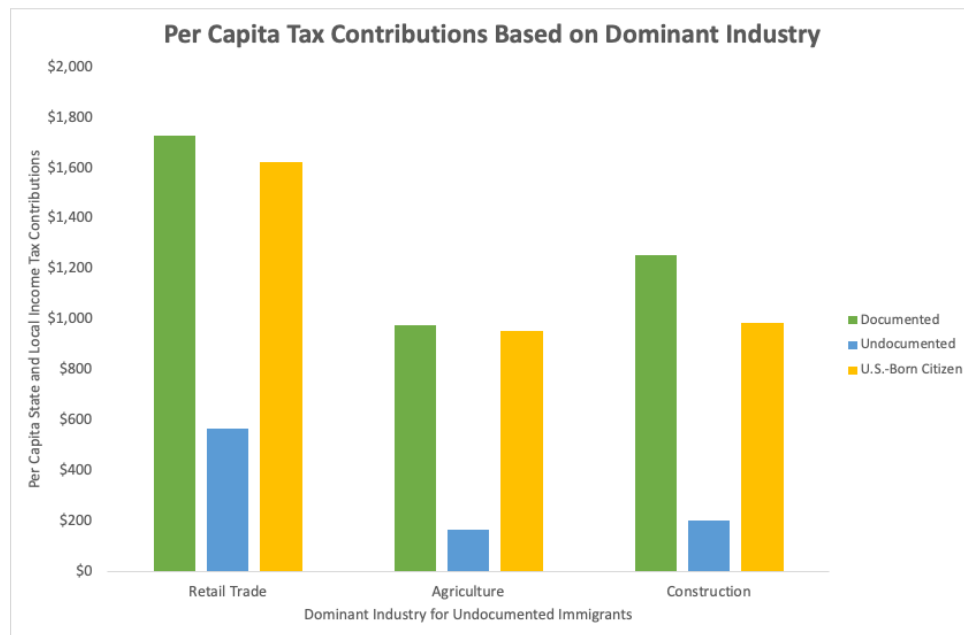

Figure 4. Data Source: California Immigrant Data Portal

There is a clear reason why this may be: being employed in the retail trade sector is simply more profitable for workers than being employed in agriculture. Therefore, if individuals are making more money by being employed in the retail trade sector, they will subsequently be contributing more in income taxes than those who are making less money in agriculture and therefore contributing less in income taxes.

However, this is a bit of a strange relationship, because despite different dominant industries and the variation in wages this may create, the median hourly wages of these groups compared in Figure 3 are the *same*. It is possible that the *mean* hourly wages are significantly

different than the *median* hourly wages, which could explain why tax contributions vary so much based on immigration status group and the specific county, despite wages being the "same". One of my data limitations here is that I could not find the full dataset that includes the mean and range of hourly wages for each immigration status group, so I cannot provide any insight further than the possibility that this interesting relationship seen in Figure 3 is somehow caused by variation in dominant industries.

Implications

Given that I did in fact find evidence for my hypothesis that there is a relationship between immigration status and tax contributions (which is driven by variation in median hourly wages), and that undocumented immigrants do make significant net-positive tax contributions despite having lower wages on average, there are various very important implications of this, both from a societal and a public policy standpoint. Valuable insight has been provided regarding the economic and tax contributions that a significant portion of our state's population, undocumented immigrants, are making. My findings regarding how much both documented and undocumented immigrants contribute in taxes help dispel the notion that they are taking more from the country than they are providing.

Additionally, the argument for the policy issue of expanding the social safety net for undocumented immigrants is bolstered through my findings. Undocumented immigrants *are* contributing to our state's tax revenue, and are funding the very programs that they do not have access to, such as unemployment insurance (Padilla and Flores). Another example of a program in recent years that undocumented immigrants did not have access to is the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act. The CARES Act excluded 10.6 million undocumented workers and their 4.9 million children and spouses from receiving

unemployment, small business support, and tax rebates (Ojeda et al.). This piece of federal

legislation perpetuated the pattern of leaving undocumented immigrants out of essential social

safety benefits and has widespread negative repercussions for both immigrants and the economy.

However, it is only fitting that undocumented immigrants should be reaping the benefits of these

types of programs, especially when in many cases, undocumented immigrants are in fact

contributing *more* in taxes than those who are in the United States legally and with citizenship.

This research paper also provides a strong argument for several of the current debates and

potential legislation being discussed regarding expanding the social safety net for undocumented

immigrants. One current debate within the California state legislature specifically lies within the

realm of unemployment benefits for undocumented workers. AB 2847 from 2020 would have

begun a pilot program to provide undocumented immigrants with unemployment benefits, and

although it passed in both the Senate and the House, Governor Newsom vetoed it because of

fiscal costs (Kuang and Foy). Similarly, SB 227, introduced by Senator Durazo, is currently

being considered in California's legislature as of August 2023. This bill would establish a

state-funded unemployment insurance program for workers who are undocumented (Martínez).

As discussed at length through my research, undocumented immigrants are contributing to our

state's tax revenue, and this provides a strong economic and moral incentive to expand policies

that can benefit this population group who are helping our state in a variety of ways.

Further Research

The research presented here also provides implications for what kind of further research

can and should be done to continue expanding the pool of knowledge on this important social,

economic, and political issue. In order to narrow the scope of my project and provide a more

in-depth analysis, I solely looked at state and local taxes, specifically income taxes. In further

research, it could be valuable to examine other state and local taxes, such as property and sales taxes. Examining federal taxes would also help inform public policy on a grander, nation-wide scale, by looking at the influence of immigration status on federal payroll, income, corporate income, and excise taxes.

Additionally, I did face several data limitations that may have skewed my results, possibly necessitating further research in order to solidify my findings. One such data limitation was not having accurate numbers for the number of workers in each immigration status group. Because many undocumented immigrants are employed in "under the table" work and sectors which do not leave much of a paper employment trail, I had to instead create a per capita state and local income tax contribution measure based on the total number of the population, rather than just workers. This provided an interesting complication, as even newborn children were considered as part of the population, leading them to also have a "per capita income tax contribution." However, considering that employment rates for those aged 25-64 are very similar despite immigration status in each of the 23 counties, it is likely that this data limitation did not excessively skew my calculations, as the number of workers should be fairly relative to the total population in each immigration status group.

Factoring for various other confounding variables, particularly in terms of accounting for median hourly wages, may also be a valuable thing to do in further research on this topic. As previously mentioned, an interesting relationship was illuminated in Figure 3, where I compared immigration status groups who made the same median hourly wage across different counties. Pursuing further research that can account for county GDP and doing more in-depth analysis on dominant industries and the wages they produce may help explain why U.S.-born citizens appear

to be contributing so much less in income taxes than immigrants, despite making the same median hourly wage.

Conclusion

The immigrant population in California, specifically undocumented immigrants, contribute greatly to the state's economy, workforce, and tax revenue. As revealed through my research, undocumented immigrants have substantial net-positive state and local income tax contributions, despite being in lower-paid sectors and making less money on average.

This research has furthered the critical idea that we need to be providing better social safety for those who are contributing to our economy, especially when it is their very taxes that are funding that safety net (Padilla and Flores). Rather than exploiting social services and stealing jobs, immigrants are helping make our state even better through their hard work and economic/tax contributions.

Finally, although I only focused on the state of California for this research project, the idea of expanding the social safety net for immigrants because of all that they provide is an important issue that has similar implications across all of the United States. Through this state-wide analysis, the argument can be made for widespread immigration, citizenship, and social safety net reform from a federal level. This will not only benefit immigrants but will benefit all Americans and our broader society.

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