

Processes of Belonging for Citizen-Children of Undocumented Mexican Immigrants

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Abstract In this article, we focus on the developmental contexts of middle childhood and early adolescence to explore the lives of citizen-children living with undocumented Mexican parents. We draw on the concept of belonging to highlight the distinct situation of citizen-children and the ways in which they come to understand their place in a world. To capture the experiences of citizen-children born to undocumented Mexican immigrant parents and their sense of belonging to place and community, we conducted in-depth interviews with 83 citizen-children in late childhood and early adolescence in three groups. One group of citizen-children lived in Mexico after their parents' deportation. Another group remained in the U.S. after parents were detained or deported. The third group did not have a parent in deportation proceedings. Qualitative analyses of children's recorded interviews revealed their experiences of *discovery* of parents' undocumented status; political, social and material *exclusion*; and *rupture* of family ties. Children were keenly aware that birthright citizenship afforded them numerous privileges unavailable to their parents, but that it did not extend to the very privilege, they valued most: an intact family. The loss of parents through detention or deportation forced some children to consider existential questions about who they were and where they belonged, sometimes pitting family members against one another. Our findings suggest that belonging is intimately tied to broader forces of legal persecution that go beyond individualized notions of illegality and have deep, possibly lasting psychological effects.

Keywords Deportation · Undocumented immigrants · Citizen-children · Belonging

Introduction

An estimated 4.5 million children are U.S. citizens by birth, but live with an undocumented parent (Passel and Cohn 2009). Known as “citizen-children,” these youth live under the constant threat of parental deportation. Despite their legal status and protections offered by birthright citizenship, citizen-children in immigrant families are barred from many of the rights enjoyed by youth living in citizen-only families, including the ability to defend their rights to residency and citizenship in an intact family (Bhabha 2014). The threat of parental deportation is especially acute among Mexican immigrant families, who are disproportionately affected by immigration enforcement policies. In 2010, for example, Mexicans comprised 73% of undocumented individuals who were deported, although they represented just 30% of the foreign-born population in the United States (Dreby 2012). Individuals from Mexico continue to bear an unequal burden of detention and deportation procedures, and as a result, the everyday experiences of citizen-children in Mexican immigrant families are shaped by conditions that render their undocumented parents imminently deportable (De Genova 2002; Golash-Boza 2016).

Experiences of—and threats engendered by—parental deportation generate formidable effects on children and families, both emotionally and materially (Allen et al. 2013; Chaudry et al. 2010; Dreby 2015a; Gulbas et al. 2016; Suárez-Orozco et al. 2011). Research has highlighted the consequences and harsh realities associated with the

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deportation of parents who head mixed legal status households. Mental health, quality of life, housing choices, access to education, and overall income are impacted when a parent is suddenly detained or deported (Yoshikawa and Kalil 2011). Under such conditions, citizen-children with undocumented parents report fears of separation, mixed sentiments about their heritage and citizenship, and demonstrate an acute awareness of their families' legal predicament (Brabeck et al. 2014; Brabeck and Xu 2010; Dreby 2012, 2013; Suárez-Orozco 2000). This growing body of research has helped to describe the ways in which the consequences of being undocumented ripple outward and shape differential access to social, material, and political resources for citizen-children living in immigrant families (Croucher 2004; Crowley 1999; Dreby 2013; Plascencia 2012; Rosaldo and Flores 1997; Yuval-Davis 2006). For all members in mixed legal status households, undocumented status "becomes, not just an administrative category, but a departure point for social differentiation" (Dreby 2015b, p. 180).

A number of scholars have commented on the ways in which individuals who are undocumented come to understand, experience, and embody the condition of illegality (Abrego and Gonzales 2010; Gonzales and Chavez 2012; Gonzales et al. 2013; Heidbrink 2014). These studies show that illegality generates significant constraints in terms of belonging, including experiences of social exclusion, discrimination, and stigmatization (Yoshikawa et al. 2016). Processes of belonging are thought to become particularly salient during adolescence (Khoury 2016). Adolescence marks the onset of a lifelong endeavor aimed at identity construction and social belonging, wherein youth begin to grapple with existential questions, such as "who am I?", and "how do I fit in?" (Oyserman 2001). Each of these dimensions—identity and belonging—is crucial to emotional wellbeing, although studies have focused predominantly on issues related to the effects of identity on self-definition (Scarf et al. 2016). Research has had less success investigating the ways in which belonging contributes to mental health. In part, this is due to challenges associated with distinguishing belonging from related concepts of identity and attachment, and it is worth exploring the differences among these concepts for the purposes of conceptual clarity.

Belonging is defined as a transformative, meaningful experience through which people derive both their identity and an emotional connectedness to their social and physical world. Belonging references a basic psychological need to have a social place in the world to which one belongs (Baumeister and Leary 1995). Yet, to understand how and where one belongs, individuals must also have a conceptualization of their identity. Barth (1969), for example, argued that individuals construct and utilize identity to demarcate social membership, which allows people to

classify, categorize, and organize themselves and others during social interaction. Identity is thus crucial to belonging because it is used to signify to self and others that a shared belonging can transpire (Jenkins 1996).

Belonging, however, cannot be reduced to identity. Equating identity and belonging overlooks the powerful ways in which belonging reflects emotional attachment (Baumeister and Leary 1995; Yuval-Davis 2011). Attachment, often understood as an innate need for social connection, helps tether individuals to one another in ways that generate feelings of interpersonal safety, security, and comfort (Bowlby 1982). Whereas attachment theory focuses attention to the emotional needs generated within and fulfilled by specific kinds of relationships, belonging extends the importance of connection to the broader social (Baumeister and Leary 1995) and physical world. Through citizenship and occupation of geographic space, "territorial belonging" (Bhabha 2009, p. 93) reflects a bond between person and country that has significance for a person's identity and well-being. Territorial ties affect people's physical and psychological development, health and life expectancy, education, linguistic competencies, gender roles, employment opportunities, and family and social networks.

As the radius of one's social world expands from childhood to adolescence, belonging becomes critical to the successful navigation of an increasingly complex social terrain. This is especially true for citizen-children in immigrant families as they grapple with the political dimensions that shape belonging. Belonging, as a normative developmental task, takes on new meaning for citizen-children who must confront an immigration system that designates and declares their parents to be illegal, and therefore, without any right to belong (Coutin 2003). Illegality, or the condition of being undocumented, is not bound to the body of a person who lacks legal status. It extends and ripples outward to affect partners, families, and communities regardless of authorization status (Zayas 2015). Without the legal and social rights to belong, "illegality places limits on what is possible" for both parents and their citizen-children (Gonzales and Chavez 2012, p. 261). Social and structural barriers to belonging have important implications for mental health. Children in immigrant families have been shown to be at greater risk for anxiety and depression, attention problems, withdrawn-depressed, anxious-depression, and rule breaking behaviors (Delva et al. 2013; Perreira and Ornelas 2011; Sullivan and Rehm 2005).

The purpose of this paper is to document the daily lives of citizen-children living in Mexican immigrant communities to highlight ways in which direct and indirect experiences of parental deportation shape how citizen-children come to understand their own sense of belonging,

and in turn, how such understandings shape their experiences of daily life and well-being. Our analysis of belonging draws from an interpretive framework that underscores the importance of thick description as an avenue to understand the meanings and experiences of research participants (Good and Good 1982). A primary task in such an approach is to interpret patterns of meaning as they are understood from the insider perspective and to emphasize those frames of references that participants “naturally and effortlessly use to define what...[they] see, feel, think, imagine, and so on” (Geertz 1974, p. 28). Through an interpretive framework, we describe how citizen-children come to understand the meaning of legal status during two different developmental stages (middle childhood and early adolescence), and analyze the contextual circumstances that give rise to psychosocial stress among citizen-children living with their undocumented parents.

Method

Participants

Purposive sampling strategies were used to select children who were U.S. citizens and had a parent who had been detained or deported. Because a primary aim of the research study was to compare the ways in which parental detention or deportation affected the emotional and psychological well-being of citizen-children, citizen-children were also selected to participate if they had a parent who was undocumented but had never been detained. For this project, we recruited children 8 to 15 years of age, a period marked by significant developmental achievements in cognition, emotional processes, and behavior, and also the ascendance in influence of peer groups, extra-familial systems, and social roles. Moreover, this group will have had four or more years of education in US schools, establishing their English

language abilities and identity as Americans. The total sample included 83 citizen-children who (a) lived in Mexico after the deportation of one or both parents; (b) remained in the US after a parent had been detained or deported; and (c) lived in the U.S. with at least one parent who was undocumented and had never been deported (see Table 1). Just over 60% of participants in the sample were girls. The majority of participants lived with both parents (67.5%) and were enrolled in school (98.8%) at the time of the interview.

Procedure

This paper analyzes qualitative data drawn from a larger study that used a mixed-methods approach to explore the psychosocial functioning of citizen-children of detained or deported Mexican immigrants. The study was carried out in two U.S. metropolitan areas (Austin, TX; Sacramento, CA), and sites across Mexico. Community agencies identified families who met inclusionary criteria for study participation, and interested parents were referred to the researchers. Children and parents provided assent and consent for participation, and IRB approval was granted at all participating institutions.

Measures

In-depth interviews were conducted with citizen-children to elicit narratives of the detention and removal process of parents and to compare those to the experiences of children whose parents are undocumented but had not experienced parental detention or deportation. Each interview was conducted in English or Spanish, depending on the child's preference, and digitally recorded and transcribed in the language of the interview to enhance validity (Guest et al. 2012). Interviewers were master's-level social scientists, bilingual, and trained by the second author to conduct qualitative interviews with children. Interviewers facilitated

Table 1 Demographic characteristics of citizen-children in study sample

Demographic characteristic	Accompanied parent to Mexico after parental deportation (<i>n</i> = 31)		Remained in the U.S. after parental deportation (<i>n</i> = 18)		Living in the U.S. with an undocumented parent (<i>n</i> = 34)		Total (<i>n</i> = 83)	
	M (SD)	<i>n</i> (%)	M (SD)	<i>n</i> (%)	M (SD)	<i>n</i> (%)	M (SD)	<i>n</i> (%)
Age	11.1 (1.9)		11.7 (1.8)		11.6 (1.9)		11.4 (1.9)	
Gender (girl)		19 (61.3)		11 (61.1)		20 (58.8)		50 (60.2)
School enrollment (yes)		30 (96.8)		18 (100)		34 (100)		82 (98.8)
Living arrangement								
Both parents		20 (64.5)		10 (55.6)		26 (76.5)		56 (67.5)
One parent		10 (32.3)		8 (44.4)		7 (20.6)		25 (30.1)
No parent		1 (3.2)		0 (0.0)		1 (2.9)		2 (2.4)

rapport with children by conducting the interview in a way that simulated a casual, everyday conversation, and participants were encouraged to ask questions and provide feedback about the interview (Wimpenny and Guss 2000). To help reduce interviewer bias across multiple research sites, a semi-structured interview guide was carefully constructed to provide a series of probes to facilitate deeper exploration of topics. To monitor and enhance the quality of the data, the researchers engaged in systematic reviews of interview transcripts, notes, and summaries, as well as frequent debriefing meetings with project staff (Guest et al. 2012).

Consistent with a meaning-centered approach, interview questions were open-ended to capture how children communicated, gave meaning to, and constructed their experiences and perceptions (Ochs and Capps 1996; Yamane 2000). Interviews began with a “grand tour” question (Spradley 1979) to explore children’s perceptions about home and family life, including descriptions of group activities, relationships with family members, participant’s roles and responsibilities, and life outside the home (see Table 2). These questions set the stage for a conversation about daily experiences as a citizen-child living with undocumented parents, including a description of parental deportation process, if applicable. Interview questions

encouraged participants to focus on expressing what they remembered as salient. Particular emphasis was placed on having children describe their perceptions, thoughts, emotions, feelings, reflections, and interpretations about the process to ascertain the psychosocial impact of parental detention and/or removal, or having an undocumented parent. If applicable, children were asked to reflect on how their life had changed as a result of the deportation process.

Data Analyses

We used an inductive thematic approach to qualitative data analysis to describe and interpret participants’ perspectives (Smith and Firth 2011). Our analytical approach involved three stages: development of a coding framework, coding, and comparative analysis. To develop the coding framework, two members of the research team (the second author and the project manager) independently read two interview transcripts and recorded their initial interpretations of the text. During a team meeting, emergent themes were discussed, and a preliminary codebook was developed through consensus. The codebook listed definitions, application criteria (when to apply a theme, when not to apply a theme), and examples for each theme (MacQueen et al. 1998). Using the preliminary codebook, two additional interview transcripts were read with the purpose of identifying new themes and evaluating the definitions and application criteria of previously identified themes. The process of reading two interviews and evaluating the codebook continued for three more rounds until themes were well established and the codebook was finalized. At this stage, ten interviews has been used to develop the coding framework.

To test the coding framework, four interview transcripts were randomly selected, uploaded into NVivo9, and independently coded by the second author and a research assistant. During a meeting, coding was compared and attention focused on discussing and resolving coding disagreements and refining the codebook to prevent further coding discrepancies. The coding framework was tested again on four additional interviews. Using the coding comparison module in NVivo9, we calculated percent agreement at 83%, which suggested an acceptable degree of reliability (Miles and Huberman 1994). After reconciling coding discrepancies and revising the codebook, the team determined that the codebook was adequately established to begin coding. Each interview was coded by the research assistant, and all coded text was independently reviewed and monitored by the second author. Any coding discrepancies were discussed during team meetings.

To enhance the validity of our interpretations of the data, a panel of 13 experts was convened to review the coded data. Panelists included clinical psychologists and social workers in Mexico and the United States who had expertise

Table 2 A selection of qualitative interview questions by topic

Topic 1: Family life	
	Tell me about the people who live with you.
	What kinds of things do you do as a family together?
Topic 2: Daily experiences living with undocumented parents	
	How did you find out your parents were <i>sin papeles</i> ?
	Do you think it affects your life, having parents who are <i>sin papeles</i> ? Tell me about that.
	Who are you able to talk with about your parent’s situation?
Topic 3: The removal process (only applicable to children with parental deportation history)	
	How did you learn your dad/mom was being deported?
	Tell me about what life has been like since your dad/mom has been away.
	Who do you talk to about what is going on in your life?
	How often do you think about what happened
Topic 4: Life outside the home	
	Tell me how things have been going at school.
	If you could change one thing about your life right, what would it be?

Note: This table reflects a sample of questions asked to participants who lived in the U.S. following the deportation of a parent. Unless noted otherwise, all participants were asked this sample of questions. The use of the interview guide was intended to be flexible to follow the ebbs and flows of the conversation. Probes focused on eliciting specific example, the sequence of events, and the thoughts, feelings, and experiences participants remembered as salient at the time

in the mental health and cultural issues experienced by Latino youth and their families. To ensure that every case was reviewed by multiple experts, each panelist evaluated coding summary reports for 20 participants. Panelists were brought together in person and via Skype to discuss their interpretations of the coded data. During this discussion, belonging emerged as an important meta-theme that named and captured many of the codes previously identified in the codebook. The codebook was revised to incorporate social belonging as a meta-theme (see Table 3), and interview transcripts were reviewed to link previously coded data to the new theme.

Comparative analysis was then conducted to examine similarities and differences across cases (Knafl and Ayres 1996). A coding matrix was generated using the framework matrix module in NVivo 9. The matrix was organized by themes developed during the coding process (columns) and participants (rows). Each cell of the matrix contained coded data, which was then reduced and summarized by the second author to describe the manifestation of each theme across participants. During a team meeting, the matrix was analyzed to identify similar configurations of themes across cases and to assess how such configurations differed among groups of children.

Results

Belonging emerged as a salient overarching theme that reflected how participants negotiated their understandings of a social world divided by legal status. Often, this process began with learning that their parents were undocumented. In this phase of *discovery*, participants became aware of the boundaries of belonging. They learned their parents were undocumented immigrants who held an uncertain and even dangerous legal status in the U.S. As children entered early adolescence, participants developed a growing realization of the ways in which legal status conferred social and economic privilege, on one hand, and *exclusion*, on the other. Simultaneously, citizen-children began to recognize that their own belonging was irrevocably tied to their parents' illegality and the fact that their parents' could, at any moment, be detained and deported, generating formidable experiences of social *rupture*. Descriptive results derived from the qualitative analyses illustrate the manifestation of themes of discovery, exclusion, and rupture across children in each group, and the following sections elaborate on the themes in the words of the children.

Discovery of a parent's legal status did not occur in a universal way across participants (see Table 4). Many children said they had "always known" about their parent's status, or had learned it at a young age. For others, the discovery came as a shock as they learned it for the first

Table 3 Sample of finalized codes related to the meta-theme of social belonging

Theme	Definition	Example of theme in interview
Discovery	The process through which participants became aware of parent's legal status. Include statements by participants about not knowing.	"I don't really distinctly remember a time when they told me, you know, 'oh, we're illegal.' I just kind of remember always knowing. Always knowing that we were illegal...that they were illegal."
Exclusion	References the subjective experience of social and/or material marginalization as a result of parent's legal status. Include themes related to: (1) an inability to communicate with other individuals as a result of having an undocumented parent; (2) experiences of discrimination; and (3) financial struggles.	"My dad told me once that he would like to have another job but he can't because he doesn't have any papers. But I know he wants another job because he wants to earn more money. He was thinking of taking a job for more hours, but then at the end, he decided not to because he would have to be there all the time, and we wouldn't be able to see him. So he didn't take that job at the end. It's like, it makes me kind of sad because he can't get a regular job with regular hours that would pay him more money."
Rupture	A significant break in family or social ties as a result of the parent's legal status. Include rupture caused by parental detention or deportation. Include experiences when undocumented parents are separated from their family to find work, such as migrant farm labor.	"I'd say two or 3 months ago we got a decision from the judge saying that he had to leave in less than 60 days. He says he doesn't want to separate away from us. He really wants...I think he really wants us with him. 'Cause he, he doesn't want to be away from us. But he, he doesn't think it's safe for us over there, or the best place for us. I don't think I could live without my dad. I want to go with him."
Social connection	Descriptions of social connection. Can include relationships with family, peers, and school and community individuals. Include statements by participants about reunification with nuclear and extended kin following detention/deportation.	"I've talked to my teachers. Because they noticed I've been going down, and they didn't know what it was. They noticed my behavior was also weird and grew worse. And I talked to them about it. They were really supportive."

Table 4 Frequency of themes of discovery, rupture, and exclusion across age and participant sub-group

Themes	Living in Mexico with deported parents		Living in US after parental detention or deportation		Living in US with no parental detention	
	8–11 years (<i>n</i> = 20) <i>n</i> (%)	12–15 years (<i>n</i> = 11) <i>n</i> (%)	8–11 years (<i>n</i> = 11) <i>n</i> (%)	12–15 years (<i>n</i> = 7) <i>n</i> (%)	8–11 years (<i>n</i> = 16) <i>n</i> (%)	12–15 years (<i>n</i> = 18) <i>n</i> (%)
Discovery ^a						
Early age or “always knew”	11 (55.0)	6 (54.5)	5 (45.4)	6 (85.7)	15 (93.7)	17 (94.4)
During parental detention or late age	2 (10.0)	2 (18.2)	4 (9.1)	1 (14.3)	0 (0.0)	1 (5.6)
Exclusion	14 (70.0)	6 (54.5)	7 (63.6)	3 (42.9)	10 (62.5)	14 (77.8)
Rupture	17 (85.0)	8 (72.7)	11 (100.0)	7 (100.0)	2 (12.5)	2 (11.1)

^a Sixteen participants, 19.3% of the total sample, were unable to recall when or how they learned about their parents' status

time at a later age (12 or older) or when a parent was detained. Among citizen-children living in Mexico after their parents' deportation, approximately half stated they had always known that their parents were undocumented. Among children who had experienced a parent's detention or deportation but were living in the U.S., less than half of the younger participants recalled knowing about their parents' status at an early age. This contrasted with the older age cohort: 86% reported that they had “always known” their parents were undocumented. An overwhelming majority of children whose parents were under no deportation proceedings cited that they “always knew” of their parents' legal status.

The links between discovery and belonging were especially salient for youth moving toward adolescence, during which children developed more critical and comprehensive understandings of legal status. For example, Felicita, who was 11 years old at the time of the interview, lived with her older sister, mother, and father, all of whom were undocumented. Like many citizen-children in our sample, Felicita spent her early childhood completely unaware of her parents' legal status. When she was 7 years old she learned how her parents came to the U.S., a story that she heard initially from her cousin who told her “your parents came here illegally.” This confused Felicita, who asked, “Wait, illegally? What does that mean?” She did not comprehend what not having papers meant. “I thought she meant papers, like those right here (gesturing to a pile of papers).” Felicita confronted her parents with the newfound information, and they substantiated her cousin's claim. Although her parents explained the concept of “undocumented” in a way that Felicita described as “sort of a basic,” she still felt confused and comforted herself by waiting “until I grow up to get this better.”

Like Felicita, when children first learned that their parents were undocumented, most of them were too young to understand the meanings of concepts such as undocumented, illegal, or papers. The concept of papers, and how papers differentiated legality from illegality, remained vague and unclear. For example, 9-year-old Carissa learned that her father was undocumented when she was about 7 years old. Her mother was planning to take Carissa and her sister to Mexico for vacation. When she questioned why her father was not accompanying them, she learned that her father “couldn't have a passport because he is not from here.” Her father explained to Carissa he was unable to secure a passport because he was *sin papeles*. As Carissa understood the situation, her father simply did not have important, official papers, “like the ones that my mom has in the folders in our house.” Initially, Carissa found it difficult to understand how papers: (1) established legal status; and (2) distributed specific rights and privileges, such as applying for a passport and traveling across state and national borders.

As citizen-children grew older, the concept of papers and legal status took on new significance, crystallizing for them the fact that they were different from their undocumented parents. For example, when 10-year-old Aimee, whose parents had never been detained, learned that her parents were undocumented, she realized she was “different. It kind of made me feel, like, sad. Really sad. Because I feel that we are kind of different because I’m American, and they are not.” The most tangible way in which children came to understand legal status was through growing awareness of how illegality barred their parents from access to specific rights, including access to employment opportunities and healthcare. As 14-year-old Maggie, whose parents had never been detained, explained, “Like if [my parents] would have papers, they would be able to get a better job, or go to college or school so they could have a better job, a job that they would actually like.” Differences in terms of access pointed to identity boundaries between citizen-children and their undocumented parents.

Over a period of time, citizen-children soon realized the most severe consequence associated with differences in legal status: that their parents could 1 day be deported. The realization of a parents’ deportability came with a recognition of the limits of citizenship within the participant’s own lives, revealing their own tenuous belonging to both family and homeland. For example, 12-year-old Mateo, whose parents had never been detained, feared that he would be sent to a foster home if his mother was deported. “I don’t want to be with another family that’s not mine,” he said, “I want to be with mom and my brothers and my sister.” Yet, the prospect of going to Mexico did not seem to be a better option from Mateo’s perspective as “It would be harder for me to go to school and get a job. I wouldn’t know all the words. I can only speak Spanish, but I can’t read it and spell it out.” For Mateo, the loss of his mother through deportation would force him to choose between family and country.

For a few participants, the significance of their own tenuous belonging gave rise to nightmares, as exemplified in Felicity’s recurring nightmare:

They were looking for people, and I didn’t know who they were looking for. I heard people saying, ‘show me your papers!’ My friends, they had black hoodies, and they could cover themselves well. But I had a pink sweater... I was left out... until they found me, and they took me into... this jail. That’s when I woke up.

Nightmares and feelings of insecurity, worry, and fear reflected participants’ growing recognition of the volatility of their own belonging because parents were central to their social connectedness. In other words, families grounded citizen-children’s sense of belonging.

For citizen-children, the discovery of a parent’s undocumented legal status, coupled with indirect and direct experiences of parental loss via detention and deportation, generated exclusion. We defined exclusion as children’s subjective experience of significant social or material marginalization as a result of a parent’s legal status. Younger children in Mexico felt the sense of exclusion more acutely or mentioned the subjective experience of exclusion more often than older children living with their deported parents in Mexico. Among those children “left behind” in the U.S. after a parent’s detention or deportation, over 60% of the younger cohort felt a sense of exclusion. The majority of participants whose parents were under no detention or deportation proceedings reported a sense of exclusion due to their parents’ undocumented status.

Exclusion could be both symbolic and structural, but it manifested in ways that led to significant feelings of social or material marginalization. In the case of 14-year old Marisa, for example, her family had recently moved into a dilapidated trailer in a rural town outside of Austin, Texas. Marisa expressed an acute sense of the ways that illegality contributed to processes of exclusion, evident in the fact that one of her aunts got “papers” and “Now they have really good money.” In contrast, her father “makes efforts. He knows what’s right for us. He makes sacrifices that hurt us, like moving out of the big house we were in, but he knows that it’s right.” Still, it did not lead to success like the aunt had. With two undocumented parents, Marisa had to move from a “big house” when the landlord doubled the rent. The move from family, friends, and the community that she knew was difficult for Marisa. Every weekend she worked with her family to improve the conditions of the trailer, including hanging sheets as partitions for sleeping areas. Marisa hoped for her own bedroom again.

Marisa felt marginalized in her new town. She said, “A lot of people are not my color, like the white people. I feel like they don’t like us because of what we are and what we do. Like cross borders and things.” Despite that Marisa did not cross a border, having been born and raised in the U.S., she nevertheless saw herself as very much belonging to her family’s history of immigration. In that shared belonging of illegality with her family, Marisa felt excluded, marginalized, and discriminated against in her new town. As a result, she attempted to avoid “white people. ‘Cause their reactions are too powerful. I feel like they’re gonna insult and say something, [like], ‘Mexican, go home.’” Perceptions of skin color, ethnicity, and legal status intersected to deny and exclude belonging.

Similarly, 14-year-old Hector described his own sense of feeling out of place. At the time of the interview, he lived with his grandparents, both of whom were undocumented but had never been detained. He explained, “I understand more the risk of not having papers, and I might lose [his

grandparents]. I'm afraid to lose them actually because I wouldn't know where to go, and I don't really feel comfortable with other people." Much of his discomfort with other people stemmed from his own perception that he did not belong. He noted, "I don't feel like other kids in school. I feel kind of like an outlaw." Hector's words signified the extension of his grandparents' illegality. For Hector, being positioned between legality/illegality and belonging/not belonging produced feelings of worry and fear for his grandparents' futures and his own.

Experiences of exclusion were especially salient among participants who directly experienced parental deportation, and particularly among those who reunited with their parents in Mexico. Few participants perceived life in Mexico as tolerable. Citing poor education, little protection from violence, and few career opportunities, participants attempted to adapt to their circumstances, but in general, they viewed life as more difficult. Some expressed hope that they would 1 day return to the United States. For others, sadness and a sense of displacement colored their narratives, especially among adolescent youth. This was evident in the case of Silvia, a 15-year-old whose father had been deported. Just prior to the interview, the family had reunified in Mexico. For Silvia, the greatest challenge was adjusting to what she perceived as a lower standard of education in Mexico and less emphasis on the importance of education. She described that, "Here [in Mexico], you have to dedicate yourself to cleaning the house. You have to watch your younger siblings. It's no longer about studying." Resentful toward her new roles and responsibilities in Mexico, she often hit or neglected her younger siblings. She felt that no one understood her transitional difficulties and what she perceived as a lost future. She explained, "Nothing matters to me anymore. Before, I used to say that I was going to be a doctor. That I was going to be someone in life. Now, I don't have a desire to do anything." Silvia had once envisioned a future characterized by successful participation and citizenship in the U.S. Her father's deportation severed her access to that future and left her ill-prepared for the transition to a new way of life.

The theme of rupture referred to a significant breach in family and social ties, according to the child's perspective. Among children in Mexico, not all participants perceived a rupture because some felt they were completely reunited with nuclear and extended kin in Mexico. They sensed that they belonged. Of course, each experienced a rupture in some form or another, but over time, their experience of rupture dissipated as they became accustomed to a renewed sense of family togetherness in a foreign country. In general, however, experiences of rupture were more common among participants with parents who had been detained or deported. Among children in Mexico, for example, experiences of rupture seemed to strike the younger children more

frequently (see Table 4). A majority of participants in Mexico, including 85% of the younger participants and 72.7% of the older participants, strongly felt a rupture in family or social ties. Among the youth who had remained in the U.S. after a parental detention and deportation, citizen-children of all ages reported a deep sense of rupture. The reported ruptures of citizen-children with no experience of parental detention or deportation were lower across all age cohorts.

In all cases, experiences of rupture were brought about through a growing awareness of two contradictory processes at work: (1) birthright citizenship afforded participants numerous privileges unavailable to their undocumented parents; and (2) birthright citizenship did not extend to the very privilege they valued most: an intact family. Not surprisingly, parental deportation was cited as the worst trauma that could befall an immigrant family. For example, Amelia experienced the simultaneous detention of both of her parents. Still living in the U.S., she marked the detention of her mother as a major turning point in her life. In her mother's absence, Amelia described feelings of intense anger and sadness. She recalled that she had so much anger, she had to "take it out on someone. But instead of taking it out on my family and like hurting them more, I decided to take it out on school... Whenever I got to school, I was like, sad, depressed."

It was not until the release of her mother that Amelia could refocus her attention at school. Still, the experience left her changed. As she explained, "whenever I saw that, it was like, more responsibility. I have to behave good, focus on school. It's like, everything was on me." Amelia described channeling this responsibility in her schoolwork, so that she can "be good in school, and have good grades, and like be somebody in life."

As Amelia's case illustrates, the sudden separation from a parent as a result of arrest and detention was described as emotionally traumatic. The loss incurred by separation not only contributed to intense sadness, but also fear, worry, and anxiety as children pondered when their parent would return and how their parent's absence would affect the family. More than one third of the participants in our sample described emotions and behaviors associated with loss, which included excessive crying and difficulties eating and sleeping. Among those participants who experienced longer separations from their parents through detention or deportation, they often described more severe practices and habits associated with loss. Parental deportation suggested to them that their lives—present and future—would be marked by rupture, estrangement, and lack of belonging.

The starkest manifestation of the inability to reconcile feelings regarding family, citizenship, homeland, and belonging took the form of an attempted suicide. Fourteen-year-old Adriana, who was left behind in the U.S. following her father's deportation, attempted suicide when her father

was detained. Adriana's decision to attempt suicide was rooted in many stressors, although she noted that the consumption of her parents' attention due the protracted legal battle figured prominently. As she explained, "I felt like my parents really didn't care about me at that moment because everything with the legal issues." Ultimately, her father was deported. Although the family could visit Adriana's father in Mexico, a feat that was facilitated, in part, by her mother's status as a U.S. citizen, the visits did little to assuage her overall depressed state. As she noted, "it's not that normalness. That normal feeling of waking up in the morning and seeing your dad. It's not that feeling anymore."

The loss of parents through detention or deportation forced some children to consider existential questions about who they were and where they belonged, sometimes in ways that pitted the desires of individual family members against one another. For example, Daniel, who was nearly 14 years old at the time of the interview, had recently reunited with his father in Mexico. Prior, Daniel lived in the US with his younger brother and mother, both citizens. Daniel did not know that his father was undocumented until he learned of his father's arrest and detention. Approximately 1 year following his father's deportation, Daniel developed an intense fear that something horrible would happen to his mother. As he recounted, "I was scared someone would hurt her or kidnap her, things like that. Because my father wasn't there. If my father wasn't there, who was going to protect my mom?" Daniel began to experience intense headaches and nausea, sometimes vomiting daily.

At the recommendation of the psychologist, the family began to split time between the two countries: 6 months in Mexico, together as a family, and 6 months in the U.S., away from Daniel's father. Still, Daniel did not recover from frequent nervous attacks and the family decided to move to Mexico permanently. Daniel's symptoms improved but his 10-year-old younger brother, Juan, had a different experience. Juan found the constant travel between the U.S. and Mexico to be confusing and disorienting. "I wondered why. Why can't I just be happy on one side? Why do we have to keep traveling?" Yet, he never told anyone his thoughts. "I didn't think my opinion would help anyone. I'm just a kid." Juan desperately wished to return to the U.S. He deeply missed the family members that had been left behind, which highlighted that he was caught between two families and two nations. As he expressed, "I have family there [U.S.], and I have family here [Mexico], on both sides. I'm like in between Mexico and the United States. It's like I'm between two worlds."

Discussion

Whether in Mexico with their deported parents, or left behind in the care of a single parent or others after the

detention or deportation of parents, or even those with no detention or deportation in their backgrounds, citizen-children of undocumented Mexican immigrants live in spaces of marginalization. Our study shows that marginalization is produced by an uneasy relationship between belonging and illegality. Citizen-children in our study engaged in a world around them in which they garnered many privileges barred to their undocumented parents. Yet, those privileges extended only so far. The discovery of difference in terms of legal status often produced tension, fear, and anxiety because, despite the protections offered by citizenship, the deportability of parents meant that children's belonging to families, neighborhoods, and communities in the U.S. could disintegrate at any moment. Our study stands in contrast to current migration and deportation literature on illegality and childhood by demonstrating how even young children come to understand and recognize their parents' undocumented status.

Bhabha (2009) argued that belonging has overwhelmingly significant implications for a child's well-being since it "affects children's life expectancy, their physical and psychological development, their material prospects, their general standard of living" (p. 95). Our study lends empirical support to Bhabha's observations. Citizen-children, through an extension of their parents' illegality, experienced lower standards of living, such as housing conditions, because their parents were unable to find stable employment that provided a livable wage. Moreover, numerous citizen-children in our sample described and evinced behaviors that pointed to psychological distress. Our findings suggest that access to belonging is intimately tied to broader forces of legal persecution that go beyond individualized notions of illegality and have deep, possibly lasting psychological effects (Boehm 2008; De Genova 2002; Quesada et al. 2011).

Arguably, the most destructive force to belonging was the sudden, and for many, inexplicable loss of a parent to detention or deportation. The dramatic loss—often intensified through nighttime raids of households—shattered participants' sense of belonging and security, resulting in anguish and suffering. Many losses were imbued with ambiguity when there was a sudden and dramatic loss of a parent, leaving in its wake the lack of closure or final resolution. Citizen-children had no sense of when parents would be released from detention, or if they would be able to return to the U.S. following deportation. This ambiguous loss of parents (Boss 1999, 2007) was inherently unclear, leaving participants to wonder and worry whether the loss was temporary or permanent.

By extension, citizen-children's experience of belonging was also ambiguous. Ruptures and social forces of exclusion produced an ambiguous belonging in which citizen-children became unsure of where—and to whom—they

belonged. Ambiguous belonging, as experienced by citizen-children in our study, was generated via parental deportability. Always present in the minds of citizen-children was the fact that, at any moment, their parents could be suddenly detained and deported. Some participants feared what would happen to them if they were to remain in the U.S. following the deportation of a parent, whereas others refused to think about such terrifying possibilities. Thus, regardless of direct experiences of parental detention and deportation, citizen-children experienced a kind of liminality that shaped their experiences of everyday life.

Ambiguous belonging has most often been described by scholars who study the 1.5 generation, or those individuals who are foreign-born, but primarily raised in the United States. For example, Plascencia (2012) described the experiences of the 1.5 generation as a “twoness,” in which young adults are neither from the United States nor their place of origin (p. 14). Our results demonstrate that citizen-children with undocumented parents also experienced twoness. In this way, our study attests to the importance of considering the ways in which ambiguous belonging plays out in the lives of U.S. citizens. Doing so allows for a more theoretical critique of the myth of belonging along lines of citizenship. As Kılıç and Menjívar (2013) argued, “access to citizenship by no means guarantees belonging or acceptance as equal members” (p. 205). It is here that we might understand how belonging intersects along lines of race, ethnicity, and class to produce social exclusion, even among those who are citizens by birth.

Importantly, there is continued need to understand how process of belonging emerge within and are shaped by developmental contexts (Yoshikawa and Kalil 2011). We see how each of the processes associated with belonging and its disruption, from the discovery of a parent’s legal status to the rupture of family ties by detention and/or deportation to the exclusion from social structures, have powerful psychological effects, indeed damage, that may take years to reconcile and repair. Future research can help to advance our theoretical understandings and empirical knowledge of the developmental implications of barriers to belonging. Doing so will be key to the development of effective intervention and policy.

Limitations and Implications for Future Research

Although the results of our research are consistent with the extant literature that emphasizes the detrimental effects of undocumented status on citizen-children, we acknowledge several limitations that restrict the generalizability of our findings. Recruiting via community sources can result in a self-selection process and a narrow band of individuals. Data were collected only from Mexican immigrant families. Future research should consider how processes of belonging

are shaped by national origin, which would advance our understanding of the links between belonging and mental health outcomes across difference contexts. Additionally, our findings cannot make claims about the causality of mental health outcomes given the cross-sectional nature of our data. There is a critical need for longitudinal research that can ascertain mechanisms of causality and developmental effects.

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Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Ethical Approval All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed Consent Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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