

Undocumented Latino Youth: Migration Experiences and the Challenges of Integrating into American Society

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Abstract This descriptive qualitative study explored the challenges that undocumented and unaccompanied Latino youth face in their migration and their attempt to integrate into American society after crossing the US–Mexican border. In-depth interviews were conducted with undocumented and unaccompanied Latino youth in Texas. Data were analyzed for patterns and themes. The findings indicate that youth are more prone to personal failures across several domains, which can lead to a life of crime. The descriptions are categorized under themes that correlate to familial makeup, migration and border crossing experiences, and experiences as unaccompanied and undocumented youth living on the US–Mexican border. These results help to contextualize the immigration debate as related to undocumented Latino youth and crime. They indicate that most of the undocumented Latino youth were victims of crimes more so than perpetrators of crime. Their victimizations included exposure to pervasive violence and other challenges that made realizing their full potential difficult.

Keywords Crime · Migration · Latino · Unaccompanied · Undocumented · Youth · Juvenile

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Introduction

Among the thousands of individuals who are apprehended while crossing the US border each year, there are over 80,000 children, some unaccompanied and others accompanied (Haddal 2007). The unaccompanied minors enter either of their own will or not, seeking protection, jobs, family reunification, or are smuggled into the US for sexual exploitation or sweatshop labor (National Juvenile Justice Network 2006).

In 2013, the Pew Charitable Trusts reported that as many as 120 undocumented and unaccompanied children cross the Texas border daily. The organization also suggested that the problem facing the Texas border where there is an increase in the number of undocumented children is a concern for other states and reflects a national trend. A more recent Texas report also confirmed that there has been an increase in the number of unaccompanied and undocumented children at the US–Mexican border which has forced Texas Governor, Greg Abbott, to seek help from the federal government in getting additional agents and resources to patrol the border (Rosenthal 2015). The report found that, in August 2015, approximately 4600 unaccompanied children were apprehended at the border which represented an increase of 400 from July and 800 from June in the same year. Such increases suggest a deviation from the norm where border crossings have traditionally been lower for the month of August (Rosenthal 2015). Also, these recent developments have increased fears among the American public that more minors from Central America may attempt to cross the border. Some, both citizens and lawmakers, have attributed such increases to the DREAM Act (an acronym for The Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act). The “dream act” is a federal law designed to provide immigration relief to undocumented students and subsequently remove certain economic and legal barriers (Gonzales 2010).

Contextualizing Immigration

There are two basic categories of illegal migration to the USA. First, the undocumented, is the person who enters the USA with no legal documentation or legal authorization, usually by crossing the US–Mexican border (Rio Grande Valley, Texas). Second, immigrants who enter the USA with a temporary visa (student, tourist) which are valid entries, but who then overstay the terms of their visa thereby becoming undocumented. Most of these overstayers come from the northern US–Canadian border and other ports of entry (seaports, airports) nationwide. Fraudulent documents are also used by some immigrants to enter the country. These persons, plus legal permanent residents who commit a crime in the USA but do not leave after a crime, are also considered illegal aliens (LeMay 2007).

The legacy of immigration can often be characterized as one of struggle, discrimination, and violence (Rodriguez 2007). This is more likely the case for non-Europeans. As Rodriguez (2007) noted, non-European immigrants are commonly viewed as major contributors to the breakdown of US morality, unity, and stability. For example, Mexican youth are sometimes seen as outcasts and criminals, a rhetoric recently repeated by presidential candidate, Donald Trump.

It is probable that with increased restrictions on legal immigration, undocumented immigration may increase (Hood and Morris 1995). Public rhetoric varies

about whether immigrants create businesses and jobs, boost the wages of native-born workers, or cause unemployment in the USA. Benton-Cohen and Cadava (2010) suggested there is generally a strong correlation between economic recession and anti-immigrant sentiment. This has made it convenient for some politicians to focus on immigrants rather than address underlying economic slowdowns and immigration policy. The American Immigration Council AIC (2011) indicated that the unemployment rate would be much higher in areas with more immigrants, if immigrants were taking away jobs from native-born workers. Also, the council pointed out that more recent and unauthorized immigrants are more likely and willing to work for lower wages and less desirable jobs than native-born workers. Therefore, as supported by some evidence, immigrant workers do not take jobs away from native-born workers. Overall, the AIC (2011) suggested there is no correlation between unemployment and immigration. In other words, immigrants, including both authorized and unauthorized, help to create jobs through entrepreneurship and purchasing power. When immigrants purchase goods and services from US businesses, they help to strengthen US jobs and may even create their own businesses offering new products and services.

In contrast, Borjas (1994) stated that the wages of unskilled native employees may be negatively impacted by undocumented immigrants depending on their population size, makeup, and skills. In comparison to earlier waves, recent immigrants have had a more adverse effect on welfare programs given their intense participation in such programs (Borjas 1994). More recently, Borjas (2013) concluded that both legal and illegal immigrant workers expand the US economy by about 11 % yearly, but a significant portion of such benefits do not extend to the native population. Also the net benefits extended to those native-born from undocumented immigrants appear to be quite small. The adverse effect of immigration is more significant for those native-born workers without a high school diploma (Borjas 2013). Often times, these workers represent some of the poorest segments of the American population. A significant number of the children of these workers live in poverty and in households with at least one parent without a high school diploma (Borjas 2013). Children in immigrant households are also more likely to be at risk for maltreatment because of the challenges and pressure experienced by immigrant families stemming from the immigration experience (Dettlaff et al. 2009).

Many Americans believe that undocumented individuals enter the USA to work, which contributes to the tax base (Sanders 2006). This inference is supported by other researchers, such as Porter (2005) who claimed that undocumented immigrants generate some six to seven billion dollars in social security taxes and about 1.5 billion dollars in Medicare taxes annually. Porter (2005) fears that these laws will only increase crime and aggravate public health problems.

Paral et al.'s (2009) work indicated that undocumented immigrants who gained legal status in the 1980s through the legalization provisions of the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) experienced clear improvement in their socioeconomic situation. Specifically, the educational accomplishment of IRCA immigrants improved considerably, their poverty rates declined considerably, and their home ownership rates enhanced extremely. Moreover, their real wages rose as many of them moved into managerial positions, and the vast majority did not depend upon public assistance. These findings support the concept that legalization of undocumented immigrants can play a significant role in boosting the economy and lowering socioeconomic disparities.

Thus, a more comprehensive immigration policy reform that includes the legalization of young undocumented immigrants may fuel the US economy. Allowing legal status is likely to make these new Americans less dependent on government welfare and other state or local assistance. With the opportunity and privilege of becoming American citizens, immigrants hope to become better educated, boost the American economy, earn higher wages with benefits, and participate in public political agendas. Hence, many undocumented immigrants are unlikely to participate in delinquent and criminal activities if they have legitimate economic opportunities. While this study did not examine the correlation between immigration and the economy, which is beyond the scope and purpose of this study, the empirical evidence is mixed and requires further investigation.

Many youth face trauma, fear of deportation, employment abuse, and other negative consequences of being in the USA illegally (undocumented), but unaccompanied youth continue to migrate to the USA. The migration of unaccompanied immigrant children to the USA presents extraordinary challenges for children's rights advocates, governments, and, most importantly, undocumented children themselves. Many of these undocumented children may experience a very complex web of constructions of childhood, children's rights, systems, and laws, which may impact the influential years of childhood. Nevertheless, they engage with this complex web of constructions of childhood; different realities of children's rights; laws that protect or punish; and systems that are sensitive to them, ignore them, abuse them, or expel them. As a result, advocates have traditionally focused their efforts on modifying the law to include the recognition of children as subjects, rather than objects, of immigration law. Such efforts have resulted in changes to both detention policy and substantive immigration law as they relate to a subset of child immigrants known as Unaccompanied Alien Children (UAC).

In the USA, Latinos are the prevalent marginal ethnic group. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2011), Latinos/Hispanics are defined as individuals of Mexican, Cuban, Central American, Puerto Rican, and/or South American origin. Overall, the Latino population has increased significantly and continues to grow each year. For example, Lopez and Taylor (2010) found that the US Latino population grew from 35.3 million in 2000 to more than 46.9 million in 2008. This is greater than the entire population of Canada. Immigrants (foreign-born) or the children (American-born) of immigrants in the USA are approximated at 70 million (Suarez-Orozco and Suarez - Orozco 2009). Between 2000 and 2010, the Latino population grew by 43 %, and between 2010 and 2013 by 7 % (Center for American Progress 2014). Approximately half of the undocumented population has children which further present challenges. Other evidence indicates that approximately 4.5 million US-born children have at least one undocumented parent (American Immigration Council 2011; Capps et al. 2007). Several other researchers have indicated more than half of the immigrants in the USA come from Latin countries (Ko and Perreira 2010; Lollock 2001). More recent evidence indicated that the US foreign-born population grew from about 8 to 13 % from 1990 to 2013 (Ewing et al. 2015). During this period, the number of undocumented immigrants grew from 3.5 million to 11.2 million. Of the 11.9 million undocumented immigrants in 2008, Mexicans represent by far the largest group of undocumented immigrants, with more than 7 million. This estimate of 59 % of undocumented Mexicans has remained unchanged for the past 30 years (Passel and Cohn 2008). Mexican-Americans represent

one of the fastest-growing Latino/Latina ethnic groups in the USA, but they remain underrepresented at all levels of education (Baron and Constantine 1997; Flores and O'Brien 2002; Garcia 2011; Ramirez and de la Cruz 2003). At the same time, FBI data suggest both violent and property crimes declined by more than 40 % (Ewing et al. 2015). Evidently, further empirical studies are needed in light of these statistics and research.

Background

Unaccompanied Children

Many of the problems affecting Hispanic/Latino immigrant children arise within the social and economic dynamics of globalization and transitional migration, as well as anti-immigrant policies and regulations. For example, the Immigration Act of 1965 allowed for nearly equal numbers of foreigners from all regions of the world to enter the USA (Keeley 2001). However, according to Sanders (2006), doing so reduced the number allowed from Latin America, resulting in an inundation of undocumented immigrants from Mexico, as well as Central and South America, seeking protection from political prosecution, civil strife, and poverty.

In the USA and other developed nations several unaccompanied children have arrived by way of planned resettlement programs (Byrne 2008). From the beginning of World War II, the USA begun administering several such programs for minors. Some examples are the removal of British children in 1940 during the Battle of Britain, the removal of over 14,000 Cuban children during the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion, and in 1975 the removal of over 2500 Vietnamese children at the end of the Vietnam War ("Operation Babylift") (Bhabha and Schmidt 2006; Steinbock 1989). Nevertheless, the number of unaccompanied children outside of such planned resettlement programs was largely overlooked and unmeasured until recently (Bhabha and Schmidt 2006).

After the arrival of many unaccompanied children in the USA who were fleeing civil wars and hardships in Central America, many government agencies developed rough data systems to track these persons (Byrne 2008). The Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), which is commonly cited, maintains statistical database on unaccompanied children. In 2003 the ORR assumed custodial authority of unaccompanied children, in accordance with the Homeland Security Act (HSA) of 2002 (Byrne 2008). ORR statistics indicate that since 2005, more than 7000 unaccompanied children have been referred to them from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) annually. This number does not include the number of Mexican children who decide to return voluntarily to Mexico at the US border and hence never enter ORR custody (Byrne 2008).

In addition, an era of increased governmental and private attacks against immigrants makes the reality of living without authorization in the USA even more complicated. Undocumented youth also face identity concerns, stress, challenging environmental and socioeconomic conditions, substance abuse disorders, vulnerability to trauma, depression, and other psychiatric disorders, and many barriers to securing needed treatment (Flores and Kaplan 2009). In 2003, Ramirez and de la Cruz concluded that

Latinos are a young population, with three fourths of this ethnic group 18 years and older and the rest 17 years or younger. Compared to Whites, Latino youth have a tendency to exhibit more behavioral problems (Snyder and Sickmund 1999), higher numbers of educational disappointment (Greene and Forster 2003), and higher rates of alcohol and illegal drug abuse (U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2002). Newly arriving Latino immigrants are an important ethnic group in need of study (Esbensen and Carson 2012; Phinney 2003; Ryder et al. 2000). Yet, very little is known about their experiences, especially those of undetected unaccompanied youth.

Attitudes Toward Immigration and Crime

Lamn and Immohoff (1985) noted that immigrants are often viewed as inherently criminal which they describe as generalizing observations that undocumented immigrants are by definition “criminal.” The notion is deeply rooted in American public opinion and is fueled by media anecdotes (Esbensen and Carson 2012; Kubrin et al. 2012; Rumbaut and Ewing 2007; Wright and Rodriguez 2012; Zatz and Smith 2012). It is more likely, however, that because immigrant adolescents tend to live in impoverished communities where they are usually exposed to greater amounts of peer and drug abuse, violence, and crime (Berman et al. 1996; Esbensen and Carson 2012). As such, juveniles (individuals under 18 years old) are at a high risk of offending if exposed to unlawful behavior. Hartjen and Priyadarsini (2003) assert that differential association with criminal peers, not having proper or effective societal controls or not having enough self-control, may be a reason for delinquency everywhere and among all people. Other researchers, such as Santisteban et al. (2006), have found that it is valuable when parents retain their Hispanic cultural practices alongside family performance because doing so helps to reduce adolescent delinquency. Although popular notions continue to link immigrants to crime, some evidence challenge this. Martinez and Lee (2000) concluded: “The major finding of a century of research on immigration and crime is that ... immigrants nearly always exhibit lower crime rates than native groups” (p. 496). As a caveat, however, Camarota and Vaughan (2009) claimed that the link between immigration and crime remains unclear. They suggested that older empirical evidence indicates low crime rates while more recent studies suggest higher rates of criminal involvement for immigrants. They continued that a DHS report claims that documented and undocumented immigrants make up approximately 20 % of the incarceration population, but given that about 16 % of the nation’s adult population are foreign-born, it is not clear how DHS arrived at such estimates.

The immigration experience involving separation from parents and siblings for extended periods of time (Garcia 2001) for undocumented youth can be life threatening. The trip and entering the USA present risk for violence, robbery, and sexual assault (Solis 2003). Depression and anxiety are stressors associated with the initial stage of migration. Individuals who experience significant trauma during immigration may also develop symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (Smart and Smart 1995). Many if not most undocumented immigrants have to deal with stressors that are connected to poverty once in the USA.

Discrimination can further stunt ethnic identity development, as well as limit the achievements and aspirations of the youth (Yeh et al. 2008). Research indicates that a positive sense of ethnic identity may serve a protective or buffering role (Perreira et al. 2006).

Scant Knowledge on Undocumented Youth

Most undocumented Latino immigrants enter the USA via the Mexican border, traveling by train, motor vehicles, or foot (Bhabha and Schmidt 2006). Each government agency keeps its own records of unaccompanied and undocumented children. For example, children apprehended by the DHS but not referred to the ORR are not included in ORR statistics (Byrne 2008). Researchers have not been able to access data on children apprehended by DHS. Most government statistics, including ORR and other agencies, have had little to say about unaccompanied children unless they come into contact with authorities.

Many researchers do not have access to undetected immigrant youth (Ko and Perreira 2010; Chavez 2009). Therefore, there is still a gap in the literature regarding the life experiences of undocumented youth who are much more limited in respect to mobility, healthcare access, occupations, and education than documented immigrants (Garcia 2011; Mendez-Shannon 2010; Sullivan and Rehm 2005; Wright and Rodriguez 2012). Attention to social development among undocumented immigrant youth is missing and much needed, because of the nation's ongoing political debate about immigration, what it means to be "American," and citizenship (Perez et al. 2010; Wright and Rodriguez 2012). As such, this study addresses a salient knowledge gap by focusing on the circumstances of undocumented youth living in the USA without parents or guardians. It asks the following research questions:

1. What motivates undocumented youth to immigrate to the USA?
2. To what extent have these youth been victimized (discrimination, exploitation, and abuse) both during their journey and once settled in the USA?
3. To what extent have these youth committed delinquency/crimes?
4. What types of obstacles have these youth encountered in terms of education and work?
5. What are their fears and aspirations?

Method

The data for this study came from 12 undocumented immigrant Latino youth living on the US–Mexican border. All the participants were under 21 years of age at the time of the study. These youth were recruited through snowball sampling. The snowball technique is one where participants refer others within the same social network that matches the inclusion criteria and those who are willing to participate. Data collection was via interviews for detailed descriptions of unaccompanied minor experiences. The qualitative approach is also suitable in understanding the experiences of a group of people or an individual

from the perspective of those who have actually lived through it (Mendez-Shannon 2010; Wright and Rodriguez 2012). Qualitative content analysis allows researchers to comprehend the social reality in a subjective but scientific manner (Zhang and Wildemuth 2009).

Data collection included semi-structured interviews which were conducted during summer 2011 through spring 2012, with each interview ranging from 90 to 120 min. Each interview was recorded which allowed the researchers to complete transcriptions and have participants review the notes for additional clarification prior to analysis. Many of the questions used in the interviews were adapted from the psychological and sociological literature on immigrants and undocumented youth. To accommodate all participants, questions were written in English and Spanish, with participants given the option to communicate in one or both languages at any time during the interview process. As other researchers have noted, utilizing open-ended questions through in-depth interviews has been the most appropriate methodology for carrying out research among undocumented immigrants who are difficult to define or sample through normative resources (Chavez 1991; Cornelius 1982; McGuire and Georges 2003; Mendez-Shannon 2010). Participants are referred to by pseudonyms.

The researchers were able to transcribe, code, and examine patterns and themes in responses, which helped to create domain charts that mapped ideas and the interrelationships among concepts. ATLAS.ti version 7.0 was utilized to identify and categorize major themes in the data. Researchers were able to assess uncharacteristic results that did not fit the pattern identified for most participants.

Findings

The researchers reviewed the data gathered between summer 2011 and spring 2012 to identify the main challenges undocumented and unaccompanied Latino youth encounter in their attempt to integrate into American society. The findings offer demographic details and background information (see Table 1). This includes country of origin, age at the time of arrival, current age, level of education, and family. Five of the participants are from Honduras. The remaining seven are from Mexico. Only three were reportedly detected by US border patrol agents which suggests that those who survived the journey were successful in making it onto US soil and had some semblance of a normal life. Most had acquired a human smuggler which ranged in cost from US\$250–US\$3500. Only three of the participants had a college education at the time of the interviews, while the rest had not graduated from high school.

The narratives address:

1. Motivation of youth to immigrate to the USA

Regarding the motivation for undocumented youth to immigrate into the USA, the findings reflect three themes: (1) finances, to have a better life; (2) education, to attend a public school, college, or university; and (3) family reunification, with relatives already in the USA (see Table 2). Overall, financial security was a major factor for all the immigrant youth in this study.

Table 1 Profiled unaccompanied immigrant youth

Pseudonym	Age at the time of interview	Detected by US border patrol	Country of origin	Age at the time of arrival	Victim of crime and/or violence	Level of education	Acquired human smuggler
Marvin ^b	18	No	Honduras	14	Yes	5th grade	US\$600
Bryan	20	No	Honduras	10	Yes	College	US\$3500
Cowboy	16	No	Honduras	12	Yes	9th grade	No
Morris ^a	21	No	Honduras	18	Yes	6th grade	US\$800
Joey ^a	21	Yes	Honduras	13	Yes	6th grade	US\$800
Bobby	23	No	Mexico	16	Yes	5th grade	US\$350
Louise	25	No	Mexico	16	Yes	2nd grade	US\$350
Dynamo	22	Yes	Mexico	13	Yes	College	No
Dan	24	No	Mexico	17	Yes	5th grade	US\$800
Marco	33	No	Mexico	15	Yes	College	Yes
Christopher	25	No	Mexico	19	No	8th grade	US\$350/ US\$450
Victor	27	Yes	Mexico	19	No	6th grade	US\$250

^a Morris and Joey are brothers

^b Marvin is first cousins with Morris and Joey

Based on this study, there are many reasons and justifications for migrating illegally and unaccompanied to the USA. For example, Marvin decided to immigrate to the USA to reunite with his dad. Marvin claims:

Table 2 Motivation for the unaccompanied and undocumented youths to immigrate to the USA

Pseudonym	Age at the time of arrival	Finances	Education	Reunification
Marvin ^b	14	X	X	X
Bryan	10	X	X	X
Cowboy	12	X	X	X
Morris ^a	18	X		X
Joey ^a	13	X		X
Bobby	16	X		X
Henry	16	X	X	X
Dynamo	13	X	X	X
Dan	17	X		
Marco	15	X	X	X
Christopher	19	X	X	X
Victor	19	X		

^a Morris and Joey are brothers

^b Marvin is first cousins with Morris and Joey

There was a time when I was happy with my parents in Honduras. One time my mom hurt my father when I was about ten years old and I am the oldest sibling. The betrayal of my mom towards my father caused a lot of fights, dysfunction, separations, and after all this our mom preferred to abandon us. She left and we never heard from her again. And I did not want to hear from her, anyway.

He stated that in Honduras, life was economically difficult. His father told him to come to the USA to study. At the age of 14, he came to the USA in an attempt to reunite with his father, who was in Kansas City, Kansas. Marvin was migrating with his cousin, cousin's wife, and their 8-year-old son. Marvin's cousin and his family were captured before making it to the US–Mexican border. However, Marvin was able to escape and continued his venture alone to the US–Mexican border. Another participant, Bobby, claimed he was invited by a male cousin and he wanted to better his life. As he puts it: “I wanted to try my luck to have a better future.” He describes himself as a sincere individual who works hard and is not lazy. He also stated that he wanted to make a better life for himself and for his family. His parents are farmers in Vera Cruz.

Regardless of the justification or motivation, migrating to a new country may be nerve-racking for adults, but even more so for children. It is not an easy task in making the decision to leave one's home and family. Then, there were the added challenges of youth not knowing the English language and experiencing a culture not like their own. According to Pantin et al. (2003), immigrants of Latino descent usually inhabit impoverished communities, creating economic stress that exacerbates feelings of helplessness and isolation.

2. Victimization of youth (discrimination, exploitation, and abuse) both during their journey and once settled in the USA

Another question of concern is whether or not undocumented youth have experienced victimizations. This response is in three categories: (1) border crossing abuse and exploitation, (2) criminal victimizations in the USA, and (3) exploitation by employers. As shown in Table 3, 10 of the 12 participants reported that they had been abused and exploited during border crossing, 11 experienced victimizations once inside the USA, and nine reported exploitation by their employers. Specifically, some youth had to work long hours without breaks and some received lower wages and were not always paid on time and, in others cases, were uncertain when and if they would be paid at all.

In contrast, undocumented youth with no means to meet their employment needs may consider illegitimate responses as practical. Blocked in their pursuit of economic success, many of these undocumented youth felt forced to adapt in uncharacteristic ways to the frustrating environmental condition. For instance, Cowboy stated that when his father got deported he had no choice but to stay and work with a man who continued to abuse him. “... my dad got deported and I was abused by my boss. I had to stay with the man who kept abusing me. I was kicked by my boss with his boots. He would also hit me with a belt on the back. He would call me a wet back.” Dynamo also explained that he had to work in the fields without breaks, even when the sun was really hot. “They are hurrying us up and do not slow down when we pick squash. We

Table 3 Youth victimizations

Pseudonym	Border crossing abuse and exploitation	Criminal victimizations in the USA	Exploitation by employers
Marvin ^b	X	X	
Bryan	X	X	X
Cowboy	X	X	X
Morris ^a	X	X	X
Joey ^a		X	X
Bobby		X	X
Henry	X	X	
Dynamo	X	X	X
Dan	X	X	X
Marco	X	X	X
Christopher	X		
Victor	X	X	X

^a Morris and Joey are brothers

^b Marvin is first cousins with Morris and Joey

just work all day from 7 A.M. to 8 P.M.” Another participant, Bryan, described being raped. These narratives shed a light on many of the challenges undocumented Latino youth encounter, including victimizations.

3. Latino immigrant youth involvement in crime and/or delinquency

In regard to criminal and delinquent involvement, it is possible that these youth may not have reported all their illicit activities to the researchers out of a concern about law enforcement detection and eventual deportation. Consistent with Martinez and Lee’s (2000) finding that the crime rate is usually lower for immigrants than native groups, the researchers found that youth in this study exhibited low to no crime rates as only two of the participants admitted to participating in criminal or delinquent activities and four admitted to using drugs (marijuana was the only drug participants admitted to using) or alcohol (see Table 4). In addition, these Latino youth without adult supervision were more susceptible to being victims instead of acting as criminal perpetrators. Fear of deportation among this population ultimately serves to further increase their likelihood of being victimized and exploited by others who would take advantage of their status.

4. Obstacles immigrant youth have encountered in terms of education and work

For the most part, the youth in this study expected to integrate into American society and to achieve the American dream but this was more challenging than they imagined. In terms of education and work, there was the theme of *unexpected suffering*. The unexpected suffering includes (a) a false perception that in the USA, *employment* would be plentiful, easier to obtain, and stable with employers who would always treat

Table 4 Self-report of delinquency or crimes in the USA

Pseudonym	Delinquency/crime	Drug/alcohol use	Rationale or conduct
Marvin ^b			
Bryan	X	X	
Cowboy			
Morris ^a		X	
Joey ^a	X		X
Bobby			
Henry			
Dynamo			
Dan			
Marco		X	
Christopher			
Victor		X	

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^b Marvin is first cousins with Morris and Joey

them well; (b) transportation difficulties (there was a common assumption that they would be able to walk to the places they needed to visit as had been the case in their country of origin); (c) not accessing healthcare (given their illegal status, and thus suffering through illnesses); (d) missing family (these were after all, rather young unaccompanied youth below the age of 21), and (e) a persistent fear of detection and deportation (see Table 5). As such, some of the participants continued to struggle on a

Table 5 Unexpected suffering in the USA

Pseudonym	Employment	Transportation	Not accessing health care	Missing family	Persistent fear of deportation
Marvin ^b	X	X	X	X	X
Bryan	X			X	X
Cowboy	X	X		X	X
Morris ^a	X	X	X	X	X
Joey ^a	X	X		X	X
Bobby	X		X	X	X
Henry	X	X		X	X
Dynamo	X	X	X		X
Dan	X	X	X	X	X
Marco	X	X	X	X	
Christopher	X	X	X	X	X
Victor	X	X	X	X	X

^a Morris and Joey are brothers

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daily basis to elude detection while others had either graduated from high school and/or college and had acquired citizenship or some type of temporary visa.

Bryan disclosed to the researchers that now he has a legal document that will allow him to work in the USA without fear of deportation. Bryan was able to get this document because of the reprieve passed by President Obama via his executive powers on June 15, 2012. Bryan stated that, “Just so you know, I have already gotten some type of documentation that allows me to work here in the U.S. and am extremely happy, and now I feel free!” This document, this reprieve, by executive order relieved many of these undocumented youth from some of the hardships associated with not having legitimate employment access.

5. Immigrant youth fears and aspirations

All 12 youth wanted US citizenship and financial security (see Table 6). Overall, the aspirations were simple; as Marco put it: he wanted to get his family out of poverty and to work a lot to have a better life: “I keep thinking about this, to move forward in life!” Marco exclaimed.

The narratives in this study may raise questions, but each narrative is in line with ongoing public discussions and current study’s findings. Participant narratives and detailed descriptions about why, when, and how these youth came to the US–Mexican border and crossed into the USA are provided. Most of these now young adults navigate their lives on a daily basis with minimal education, minimal work experience, and without legal documentation. Despite their undocumented status, minimal support from outside sources (e.g., parents, government support), and multiple barriers (e.g., language barrier, lack of occupational opportunities, minimal education), these undocumented youth demonstrate high levels of resiliency by continuing to seek

Table 6 Undocumented youth aspirations

Pseudonym	To be with family	US citizenship	Higher education	Financial security
Marvin ^b	X	X	X	X
Bryan	X	X	X	X
Cowboy	X	X	X	X
Morris ^a	X	X	X	X
Joey ^a	X	X		X
Bobby	X	X	X	X
Henry	X	X	X	X
Dynamo	X	X	X	X
Dan	X	X		X
Marco	X	X	X	X
Christopher	X	X	X	X
Victor	X	X		X

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employment and attempting to better their lives while existing, trying to live, on the US–Mexican border.

The youth in this study did not remain in isolation as they eventually created meaningful relationships. Most now had either wives, close friends, and/or children of their own. These meaningful relationships seem to have deterred them from the temptations of crime and delinquency. This focus on obligations and responsibilities was described by Marco, “I always think and stay positive. Since I have had the opportunity to go to school and become the man I am now, now my goal is to stay humble. I know I am being an example for my children, so they can understand.”

Similarly, Cowboy who was 16 years old at the time of the interview said, “I think it is fun going to school and getting to see movies at home. First thing I do is homework. My friends take me to the movies. I just follow the laws.” Similarly, Bobby describes how his strong connection and loving relationship with his wife and family have sustained him to conform, as he explained that before he used to be alone and now he has a family. Bobby said, “I now communicate a lot with my wife. The decisions I make are not only for me, they are for my entire family.”

Employment worries contributed considerably to the immigrants’ mental state. According to Finch et al. (2003), economic hardship, job demands, and securing employment were acknowledged as key stressors contributing to mental illness among the Latino immigrant population. Occupational dilemmas have been found to adversely impact Mexican immigrant youth, leading to elevated levels of anxiety and depression (Grzywacz et al. 2005). Similar evidence was found in the current study. For example, Marvin explained that he wanted to work but he continued to feel the anxiety about the obstacles in working for the past 3 years.

It is hard to have a ride to work. I am trying to work, but it is hard to get around. I got very sentimental with all the pressure, so I just started crying about all the problems. Before, I was a happier person. For the last three years I have been crying and crying a lot. I have had a very bad life lately and this has made me a more serious person. I have no documents here and life is hard without them.

Discussion

These youth seem to need persons acting in loco parentis (an adult assuming the role of a parent) to achieve some of the responsibilities of adulthood on their behalf, thus easing their anxieties and whom might assist them to navigate US systems. Such mental health challenges may become an obstacle in the career development stages of immigrant youth. As such, professional counseling may be a useful tool for many Latino immigrant youth hoping to experience personal satisfaction based on developing career paths and achieving their career dreams. Accordingly, intervening will help to decrease the likelihood of poor academic achievement, high delinquency rates, and substance abuse among undocumented immigrant youth.

Since the 1990s, the undocumented population in the USA has been progressively increasing. Currently, Latino juveniles represent one of the largest and fastest-growing immigrant populations. Also, the Urban Institute (2004) estimated immigration more

than doubled during the 1990s and undocumented Mexicans make up approximately 57 % of the total, which is roughly 5.3 million. Other evidence suggests the undocumented population spiked in 2007 at approximately 12.2 million, which accounted for about 4 % of the US population (Krogstad and Passel 2015). In 2014, however, there was a slight decrease in the number of undocumented immigrants, as Krogstad and Passel (2015) noted, there were over 11 million undocumented immigrants in the USA. Although Mexicans continue to make up a significant portion (52 %) of the US undocumented population, their numbers have been decreasing in recent years. For example, in 2009, there were 6.4 million but that number decreased to 5.9 million in 2012 (Krogstad and Passel 2015). Overall, the undocumented population has been relatively stable for the last 5 years and represents about 3.5 % of the US population. In regard to youth, they migrate to the USA for various reasons as explained by the 12 unaccompanied youth. They seek to adjust and/or transition to US work and living environments for improved family economics given poverty in their home country (Yakushko et al. 2008). Previous works indicated that persons choose to immigrate because of the financial or political situation in their own country, situations that leave them with little to no other choice (Jennisen 2007; Keely 2001; Segal and Mayadas 2005).

This study's findings indicate that "unaccompanied children" have very different stories: some come to the USA to escape war, famine, poverty, or abuse; some come in search of family members; and some are brought by adults who intend to exploit them. For example, some of the youth in the study reported that they received lower wages and did not always get paid on time, and others were physically abused by their boss. Unaccompanied children enter the immigration system by other pathways as well, and while some are apprehended crossing an international border, others live in the USA for months or years before coming to the attention of federal authorities. Notably, immigrant Latino youth who come into contact with US federal authorities are not always processed. This is generally the case where children may be from neighboring countries such as Mexico or Canada and can be returned within 24 h without being processed (AIC 2015). In other cases, if the youth has not committed any crime or other offenses, he/she may be released without an actual hearing. The decision as to whether a youth should or should not be processed is not always uniform among agencies or authorities.

After this study's data collection, the impact of the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) of 1996, the Anti-Terrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act (AEDPA), and the USA PATRIOT Act led to an increase in the number of undocumented youth subject to deportation from the USA, while at the same time eliminating relief for immigrants with family ties in the USA, regardless of the severity of the situation. The IIRIRA Act of 1996 criminalized American-owned businesses that hire individuals with no legal documentation to work in the USA and further increased border enforcement and control while restricting social services to immigrants (Fragomen 1997). When the federal government intensifies immigration enforcement, undocumented youth are at greater risk for family separation, trauma, and economic hardships which may lead to serious consequences for all immigrant family members and the communities in which they reside. Such enforcement undermines long-standing family reunification principles of US immigration policy and poses dire

social, economic, and psychological costs for deportees and their family members both in the USA and in their communities of origin (Hagan et al. 2008).

Juvenile justice professionals should be mindful of the stresses Latino youth might have suffered in their countries of origin in addition to those of their immigration experiences (Cintron 2006). Many times situations may result in prolonged detention or deportation for undocumented youth even if they have lived most of their lives in the USA. Unaccompanied alien children may encounter unique challenges when they are forced to navigate a very complex legal system, one designed for adults, without the assistance of legal counsel. While this study indicates that most Latino youth are more likely to be victimized than being perpetrators of crime, it should be noted that youth who are exposed to pervasive violence are less likely to succeed or recognize their full potential. Rather, these youth are more prone to personal failures across several domains which can lead to both criminal offending and perpetuation of a cycle of violence.

Safeguarding children must remain a priority. In recent years, there has been some progress. Examples include new procedural safeguards for minors in removal proceedings, improvements in transfer conditions and custody of unaccompanied minors from the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), which is now obsolete, to ORR, reduction in the length and use of detention, and increased alertness to the trafficking of children (Byrne 2008). Many observers believe that the proposed Unaccompanied Alien Child Protection Act would likely result in further improvements by separating unaccompanied children in federal custody from those with a juvenile justice conviction, requiring that custodial facilities provide proper services and that unaccompanied children be provided with legal representation and a guardian ad litem.

Although a wealth of information on unaccompanied children in the USA exists, more nuanced research focusing on their experiences and challenges is needed (Byrne 2008). We hope this document will help inform policymakers and practitioners on how best to address and advance the interest of unaccompanied children in the USA. Nearly all Americans have been connected to immigration, with some being immigrants themselves or descendants of immigrants. However, the nation's political climate and ongoing immigration debate suggest xenophobia of some groups. As such, it is imperative to acknowledge perceptions of newly arrived immigrants in the USA; Latino immigrant youth are no exception. Advocates have traditionally focused their efforts on modifying the law to include the recognition of children as subjects, rather than objects, of immigration law, which suggest that immigrant youth are worthy of further empirical inquiry.

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